

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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CORSAIR



S144 Corsair
PortPhillipHeadsPointNepean
PrintOfShip

Location

Corsair Rock, Point Nepean, Port Phillip Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S144

Date lost

24/05/1874

Official number

48409

Construction material

Wood

Hull

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Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

1

Length/Breadth/Depth

63.60 Feet / 18.90 Feet / 9.60 Feet

Year of construction

1832

Built port

Cowes, Isle of Wight

Built country

England

Registration Number

50 of 1864

Registration Port

Melbourne

Date lost

24/05/1874

Departure

Queenscliff

Cargo

Previous cargo of guns, pistols, cutlery, paint and oats

Owner

Port Phillip Pilots

Weather conditions

Strong south westerly wind and huge seas (UID 1)

Cause of loss

missed its stays and hit rocks inside Point Nepean reef

Passenger comments

All Pilots (UID 9)

Number of crew

11

Statement of significance

The Corsair is historically significant as the wreck of a Port Phillip Pilot vessel, and for naming Corsair Rock at the entrance of Port Phillip Heads.

VHR history

The Corsair was an 51-ton gross, single-masted cutter, built in Cowes on the Isle of Wight, England, and formerly belonged to the Royal Yacht Squadron, where it was celebrated as a finely built and fast sailing vessel. One of its accomplishments was beating the yacht Talisman and winning a 100-guinea prize in a race between Cowes and Eddystone. It was carvel-built with a square stern, made of English oak with copper fastenings and yellow metal sheathing, and had dimensions of 63.6 x 18.9 x 9.6 feet (19.3 x 5.76 x 2.9 metres). The Corsair arrived in Williamstown on 6 June 1853 after a 74-day trip from England with 11 crew a fast trip and a long one for such a small boat. It was a speculative voyage undertaken by its owner and master Captain Croft, who hoped to sell the vessel for a good price as well as a small but valuable cargo of guns, pistols, cutlery, paint and oats. On arrival in Australia its sailing and seaworthy qualities were recommended by the Port Phillip pilots as suitable for being a cruising pilot vessel and it was bought by the Victorian Government. It was later sold to the newly formed privatised Port Phillip Sea Pilots for £925 on 26 August 1854. Owned by the No. 1 Pilot Company, the Corsair was involved in a number of collisions over the years (with the Flavius (in 1854), Seawitch (1856), Loelia (1860), Spray (1864) and Nith (1867)) and gave its name to Corsair Rock when it located and mapped the hazardous submerged outcrop. Corsair Rock was gazetted as a hazard on 7 November 1853, but the unnamed and uncharted obstacle had been known about for many years prior to this by the pilots and mariners. It is popularly believed that the rock was responsible for the wreck of the Corsair on it, and so named after it, but in fact it was in the Corsair that pilots first located and charted the dangerous obstacle in October 1853, thus giving it its name. The Corsair itself was not wrecked until 19 years later on Point Nepean. In the early morning of Sunday, 24 May 1874, the Corsair was beating to the outside of the Heads in a strong south-westerly wind and a flood tide in order to take up its station in the offshore cruising ground. A number of recent strong south-westerly gales had brought many overdue ships to the Heads and there was a shortage of pilots to meet the demand. The Corsair had been anchored inside the Heads and a replacement team of five pilots (Singleton, Kennedy, Deane, Gaunson and Robertson) was landed on to it by the steam tug Hercules at midnight on Saturday, 23 May. The pilots took the cutter out close to Point Nepean to avoid the full force of the flood tide, when the vessel missed stays and before it could attempt to tack again, was swept on to the reef with large seas breaking over it. Three pilots and one seaman got out in one of the ship's boats and were swept into the darkness. The other boat with the remaining three pilots and nine crew managed to get clear of the surf zone and land at Queenscliff. Fears were held for the other boat but the Queenscliff lifeboat found it and all the crew safe on the beach the next morning. At the same time as the Corsair became a victim of the gale conditions, the tug Warhawk had just completed towing the dismasted ship Loch Ard through the Heads that day and, being nearby, went to the Corsair to render assistance but was not required. One newspaper report of this incident involving the Loch Ard, famous for its tragic wrecking almost four years later near Port Campbell on 31 May 1878, shows it had a lucky escape on this occasion; ...that the anchors of the Loch Ard should have held in such a gale created no small amount of surprise, as also did the fact that her captain did not make a fair wind of it by standing out to sea long before he had got close in shore. Had she dragged her anchors she would have gone on to the rocks on the back beach, where she must have gone to pieces in so short a time that it is extremely improbable that any lives could have been saved, as no assistance from land would have been available...The dismasted vessel was towed into harbour by the Warhawk on Saturday, and as she anchored opposite the quarantine ground presented a most deplorable appearance, her crew and passengers being worn out by the fatigue and the terrible anxiety they had to suffer for so many weary days and nights, the agonising moments spent on Friday night when every minute they expected would be their last having told upon even the bravest and most powerful. The Corsair was full of water and soon became a total wreck, but most of its rigging and gear was salvaged at the time and, fortunately, it was fully insured. In 1906, some workmen unearthed her stern-post on Nepean Reef and it yielded about 40 lb of brass and copper. A carved stempost with brass fittings has also since been recovered by divers from shallow water near this location and corresponds with the Corsair's location in the auction notice at the time which was given as outside Point Nepean, stranded between the Dry Rock and the shore resting on sand on the northern side of the reef.