

The Tragedy of the *JAMES SERVICE* 1869-1878

The *James Service* was an iron barque built in 1869 by Dobie and Co., of Scotland. It was 455 tons (462.301 metric tonnes), 153 foot long (46 metres), 28 foot wide (8.5 metres), 15 foot in depth (4.6 metres) and was owned by the James Service Co. of Melbourne. It was used for transporting timber from the city of Melbourne, Australia to the city of Calcutta, India.

On April 27, 1878, the *James Service* began a return journey from India to Melbourne, carrying a crew of three white officers and eleven Malays. The passengers included members of a theatrical company. There were seven in number including a well-known actress at the time from London, Mrs Cowdery who went by the stage name of Bessie Edwards. She was on board with her husband Charles Albert Cowdery.

The cargo consisted of 1000 bales of sack bags, 3000 cases of castor oil, 600 bales of jute and 50 tons of sundries, which included crates of bowler hats. The ship was becalmed for sixteen days in the Bay of Bengal. Captain Young suffered severe sunstroke. This brought on fever and dysentery. He was unwell and delirious.

The young actress Mrs Cowdery wrote to her sister in Melbourne complaining: "We have been five weeks at sea with an insane Captain."

Captain Young's behaviour must have been extreme, for he was put under restraint by the chief petty officer who took the ship to the nearest port which was Penang. Captain Young was replaced by Captain Sievwright. Captain Sievwright was accompanied by his wife.

On June 7, the ship left Penang for Port Adelaide and Melbourne. The July of 1878 saw a fortnight of north-westerly gales along the south West Australian coast, with winds reaching 90 miles per hour (145 kilometres per hour).

During the night of Monday July 22 several settlers south of Mandurah claimed they heard the signal gun of a ship in distress. Another local reported seeing a large vessel which appeared to have lost its mizzen mast, beating to the north off Mandurah.

On Tuesday July 23 a local stockman Edward Clifton saw wreckage coming ashore. He decided a wrecked ship must be nearby. On horseback he searched up and down the beach but was unable to see anything through the winter gloom. He rode hard to Mandurah and reported his concerns to the local police officer, Constable Holmes.

Constable Holmes and Edward Clifton returned to the beach and climbed the nearest high feature from which Holmes scanned the sea with a powerful telescope. On the south end of the Murray reef about 7 miles (11 kilometres) west of Point Robert off Hall's Head he could distinguish the topmast of a vessel.

The weather was so blustery and the sea so rough that it was deemed impossible for any boat to be sent out to the wreck.

A search was conducted by Constable Holmes, Mr James Tuckey and other locals along North Beach. A longboat marked with *James Service Melbourne* on its stern was discovered. Endless tins of castor oil were found. Large quantities of clothing, boxes, trunks and luggage were also found, marked with their owners names. "Miss Bessie Edwards, Royal Theatre, Calcutta", "H. Williams", "J. Reddie", "F.J. Steeler" etc, but there were no traces of anyone having reached the shore.



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A passenger's diary was found washed up on the beach, dated 20th July. It stated that the ship had encountered very boisterous weather for some time, and that on one occasion the wind had been so strong as to put her on her beam ends, the yards touching the water. By Tuesday afternoon the ship's masts were no longer visible above the raging sea and the hopes of finding any survivors diminished.

On Wednesday mounted police under the direction of Water Police Sub-Inspector Mills patrolled the desolate beaches from Rockingham to Mandurah to safeguard the property being washed ashore.

On Thursday, July 25, the first body was found floating near the shore. It was identified as Mrs J Towers. A second body, found on Sunday, July 28 was another woman identified as Mrs Cowdery. They were both from the theatrical company.

Bodies continued to wash ashore for nearly three weeks. Not all the bodies were recovered. Mr and Mrs Cowdery, the Captain and a few other passengers and crew were buried at Christ's Church cemetery, on the corner of Pinjarra Road and Sholl Street. A few bodies were so badly decomposed they were buried in the sand hills at the beach and others were buried at the Rockingham Cemetery.

As no one aboard lived to tell the story of what happened to the James Service and how it met its fate on a reef many kilometres off-course, it can only be surmised that the ship had suffered heavy damage and was partly disabled after losing its mizzen sail.

It is believed the stricken vessel was trying to reach Fremantle to have urgent repairs done. Today the James Service has virtually become part of the reef that claimed it. Lying on its port side, the wreck is encrusted with marine growth. The James Service wreck is an historic site and according to the provisions of the Museum Act 1969 and the Maritime Archaeology Act 1973, is vested in the WA Museum on behalf of the Crown. The WA Museum has a responsibility to the community to protect and preserve this historic site.



The *JAMES SERVICE* Anchor

The *James Service* wreck was rediscovered at latitude 32° 27.5' south, longitude 115° 39.5' east, lying in 15-25 feet (6 metres) of water on the Murray Reef by members of the Underwater Explorers Club during a search in 1962, led by diver Harold Roberts.

Twelve Members of the Underwater Explorers Club used hookah gear and two boats to raise the anchor ten months after the wreck was identified. The anchor, weighs nearly three tonnes, is 10 feet long with a 5 foot crossbar (3mx1.5m). It took eight hours to raise. The anchor now stands in the graveyard at Christ's Church where it shelters the graves of some of the ill-fated passengers and crew.



Glossary

Barque - a type of sailing vessel with three masts, the rear most having lateen rig sails

Becalmed - motionless through lack of wind

Jute - long, soft, shiny vegetable fibre that can be spun into coarse, strong threads

Mizzen - the third mast or the mast immediately aft of the main-mast. Typically, shorter than the fore-mast and main mast

Yard - a spar, horizontal wooden pole from which sails are set

Sundries - many, varied and diverse items

