



Privateers & Prizes

in Sydney Harbour

A merchant ship from the early 19th century.

One day in April 1799, Sydney saw a most unusual sight. Into the harbour sailed a Spanish prize of war, the *Nostra Senora de Bethlehem*, escorted by the two ships that had captured her. She was only the first of a number of such prizes over the next decade.

The captors of the *Nostra Senora* were the *Cornwall* and the *Kingston* – not naval ships, but privateers. They were in fact whaling ships, and they had captured the Spanish ship

off the west coast of South America as they were proceeding from Cape Horn to their whaling grounds.

Privateers had existed since before Elizabethan times, and that most famous privateer of all, Sir Francis Drake. They were merchant ships that during wartime could obtain a 'letter of marque' from their national authority – in Britain and Australia in the 18th and 19th centuries the Admiralty – to act as a unit of the armed forces.

In the days when ships were often captured as prizes, and their value, including that of their cargo, shared among the crew, this was an attractive proposition. But the rules for their operation were strict – anyone without a letter of marque, or operating when a state of war did not exist, could be treated as a pirate, and captain and crew hanged (see *Afloat* June 2000, *The Taking of the Brig Harrington*).

Britain had been at war with both France and Spain since 1792, though this had so far hardly touched the remote colony of New South Wales. Now the activities of these privateers and others, mainly whaling vessels, brought the war much closer.

The *Nostra Senora* had a valuable cargo that included spirits, which suited the colony's New South Wales Corps very well. Her captors were substantial whalers, both sufficiently well armed to take on the larger Spanish ship, especially when acting together. The *Nostra Senora* was declared a prize and sold to the captain of a convict transport just arrived in Sydney. He renamed her *Hunter* and used her to trade in and out of Port Jackson for a number of years.

Later in the same year, 1799, a second Spanish prize

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turned up in the harbour. This was *El Plumier*, loaded with wine, spirits and other cargo, and captured off the coast of Mexico by three more British whaling ships acting in concert, *Betsey*, *Barbara* and *Resolution*. *Betsey* herself had been a Spanish prize, and was armed with two 19-pounder guns and twelve 9-pounders.

The others were not heavily armed, and the capture could only have succeeded by three ships acting together. *Barbara* was later captured by the Spanish off the River Plate. (For *El Plumier*, see Afloat September 2003 The Sad Fate of the Scottish Martyrs).

Another prize, the *Santa Anna*, arrived in 1806, taken by *Port au Prince* off Panama. *Port au Prince's* master, Captain J. Duck, sported four 12-pounder carronades, and this enabled him to defeat even larger ships if he could get close enough without suffering much damage. Carronades were short, light guns firing heavy shot over a limited range, and designed for the close quarters fighting that British ships, especially the Navy, favoured at that time.

Many other prizes came to Sydney in the next few years, almost all Spanish, until peace came in 1815. All had been captured by British privateers, and almost all of these were whaling ships.

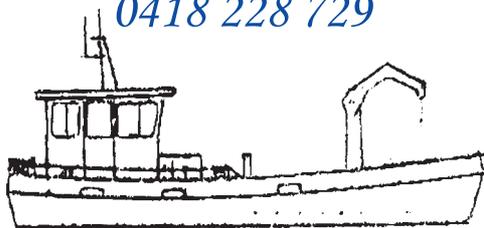
Sydney was the nearest British port to the west coast of America, which at that time was controlled by Spain, from California to Cape Horn. Since this coast was at the same time the principal whaling ground in the Pacific, where whales migrated up and down the coast, depending on the season, the British whalers-cum-privateers enjoyed rich pickings.



A typical medium sized transport of the early 19th century.

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Before the prizes began to arrive, however, Sydney had seen some whaling ships. These had come to the colony as convict transports, contracted by the British Government because of their capacious holds.

These were designed to contain large numbers of barrels of whale oil, but were equally useful for convict accommodation on the voyage of several months from England and Ireland to Sydney. Once they had discharged their human cargoes and dismantled the cages in the holds used as cells on the outward voyage, the whaling ships would reprovision and sail to the American west coast whaling grounds.

The first whaling ship used as a convict transport was probably the *Mary Ann*, 298 tons, whose captain was Mark Munro. She arrived in Sydney in July 1791 with 141 female convicts, and later took convicts to Norfolk Island. Then she left for the whaling grounds off South America.

The 1790s saw a large number of such ships arrive, including *Matilda*, *Salamander*, and *William and Ann* (all

in 1791), *Indispensable* (1796) and *Britannia* (1798). Later whaling ships called at Sydney to obtain food during their long stay in the Pacific, and it was soon realised that there were whales following the seasonal patterns of moving south in summer and north in winter along the east coast of Australia, just as in South America.

The taking of whales had already begun in Australia by then, with whale boats operating from shore stations in the Derwent River in Van Diemen's Land, in Twofold Bay, and in Watson's Bay in Sydney Harbour.

Then in the early nineteenth century some Sydney merchants began to send ships to Bass Strait to collect sealskins, as the *Santa Anna* did in 1807. And soon after, ships based themselves in Sydney with the specific intention of catching whales off our coast, an industry which continued for the next century and a half.

But that, as they say, is another story. ↓

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