Between 1787 and 1900, about 1.6 million immigrants, including about 160,400 convicts, travelled to Australia by ship. Voyages could last more than 100 days, often with no stopovers. Some passengers wrote diaries to keep themselves occupied and as an outlet to vent their frustration with the conditions and other passengers or to record their philosophical or religious reflections. Occasionally an enterprising person would produce a handwritten newspaper. The Manuscripts Collection of the National Library of Australia has about 100 diaries and other first-hand accounts from these voyages. Historian and museum curator Roslyn Russell has used these to illuminate the shipboard experience, supported by an incredible array of art and sketches, including the 1840 oil painting (right). Descendants of these migrants will get a vivid picture of the challenges involved. Lower-class passengers would dine on mutton fat pudding, while first-class passengers would get fresh meat, slaughtered on board. Then there were foul odours, rats, despotic captains, water rations, disease, violence and fear that the ship wouldn’t make it to the other side of the world. Edith Gedge, who travelled on the Sobraon, wrote: “Sometimes for days the food is so unpalatable as to be almost uneatable, and the cocoa and soup made by the ship would do an invalid more harm than good.”

Verdict: the incredible hulks