

HMS Buffalo project aims to engage community with “incredible piece” of local history

By Gillian O'Neill

New light could be shed on the story of Whitianga's well-known shipwreck, HMS Buffalo, with two of New Zealand's leading experts in the field of maritime archaeology set to conduct a detailed re-survey of the vessel which lies in shallow waters just metres from the beach to which it gives its name.

Matt Gainsford and Kurt Bennett have worked in partnership with the Mercury Bay Museum to establish the HMS Buffalo Re-examination Project which will be funded by the Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology. “Each year they distribute a scholarship fund of a total of \$6,000 and the project was one of two that they decided to fund this year,” said Kurt, who has worked with the Mercury Bay Museum in the past on analysing material found from the wreck. He has just recently completed his PhD thesis with a focus on three historical ships, including HMS Buffalo.

Kurt was inspired to embark on the re-examination project after a dive in April 2019 when he noticed a significant change in the amount of the wreck that is now exposed. “Parts of it are a lot more visible now, so there is more information that we can capture that will help the museum in the development of its Buffalo collection,” he said.

The last survey was conducted in 1986 and both Matt and Kurt are excited at the potential for using the increased exposure of the wreck along with new technology to do even greater analysis and add more detail to what is an already colourful story.

“I'm very excited by what this can do



Maritime archaeologists, Matt Gainsford (left) and Kurt Bennett, who will be leading the HMS Buffalo Re-examination Project which is being carried out in partnership with the Mercury Bay Museum.

in terms of education,” said Mercury Bay Museum manager, Rebecca Cox. “The survey will really just be the first step in the process and we see this as a great opportunity to get the wider community involved in and engaged with this incredible piece of our history that is literally right here on our doorstep.”

The onsite survey itself will take three days and is expected to happen in February

next year, but all the data analysis and interpretation will be a much longer process. Eventually, the thousands of photographs that will be captured will be used to produce a 3D model which could potentially be displayed at the museum.

A short preliminary dive on Thursday last week has whetted the appetite for both Matt and Kurt. “We hope by doing these sorts of projects where students from local schools

will be able to come along and see how fascinating it is, we might encourage some more people to go down the path of marine archaeology,” said Kurt.

Matt, who was seeing HMS Buffalo for the first time, said he was very impressed, noting that the wreck sitting at just 3m below surface and so close the shore was extremely unusual. “It's in really good condition given its age,” he said. “It's orientation, how it is sitting in the water, has maybe helped with that. But you can see how the sand has shifted over time and so much more is now exposed.”

As are all pre-1900 shipwrecks, HMS Buffalo is a protected structure, so permission must be obtained from Heritage New Zealand for the official survey, which will involve removing a number of small samples. “We have enough to get the project going, but we will be looking for some additional funding in order to continue on through the next phases,” said Rebecca.

As well as a museum display and the development of an education programme for schools, Rebecca said some public events where Kurt and Matt will share their findings and answer questions will also be organised for the local community.

The resting place of the HMS Buffalo is marked by a buoy just a few metres out from Buffalo Beach where the main public toilet block is located. The ship was loading timber near Whitianga on 28 July 1840 when it was driven by a storm onto this spot. Two crew lost their lives. The Mercury Bay Museum already has a dedicated display detailing the ship's history and eventual fate.

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