

Tragic Shipwreck Off Oeo

By R. B. Connelly.

On July 24, 1901, the barque "Lizzie Bell" bound from Wellington to Newcastle foundered on the rocks near Oeo, coastal Taranaki, and 12 lives were lost in the most tragic shipwreck of the province's history.

Only the captain, the mate, two seamen and two young apprentices from the crew of 18, survived the ordeal, which lasted throughout the night until rescuers reached the rock-strewn beach the following morning.

In ballast, the Lizzie Bell left Wellington early on July 24 and had favourable winds. At about 11 p.m. the vessel had all sail set and was travelling at the rate of 12 knots.

The weather was fine, but cold and there was a slight haze as the barque made her way to Cape Egmont.

Suddenly the vessel struck a rock about a mile or two from the mouth of the Oeo stream and the crew immediately abandoned ship.

Disappeared

Later the boat again overturned and this time several crewmen disappeared. The survivors almost perished with cold and lost count of time and position.

Early next morning the more vigorous survivors found themselves on the rocks below a property owned by Captain Good, Oeo. A count taken showed that several crewmen had disappeared following the second capsizing of the lifeboat. Two bodies were found jammed amongst the rocks on the beach, two crewmen died in the boat during the night and before rescuers could arrive at the beach two more men who had survived the ordeal of the night were also dead.

Another small steamer, Manaha, was also wrecked on the Oeo beach on May 29, 1896. When the inquiry was completed the wreck of the Lizzie Bell was purchased by Mr Mulholland, a carrier between Hawera and Opunake.

Buried At Pihama

They were all buried at Pihama cemetery and a fine memorial stone has been erected over the plot.

Later the hotel was deemed to present a danger to navigation and it was shifted to the bottom of the hill where it now stands.

A Magisterial inquiry into the wreck of the Lizzie Bell was opened on July 30 at New Plymouth.

Captain Rees said the barque was found well in every respect when she left Wellington. The compasses were adjusted at sea between Dunedin and Wellington as the steering compass was affected by the iron of the vessel.

The ship had a narrow escape on Ninety-Mile Beach when making for Port Chalmers, but this was due to a gale and not a faulty compass.

Captain Rees told the inquiry he had not left the deck from the time the barque cleared Wellington.

Error

He said there was an error of about 2 1/2 points between the steering compass and the pole compass. At Stephen Island the log was 15 miles out, which he accounted for by stiffness.

Captain Rees added that unless the compass was in error or a strong current existed he could not account for the ship's position when she struck the rock.

"If I had been able to hold on to the wreck until daylight, all hands would have been saved," he told the inquiry.

The court, after an exhaustive and lengthy inquiry gave its finding that the course stated by Captain Rees was not steered and the loss of the barque was due to negligent navigation.

Captain Rees' certificate was suspended for 12 months and he was ordered to pay \$25 towards the cost of the inquiry.

Iron Barque

The Lizzie Bell was an iron barque of 1070 tons gross register and her principal measurements were: Length, 214 feet 5 inches, beam 34 feet 4 inches and depth 21 feet 3 inches.

The scene of the wreck was close to the spot where the schooner Annie Wilson and the steamer Marahara had previously gone ashore.

Cowshed Built

Following the salvage operations Mr Blake purchased enough of the timber of the wreck to build a cowshed and yard.

The iron girders of the deck were used as posts for the yard and as no cutting

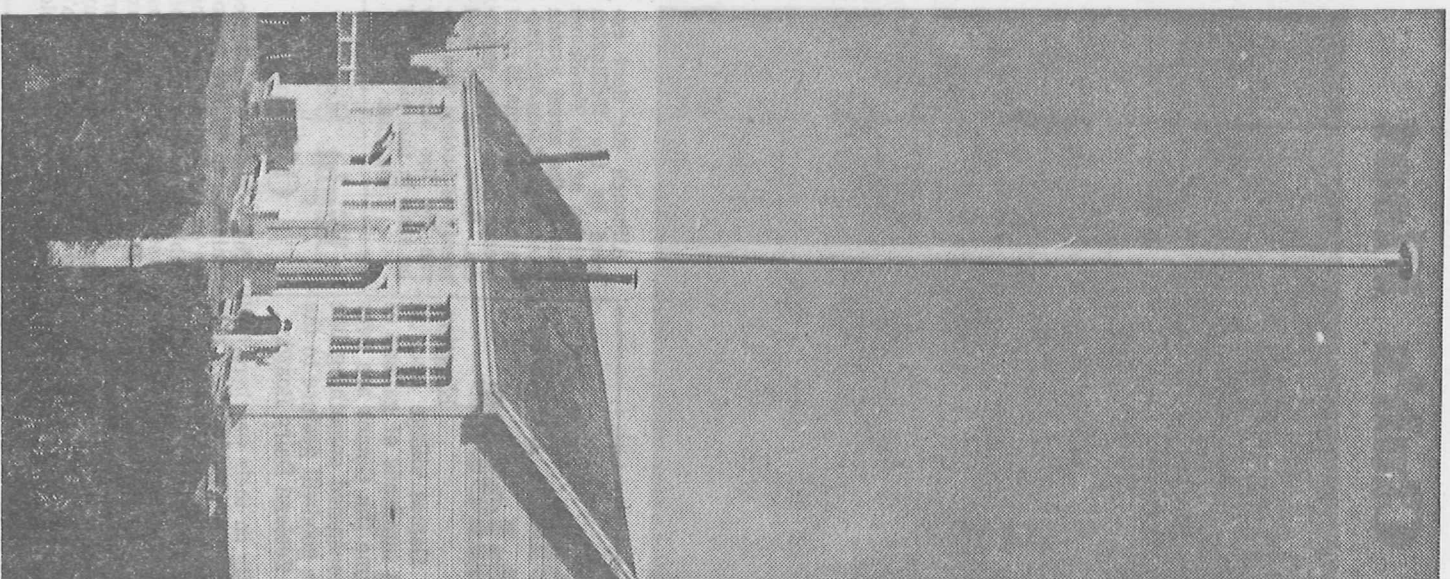
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implements were available Mr Blake had to dig some very deep holes to sink the posts into the ground. One went to a depth of eight feet.

Recently, Mr Blake's youngest son paid a visit to the farm, 64 years after the wreck, and saw quite a lot of the timber and iron girders that had been used. Much of the timber was still in a remarkable state of preservation.

The bell from the wrecked barque was taken to the Oeo school, where today it is still used to summon classes daily.

Still active at Hawera, Mr Blake has also managed to retrieve the anchor of the Lizzie Bell and this has been mounted in the garden of his Furlong Street home.



A spar from the ill-fated barque, Lizzie Bell, which now serves as a flag pole at the tiny Oeo School, in coastal Taranaki. The school also possess the ship's bell from the barque. The bell is mounted above the main classroom entrance to the school and for many years has been used to summon daily classes.



Retrieved from the wreck of the barque, the anchor of the Lizzie Bell has recently been mounted in the front section of the Hawera home of Mr J. R. Blake, Furlong Street. Intensely interested in the history of shipwrecks off the Taranaki coast, Mr Blake has spent many years obtaining particulars pertaining to the foundering of the Lizzie Bell.