

Fears the wreck of HMS Buffalo is disintegrating

By Tony Stickley

Fears are growing that the wreck of the HMS Buffalo may disintegrate completely unless urgent protection measures are put in place, after five large timbers from the ship were washed up on Buffalo Beach during last week's storms.

The pieces of wood - one measuring over 3m and the other four over 2m - have been handed to the Mercury Bay Museum where plans are already being drawn up for a carport-type structure with desalination tanks to be built behind the museum building to preserve the wood for research and educational purposes.

Museum manager, Rebecca Cox, who is also one of the project leaders of the HMS Buffalo Re-examination Project, which carried out a survey of the stricken vessel earlier this year, said she had mixed feelings about receiving the timbers. "There was excitement about receiving them, but there was also the awful thought of what was left of the wreck and possible further destruction," she said.

Rebecca said that storms sometimes dislodge thin planking from the vessel, but this time it was substantial pieces of wood that were washed up.

When the wreck was last surveyed 30 years ago, it was completely covered in sand, as it had been at the time of the 1960 tsunami, which Rebecca believed had protected it from the ravages of the tide.

However, in the most recent survey some of the timbers were 1.5m out of the sand. "That left them exposed and unprotected from the force of the sea, especially the easterly swell," Rebecca said.

Another survey would now have to be carried out when a new date could be arranged with volunteer divers, with the new results being added to the pending report which is due to be released later this year. Since the latest survey was carried out so recently, analysis and inspection of the five washed-up timbers would help identify exactly where



Mercury Bay Museum manager, Rebecca Cox, with the pieces of wood from the HMS Buffalo wreck that washed up on Buffalo Beach in Whitianga during last week's storms.

they came from on the wreck.

However, it was far from certain at this stage that there would be much left of the wreck to survey. "Our fear is that the wreck will degrade completely if nothing is done, there might not be much there even now,"

Rebecca said. "That is why a further survey will be very important. It will be key."

Some of Rebecca's colleagues involved with HMS Buffalo had a "dream" of having the wreck brought ashore to be preserved, but Rebecca felt that was unrealistic. "It would

not be feasible, the dollar amount to do that would be colossal," she said.

Even before last week's destructive seas, Rebecca and the survey team had intended using the survey report to draw up a detailed list of measures to conserve the wreck where it lies. With wrecks in other parts of the world, in-situ protection measures such as constructing artificial reefs or some other sort of protective covering had been used, but Rebecca said that at this stage they did not know whether such a preservation operation would be achievable for HMS Buffalo because it lies in a tidal zone. "It would be very costly and we are not sure at this stage that it would work, but these are ideas that need to be investigated," she said.

"If the wreck is not protected, it will just disappear and that is not something that the people of Whitianga, or the country as a whole, would want to happen because the wreck is so significant and ingrained in the community."

If any of the conservation ideas that were produced were deemed feasible, Rebecca said she and her colleagues would have no hesitation asking for grants and donations for the work to be carried out. "There would be a community fundraising campaign and we would approach other organisations," she said. "After all, the wreck is a protected archeological site, so it comes under Heritage New Zealand and it is in a marine environment, so it comes under Waikato Regional Council as well.

"And what's more, it is not just a locally significant wreck. It is also of national and international significance with links to England, Australia and Canada."

In the meantime, the museum intends conserving the four washed-up pieces of wood with input from local schools as part of an environmental and educational science project which Rebecca said would be "unique in New Zealand."

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