

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 15/05/24

S.S. CHAMPION

Location

Bass Strait, off Cape Otway

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S110

Date lost

24/08/1857

Official number

31788

Construction material

Iron

Hull

schooner rigged, four water tight compartments with valves, one abaft the engine room, compass placed above the deck in the fore part of the vessel (Argus 26/10/1857)

Propulsion

Steam - Screw

Engine specification

60 HP, top speed in excess of 12 knots, machinery certified 1854

Engine builder

T.D. Marshall, South Shields

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

129.40 Feet / 21.20 Feet / 11.20 Feet

Builder

Thomas Dunn Marshall

Year of construction

1854

Built port

South Shields

Built country

England

Registration Port

Portland

Date lost

24/08/1857

Departure

Portland, Port Fairy, Warrnambool

Destination

Melbourne

Owner

Geo. Henty and Co. (owned both vessels involved), jointly owned by S.G. Henty & Co. and Capt Helpman (Capt Helpman had previously been original owner and master)
 LIST OF OWNER INTERESTS
 J.S. Henty & Co., Melbourne; Henty Learmonth &

Master

Captain Benjamin Francis (Frank) Helpman/ (prev. Lieutenant Helpman R.N.)

Weather conditions

calm, cloudy, horizon clear, night, 4-5 miles good visibility, no swell, smart NW breeze

Cause of loss

Collided with the steamer LADY BIRD and sank in fifteen minutes

Passenger comments

Captain Helpman wasn't sure of the number of passengers as they usually didn't count them until they arrived at Port Phillip Heads, but thought there were about 11 in the cabins and 17 up forward (Argus 29/8/1857)
Survivors-Saloon
Mr Albert A.C. Le So

Number of crew

25

Crew comments

"25 men"
Mr Thomas Campbell (Chief Officer)
George Fitzgerald, Seaman (on lookout duty at time of the collision)
John Sutherland, Seaman (at the wheel from 10pm until time of the collision)
Lake (Luke?), Seaman
Lawrance Matthewson, Seaman
Hurst, Sea

Statement of significance

The wreck of the SS Champion is significant historically as one of Victoria's worst shipwrecks. As an early steamship it played an important part in the development of and communications between the Western district and Melbourne. Although the site has not yet been located it is predicted to be highly significant archaeologically with the potential to yield information about early coastal shipping and the western district passenger and cargo trade. It is significant technically as an example of an early iron screw steamship, and is part of the western district steamship resource including the SS Casino, SS Coramba and SS Julia Percy.

VHR history

It was the regularity that steamships bought to the western district service that, directly or indirectly, caused the collision between these two early steamships both owned by the Henty Steam Navigation Company. The Company's timetable caused both vessels to meet each other on opposite courses at Cape Otway, in the same area where they both altered their courses to head for either the western district ports or Port Phillip Heads. The result was one of Victoria's worst shipwrecks, with the deaths of 26 people who were all passengers asleep in their cabins.

Just five years after the first steamship entered Portland Bay in 1848 (Ben Boyd's Juno), the SS Champion arrived in Melbourne from England in June 1853 destined for the Western District-Melbourne trade. The original owner and master of the Champion was Captain Benjamin Francis (Frank) Helpman who was now a co-owner and apparently acting as an agent for Hentys.

Between 1837-1840 Captain Helpman served on the HMS Beagle with Captain Wickham, and Mt Helpman in north-west Western Australia is named after him. Following the Champion disaster from 1861-1869 he was Warrnambool's second Harbour Master. One of his great-grandsons is actor and dancer Sir Robert Helpmann (who added an n to his surname) (Douglas: 104).

Reporting on trials of the Champion a London newspaper reported that:
"A smart iron screw steam-ship, barque rigged, called the Champion, intended to run as a mail and passenger packet between Melbourne, Sydney and Port Adelaide, made an experimental trip down the Thames yesterday...commanded by Mr Helpman, a gentleman who has been engaged many years in the Government surveys of the coast of Australasia. The ship draws but eight feet, and is thus most capable of encountering the difficulties in crossing the shallow bars in most of the harbours of the colony" (cited in Parsons, 2000).

Commencing operations in December 1854, the Champion was the first steamship in Stephen Henty's fleet (five ships by 1863) and it was joined soon after by the SS Lady Bird. The Lady Bird, a smaller ship of 230 tons, and the SS Ant (wrecked at Barwon Heads in 1866), later stood by to assist survivors of the disastrous wreck of the Admella at Carpenter Rocks, South Australia in 1859.

On this occasion on 24 August 1857, it was a calm, clear night when the courses of the Champion and Lady Bird, both on their regular scheduled routes, converged off Cape Otway. The Champion was bound from Portland to Melbourne (via Port Fairy and Warrnambool) and the Lady Bird was travelling in the opposite direction, from Melbourne to Port Fairy and Portland.

Despite Captain Helpman telling the lookout to watch out for the Lady Bird as they were expecting to encounter her between 11 and 12pm, and both lookouts being aware of the other approaching vessels' lights for about fifteen minutes before impact, the collision occurred just before midnight.

The Lady Bird had four seamen on deck with two on watch when the mate McDougall called Captain Alexander White up from the cabin where he was lying down. Captain White took one look at the approaching red (port) light of the Champion 500 yards away and sang out "hard a port, hard a port hard over" to the man on the wheel and to McDougall and "stop her" to the engineer. He then ran down into the engine room shouting out "stop her". He later testified that even though he was not sure that the engines were stopped or not, it would not have affected

the speed significantly to avoid the collision. The Champion was travelling at its full speed of ten knots.

Meanwhile on the Champion, upon hearing his mate Thomas Campbell's cry of 'Port the helm' Captain Helpman ran from below where he had been resting onto the deck. He came up in time to see a bright torchlight illuminating the bow of the Lady Bird and prepared for the inevitable shock. The Lady Bird rammed head on into the port side of the Champion just abaft the mizzen mast chain stays with a "cutting and sawing noise" and the Champion immediately began filling with water. Within five minutes the cabin was full of water, and in just fifteen minutes the flagship of the Henty's fleet and proud symbol of Western District's prosperity had disappeared, taking with it 26 of those on board. Mr Alfred Le Souef, later to become well known as the director of the Melbourne Zoological Gardens, was one of the fortunate few passengers to have survived - most were asleep below decks. He clung to, and was seen hanging from the bowsprit of the Lady Bird as the two vessels drifted apart. Another unidentified male passenger was seen on the deck of the Champion in his night flannels, but was never seen again. The force of the collision also broke off one of the Lady Bird's catheads dropping the anchor into the water, and one of the Champion's seamen Fitzgerald who was in the water was able to clamber up the anchor chain.

It was controversial that all the deaths were those of passengers, and that not one of the thirteen women and children passengers on board were saved. Evidence was given at the Marine Board Inquiry that no alarm bell was rung to alert the passengers or crew below decks, although there had been a great deal of shouting. Other members of the crew jumped onto the bow of the Lady Bird, which was pushing the stern of the Champion under. The rest of the survivors were picked up by the Lady Bird's boats. The Lady Bird limped back to Geelong with all of the survivors. No doubt many were shocked, distraught and traumatised, having lost friends and loved ones - nearly all of the passengers were from the western district community. Of the 33 passengers carried only 7 were saved.

One of the saloon passengers on the Champion was Mr McKenzie who owned a racehorse 'King John' being transported to Melbourne. Two days after the wreck 'King John' was found grazing near Cape Otway, having swum about ten miles to shore - "one of the most astonishing instances of animal sagacity and endurance on record" (Portland Guardian 9/9/1857). This was despite being encumbered by a heavy blanket and part of his harness box which he had broken free of.

A Marine Board Inquiry failed to find out who was to blame for the collision, due to conflicting evidence given by members of the crew, and giving rise to further controversy with claims of a cover up.

A subsequent Supreme Court criminal trial of the Queen vs. Thomas Campbell (Mate of the Champion) and John McDougall (Mate of the Lady Bird) for "criminal misdemeanours on the high seas under the Merchant Shipping Act" found both men not guilty (Office of the Crown Solicitor, Criminal Trial Briefs, PRO VA 00667).

However Mrs Slattery, widow of passenger and Merri River farmer Charles Slattery later sued the Henty Company and won substantial damages (McKenzie).

Captain Helpman recounted at the Inquiry how at least two collisions had been avoided in the past by both stopping engines and altering course at the last minute, on one occasion causing the Champion to completely go about. Before the collision he was also recorded to have made a prophetic forewarning before witnesses in the Customs House when, tracing the usual courses of both vessels on the counter with his finger, he said that "one day there would be a collision" between the two vessels. Captain Alexander White of the Lady Bird stated that on two occasions the Champion had crossed the course of the Lady Bird, once across the bows and once past the stern.

The wreck of the Champion has not yet been located, and is predicted to lie in between 70-80m depth in the main shipping channel east-south-east of Cape Otway in a collapsed but stable condition, buried to its waterline on a sandy seafloor. Testimonial evidence gives the rough position of the Champion as "Cape Otway 5-6 miles west north-west" (Argus 29 August 1857, Captain Helpmann's account), and "Cape Otway astern" (Mr Le Souef, Argus 29 August 1857).