

Woolgoolga has a rich history that is closely linked to the sea. In the late 1800s, Woolgoolga was a remote settlement striving to grow and develop its abundant natural resources. Timber around the creeks was being cleared to make way for sugar and maize plantations. With no roads to speak of in the district, Woolgoolga looked to the sea and shipping as a way of getting produce to markets.

In the beginning there was no jetty for ships to stop at, so produce was taken to nearby ports such as Grafton on the Clarence River where it was loaded onto ships for transport to markets. This method of transport proved to be either too expensive or too difficult.

Without a jetty, the ships that did call into Woolgoolga anchored in the bay, sheltered by Woolgoolga Headland. They loaded timber logs cut from the nearby forests, sugar and other goods either from the beach or over the rocks on Woolgoolga Headland. It was clear that for Woolgoolga to prosper a substantial jetty was needed and the community began to lobby the government to build a jetty at Woolgoolga.

In the meantime, two private jetties were built to try and assist with the movement of goods to and from Woolgoolga. However, these were quite small and did not cater for the large steamships of the day. Eventually, the community's lobbying was successful and in the early 1890s a substantial jetty was built and Woolgoolga prospered.

There is quite a lot of Woolgoolga's maritime heritage remaining, but you need to know where to look and the opportunities to see it are fleeting, as it is often covered by sand. This is a blessing in disguise as the sand protects the items from the harsh coastal environment and occasional unwelcome vandalism. It is unlikely that what we have today would have survived if it was not buried by the sand.

The map below identifies the location of many of the surviving items. A detailed description of the items is also provided below. The Coffs Harbour Regional Museum is another good place to learn more about our region's heritage.

Please enjoy Woolgoolga's links to earlier times but also treat our heritage with respect.



Woolgoolga Jetty headstock

During a cyclone in February 1937, a section of the Woolgoolga Jetty “200 feet in length was torn up and the wreckage was strewn about the beach”. This photo is of a headstock from the jetty that has been lodged in the rocks just north of Woolgoolga Lake.

Headstocks were located near the top of the piles and provided support for parts of the decking. It is possible that this headstock was part of the jetty that was washed away in 1937. It is almost always covered by sand and rarely exposed.



Woolgoolga Jetty headstock

Great Northern Timber Company tramway bridges

In the early 1900s the demand for NSW hardwoods was very high. Because Woolgoolga had a jetty and access to coastal shipping it was able to help supply that demand. Two large sawmills were constructed in Woolgoolga, each with their own tramways.

The tramways were used to bring timber from the forests to the sawmills. One company was the Great Northern Timber Company and the timber piles shown in these photographs were part of the tramway bridges that crossed Poundyard Creek, Woolgoolga Creek and Jarrett Creek.

Another company, the British Australian Timber Company, operated a different network of tramways around Woolgoolga.



Poundyard Creek bridge piles



Woolgoolga Creek bridge piles



Jarrett Creek bridge piles



Locomotive crossing Jarrett Creek C1916

Neil Yeates Collection

Buster

The Buster was a three masted barquentine, meaning that it was square rigged on the foremast and fore and aft rigged on the main and mizzen masts. She was constructed in Parrsboro, Nova Scotia in 1884 from Douglass fir, known in Australia as Oregon pine. The Buster was 39.4 metres long, 9.6 metres wide and weighed 281 tonnes.

Early in February 1893, Captain Carnie of the Buster was in Sydney Harbour waiting to sail to Woolgoolga where he was to take on timber and piles bound for Port Chalmers in Dunedin New Zealand. There had been an extended period of bad weather and he was looking for a chance to sail to Woolgoolga. He had already tried once but was forced to turn back and shelter in Watsons Bay.

February of 1893 was a period of particularly bad weather on the east coast of Australia. In February three cyclones crossed the Queensland coast. While Captain Carnie waited in Watsons Bay, the last of these cyclones was making its way down towards Brisbane and the north coast of New South Wales.

The situation in Queensland and northern New South Wales was dire and February 1893 was to become known as Black February. Many towns were flooded more than once and newspapers of the day reported seeing houses floating down the Brisbane River.

Unaware of the cyclone making its way down through southern Queensland and northern New South Wales, Captain Carnie took advantage of the first break in the weather and set sail for Woolgoolga. This is his story of the events that unfolded on his arrival at Woolgoolga:

We arrived from Sydney on Friday. A moderate easterly breeze set in, so let go both anchors and ran a hawser out, making fast to the buoy.

During the early running the wind and sea had increased greatly, vessel knocking about like a cork, and straining heavily on the cables.

At 9 am an immense sea struck her on the port bow, and the chain on that anchor carried away. Under great difficulties, and not without some danger, we managed to get another hawser to the buoy, doubling our hold now that she was hanging to but one anchor. At 10 am the starboard chain parted, the sea now being frightfully high.

All day we hung on. No boat could live in the sea running, so we trusted that the weather would moderate at sundown. Instead of a favourable change darkness fell upon as wild a night as ever set in. Still our hawsers proved staunch to us, and we waited hoping to weather the night and find the worst of the storm had past.

It was a vain hope. At 9 o'clock that night a sea like a wall was seen to be running in right for us. It came on towering overhead as though it would overwhelm the ship and carry us swiftly to destruction. As she rose to it, standing almost perpendicularly, away went one of the two hawsers.

We felt now that our time must be short unless a miraculous change took place in the wind and sea. Every instant was thought to be our last, and as each succeeding sea came up and we found her yet hanging to the buoy, hope rose again, but only to give place to alarm.

All round was impenetrable darkness, and the roar of the sea breaking ashore was heard between the howling of the gale in the rigging. Nothing could be seen for the blinding rain squalls. After No. 1 hawser parted every minute seemed an hour, and when our second carried away an hour after the first, we appeared to have been an age awaiting the fatal break.

Swiftly the fine ship was borne shorewards, and in less time than one could count the seconds she struck hard astern and slewed sharply right round, stern to the sea and bows to the shore.

Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate, 22 February 1893

The crew were wet, cold, hungry, and exhausted. They took to the rigging to escape the waves that continued to crash over the ship, not sure if they would survive the night. Legend has it that they took emergency action and gathered all the alcohol that they could find on the ship and drank it to help them get through the night.

At dawn the crew and passengers found themselves high and dry on the beach. They climbed down out of the rigging and onto the beach. There was no loss of life.



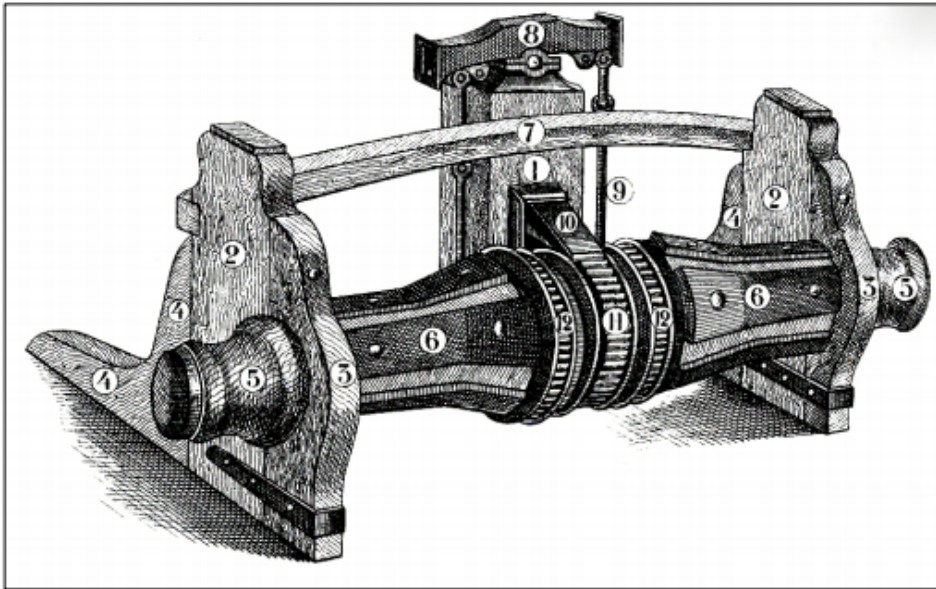
Remains of the Buster



Artist impression of what the Buster may have looked like

Windlass from the Buster

A windlass is a large winch that was used onboard ships to lift anchors. Windlasses on sailing ships were operated by hand and the image below is a picture of a windlass that is very similar to what may have been onboard the Buster.



Hand operated windlass - Paasch 1890



After the Buster was wrecked, salvage works were conducted to remove anything of value and that would most likely have included the windlass.

This is a photograph of a windlass that is buried on Woolgoolga beach not far from where the Buster now lies. Timber samples taken from this windlass were analysed and found to be oak originating from Canada where the Buster was built. The results strongly suggest that the windlass is from the Buster.

The section of the windlass shown in the photograph corresponds to the sections marked 11 and 12 in the diagram above.

It appears that the windlass was broken while removing it from the beach and it was decided not to move it any further.

W. T. Pullen's Jetty piles

Woolgoolga needed a jetty to facilitate the safe transport of goods to and from Woolgoolga. The people of Woolgoolga lobbied the Government for many years to build a jetty for this purpose without much success.

Over the years the need for a jetty grew and a local businessman, William Toft Pullen, could wait no longer. In January 1886 he started to build his own jetty and when completed it extended 300 feet (90 metres) into Woolgoolga Bay.



Remaining piles of Pullen's Jetty

The jetty performed well for a time but Pullen did not protect the piles of the jetty from shipworms. These marine worms burrow into submerged and unprotected timber and in October 1888, the jetty collapsed. In a letter to the editor of the Clarence and Richmond Examiner, Mr Pullen confirmed that shipworms and not poor construction were the cause of his jetty's collapse.

The remains of the piles can sometimes be seen but only when much sand has been eroded from Woolgoolga Beach.

Possible road surface

An erosion event in May 2013 exposed something unusual. It looked very much like a dirt road and appeared to be made of some type of compacted clay and gravel, very similar to the road base used to construct dirt roads today. The width and the fact that it slopes toward the beach suggest that this may have been a road that was built through the dunes.



Unusual surface exposed in 2013



Close-up of unusual surface exposed in 2013

Old newspaper clippings tell of how before Woolgoolga had a jetty, bullock teams were used to bring produce and equipment to and from ships anchored in the bay. It would have been very difficult to pull drays and wagons through the soft sand of the dunes without a solid surface.

The picture below shows Dag Casson's bullock team with a load of what could be "mattresses" of sugar, possibly to be loaded into the "surf punt". The surf punt was used to take produce to the waiting ships in the days before a jetty was built. The location appears to be in the vicinity of where the surface was exposed in 2013.

Could the unusual surface in the photographs above have been a road built to help the bullocks move more easily through the dunes?



Dag Casson's bullock team

Courtesy of Coffs Harbour City Council

Unidentified timber

Lying under the sand directly in front of the current boat ramp is an assortment of timber which was uncovered in 2011 and 2012. The timber consists of large cut timber, square in shape, and a round pile. There are also the remains of some small planks:

- The large square cut pieces are approximately 7.5 metres long and 300 millimetres square. These have a rebate cut into one end where a cross member may have been fixed
- The round log is approximately eight metres long and 400 millimetres in diameter. It has rebates cut into one end and appears to have been broken off on each end
- The smaller pieces are approximately 100 millimetres by 25 millimetres and appear to have been planking.

It is impossible to say for sure where these timbers came from as there are several possibilities. The round log appears to have been a pile and the size suggests that it may have been related to W. T. Pullen's jetty that was constructed nearby and collapsed in October 1888. The smaller planking-like material could be associated with this.

The square sections could be related to the government built jetty that was severely damaged in a storm in 1937, resulting in pieces being strewn along the beach. It is

also possible that they are a part of the “jetty slide” that was built nearby across the rocks. The size of the timber corresponds to the dimensions of some of the holes cut into the rocks.

The timber could also be associated with the slipway that once existed at this site.



Unidentified timbers



Underwater image of unidentified timbers

“Jetty slide”

The remains of a structure are still visible on the rock platform at the southern end of Woolgoolga Beach. These include holes of varying size that have been cut into the rock and iron bolts that have been cemented into the rock.



It is not known for sure what was located here or how it was used. However, it is likely to have been a structure to assist the loading and possible unloading of ships.

A newspaper article indicates that timber logs were rolled over the headland and onto the structure. Another reports that outgoing goods were loaded from the structure, which extended over the rocks to deep water, into specially built punts. Loading in this way avoided the risk of goods such as sugar getting wet when being transported to the waiting ships.

Iron bolt set into rock platform



All that remains in 1930

Courtesy of Coffs Harbour City Council



1892 sketch of "Jetty Slide"



Location of Woolgoolga Headland loading facility

Mooring buoys

Ships arriving at Woolgoolga to load or unload cargo used mooring buoys to hold the ship away from the jetty. Ropes from the ship were made fast to the buoys that were positioned alongside the jetty. Ropes from the ship were also made fast to the jetty. Mooring in this way held the ship in a position between the buoys and the jetty, preventing the ship from bumping into the jetty while it was being loaded or unloaded.



Mooring buoy from Woolgoolga Bay

Hearnes Lake wreck

A wreck lies somewhere in the mouth of Hearnes Lake. It has been exposed only once in recent years. Nothing is known as to the identity of the wreck or how it came to be there. An eyewitness said that the exposed section was approximately 3.5 metres wide and 23 metres long. A section of lead pipe, approximately 50 millimetres in diameter, was attached to the timber.



Hearnes Lake wreck

Courtesy of Coffs Harbour City Council

Protection of Shipwrecks and Maritime Heritage in NSW

Historic shipwrecks in NSW State waters or in waters adjacent to the NSW Coastline are protected by the Commonwealth ***Underwater Cultural Heritage Act 2018*** and the ***NSW Heritage Act 1977***. It is an offence to move, damage or destroy an historic shipwreck, associated relics or any archaeological site. Substantial penalties apply.

For further information on historic shipwrecks and underwater cultural heritage in NSW please visit www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/about-our-heritage/maritime

Shipwrecks and maritime heritage are one of many values protected within the Solitary Islands Marine Park. For more information about the park visit www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/solitaryislandsmarinepark

Report illegal behaviour to Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000

This project was funded by the NSW Government under the Marine Estate Management Strategy. The ten-year Strategy was developed by the NSW Marine Estate Management Authority to coordinate the management of the marine estate.