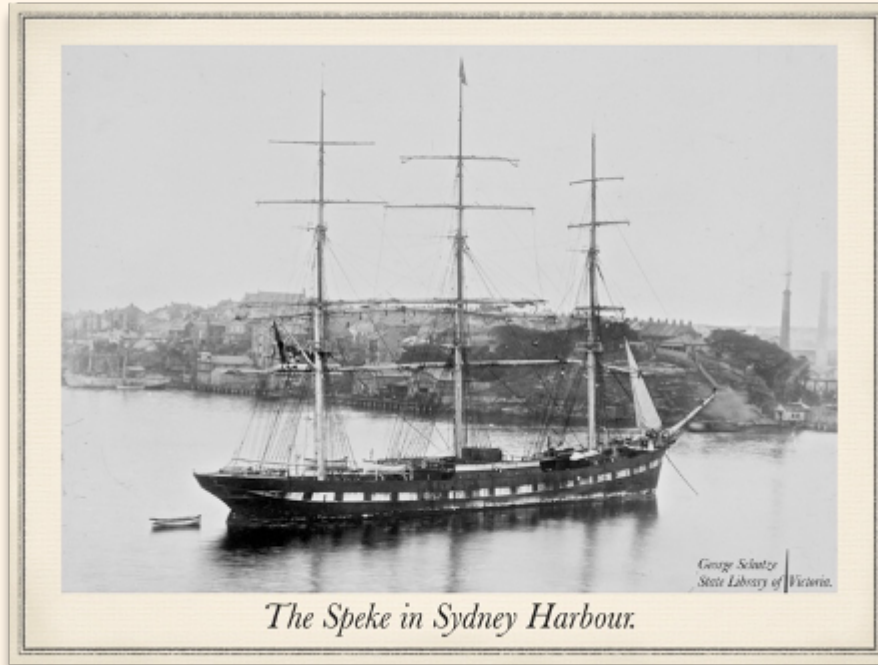


The Speke

22 February 1906



“Mountainous seas as high as the topgallant mast”

It was 22 February 1906, a wild Thursday afternoon and the 3,000-ton steel sailing ship, *The Speke*, was bound for Geelong to load a cargo of wheat after having completed her voyage from Peru to Sydney Heads.

She had passed the Wilson Promontory and now faced the full force of the gale, battling the mountainous seas of Bass Strait and in the words of the first mate Mr Cooke, they were “as high as the topgallant mast”. *The Speke* was the second largest triple masted full-rigged vessel afloat, only being beaten by her sister ship *The Ditton* by an inch or two.

Battling the treacherous seas and gale force winds, Captain Tilston misjudged his bearings, mistaking

Cape Schanck Lighthouse on the north coast of Western Port for that of Split Point Lighthouse at Airey’s Inlet – some 80kms away.

At 1.30pm on that Thursday afternoon *The Speke* was driven ashore in the severe gale, ramming into rocks near the Kitty Miller Bay on the south coast of Phillip Island. Immediately after striking the rocks she swung round and lay broadside with the wild seas breaking over her.

A heroic struggle began. Two lifeboats were lowered but with the seas pounding them onto the rocks, there was no hope of them being of use as they were almost immediately hopelessly smashed and the men who were in them had a frantic fight for life.

Among the men who had gone into one of the boats was the seaman Frank Henderson.

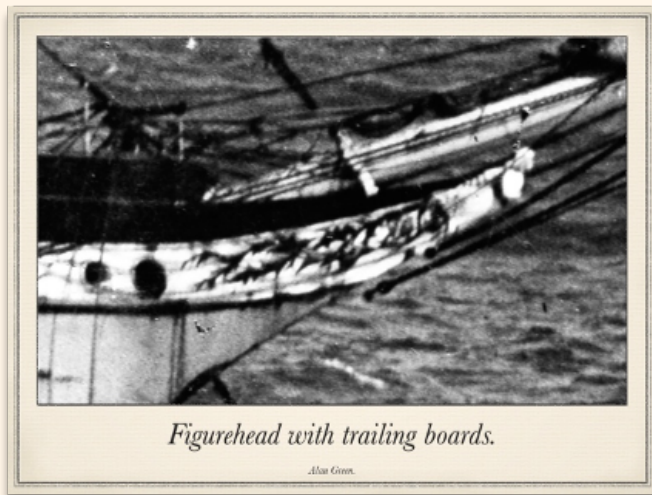
As the lifeboat was battered relentlessly against the rocks, all of its occupants were thrown out into the treacherous seas.

Remarkably, all except Henderson managed to swim or scramble to the rocky shore and then climb beyond the reach of those monstrous waves . Henderson was either drowned or was battered to death.

Despite the perilously dangerous seas the second mate, Mr Cook, readily followed orders from Captain Tilston to go over the side and carry a life-line ashore. He successfully managed to fix the line around a boulder and the remaining 26 men slid from the ship to the safety of the rocky shore.

“A pair of trousers found two days later indicated that his body had been taken by sharks.”

Meanwhile on the Island, a horse racing event was winding up. One of the ‘jockeys’ in the event, Irishman Pat Phelan, known as Little Pat, was making his way home, possibly somewhat under the weather, along Back Beach Road when he saw a band of 25 bedraggled men coming from Kitty Miller Bay Road, which bordered his property. Upon reaching them, he soon learned that they were survivors of the shocking shipwreck of *The Speke*.



He immediately transported as many as he could to his neighbour Sarah Harris’ house, *The Pines*, in Ventnor. He then enlisted the aid of others to help transport the remainder to various premises. Sarah, who had lost her husband only six months earlier, told her children years later that the men ‘ate her out of house and home!’ She also told of the agony of the ship’s master Captain Tilston, who wept in her living room over the loss of one of his crew, Frank Henderson, and for the loss of his ship.

Captain Tilston was so grateful for the hospitality shown by Sarah and other locals that he gave her a compass box, which is today in the Phillip Island and District Historical Society’s collection.



A pair of trousers belonging to Frank Henderson were found two days later with a tear in the region of the right hip, which indicated that his body had been taken by sharks. His body was never found.

Captain Tilston had his master’s certificate suspended for 12 months after being found guilty of careless navigation although it is thought that the lightly ballasted hull combined with the atrocious weather would have contributed to this tragedy.

The *Speke*, built in 1891 at Carnarvon in Wales for a cost of £22,000. The wreck of *The Speke* was purchased for a mere £12 - fifteen years later.