

Great Barrier Island: Home built from wreck's bones

By Raewyn Court
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Pioneer brothers created a memorial to a wrecked ship, says Raewyn Court.



The timbers of the SS Wiltshire, which wrecked on a Great Barrier cliff face in 1922, were used to build the Gray home. Photo / Raewyn Court

It's not often you come across a historic homestead that is part house and part ship - but that's the story behind the new museum on Great Barrier Island.

When my forebears, brothers Hugh and Frank Gray, started building the house 90 years ago, they found the process of cutting kauri from the bush and sawing it up in the newly built mill arduous and time-consuming.

But luck came their way on a filthy night of torrential rain and heavy seas in May 1922, when the steamship SS Wiltshire struck the rocks on the southeastern cliff face of Great Barrier.

After the brothers had raced on horseback to help rescue all 113 passengers and crew with no loss of life (even the ship's cat survived), the ship broke up and the wreckage began to wash up on east coast beaches.

Ah, the bounty to be had. Barrels of spirits came in on the overnight tide, and the locals soon learned to rise early so they could bury the barrels in the sand before the customs men came through with their hatchets.

With house-building in mind, the Gray brothers were most interested in the timbers washing up from the wreck. The derricks had been made of a lovely Baltic pine, and Hugh and Frank rafted it up the Kaitoke Creek on the incoming tide, to be carted by horse and dray to the house site and sawn up for purlins and rafters.

Cabin doors became the house's interior doors. The kitchen ceiling was lined with Baltic pine, which over time blackened with smoke from the wood range.

Frank never married, but Hugh and his wife, Ida, raised six children in the house before moving to Auckland during World War II.

The house was used by the family for holidays for the next 50 years, gradually falling into a state of disrepair and becoming uninhabitable by the 1990s. By then it was spooky to walk through the gloomy rooms. Scraps of original wallpaper were the only recognisable sign of decades of pioneering family life, with all its joys and tragedies.

But the Great Barrier Island Community Heritage and Arts Village Trust has rescued the Gray house - along with another historic home, the Mabey house, associated with the wreck of the SS Wairarapa in 1894 - and has relocated it to the village in central Claris. The old homes are being restored to form part of the island's museum-and-art gallery complex. Despite the deterioration of the Gray house, some of the SS Wiltshire's timbers have remained and will be incorporated into the restoration as a memorial to that long-lost ship.