

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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SS ANT

Location

Ant Spit, Thirteenth Beach, Barwon Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S33

Date lost

12 Jun 1866

Official number

31621

Construction material

Iron

Hull

Iron; 1 deck and a break; round stern; clincher built, no galleries or head, two masted schooner rigged, 139 81 tons underdeck, 98.54 tons register, sister ship to Corio.

Propulsion

Steam - Screw

Engine specification

30 H.P., 2 cylinder inverted, length of engine room 22.6 feet

Engine builder

Blackwood and Gordon

Number of masts

2

Length/Breadth/Depth

100.80 Feet / 17.80 Feet / 9.20 Feet

Builder

Scott & Co

Year of construction

1854

Built port

Greenock

Built country

Scotland

Registration Number

12 of 1864

Registration Port

Melbourne

Date lost

12 Jun 1866

Departure

Circular Head, TAS

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

Wheat, skins, potatoes, 16 sheep

Owner

1854 - Samuel Martin & Others, Belfast.
 1856 - T.Thompson, Hobart.
 May 1857 - Peter Le Page, Melbourne.
 Oct. 1857 - George Ormerod, & Co. Guichen Bay, SA)
 Feb. 1864 - J. Fowler
 July 1865 - Gippsland Steam Navigation C

Master

1865: Capt King
 June 1865: Capt Harrison

Weather conditions

Moderate sea; fog

Cause of loss

Foggy weather, careless navigation

Number of crew

17

Statement of significance

The remains of the wreck of the SS Ant have not been inspected, and therefore an assessment of its archaeological significance cannot be made. The Ant is historically significant as an early iron screw steamship that played an important role in the development of trade in South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. Its role in the SS Admella shipwreck disaster is also noteworthy. Its early simple steam engine is of technical interest.

VHR history

The SS Ant was reputedly the first ship to sail direct from Belfast, Ireland to Port Phillip, arriving in 1855. (Parsons, 1981: 20). The Ant had an eventful career trading for a number of owners between south-eastern mainland Australian ports and Tasmania. It was involved in a number of famous wrecks and rescues, before being wrecked itself. Unusually for a British built steamship, the Ant is not found listed in Lloyd's Registers. Between 1857 and 1864 the Ant was owned by George Ormerod & Co and traded between Melbourne, Adelaide, Robe and Port MacDonnell (Parsons, 1981: 20; Pemberton: 37). George Ormerod was a pastoralist who had developed Robe as a wool shipping port, and his promisory notes were supposed to have made up "two-fifths of the currency" of the south-east district of South Australia (Mudie; 107). It was during these years of service that the crew of the Ant played a rescuers role in one of Australia's - and the world's - most dramatic shipwrecks, that of the SS Admella at Carpenters Rocks, a reef offshore from Cape Banks on the south-east coast of South Australia. The Ant was replaced on its South Australian trade route by the SS Penola in 1864 (which collided with and sank the SS City of Launceston in Port Phillip Bay in 1865), and sold to the Gippsland Steam Navigation Co. in July 1865. The Ant was used in the seasonal trade between the Gippsland Lakes and Melbourne. During this period of ownership it was involved in the rescue of crews from the vessels Natal, Tomatin and Lady Young, all wrecked in the same south-east gale along the east coast of Wilsons Promontory on 14 July 1865. On its final voyage the Ant was bound from Circular Head, Tasmania to Melbourne when it was wrecked. On the morning of 12 July 1866, in heavy fog when expecting to be approaching Port Phillip Heads and instead finding he was near Cape Patton, Captain Harrison ordered the course changed to east and ran for ten miles. It was reported in the Argus that " upon hearing breakers, the engines were ordered to half speed, and the Ant's course altered southerly. In about five minutes afterwards she struck on a rock three miles west by north of Barwon Heads " (Argus 13 July 1866). It was reported that " ..at a quarter past eight a.m. this day, the Ant, steering north-east by east, struck on a rock five miles south-west of Barwon Heads, about a mile from the shore, the engines going slow at the time. Immediately upon striking a seaman reported that the fore compartment had filled. Captain Harrison found it was impossible to get the steamer off, the engines having stopped. They then lowered the boats down, to save the passengers and crew, there being a very heavy roll but no break. Four hands and a passenger remained on board until 10a.m., when, finding the vessel full of water with her back broken, they left her, to procure assistance to save the deck cargo, the hull being full of water (Argus 13 July 1866). They engaged a fishing boat to take them to Queenscliff, where they arrived at 1.30p.m. Captain Harrison was found guilty of negligence in placing reliance on defective compasses "after same had twice in 18 hours proved defective", navigating at full speed in fog contrary to Steering and Sailing Directions, and neglecting to take soundings "an omission, under the circumstances, showing most culpable negligence". He received a nine month suspension of his certificate (Marine Board Inquiry 19/6/1866). Salvage work went on for some months after the wrecking, work included dragging the vessel closer to the shore, and the engines were still visible at low tide in the mid 1900s. The shallow sands at the western end of Thirteenth Beach upon which the site lies is today still known as Ant Spit. The reported site is subject to surf, is usually buried, and is subject to poor visibility by its proximity to the outlets of the Barwon River, Thompson's Creek and the Black Rock sewerage treatment outfall at the western end of Thirteenth Beach.