

THE WRECK OF THE *ISIS*

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Pages 29–32.

In early March 1932, many local residents of Frankston watched the arrival of the sleek white yacht *ISIS*, in full sail. Owned by William Buckland, *ISIS* frequently anchored off the beach between the pier and Olivers Hill in front of the holiday home where the Buckland family often resided. The weather was warm and wonderful for swimming and all the local young people welcomed this arrival, as it gave them excuses to swim out and around her, often accepting the offer of boarding her for a brief period. The following days were pleasant as the *ISIS* anchored near what was termed the Inner Reef, a short rocky area about half way between the pier and Olivers Hill.

The *ISIS*, which was designed by W Fyfe, was a handsome wooden stem schooner yacht of 51 reg tons / 41 tons net and the following dimensions: 26 x 4.1 x 2.8 meters (85'3" x 13'6" x 9'3") *ISIS* was built in 1892 at Berry's Bay, North Sydney by W Reeks for [Sir] James Fairfax. Originally she was fitted with a Rankin & Blackmore compound steam engine. This engine was replaced in 1921 with a 100 hp oil engine. Her O/N was 101 134 and signal letters: VMPQ.¹

The captain and engineer were permanent crew and passengers joined for cruising at various times. On the day of 10th March, the weather looked perfect, but a local fisherman was apprehensive. He rowed out to the yacht and suggested she be moved further offshore, as he suspected heavy weather would develop later, and as she was moored so close to the reef would be in danger.

The barometer remained steady; the *ISIS* remained at her moorings.

Later that evening the wind freshened and about midnight had reached gale force. I remember being wakened by banging and rattling as my family closed windows and doors — we gathered inside watching — the strong wind had snapped power and telegraph poles on opposite sides of the Nepean Road, and the wires were sparking when touching. A car came along (I think a taxi driven by Bert Latham) and seeing the trouble reversed rapidly. As we watched, sand from the sea and branches from trees were being blown across the road. We had been able to see the lights of the *ISIS* during the evening and now when we looked again there was only darkness at sea.

The yacht was torn from her moorings by fierce seas, driven stern first on to a reef about four hundred metres from the shore and battered to pieces, sinking in 5.4 metres (18') of water. Her masts were torn loose and flotsam carried ashore. The three men were asleep when the storm struck and the anchor began to drag. At first they could not start the engine, and when they did succeed they found it impossible to raise the anchor. The three men managed to escape in a dinghy, but in the high seas an oar was lost. With great difficulty Captain Thompson managed to get the dinghy ashore. The *ISIS* was valued at £6,000 and had cost £14,000 to build.²

Later Mr Buckland was reported missing, and I believe the Lifesaving Club was called out and the beach was searched for hours. Later next morning he was found asleep in his bed at home.

¹ . Information taken from Marine Underwriters Association of Victoria Register of Australia & New Zealand 1895 and Lloyd's Register of Yachts 1892 — courtesy Peter J Williams.

² . Based on information contained in report of the wreck in *Port Phillip Shipwrecks* Volume 3 by Leonie Foster.

By daylight the yacht was a total wreck and lay just beneath the surface for many weeks before finally breaking up and submerging, with parts standing sentinels for passers by. Flotsam and wreckage littered the beaches and was a delight to the local population, especially each morning when the scavengers scoured the sand for relics.

Much flotsam, for example a piano and desks, was collected on the beach, and loose equipment was often planted in the scrub and collected later. The ship's bell was one item, not heard of again until just recently, and then 'lost' on inquiry. It was a windfall for the people of Frankston that night of the eighty mile an hour gale, which wrecked the *Isis*.

Many of the stronger swimmers exercised to the wreck and back. A few people were curious enough to dive on the hull and swim through the alleyway, often meeting someone coming in the opposite direction and with no room for passing. This caused some turmoil for lack of 'puff', and caused one young swimmer (Ray Ewers) to think that there must be an easier way.

Thus on returning home he and the local brains trust investigated some 'other way', which eventuated in a home made diving helmet. Helped by two neighbours (Jim Grice and John Uther) they experimented with tins and canvas and with advice from family and friends constructed the following 'high tech' gear. Into the side of a four-gallon kerosene tin an observation port was cut measuring 8 x 15 cm. This port was covered with a piece of glass and sealed in with wet seal plasticine. Shoulder shapes were then cut and tightly padded and held on to the shoulders with the weight of two house bricks. Later the bricks were replaced with concrete-filled bicycle tubing. Air was supplied using a garden hose attached to a pump that had belonged to a De Dion motor car circa 1911. Ted McComb supplied the ropes for towing the loot ashore.

The boys used to row out in a ten-foot dinghy with their equipment. One would go overboard, adjust the helmet and the pump supervisor would then have to work up the air pressure to fill the helmet to expel any water. This worked fairly well, as the diver cut the pieces from the wreck and secured them with ropes. If the pump supervisor's attention was diverted by the submarine activity and he forgot to pump, the helmet would fill with water, resulting in the rapid return to the surface of the unfortunate diver.

When the ropes were secured, the diver would resurface and the long tow to the beach would start. The enthusiastic rowers were often thwarted as ropes would slip and the tow would start again. Progress was relatively easy until the sandbanks were reached; often happy swimmers were at hand for the difficult haul to the beach. It was arduous but enjoyable work for teenagers.

Agitation from local boat owners and fishermen that the wreck was a shipping hazard caused the Marine Board to detonate the wreck. It was an unofficial holiday for the divers and the submarine workers, who sat on the dunes to watch the activity.

However, much salvage settled on the inner reef and the 'high-tech' team's salvage commenced during the summer holidays. The keel, rudderpost and propeller were cast from manganese bronze. The keel and rudder post were cut into suitable lengths and dragged ashore in stages. During some parts of the year the little red crabs objected to their homes being tampered with and gave chase to the retreating divers.

The float and drag process was the boys' department and one James Copple of Melbourne finally purchased the substantial metal for the large sum of £3-15-0.

Many years later, in 1978 deep-sea diver John Johnstone, retriever of the gold from the *Niagara*, asked if we had heard of the *Isis* at Frankston. Both he and his brother had searched, but were unable to locate the area. He could not believe my story.

During the days following the wreck of the *Isis*, flotsam which was washed up on the beach was mostly secreted away by its finders. A gentleman found on the beach a part of the cabin panelling made of fiddleback blackwood and returned it to Mr Buckland, who then had a tray made of the piece. Mrs P Lyons, widow of the late William Buckland, donated the tray to the Frankston Historical Society. I believe *Isis* was Mr Buckland's favourite yacht.

Author's note: The average age of the 1932 'high tech' team was fourteen years:

John Maxwell Utber (1919–1992) educated at Frankston State School and High School, Melbourne Grammar School, served in the RAAF 1942–1947.

Raymond Boulton Ewers (1917–1998) educated at Frankston High School, Dookie Agricultural College. Served in the AIF 1942–1946. Sculptor.

James Rober Bree Grice (1920–1975) educated Mentone and Melbourne Grammar Schools. Served in the AIF 1940–1946. Farmer.