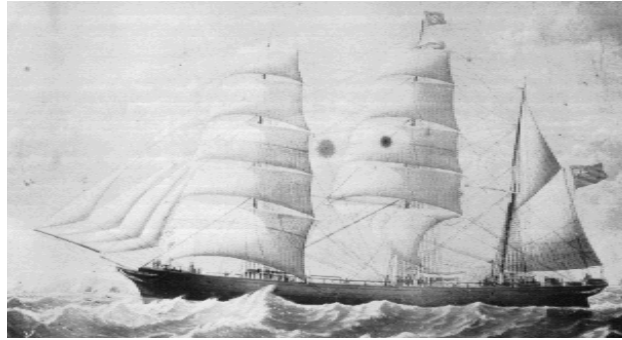


# The *Geltwood* 1876



The *Geltwood* from a painting by J. Witham

## The *Geltwood*

The *Geltwood* was a three masted iron hull barque, 215.7 feet (65.2 metres) in length and of 1056 tons, built by R. Williamson and Son at Harrington, Scotland in 1876.

Under the command of Captain Harrington the *Geltwood* departed Liverpool bound for Melbourne on 23 March 1876 with the Captain's wife, one passenger and 28 crew. The vessel carried general cargo valued at £18,400 comprising chiefly of tobacco, tinsplate, ale, crockery, galvanised iron, fencing wire and roof slates. This was the *Geltwood's* maiden voyage and it was expected to take about 90 days to sail to Melbourne, arriving about 22 June.

## The wrecking

On the 5 July 1876 the fate of the *Geltwood* became known. James Sparkes, boundary rider of Benara Station reported to the Millicent Police a ship wrecked a mile offshore, 10 miles (16 kilometres) south of Rivoli Bay. There were no survivors. Over the next 4 months only four bodies from a total of 31 aboard the *Geltwood* were found. They are buried in the old Millicent burial ground, three in a common grave with a wooden marker. The fourth, James Nelson, the passenger aboard the *Geltwood*, has a marble headstone.

The Police found several dray and wagon tracks on the beach opposite the wreck; upon investigation they found quantities of the cargo in nearby sheds and huts. Two people were convicted of stealing and sentenced to 2½ years in gaol while several more were given fines.

It is not known when the *Geltwood* was wrecked but it was probably on 14 June because there was a severe storm that day. Distress signals were seen and heard in the region.

## The wrecksite

In 1876, parts of the *Geltwood* could be seen from shore. In 1877, 22 tons of the *Geltwood's* cargo was recovered and auctioned. It would not have been long after 1876 that the remains visible above the water would have deteriorated and broken away.

## Its discovery

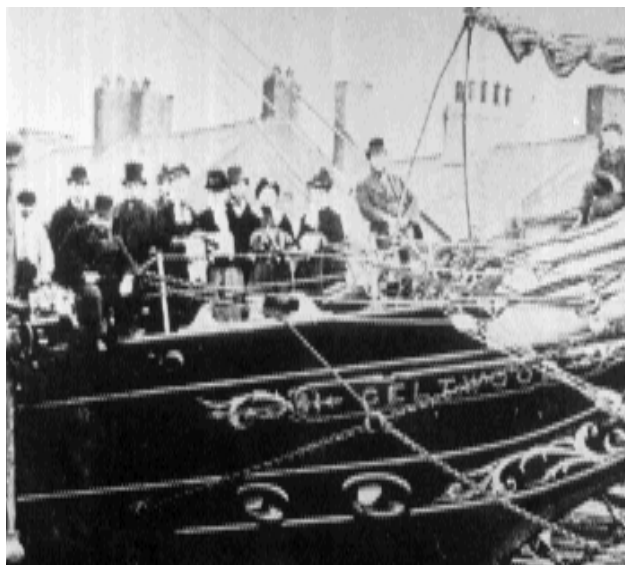
104 years later (December 1980) Southend fisherman, Lance Chambers, sighted the wreck from the surface and in December 1982 Mick Galpin dived on the wrecksite. In February 1983 John Deeprise and John Charles dived the wreck and they subsequently reported the find to the Commonwealth Minister responsible for the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*. The *Geltwood* was declared an Historic Shipwreck because of its archaeological significance and because of its historical significance to the south-east. Under the legislation it is an offence for anyone to remove anything or to interfere with the wrecksite unless a permit is obtained.

## The wrecksite today

While the *Geltwood* wrecksite is a spectacular dive it is generally inaccessible because of the continual swell and can therefore be dangerous. Diving should not be attempted on the *Geltwood* without further consultation. There is still a

Searching for survivors, courtesy J.K. Loney





The builder and associates on the bow, courtesy G. Sprott

substantial amount remaining of the ship and it is possible to see parts of the iron hull, masts and yards and other ship fittings lying flattened and broken on the sea bed. The ship's anchors and chain can be seen at the seaward end, indicating the bow of the ship.

Thickly concreted cargo remains such as fencing wire can be seen together with some of the slates, bottled ales, hardware and crockery, some broken, others in remarkable condition. Storms and big seas will take a toll on some of this material but some will survive for many years to come.

A community group from the Southend, Millicent area have been involved in documenting the remains of the *Geltwood*. They have recovered some of the ship's cargo and anchors, which can be seen at the Millicent National Trust Museum. Another anchor is displayed at Southend opposite the Canunda National Park Ranger's headquarters. This is in memory to those who perished aboard the *Geltwood* and to those that continue to be lost along this hostile coast.



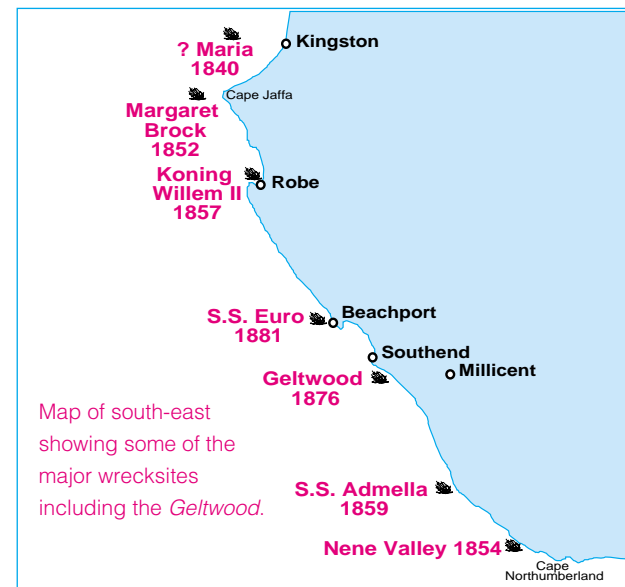
Aerial photo: Southend and the coast near the *Geltwood* wrecksite, courtesy Mapland

#### **Background history**

In 1876 the only means of transport to and from overseas countries was aboard ships, and they were the most efficient and economical means of transport within the State and Interstate. Ships were more than a means of transport, they were a way of life, with crew and passengers spending many months living and working together in a foreign environment, i.e. the sea. Their dominance is reflected in part by the number of shipwrecks; about 8000 in the whole of Australia; and about 700 in South Australia.

Ships of European origin passed the south-east coast of South Australia from the early 1800s but the first known ship wrecked here was the *Fanny*, blown ashore on the Coorong in 1838. Early mariners exchanged knowledge about the dangers of sailing along the south-east coast. In 1853 an official set of sailing instructions was issued by Captain T. Lipson, the Colony's first Harbour Master and Naval Officer. He wrote:

*I consider that more care and attention are required on this line between Cape Jaffa and Cape Northumberland, than on any I have seen. The prevailing winds are from the south and west, a continual swell sets on the coast; which*



together with the great unevenness of soundings, cause such an irregular sea, that in the event of a vessel being obliged to carry off the land, the strain and tear would be awful.

Modern vessels continue to be lost along the south-east coast. From a total of 89 shipwrecks located in the south-east, 46 were pre-1911 causing 206 deaths, and 53 were from 1917-1988 causing 35 deaths. As from 1 April 1993 all ships wrecked 75 years ago and older are protected under the (Commonwealth) *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*.

For further information on the *Geltwood* see the book *The Wreck of the Geltwood* by Lois Dean and *Shipwreck sites in the South-east, 1838-1915* by Paul Clark.

For further information about diving on the wrecksite and the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* contact:  
Heritage SA (08) 8204 9245

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Front cover: Coils of fencing wire and roof slates on the wrecksite.  
Photograph B. Jeffery