

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 28/04/24

EARL OF CHARLEMONT

Location

Barwon Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S202

Date lost

18/06/1853

Construction material

Wood

Hull

Oak, hackmatack, spruce and beech; yellow-metalled; figure head of a man; no. of years assigned - 4; A1 1853; two decks, square stern, no galleries. Damage repaired 1853 - new deck, keelson;

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

147.80 Feet / 30.60 Feet / 22.70 Feet

Year of construction

1849

Built port

St John, New Brunswick

Built country

Canada

Registration Port

Liverpool

Date lost

18/06/1853

Departure

Liverpool

Destination

Melbourne and Sydney

Cargo

100 tons of iron and some coal, and general merchandise

Owner

Magee & Co; Capt. Gardner allegedly owned 1/8 share

Master

Capt. William Gardner

Weather conditions

Wind force 4; clear night the foggy, tide setting

Cause of loss

Struck reef, careless navigation

Passenger comments

Immigrants

Number of crew

15

Crew comments

approximately 15

Statement of significance

<p>The wreck site of the Earl of Charlemont is historically and archaeologically significant for the remains of its cargo and passengers' belongings from an international immigrant ship of the gold rush period, representing the

cultural material being bought out to Australia in a typical immigrant ship. It is socially significant for the descendants of the many immigrants who made it ashore safely, and who have erected a memorial cairn to their forbears on Point Flinders.

VHR history

The ship Earl of Charlemont was probably named after James Caulfield (1728-1799) the first Earl of Charlemont, who devoted himself to Ireland's social and cultural improvement, and took an active part in political matters, including forming the Whig Club in 1789 to argue for parliamentary reform.

The ship Earl of Charlemont struck what is now known as Charlemont Reef, about one mile south-west of Barwon Heads, then was carried onto the shallow reef directly in front of Barwon Heads Bluff, where remains of the wreck lie sanded up for most of the year and difficult to access due to breaking surf.

The following account of the arrival and wrecking of the ship Earl of Charlemont is taken from a report in the Argus, 21 June 1853:

"The Earl of Charlemont, 878 tons, Captain Garner, one of the Fox Line of Australian Packets, with 435 passengers, for Melbourne and Sydney, from Liverpool, went ashore at the Barwon Heads on Saturday morning. She sighted Cape Otway on Friday last, passed it about twelve o'clock, and kept off about two miles from shore. About five o'clock the same evening, she was twenty miles from the Lighthouse, a breeze blowing off the shore. The vessel lay to for the night, which was quite clear, the moonlight lasting until four o'clock, when the vessel struck. There was no wind at the time, but the tide was setting in strongly, and the vessel bumped so violently, that the foremast went over the bows at once, carrying away the rigging, and so close was the vessel to the shore, that some of the crew clambered down the chains, along the fallen mast, and made to the shore by swimming a few yards. The vessel then fell on her starboard side, and began to fill, and the tide rising made a clean breach over her. Three lifeboats were immediately launched, and three attempts were made to carry a rope ashore; each attempt failed; the boats were capsized, but the crew manning them escaped and getting ashore, cowardly left their companions and passengers to their fate. During this time the greatest order prevailed. Mr Savage, a steerage passenger, then undertook to carry a rope to the land, swam ashore, at the risk of his life, and successfully accomplished it. The life boats were then attached to the rope, and the lady passengers and children were safely landed, then the married men, and finally the bachelors, with the exception of about forty, who dropped over the bows of the ill-fated vessel, and swam ashore some time before the rope was fastened to the land, rendering assistance to the boats, and carrying the female passengers through the surf. Not one life was lost. Fires were lighted, round which the passengers crowded; some food was procured from the vessel, some sheep; and a bullock from Mr McVean's station, and there all lay that night unhoused."

Press criticism of the behaviour of the captain and officers was rife. One report in the Melbourne Morning Herald stated that:

"The Captain, like the Captain of the Sacramento (another immigrant ship wrecked on 27 April 1853 on Lonsdale Reef), had taken the precaution of going to bed on first sighting the land, and does not seem to have encumbered his officers' minds, with superfluous directions about lights and soundings" (MMH 30/6/1853).

The pilot schooner Anonyma (wrecked on Point Lonsdale six years later) stood off to render assistance but couldn't get close to the wreck, while Pilot Taylor and the Second Mate of the Boomerang swam across the Barwon River to render assistance, the third wreck Pilot Taylor rendered assistance to in the period of a month (the others being the Frisk and the Sea both wrecked on Point Nepean on 31 May 1853).

The Board of Inquiry investigating the wreck issued a report, a case was made out but charges were not laid, and severe public criticism followed at the uselessness of officialdom and the enquiry process. Much public sympathy was expressed for the immigrants who had apparently suffered extremely poor conditions during the voyage and had lost their possessions in the wreck. Geelong people subscribed 1,000 pounds to a fund to assist the passengers. Captain Gardner and his wife left Australia in the Madagascar in July, which was carrying 68,390 oz. of gold but the vessel was never heard of again - piracy was suspected. The vessel remained intact for a month, and some salvage of luggage was carried out, however by 22 July the idea of getting the ship off was abandoned, as "high winds and heavy surf have damaged her considerable with each succeeding tide forcing up her water casks ripping her deck. This demolition is going on rapidly with the cargo and luggage constantly immersed" (MMH 22/7/1853). The estimated amount of loss was 7,000 pounds.

The site is subject to sanding up with up to 8 feet of sand, but on the rare occasions it is exposed many artefacts can be seen on the site. While most of the hull has gone, chain, concretions and iron lie scattered about in the uneven limestone reef, and the remains of a cartwheel have been reported. Buttons, coins and other small metal objects have survived as evidence of the immigrants' lost possessions.