

**ACTIVITY:** Bathing

**CASE:** GSAF 1837.01.17

**DATE:** Wednesday January 17, 1837

**LOCATION:** The incident took place in the Macleay River, 50 miles from the harbour, New South Wales, Australia.

30°S, 153°E

**NAME:** Alfred Australia Howe

**DESCRIPTION:** He was a 12-year-old male.

**BACKGROUND**

**MOON PHASE:** First Quarter, January 14, 1837

**ENVIRONMENT:** The Macleay River flows into the sea at Trial Bay, 386 kilometres north of Sydney.

**DEPTH OF WATER:** "Shallow"

**TIME:** Evening

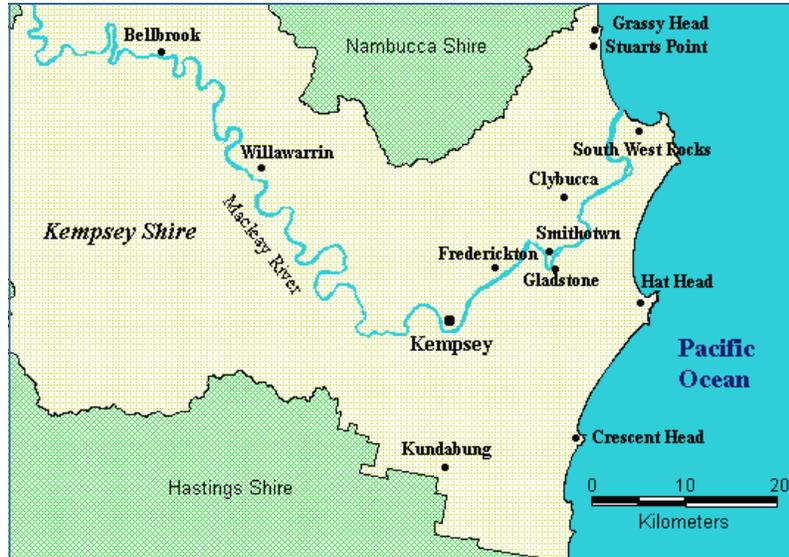
**NARRATIVE:** Whilst washing his feet in shallow water on the banks of the river in charge of a man-servant he was "suddenly seized by a large shark ... and dragged into the current. The man rushed in, grasping the boy at the hazard of his own life and pulled him out of the monster's mouth and swam to land just as the fish pursued them furiously to shore. The effusion of blood was instantly stopped, but symptoms of mortification exhibited themselves. The surgeon ordered his removal to Port Macquarie for amputation of the limb, but death terminated his sufferings by lock-jaw in a litter on the road."

**INJURY:** His calf was bitten by the shark and he subsequently died of tetanus.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** Not identified

**NOTE:** Sharpe notes that Alfred Howe was the grandson of the first Government Printer and the son of the owner of the Sydney Gazette, Robert Howe, who died in a boating accident in Sydney Harbor eight years earlier when he tried to save young Alfred from drowning.

**SOURCES:** The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, Saturday January 28,



This is the first time we have ever mentioned the name of this individual in the *Gazette*. It will be the last. The unfortunate man was drowned by the upsetting of a boat, in endeavouring to get on board the steamer, three days prior to her sailing from Port Macquarie. The same vessel brings the news that Alfred Howe, the eldest son of Mrs. Watt, had died from the effects of lock jaw, occasioned by his being dreadfully bitten in the calf of the leg by a shark when bathing.

1837, page 2; Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society, I, Part 2, 1924; G.P. Whitley (1940) The Fishes of Australia, Part 1, page 14; Victor M. Coppleson (1933); Coppleson Archives' The Living Age, Volume 19 Issue 240 (December 23, 1848), page 548; Alan Sharpe, page 87.

Mrs A.G.Foster has quoted (Roy. Aust. Historical Soc. Jour. & Proc. X, Pt.2, 1924, p.117) from the Sydney Gazette of January 31, 1837, an account of the death on January 17, 1837, of Alfred Australia Howe aged 12 years. The second son of the late Robert Howe who was the second Government Printer and was drowned off Fort Macquarie on January 29, 1829. Whilst washing his feet in shallow water on the banks of the stream (the McLeay River) in charge of a man-servant he was "suddenly seized by a large shark nearly 50 miles from the harbour and dragged into the current. The man rushed in, grasping the boy at the hazard of his own life and pulled him out of the monster's mouth and swam to land just as the fish pursued them furiously to shore. The effusion of blood was instantly stopped, but symptoms of mortification exhibited themselves. The surgeon (p73) ordered his removal to Port Macquarie for amputation of the limb, but death terminated his sufferings by lock-jaw in a litter on the road." Eight years before he had been miraculously saved when his father was drowned by the upsetting of a boat off Pinchgut

**SOURCE:** Coppleson Archives, 1223/13, Item 1 Miscellaneous/Letters relating to publications: [Ref notes page 20], page 71 Injuries from fishes. Shark bite and tetanus

## DEATH.

At the M'Leay River, on Wednesday evening, the 17th January, Master ALFRED AUSTRALIA HOWK, aged 12 years, second son of the late ROBERT HOWE, Esq., of Sydney. This unfortunate youth whilst washing his feet in shallow water, on the banks of the stream, in charge of a man servant, was suddenly seized by a large shark, near fifty miles from the harbour, and dragged into the current. The man rushed in and grasping the boy at the hazard of his own life, pulled him out of the monster's mouth and swam to land, just as the fish pursued them furiously to the shore. The effusion of blood was instantly stopped, but symptoms of mortification exhibiting themselves, the Surgeon in attendance peremptorily ordered a removal to Port Macquarie, for amputation of the limb, but death terminated his sufferings by locked jaw, in a litter on the road. Eight years ago this unfortunate boy was miraculously saved from a watery grave, at the time his equally unfortunate father was drowned by the upsetting of a boat off Pinchgut. The good qualities and high promise of the youth are justly appreciated by all who knew him; and time itself can never efface from his unhappy relatives, the dreadful catastrophe which has deprived a mother of her fondest hope, and two sisters of their dearest brother. He will be removed to Sydney for interment in the vault of his family, so that the bodies of the father and son may mingle in dust together.

*The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser,  
Tuesday January 31, 1837, page 3*

turned quite pale and sick. It seemed that a boat, anchored some fifty yards or so from ours, had hooked a large shark when we were about one third of our way back to the boat; and the cries were for us to go back on shore, and the boat would come to us. After a struggle, although the hook and line were very strong, he had got off, having bent, or rather straightened the former, while we were still some two hundred yards off.

When in Sydney, I went one Sunday morning to bathe. I was accompanied by a friend who had just arrived from the South Sea Islands. He was very timid, and clung to the rock, never going beyond a few yards from it, and instantly returning. Upon rallying him, he confessed his great dread of sharks. I assured him that in that harbor accidents never occurred from any such cause; which was certainly correct, inasmuch as, up to that period, I had never heard of any person having been killed in it; and in the bays close to the town I should suppose that sharks scarcely ever come, being in that respect very different from the West Indies or the coast of Africa. I took my usual swim out for twenty minutes or so, and returned home. On that same day, as I was walking with another friend, after the morning service, a constable touched him upon the shoulder, and pressed his services as a juryman to serve on an inquest then about being held upon the body of a man *that morning killed by a shark*. We found the poor fellow with a terrible wound, extending from the upper part of the thigh to the knee, the flesh being, in fact, entirely stripped from the bone. He was a convict, who had been confined in Cockatoo Island, a station for prisoners, situated about eight miles from Sydney higher up the harbor, and further from the sea than the spot where I bathed that morning. The circumstances attending the accident were peculiar. He and some other prisoners had received permission to bathe; he being the first stripped, jumped into the water, which in every part of the harbor of Sydney, and the coast generally, is deep, being in that respect very unlike the shelving coasts of this country. He had not swam more than a few yards before one of the skulking ground sharks had him fast by the upper part of the thigh. One of his comrades in the most gallant manner jumped in and seized hold of him; and after a struggle, in which all the flesh was stripped off, the poor fellow was got on shore; but the great artery of the thigh was severed, and he was already dead.

Another case, somewhat similar to the above, took place in a remote part of the coast of Australia some years previous to it. Long will the catastrophe be remembered by sorrowing friends in that part of the world, although many years have passed away since it occurred; for, unlike the last case, the victim was not an outcast from society, a convict loosed from his chains for a few moments, but a young and fair lad, the pride of his fond mother, who had, by a singular fatality, lost her husband and several other members of her

family by drowning, and a friend and school-fellow of the writer of this article. He was riding in the lonely bush in company with one servant, from one cattle station to another, if I remember aright. The road lay for a considerable distance along the banks of what is termed in the map a river; but which is, in fact, an arm of the sea. He was about twelve years of age; and, as would be expected from a lad fresh from school, finding himself on horseback, about to proceed to a spot where he would have plenty of shooting and kangaroo hunting, as well as riding after wild cattle, he was in very high spirits. The day was very hot; and when, at a turn of the road, he found himself on the very verge of the cool blue water, no wonder he felt inclined to bathe. The servant, however, reminded him that they had sixty miles yet to ride, and should lose no time; he resolved, therefore, to bathe his feet only, which were very hot. He dismounted, as did also the man; and pulling off his shoes and stockings, he seated himself on a flat ledge of rock, where the water was very deep, and dipped his feet in. It was much the same as if a person suspended his feet over the side of a boat when in deep water. His head was turned towards the man, with whom he was at the moment speaking, when a small ground shark, about five feet long, rose suddenly, and seizing him by the calf of the leg, dragged him off the rock into the water. The man had seen the fish rise; but so rapidly was the poor lad seized, that ere he could spring forward to grasp him, the shark had already borne him shrieking away. As in the last-mentioned case, the looker-on was brave and true-hearted. He leaped into the water, being a good swimmer fortunately; and, though with some difficulty, succeeded in reaching and taking hold of the boy; for when a shark has a large body in its jaws, it generally rushes to and fro on the surface of the water. For a long time did they struggle, the man endeavoring to reach the shore, and the shark rushing sometimes in that direction, and at others in the opposite. At length, however, they reached a spot some thirty yards or so farther up the shore, and where the water shoaled sufficiently to permit the man to plant his feet for an instant on the ground. The moment this happened, owing to the greater resistance offered, the flesh instantly separated from the bones, and the shark swam off with the piece in his jaws. He got the poor lad, who was half drowned and nearly insensible, safely on shore; and had assistance been at hand, his life might ultimately have been preserved. But the nearest aid was sixty miles off, and the limb was so dreadfully wounded (the whole of the back portion of the leg being either torn off, or separated from the bone,) that, carrying him before him on the saddle, he was obliged to travel very slowly. Worse than this, he had to encamp one, if not two nights, in the woods, before reaching the station. The poor lad died from tetanus, or lock-jaw, a few days after the occurrence.

GSAF  
1841.03.28