# The Britomart

# One of the great mysteries of the Bass Strait is that of the disappearance of the barque Britomart. She was a modest size ship of around 250 tons, built as one of a series of brigs for the Royal Navy. The most famous of which of course was the Beagle of Charles Darwin fame. But these vessels had a bad reputation and were known as “coffin-brigs”.

# The Britomart left Melbourne for Hobart with 30 crew and passengers in December of 1839. She was carrying general cargo and sheep.

# When she failed to arrive in Hobart there was great concern but it was thought that she may have had to call in at one of the islands for repairs. The weather in Bass Strait had been fair and other ships had not experienced any problems so it was expected she would show up. A Government ship was despatched to search for her but could find no news and the Straitsmen and sealers he had spoken to denied any knowledge of her.

# However, a few weeks later a Schooner commanded by Captain Gill sailed for Melbourne from Hobart, was forced to shelter in the lee of Preservation Island and Captain Gill paid a visit to the self-appointed “King of the Straitsmen” and Government appointed Constable for the Islands, ex-convict James Munro. Captain Gill found Munro to be evasive and non-committal when questioned about the Britomart. This raised Capt. Gill’s suspicions and the next morning he landed again and searched the Island.

# He found part of the missing ship’s deckhouse being used as a pigsty. He confronted Munro about this and he said he’d found it on the beach and had no idea it was from the Britomart. In Munro’s absence Capt. Gill questioned two of Munro’s women who showed him parts of ship’s boats and the carcasses of dead sheep on a beach. He also discovered cooked mutton and ham, items which could not have floated from a wreck.

# One of the women then took him to the back of Munro’s hut where concealed under some rubbish he discovered a sea chest belonging to the Master of the Britomart. What clinched the deal was that the contents of the chest including paperwork that was dry and showed no signs of ever having been in the water.

# Gill had no doubt that Munro was implicated in the disappearance of the Britomart and he called him to account over it with a degree of uncertainty as Munro was the representative of the law on the islands.

# Munro still denied any knowledge but then offered the news that a party of sealers had left for Launceston a few day earlier with cheques worth 460 pounds and a quantity of gold and banknotes. What really astounded Capt Gill was when he was leaving, Munro handed him the Britomart’s register and papers saying he’d been “given them”, and formally charged Gill to deliver them to the Port Authorities in Hobart. Much more evidence was found and reported and the Board of Inquiry noted that “some foul play” was evidenced and Munro was implicated but he was let go due to insufficient evidence. The Furneaux group of islands was a remote lawless area and the responsibility for investigating the matter ended up with the chief suspect, Constable James Munro, so not surprisingly the matter was never resolved.

# No official charge of wrecking or piracy was ever delivered as most likely as it would have been counter-productive to trade and only make the authorities look like they could not enforce the law within the colony .

# So even after an attempt by the Hobart Town Courier newspaper to get an official investigation reopened the matter faded into history.

# It seems almost certain the vessel was taken by force, the crew and passengers murdered, the vessel looted then scuttled. There had been a rumour that she was supposed to have been carrying £150,000 in gold and silver coin, that could have been what sealed her fate. Divers in the 1970’s discovered what they believed to be the wreck of the Britomart buried in the sands between Preservation and Clarke Islands. The vessel had been burned.

# We’ll never know the truth about the fate of the ship but it most certainly met its demise under highly suspicious circumstances.