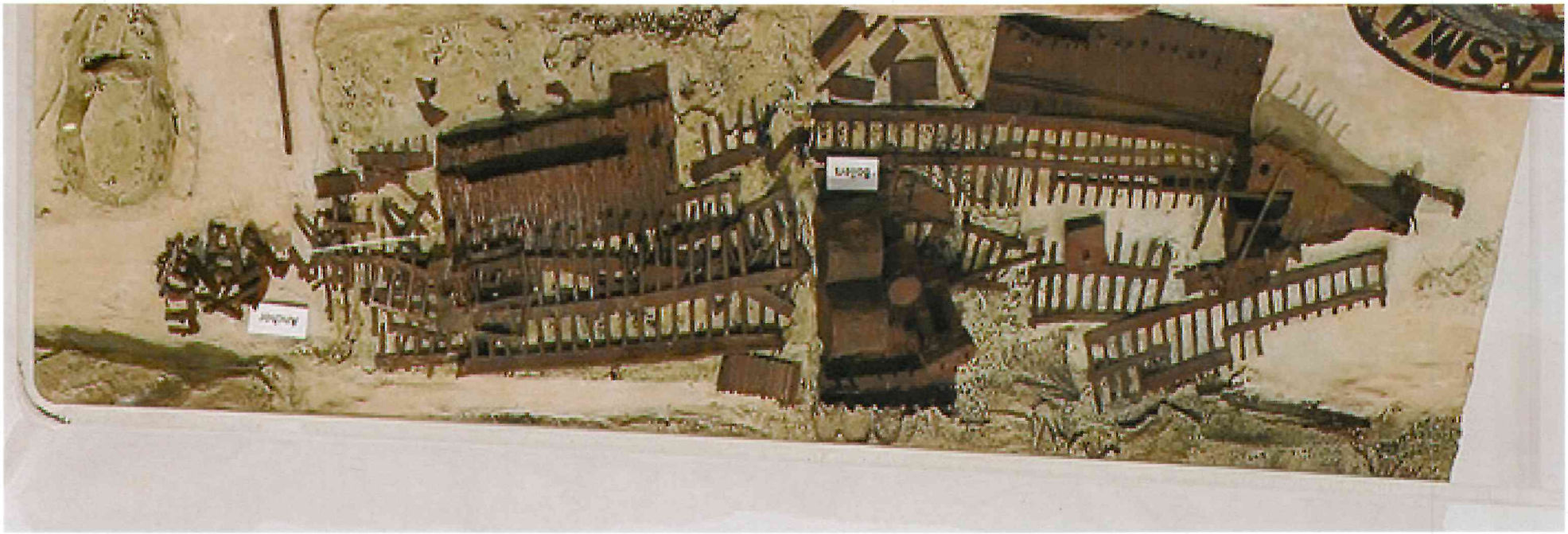

A survey of the steamship *Tasman* (1873–1883)

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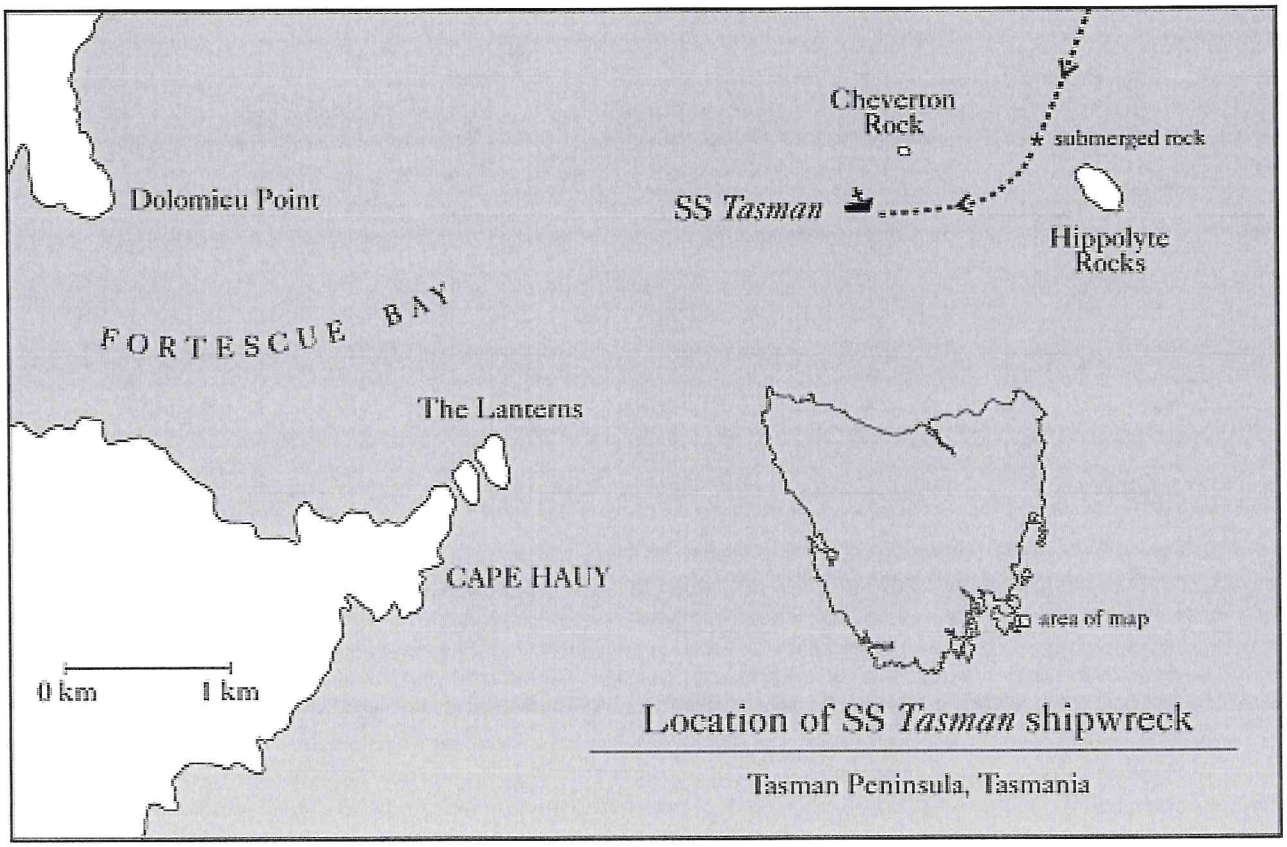

Figure 1. Location of the SS *Tasman*.

Introduction

In December 1883 the steamship *Tasman*, one of the Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company's fleet of inter-colonial traders, struck rocks and foundered off Fortescue Bay on the south east coast of Tasmania. The wreck was rediscovered in February 1998 lying in some 70 m of water approximately 1 km from its point of initial impact. A team of divers led by John Riley has since successfully carried out the survey of the wreck in cooperation with the State government authority responsible for managing shipwrecks in Tasmanian waters.

The Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company

The Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company (TSNCo.) was founded at Hobart in 1852 at the same time as the Launceston Steam Navigation Company was being formed in northern Tasmania. The TSNCo's service began in 1853 with the delivery of the new 515-ton steamship *Tasmania* from Britain, followed by the 645-ton *City of Hobart* in 1854. In competition with its northern rival the Company concentrated on the four-port trade between Hobart, Launceston, Port Phillip and Sydney over the following decade. No new vessels were added to the fleet until the period between 1864 and 1869 when three steamships were purchased directly from Scottish shipyards. A further three ships were acquired during the takeover of the Launceston and Melbourne Steam Navigation Company in 1865 following the loss of that Company's uninsured steamer *City of Launceston* (Strachan, 2000).

With virtually no competitors on its routes, the TSNCo. entered a period of steady growth during which it dominated the steamer trade from Tasmania to the Australian mainland. The advantages of size, dependability and comfort gave the steamship services an increasing advantage over the more random schedules of sailing vessels. In 1874, for example, there were 87 voyages between Melbourne and Launceston by the two Company steamships employed on that route. The regular entry of larger steamships into ports such as Hobart also resulted in the construction of extended docking facilities with four major new piers built at Sullivans Cove up until 1890.

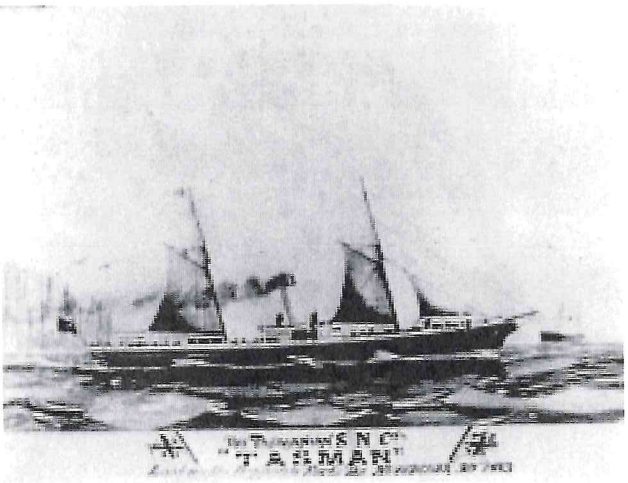

Figure 2. The Tasmanian Steam Navigation Company ship *Tasman,* November 30, 1853. Photo: Courtesy Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

During this period the number of voyages advertised by the Company steadily increased and its main Bass Strait routes were extended to include a number of smaller ports on Tasmania's north coast.

Between 1873 and 1890 the TSNCo. added twelve steamships to its fleet including the SS *Tasman* in 1873. Eight of these vessels, and a further four earlier craft, were purpose built for the Company by Scottish shipbuilders. They were constructed primarily at the Clyde River (Glasgow) which, at the time, was one of the most important iron shipbuilding areas in the world. Facing competition from the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand during the 1880s the size of the TSNCo.'s vessels grew larger and passed the 1 000 ton mark in 1882 with the completion of the 1 279 ton SS *Corinna.* During its lifetime the Company operated a total of twenty steamships with an average of one new vessel being added to the fleet every 20 months during the 1870s and 1880s. The cost of the shipbuilding program and a drop in tariffs caused by increasing competition to the major ports led to financial difficulties for the Company and in 1891 the business was sold to the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand for £85 000 (Pemberton, 1979: 116–20).

The SS *Tasman*

The iron hulled steamship *Tasman* was built to order for the TSNCo. by the firm of Blackwood and Gordon at Glasgow, Scotland. The hull of the *Tasman* was ceremonially launched on 15 February 1873 before being towed to the builders dock for the installation of engines and other machinery. Propulsion was provided by direct acting compound steam engines turning a single, four bladed screw propeller. Engine cylinder sizes were 29 and 51 inches diameter (73.66 and 129.54 cm) on a 3ft (91.44 cm) stroke, providing a combined 115 horsepower. Two Scotch boilers situated forward of the engines and

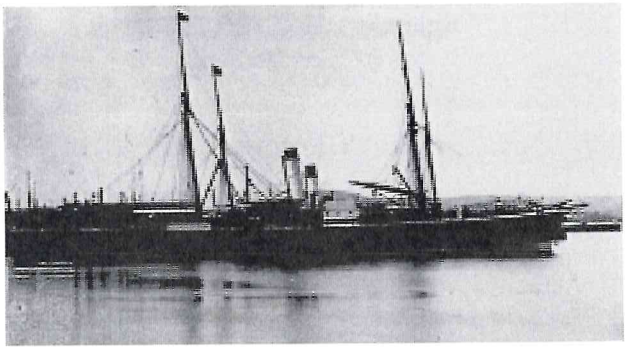

Figure 3. The SS *Tasman* at Hobart (nd). Photo: Courtesy Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

amidships provided steam. A two-masted rig provided additional propulsion.

The vessel was completed and officially surveyed by May 1873 (Archives Office of Tasmania—CUS/39). Recorded hull measurements were 209.7ft (63.9 m) length, 27ft (8.2 m) breadth and 19.2ft (5.85 m) depth in hold. Tonnage was 707.06 gross and 490.1 register after deductions for deckhouses and an engine space of 33.2ft (10.1 m) in length. The *Tasman* had two decks, an elliptical stern and a clipper type bow with a figurehead reported to be that of Abel Tasman, the European discoverer of Tasmania. The vessel was initially fitted out with accommodation for 60 first class and 40 second class passengers.

The *Tasman* left the Clyde on 21 June 1873 and arrived at Hobart on 18 October after a voyage entirely under sail. Under instructions from the Executive Director of the Company the vessel's machinery and boilers were resurveyed on 21 October. All equipment was found to be in good order and had suffered no damage on the outward journey (Maritime Museum of Tasmania—92/06). The following day the *Tasman* was registered 14/1873 at the port of Hobart, official number 57539.

A cabin plan of the ship dated from 1874 shows that the accommodation was re-configured to take a total of 94 passengers. In 1881 Morts Dock and Engineering Company, Sydney, provided tender documents for new boilers measuring 10ft 10in (3.3 m) in diameter and 10ft 6in (3.2 m) in length, together with a new 30ft (9.1 m) funnel for the *Tasman* (Maritime Museum of Tasmania—92/03). A report on the vessel completed in March 1882 discussed the installation of the new boilers and a number of repairs and alterations including the strengthening of the hull to cope with heavy deck cargoes including cattle.

> The cargo doors should also be taken away and solid plates inserted in their stead which will also tend to strengthen the ship. She will never be a strong ship that is with heavy deck cargoes as she was lightly framed when new and never intended for heavy deck cargoes. I am aware that it is only in exceptional cases she is so loaded and I may say that it is only in those circumstances that I have noticed her work. At other times she does not work more than the usual run of

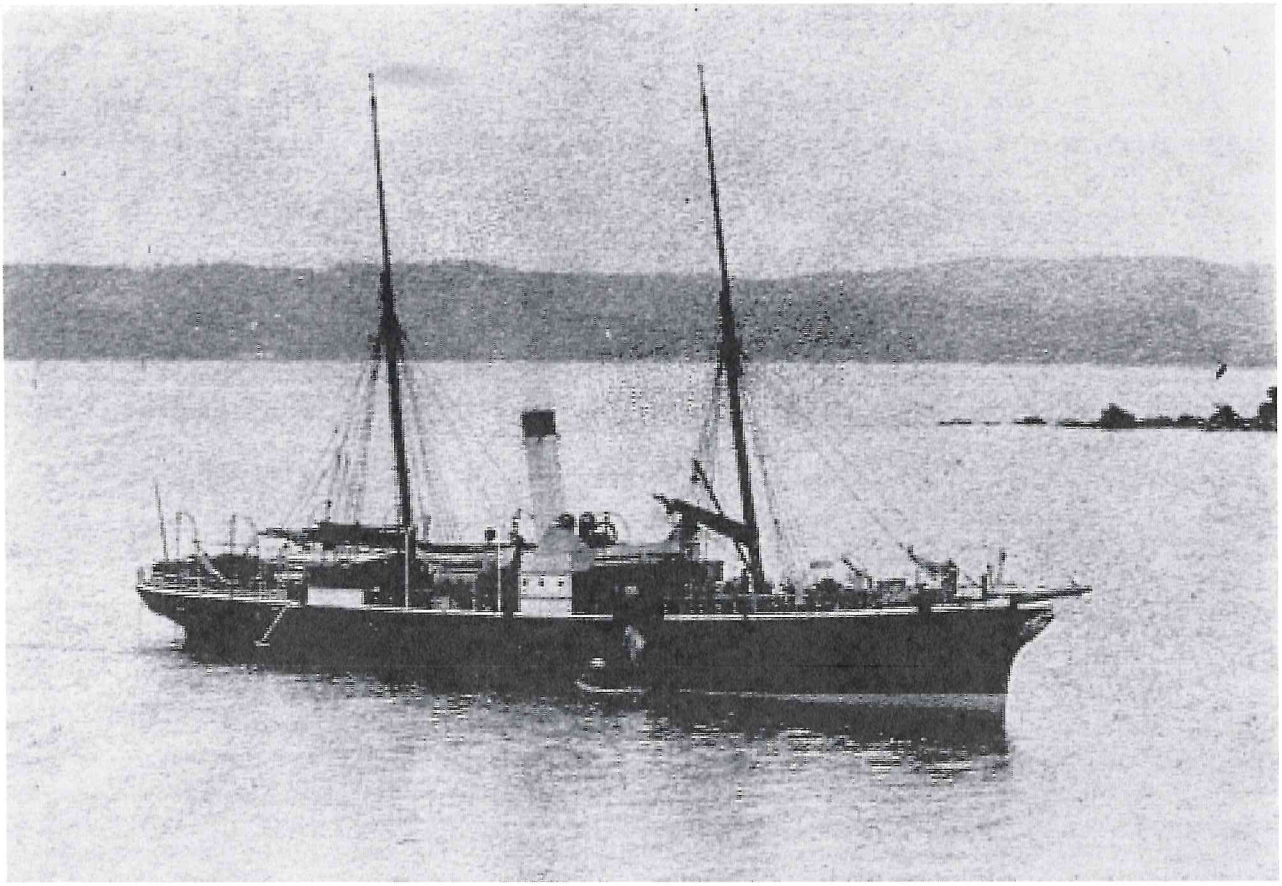

Figure 4. The SS *Tasman* loading cattle. Photo: Courtesy Archives Office of Tasmania.

steamships I have been associated with (Maritime Museum of Tasmania—93/09). **(Who is quote from and to whom?)**

The loss of the SS *Tasman*

Throughout its working life the SS *Tasman* voyaged almost exclusively between Hobart and Sydney. During 1883 these voyages departed on a regular fortnightly basis from Hobart and called in at Eden on the south coast of NSW en route to Sydney before returning via the same route. On its final voyage the *Tasman* sailed from Sydney for Hobart at 10 a.m. on 27 November 1883 under the command of Captain John William Evans. The vessel was manned by 27 officers and crew, and carried 29 passengers as well as general cargo. After picking up 71 cattle at Eden on the 29th the vessel continued south. By the time the master went below for the night at 11 p.m., the steamer was fifteen miles north of Schouten Island, on the Tasmanian east coast, and proceeding at ten and a half knots with light WSW winds. Chief Officer Frederick Marshall, who also held a master's certificate, was left at the helm with firm instructions to pass outside the Hippolyte Rocks lying approximately 4 km off the Tasman Peninsula. The calmer inner passage, preferred when there was stock on board, was not considered safe during the hours of darkness.

Captain Evans was just about to go back on deck around 6 a.m. on the 30th when he felt the ship hit something before continuing on. He rushed on deck and was shocked to find that the vessel was in the kilometre wide gap between the Hippolyte Rocks and Cheverton Rock. Although the charts indicated that there was deep water the *Tasman* had struck a large rock pillar that rises to within 2 m of the surface on the eastern side of the gap. Evans ordered the four boats swung out just in case and all hands called on deck for an orderly abandonment if necessary. The chief engineer, T.H. Williams, then came on deck and told the Captain the bottom had been torn out under the boilers and the watertight bulkheads were unlikely to hold. The boats were lowered and all on board abandoned ship with only the clothes or night attire that they stood in, not even the mails were saved.

Within fifteen minutes of striking the steamer foundered bow first, in a reported fifty fathoms of water between the Hippolytes and Cape Hauy. The force of escaping air blew several heavy articles, including the piano, through the saloon roof onto the deck. The four boats soon met up with the fishing vessels *Foam* and *Morning Light*, the former continued on to Spring Bay

Figure 5. Captain John William Evans. (Year?). Photo: Courtesy Archives Office of Tasmania.

where news of the disaster could be telegraphed to Hobart, while the latter accompanied the boats ashore at nearby Fortesque Bay. It was here that Evans learned that Marshall had seen the Company's steamer *Corinna* ahead and, having once run between the Hippolytes in a large sailing vessel, decided to cut off some distance to make a race of the run up to Hobart. A local farmer, Marryat Hornsby, and his wife looked after the castaways until the *Corinna* was sent back from Hobart to pick them up. The crew and passengers reached Hobart via the *Corinna* at 10 a.m. on Saturday, 1 December (*Hobart Mercury*, 4 December 1883).

Later events

An inquiry into the loss of the *Tasman* was held at Hobart on 5 December 1883 (*Tasmanian Government Gazette*, 25 December 1883). Evidence was taken from Captain Evans, chief mate Frederick Marshall, second mate John Mason, chief engineer Thomas Williams, seaman Henry Jenkins and master mariner William Cracknell. Captain Evans stated that he had instructed the chief mate to steer a course outside the Hippolytes and other witnesses confirmed this. He also expressed his shock at the loss:

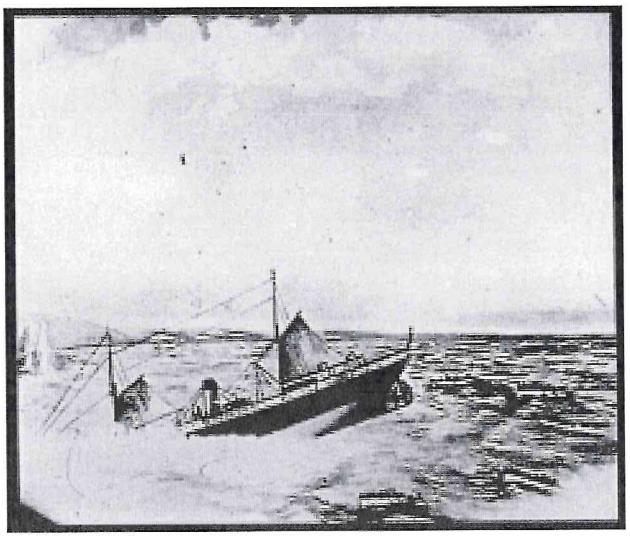

Figure 6. The sinking of the SS *Tasman* on Hippolyte Rocks. Photo: Courtesy Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

> I had no apprehension of the ship being in any danger. I never dreamed that, independently of my orders, any man would have attempted such a thing as to take the ship between the two rocks.

The chief mate's defence of his actions relied on his previous experience in sailing vessels and the need to make up time with the cargo of cattle on board. The engineer confirmed that the vessel was travelling at around 10 knots and the impact had torn out the hull plates near the boiler room, where the inrushing water had extinguished the boiler fires within three minutes.

The inquiry suspended Marshall's certificate for twelve months for not having obeyed orders, and the master was censured for allowing a state of affairs to exist in which such a flagrant breach of his orders could have occurred. The inquiry did, however, praise the actions of the officers and crew in successfully abandoning the rapidly sinking vessel without loss of life. The owners of the *Tasman* dismissed Marshall from service but he continued as a master in the coastal trade for many years. He was drowned in the wreck of the SS *Alexander Berry* near Kiama, New South Wales, in 1901. Captain Evans was demoted to chief officer of the *Southern Cross*, although he was soon promoted back in command of the SS *Esk*. In April 1886, John Evans was in command of the *Esk* when it stranded on the notorious Hebe Reef at the entrance to the Tamar River and the port of Launceston. All attempts to bring the steamer off the reef failed and it broke up during a storm some two weeks after striking. A subsequent inquiry cancelled Evans certificate for 'careless and reckless navigation' and he was finally dismissed from the TSNCo. (Broxam & Nash, 1998: 251–2). Remarkably, Captain Evans later became master of the SS *Huon* in the river trade out of Hobart before being appointed manager of

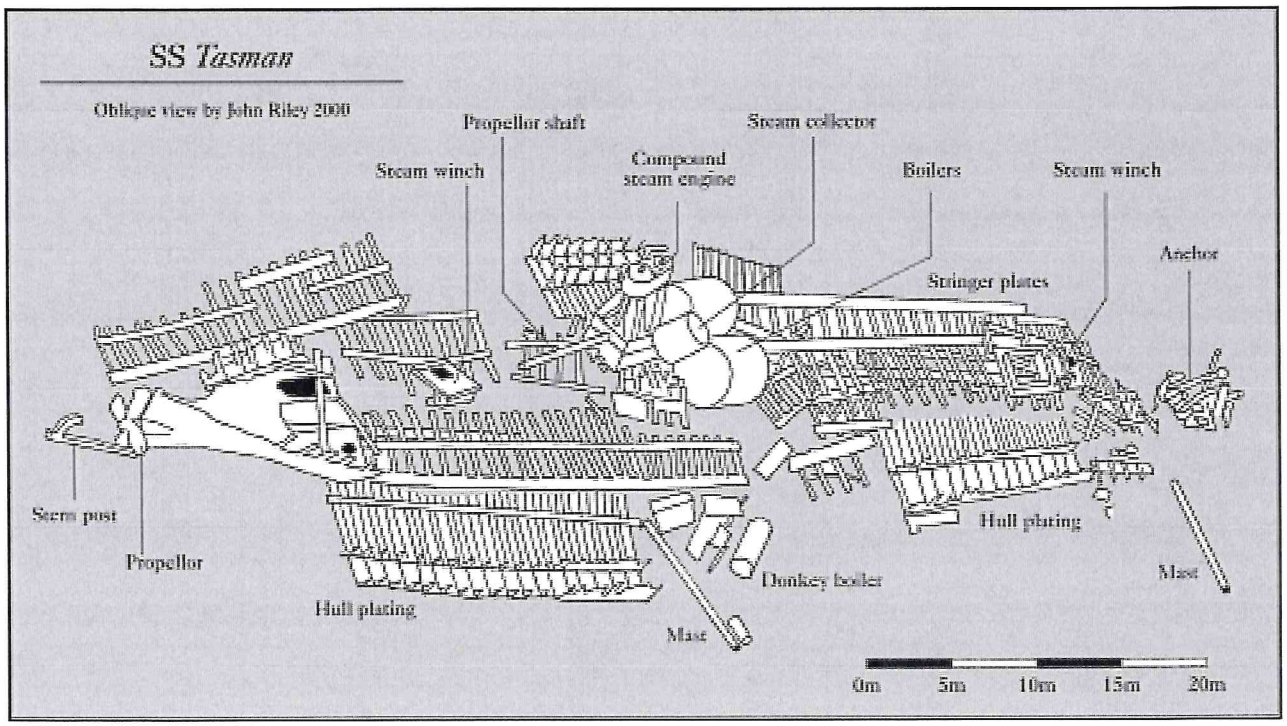

Figure 7. Site plan, oblique view, by John Riley, 2000.

the Hobart offices of Huddart Parker & Company. He was soon on the Marine Board of Hobart and served as Member for the state electorate of Kingborough from 1909 until 1937. Evans served for several years as the State Premier and was appointed as Governor of Tasmania from 1939 until his death in 1943 (Nairn & Searle, 1981: 447).

Almost forty years prior to the loss of the *Tasman* the same pillar of rock off The Hippolytes had almost claimed the government barque *Lady Franklin*. On 15 August 1842, the vessel was carrying 93 passengers from the convict establishment at Waterloo Point when it struck the uncharted rock. With crew and passengers manning the pumps the *Lady Franklin* managed to reach the Port Arthur penal settlement and was run aground off the shipbuilding yard where it had originally been constructed (Archives Office of Tasmania CSO 22/31/1099). In November 1915, the rock that had caused the loss of the *Tasman* also claimed the 1 892-ton steamship *Nord*. Encountering heavy weather during the passage from Melbourne to Hobart the master of the *Nord* had initially intended to pass outside the Hippolytes, but on the 7th decided to steam closer seeking more sheltered waters. He was using the 1914 British Admiralty charts, which still showed no obstruction despite the earlier fate of the *Tasman*. At around 5 p.m. the *Nord* struck the pinnacle and continued on, badly holed, to eventually founder without loss of life some ten kilometres away in Munro Bight (Broxam & Nash, 2000: 83–4).

Site relocation

Well-known steamship expert John Riley led the search for the *Tasman* site. In 1985 Riley had first dived at the Tasman Peninsula on the wreck of the nearby SS *Nord*. He became interested in locating the *Tasman* but was not able to seriously pursue his goal until the 1990s. Based on the known historical information of the vessel's course, speed and time before sinking a search area south west of the Hippolyte Rocks was mapped out. In 1993 the local dive charter operators, Eaglehawk Dive Centre, carried out depth sounding of the area which showed maximum depths of 90 m that prevented safe diving on ordinary compressed air scuba cylinders.

A magnetometer survey of the area was carried out in April 1996 from the Queensland based research vessel *Quest*. A substantial target was located in the search zone at a depth of 70 m but remained uninvestigated due to strong currents that prevented the deployment of a small submersible vehicle carried by the *Quest*. In February 1998, Riley and a team of Sydney based divers returned to the Tasman Peninsula with mixed gas diving equipment which would enable the team to work safely at the expected depth of the wreck. With a dive vessel from Eaglehawk Dive Centre a magnetometer was again deployed over the search area but disappointingly weak signals were picked up because of a combination of site depth and degradation of the wreck's metal structure.

The team decided to dive on the strongest signal that they had recorded and were fortunate to descend the dive boat's anchor line directly on to the wreck site. The site

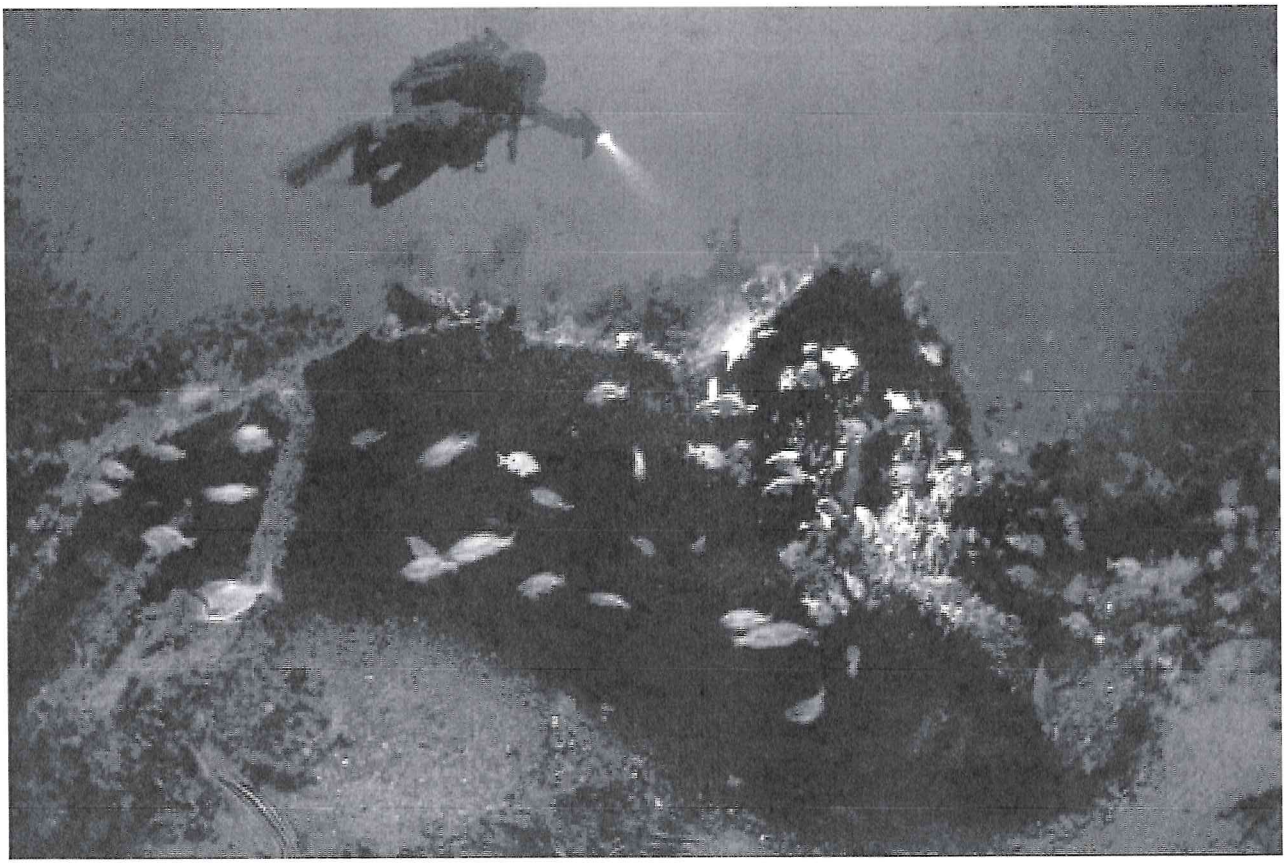

Figure 8. Diver on the SS *Tasman* wreck site. Photo: ???

lay on a relatively flat reef on an east–west orientation and was positioned close to a ledge that dropped off a further 20 m. The wreck was broken up and highly degraded but laid out in order—stern structure with propeller still in place, compound steam engine, two boilers, deck hatches and a winch and anchor near the shattered bow section. The hull plating was found to have largely collapsed to the starboard side of the wreck and flattened out across the reef. The following day the dive team returned to undertake sketching of the site and to take a series of still photographs and a video record to complete their initial investigation (Riley, 1998).

Site survey

To enable a more detailed survey of the site to be undertaken funding from the Federal Government's Historic Shipwrecks Programme was successfully sought by the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment, the managing authority for shipwrecks in Tasmanian waters. With limited capacity to undertake deep-water diving operations the funding enabled the managing authority to support volunteer dive teams with air fares, boat charter costs, equipment hire and accommodation. John Riley subsequently led two expeditions to the site in March and December 1999 to record the wreck. The project was aided by remarkably good conditions during both occasions in an area that is notorious for rapidly changing weather. The work was carried out in conjunction with the Eaglehawk Dive Centre who supplied a boat, staff and accommodation at their nearby facility.

All diving was carried out with mixed gas equipment using a combination of air, oxygen and helium commonly referred to as Trimix. Bottom times on the site were restricted to 14 minutes per dive with a subsequent in-water decompression time of 70 minutes including the use of high concentration oxygen at the shallower depths. Due to the extreme depth divers were limited to one dive per day with no more than three consecutive diving days at a time. Over the two expeditions the three/four person dive team carried out a total of 10 days diving on the wreck with a total of 23 individual dives. The survey recorded a number of additional features such as mast sections, deck hatches, an auxiliary donkey boiler, a steam windlass and the size and spacing of hull plates and framing. At the completion of the second expedition a dozen items from the collapsed stern pantry were raised for identification and eventual display at the Maritime Museum of Tasmania.

The survey work produced an extensive video by Kevin Delaney and still photographic record by Mark Spencer, who has extensive experience working on iron steamship wrecks such as the *Catterthun* in New South

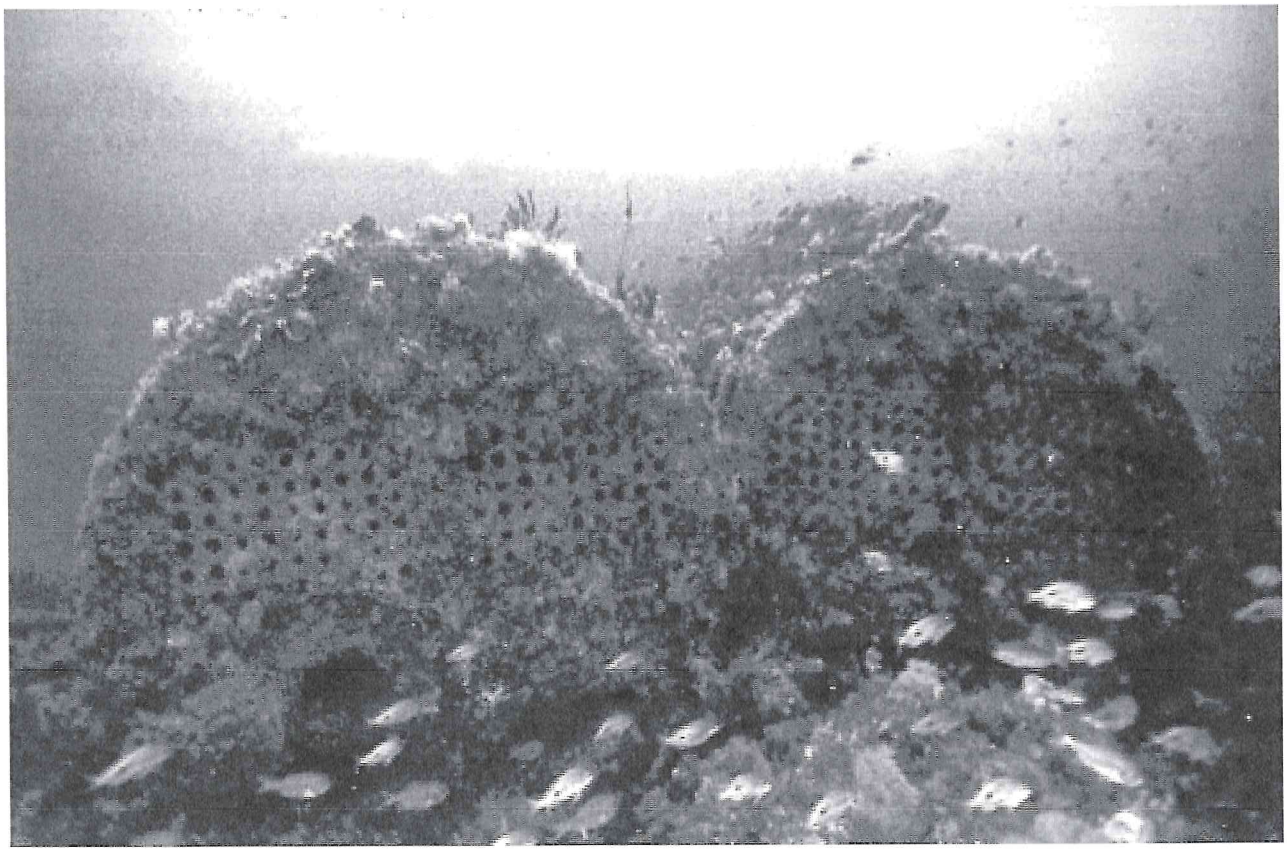

Figure 9. Forward aspect of boilers on the SS *Tasman* wreck site. Photo: Mark Spencer.

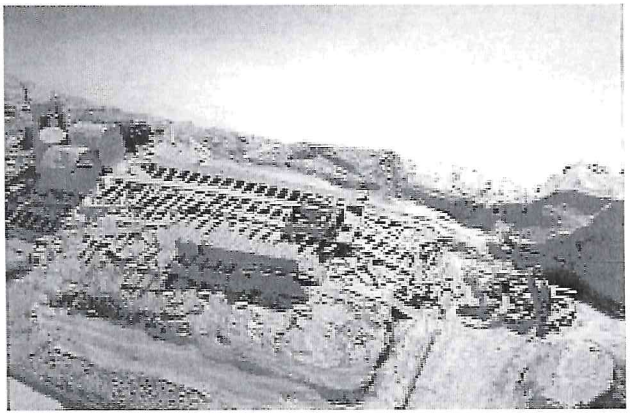

Figure 10. Model of the mid-ship's area of the SS *Tasman* shipwreck site. Site model and photo: John Riley.

Wales (Spencer, 1992). Over the series of dives John Riley produced a site plan of the wreck including sketches of some of the features. Riley also constructed a 1:100-scale model of the site similar to models he has built of a number of other iron shipwrecks. Further documentation of historical sources was also carried out in conjunction with the survey work and this located original survey documents from the *Tasman* at the Maritime Museum of Tasmania and an 1874 cabin accommodation that had recently been acquired by the State Library of Tasmania.

Summary

The recording of deep-water shipwreck sites by management authorities will become an issue as technological improvements allow amateur divers to explore deeper and impact on more sites. While many divers presently lack the expertise and equipment to carry out work in deep water, numbers will inevitably increase. Even on difficult sites such as the *Tasman* the discovery of the wreck has created considerable interest from interstate divers that will lead to more visitation.

The relocation and survey of the *Tasman* site has occurred at a time when survey work is being carried out in Australia on a number of relatively untouched iron steamship sites including the SS *City of Launceston* in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria. As well as the *Tasman* project dive teams led by John Riley and Mark Spencer have recently worked on a number of deep-water shipwreck sites. These include the Australian Navy submarine *AE2* at 74 m, the paddle steamer *Koputaii* at 76 m and the steamship *Keilawarra* at 75 m.

This work is demonstrating that technological improvements can allow divers to accurately and safely record deep-water shipwreck sites at a relatively low cost. The use of non-professional but highly qualified divers

under supervision should be considered as a means of recording difficult sites that may be beyond the current expertise and experience of government bodies tasked with managing shipwreck sites. While issues of liability, insurance and occupational health and safety may restrict such operations in some States these will need to be addressed if the expertise of amateur divers is to be utilised.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank John Riley and Mark Spencer for their work in relocating and recording the site, the volunteers who assisted with the diving operations, and Gary Myors and Mick Barron of the Eaglehawk Dive Centre for their ongoing support.

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