

**ACTIVITY:** Canoeing  
**CASE:** [GSAF 1870.00.00](#)  
**DATE:** Early 1870s

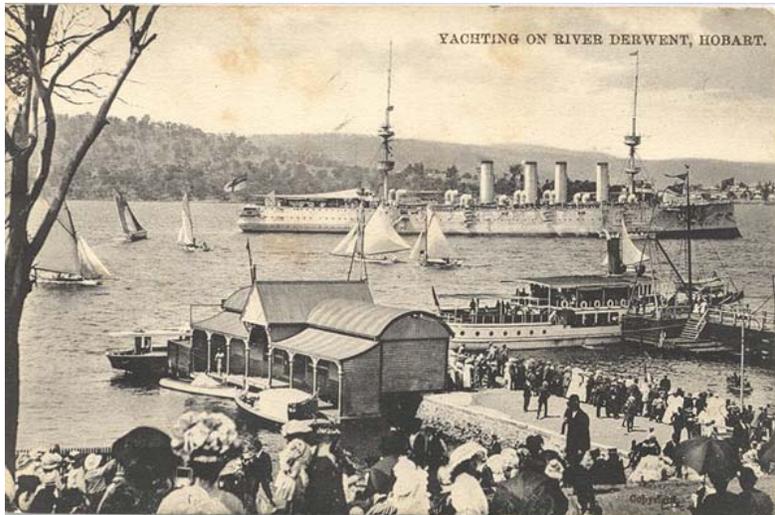
**LOCATION:** The incident was said to have taken place in the Derwent Estuary, Tasmania, Australia.

**NAME:** Sub-Lieutenant Bowyer

**DESCRIPTION:** He was a male from *H.M.S. Clio*.

**NARRATIVE:** A HOBART TOWN LEGEND – Nurtured by increased newspaper

coverage, an element of sensation had already attached itself to sharks by the early 1870s when persistent rumours of a shark attack in the Derwent estuary first appeared. Although completely unsubstantiated, the story quickly gained a credulous audience and was perpetuated well into the next century by word of mouth alone. The general premise of the story unfolded thus: A certain Sub-Lieutenant Bowyer of the Royal Navy, on shore leave from the visiting British warship *HMS Clio*, decided to spend a day canoeing on the picturesque Derwent estuary. In mid-stream his canoe was suddenly rammed and overturned by a large shark, tumbling the terrified Bowyer into the cold dark water. The shark then bit the canoe into two pieces and departed, leaving the shaken but uninjured sailor to swim safely ashore (*Jack Green / John West, ASAF / G. P. Whitley and various correspondents to The Mercury newspaper*).



Although undoubtedly dramatic, the account is not supported by contemporary newspaper reports or official records. Bowyer's ship *HMS Clio* however, was recorded as having visited Hobart on December the 16th, **1871**, for a stay of six weeks, and again in January **1873**, for four weeks. Similarly, the Sub-Lieutenant's name did appear in several newspaper reports of social cricket matches played ashore during his ship's visits, yet no report relating to his encounter with the shark was ever published (*T. C. Roughley, Australian Museum, in correspondence to the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper, 1934*).

Because Bowyer did actually spend time in Hobart aboard *HMS Clio*, the shark attack story is lent an intriguing ring of truth, a quality shared with other oft repeated myths. Of course, if such an incident had taken place and Bowyer escaped uninjured, it is conceivable that it may not have been reported to either the authorities or the newspapers. Perhaps it was only related in a hotel as Bowyer downed a couple of stiff drinks to steady his nerves after his encounter with the shark. His story could have subsequently taken on a life of its own after his ship had sailed.

Whether elements of the story are factual or not, it reveals an increased stature of sharks in the minds of the islanders in the 1870s. An undeniable excitement was generated by listening to, and relating in turn, a story involving a shark attack in the waters of Tasmania and many Hobart Town residents played their part in ensuring the legend of the 'Bowyer

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Attack' survived for at least one hundred and thirty years.

**SOURCE:** Chris Black (2010) *White Pointer South*, page 12 - 'A Hobart Town Legend'

**NOTE:** Coppleson (1958), pages 104 and 105 refers to this alleged incident and writes: "There is also an earlier story of a shark which attacked a man in the same river. The man, it is said, was killed, but one of his rescuers drove a pickaxe into the shark's head. It escaped with the pickaxe still firmly embedded in its skull." Coppleson is here conflating the attack on Amphibious Jack which took place in the Pitt Water Inlet near Sorell, a completely separate waterway, unrelated to the Derwent estuary (see GSAF 1825.00.00.b-AmphibiousJack).

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