

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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COLUMBINE



S136 Columbine
SlideNumber136 1 17 Cargo
Diver



S136 Columbine
SlideNumber136 1 10 Bricks



SS136 (1) Columbine Jul 03
012.jpg



SS136 (1) Columbine Jul 03
015.jpg

Location

between Barwon Heads and Point Lonsdale, Ocean Grove, Bass Strait

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S136

Date lost

01/04/1854

Construction material

Wood

Hull

One deck, Two ... trysail Masts, that her length from the inner part of the Main Stem to the forepart of the Stern Post aloft is Seventy-nine Feet Five Tenths, her Breadth in Midships is Twenty Feet two Tenths, her Depth in

Hold at Midships is Thirteen Fee

Propulsion

Sail

Engine specification

N/A

Engine builder

N/A

Number of masts

2

Length/Breadth/Depth

79.50 Feet / 20.20 Feet / 13.70 Feet

Builder

Alexander Hall & Sons, Yard Number 104.

Year of construction

1839

Built port

Aberdeen

Built country

Scotland

Registration Port

Inverness

Date lost

01/04/1854

Departure

Liverpool, UK.

Destination

Geelong, Victoria, Australia

Cargo

General cargo, consigned to Mr Banks of Flinders Street, Melbourne.

Owner

James Tabley (?) Pownall (64/64) of Liverpool; chartered to Fowler & Co., Liverpool.

Master

Capt. Alexander McLennan

Weather conditions

Light SE breeze; night; sea rolling heavily towards shore; fine weather.

Cause of loss

Hit the reef whilst waiting for daylight to enter Port Phillip Bay.

Passenger comments

Capt. McLennan's sister Catherine McLennan; Mr John Clarke Snr. and Mrs Margaret Clarke; and John Clarke Jnr. from Leith

Number of crew

11

Crew comments

11 (incl. captain): Alexander McLennan Captain; ? Chief Officer; ? Boatswain; David Reid - Carpenter; William Lewis - Able Seaman; Joze Maria Vianna - Able Seaman; ? Able Seaman; ? Able Seaman; William McLennan (elder brother of the captain) - Ordinary Seaman; John Battersby - Steward; Michael McGrath - Boy.

Statement of significance

<p>The Columbine is of historic, technical, social and archaeological significance internationally and to the State of Victoria.</p>
 <p>The Columbine has other aspects of cultural heritage significance which are listed below.</p>
 <p>CRITERION 1: HISTORIC</p>
 <p>The Columbine is historically significant as an example of an international cargo and passenger vessel travelling between the UK and Victoria in the gold rush era. It is also historically significant because of its links to the expansion of the Port Phillip Pilot service to cope with increased shipping through the heads in this period.</p>
 <p>CRITERION 2: TECHNICAL</p>
 <p>The Columbine is technologically significant as a rare example of a type of a small international snow brig, which although was once numerous now has few surviving examples. No plans survive for the Columbine, but it is possible that surviving elements of the hull are intact beneath the cargo mound.</p>
 <p>CRITERION 3: SOCIAL</p>
 <p>The Columbine has social significance through its association with the Port Phillip Pilot service, and the surviving family of Pilot Matthew Davidson who died during the wrecking.</p>
 <p>CRITERION 4: ARCHAEOLOGICAL</p>
 <p>The wreck site of the Columbine is archaeologically significant as an example of the small general cargos being imported to Victoria during the gold rush.</p>
 <p>The Columbine wreck site has potential for archaeological research as initial surveys of the site suggest that a large number and range of artefacts survive on the site, in addition to possible surviving hull structure beneath the cargo mound.</p>
 <p>The Columbine wreck site has potential to provide archaeological information about ship construction, trade, international passenger transport for a type of vessel which is not well represented in the archaeological record.</p>
 <p>CRITERION 5: SCIENTIFIC</p>
 <p>The Columbine site may have scientific significance however the site has not yet been investigated in enough detail to establish particular areas of scientific research potential.</p>
 <p>CRITERION 6: INTERPRETIVE</p>
 <p>The Columbine has potential to contribute towards public education as the site is on a popular surf beach, however is

difficult to access by snorkelling or diving. The Columbine has an interesting story which could be told using interpretation panels at beach access points, without compromising the stability of the site.

CRITERION 7: RARE

The Columbine is significant as a rare archaeological example of a brig involved in international voyages during the Gold Rush period.

There are 13 located wrecks of brigs in Victoria dating between 1844 and 1912. Of the 13, 7 were built in the UK, but only 4 were involved in international voyages at the time of their sinking. As detailed above (Section 6) this is a tiny number compared to the hundreds of brigs recorded as sailing between the UK and Victoria in the mid 19th century.

There are currently 13 located examples (not including the Columbine) of British built wooden hulled brigs wrecked in Australian waters between 1824-1880, of which 5 were wrecked in the Gold Rush period between 1851-1860 (Australian National Shipwreck Database).

It is also of note that 504 brigs are recorded to have wrecked in English waters between 1850-1861. Of these the vast majority (436) were British registered, but only 4 Scottish built (NMR). In addition, no wrecked brigs from this period have been located in English, Scottish or Welsh waters (NMR, RCAHMS, RCAHMW).

CRITERION 8: REPRESENTATIVE

The Columbine is significant as an example of what was one of the most common ship types frequenting Melbourne during the mid 19th century. Although there are historical records for hundreds of brigs arriving in Victoria during the gold rush period, very few of these are recorded as wrecking and even fewer have been located as archaeological sites.

VHR history

The two masted brig was built in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1839. In 1840 it voyaged from Aberdeen to the Cape of Good Hope. It had been yellow metalled in 1853, and had repairs carried out in 1849 and 1853.

On its last voyage the Columbine was 144 days out from Liverpool bound for Melbourne with six crew and four passengers when it arrived off Port Phillip Heads at about 6pm (MMH 4/4/1854, Argus 4/4/1854). Pilot Matthew Davidson was cruising in the outside pilot vessel Boomerang and boarded the vessel at 8.30pm, little realising the "melancholy and unaccountable" sequence of events that were about to unfold.

In fine weather with a light south-east breeze and a groundswell, he ordered the Columbine's course for a safe passage through the Rip with the Shortland Bluff light correctly bearing north-east. However after an angry exchange was witnessed between Pilot Davidson and Captain McLennan what happens next is unclear. Noble states that the wreck of the Columbine was attributable to the captain refusing to obey the pilot's orders (Noble: 22). However the Argus stated that the captain "was not satisfied with the conduct of the pilot, and being under the impression that he was steering a wrong course, attempted to interfere, but was repulsed, the pilot declaring that he knew what he was about" (Argus 5/4/1854). John Clarke Jnr's journal suggests nothing of a disagreement, only that the pilot did not consider it safe to attempt to enter the Heads in the dark.

At 10.30pm the Columbine struck bottom four or five times, breaking the tiller and rudder trunk. The vessel then washed over the outside reef and landed "within a cable length of the beach" (GA 3/4/1854). At 3am in the morning a decision to abandon the ship and launch the long boat to get all the crew and passengers ashore was made, perhaps sensibly in light of the water that was steadily filling the doomed vessel and seas entering the cabin. With hindsight though, and in accordance with Pilot Davidson's original advice for the passengers and crew to remain with the wreck (GA 3/4/1854), the ensuing tragedy could have been averted if all had remained on board, as the Columbine lay within 200 yards of beach, and they could have waded ashore in daylight at low tide.

The Columbine also held together well for the next few days, allowing the salvage of most of the cargo. As it happened, immediately on leaving the brig the long boat turned broadside to the surf and was filled by a sea that washed John Clarke Jnr overboard. He swam to shore with difficulty, while the very next wave capsized the boat and washed everyone else out of it except for seaman William Lewis who had lashed himself in. Arriving on shore John Clarke Jnr assisted to bring Pilot Davidson's dead body ashore. Captain McLennan then came ashore to find the body of his drowned sister Catherine, while John Clarke Jnr. was to similarly find the bodies of his parents washed ashore.

A local Mr W. Hudson of Little Malop Street, Geelong found the scene of the wreck the next morning with the survivors attempting to light a fire. He gave them some provisions of meat, bread, tea and sugar and at noon rode to town to alert the police magistrate and Lloyds agent. He reported that as he left twelve vessels were off the Heads, one of them firing guns and making signals of distress near Point Lonsdale as he left - the wind was blowing a strong southerly (GA 3/4/1854).

Pilot Davidson was one of the new pilots employed to cope with the traffic of the gold rush. Ironically he had been elected eight years previously as Vice-President of the British section of the International Shipwreck Relief Society (Noble: 22-23). He had only been a pilot for four months, but was said to have had "great nautical experience", and the tragedy was a deplorable loss for the wife and six children he left behind. (MMH 4/4/1854, Argus 5/4/1854, GA 3,7/4/1854). The Argus voiced its hope that "means will be taken to alleviate the pecuniary difficulties into which the family must be thrown by this most unfortunate disaster" (Argus 4/4/1854).

An inquest was held on 5 April 1854 at Queenscliff before Dr. Hunt, Health Officer and Justice of the Peace into the deaths of the pilot and three passengers, but

"the facts elicited respecting the cause of the wreck are exceedingly meagre" (GA 7/4/1854). This was no doubt attributable to the fact that Pilot Davidson was dead, and Dr. Hunt was "feeling some little delicacy how to proceed" (GA 3/4/1854) given that the Captain's actions may have resulted in the death of his beloved sister, and both Captain McLennan and his brother William were required to give evidence. To this day there remains an air of mystery as to the exact circumstances surrounding the loss, and the argument between McLennan and Pilot Davidson.

Salvage was successfully carried out on the wreck with light winds and seas prevailing, and most of the cargo was salvaged. The estimated loss of vessel was 3000 pounds.