

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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LIGHT OF THE AGE



S414 LightOfTheAge
PortPhillipHeadsPointLonsdale
BrokenCeramics



S414 LightOfTheAge
PortPhillipHeadsPointLonsdale
IronSpears



S414 LightOfTheAge
PortPhillipHeadsPointLonsdale
SiteDetail



S414 LightOfTheAge
PortPhillipHeadsPointLonsdale
TopView

Location

Point Lonsdale Beach, half a mile west from Point Lonsdale, Port Phillip Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S414

Date lost

16JAN1868

Official number

24610

Construction material

Wood

Hull

Oak, pitch-pine, hackmatack; bolted; metal-sheathed Draft 22'9" forward, 22'7" aft (according to Capt.Porter at Steam Navigation Inquiry, 22 Jan. 1868), 2 decks; draft 21 ft 7 in.

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Builder

Jotham A. Stetson

Year of construction

1855

Built port

Boston, Massachusetts (Parsons, 1984; Bureau Veritas 1857, 1858); Chelsea, Massachusetts (MARHST listserver discussion list June 2001; Clark, 1910 (2nd Ed. 1970): Denmead, 1973)

Built country

USA

Registration Port

Liverpool

Date lost

16JAN1868

Departure

Liverpool

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

General, salt, slates, pipes, liquors, preserved goods, crockery - worth 12,000 pounds

Owner

1855-1857: Jotham A. Stetson 1857-1858: Marshall & Edridge, London. 1862-66: T.M Mackay, Black Ball Line of Australian Packets, London. 1866-1868: H.T. Wilson, Cunningham & Co., Liverpool, White Star Line of Boston Packets, Liverpool.

Master

1857-1858: J. Williams; 1861-1868: Capt. Thomas Reid Porter (Certificate No. 7738, London Board of Trade)

Weather conditions

Heavy weather; wintery; cold; rain; very thick; bad visibility; light wind; SE by E

Cause of loss

Captain drunk, ran ashore at night

Passenger comments

42 passengers with two ladies in the cabin (Capt. Porter's testimony, Argus 23/1/1868) ;
 2 lady passengers and 43 in the steerage (Argus 17/1/1868)
 45 (GA 17/1/1868)
 Passenger names including:
 Miss Elizabeth McCandlish
 Miss Hampshire
 Mr John Neil (steerage)
 Mr Patrick O'Neil
 Mr John R. Fletcher (second class passenger)
 Mr Jas. Callaghan (second cabin passenger)

Number of crew

34

Crew comments

Edward Fisher Ley (boatswain), Michael Burgess (carpenter), Christian Christopherson (sailmaker), Charles Sharp/Sharpe (third officer), Robert Hastings (chief mate/ first officer), Henry Leon (second steward), James Edwards (A.B.), Peter Davis (A.B.), Hugh ?, Peter ?

Statement of significance

<p>The Light of the Age is archaeologically significant as the wreck of an international immigrant ship with an inward bound cargo. It is historically significant for its association with both the Black Ball and White Star Lines which carried thousands of immigrants to Australia.</p>

VHR history

The Light of the Age was a fast and large wooden clipper ship originally named the Beacon Light, and described as a 'Californian clipper' being used in that trade. There has been some confusion over over the Light of the Age's original name and date of construction, however research has confirmed it to have been originally built as the Beacon Light, 1280/1320 tons built in 1855 by Jotham A Stetson in Chelsea, Massachusetts. It was renamed the Light of the Age in 1857 by Marshall and Edridge of London, who sold it in 1862 to Thomas M. Mackay of London.

 Thomas Mackay and James Baines of Liverpool had a "fraternal arrangement" and were the main partners, along with others, who operated as the famous Black Ball Line of Australian Packets that carried hundreds of thousands of immigrants to Australia between 1852 and 1866. Between 1862-1866 the Light of the Age made several voyages to Australia under the Black Ball Line flag, mainly employed on the London to Queensland run carrying emigrants. During this time unsanitary conditions were reported by health officers and surgeons - who gave evidence of leaks from the galley and water closets constantly wetting some of the steerage berths - and poor ventilation and lighting (Stammers, p. 102, 192)

 The wreck of the Light of the Age is set against the decline of both the Black Ball Line and their rival the White Star Line (later famous for owning the Titanic). In 1865 a shipping slump and failed bank in Liverpool forced the Black Ball Line to sell two thirds of their fleet of ships (Hollett: 154-156, 163). It appears that the Light of the Age was one of these ships, and it was bought by the White Star Line. Interestingly Black Ball Line crockery has been found on the wreck site. In 1867 the White Star Line under the principal ownership of Wilson and Cunningham also went bankrupt, but was purchased by Thomas Ismay who continued the shipping line's name with four ships. He was to lose one of them, the Victoria Tower near Torquay just over a year later in 1869. The Black Ball Line lost three ships in Victoria in the 1860s, all of them destroyed by fire while in a Port Phillip anchorage - the Empress of the Sea (1861,

Quarantine Ground, Portsea), Lightning (1869, Corio Bay) and the City of Melbourne (1868, Hobson's Bay).
On the Light of the Age's last voyage it was carrying a mixed general cargo worth 12,000 pounds and 42 passengers from Liverpool bound for Melbourne. It had an inauspicious start to a disastrous trip, grounding in Blackwater Bay while being towed by steam tug shortly after leaving Liverpool on 13 October 1867. On the 9th December 1867 while off the Cape of Good Hope, a foretopmast and royal mast were lost when the foremast backstay eyebolt broke, severely injuring one seaman and causing three seamen to be lost overboard and drowned as they were furling the royals (Argus 24/1/1868). Unfortunately the boats had been brought in from the davits due to Captain Porter's fears they would be stove in in heavy weather, so two lifebuoys were thrown overboard. Every exertion was made to get the ship to go about, but with the ship in a crippled condition the men were left to their fate.
At the later Marine Inquiry into the wreck of the Light of the Age Captain Porter was reported drunk before the ship even left Liverpool, and confined himself to his cabin in a state of drunkenness in the week that repairs to the masts were being carried out, leaving the supervision of repairs and navigation of the ship to the chief mate. He was also alleged by one of the lady passengers Miss McCandlish to have had an improper relationship with the other lady passenger Miss Hampshire.
The first land sighted was the south headland of Fitzmaurice Bay, King Island which was incorrectly thought to be the north end of King Island. The later finding of the Court of Inquiry stated that "the ship was badly navigated for a day or two before making King's Island (and) was altogether out of the usual and proper track of vessels bound to Port Phillip, being much too far to the southward" (Argus 31/1/1868). Further findings were that that the ships' position was not known by dead reckoning when it made landfall, that the captain was often drunk throughout the voyage, that the sounding lead was not used, that the captain was drunk when landfall was made, and that cross bearings to ascertain their correct position and amendments to the logbook were not made. When proceeding to the Heads and signalling for a pilot, evidence was given that the captain was so drunk that he did not understand the pilot boat Rip's signals, though everyone else including the passengers did (Argus 23/1/1868).
On a starboard tack off Port Phillip Heads, blue lights were being burned to attract the pilots' attention, a lookout was posted for the two leading lights on Shortland Bluff, and the crew were ordered to turn in with their clothes on. The crew were turning in and after lighting their bedtime pipes "had not finished their smoke, when a seaman came down and said that all hands were wanted on deck 'bout ship because we were heading right in to the land" (Argus 31/1/1868). In the thick weather the Light of the Age was signalling for a pilot when suddenly the haze lifted and breakers were seen ahead. The chief mate called the captain out of bed, who immediately gave orders for the ship to go about, but it missed stays. This was attributed to the mainsail being clewed and not enough after-sail being set (Argus 24/1/1868). At this point it was attempted to wear the ship around but at 1.30am the vessel touched ground, and the port anchor was let go. Guns and rockets were fired to attract attention, and the masts were cut away to reduce the strain on the ship's hull. The foremast destroyed one of the ships boats as it came down.
Meanwhile the outside cruising pilot vessel Rip had also been signalling with lights for about three hours while 'chasing' the Light of the Age around, when it abandoned the chase due to their situation becoming dangerous. On observing the distress signals it sailed closer to investigate, and found the Light of the Age ashore. Captain Porter asked the pilots to go for help, but Pilots Caught, Draper and Rich, after conferring, decided that it was best to remain and attempt to get off all of the passengers as the flood tide would be making until 9.00am and force them to remain at Queenscliff. Captain Porter also gave them a document also signed by the Chief Mate Hastings handing over full authority to Pilots Draper and Rich to act on behalf of the agents of the Light of the Age, after effectively refusing Pilot Draper leave to board the ship Dover Castle just arrived off the Heads. At daylight the pilots launched two of their boats and took off all of the passengers and some of their luggage, taking them first to Queenscliff, then to Melbourne. During this rescue operation there was a heavy sea running, the second officer was "drunk and obstructive", the cook and steward were also drunk in the cuddy, and the captain was described as "stupidly drunk" - at one stage lifted into his bed from the floor of his cabin by Pilot Rich. While not being obstructive neither was he giving any orders that would render assistance to the operation (Argus 28/1/1868).
Pilot Draper later stated that two days later the wreck was sold in Melbourne "for a few pound and in the course of a few days the Marine Board investigated the cause of the wreck and decided to cancel the Captain's certificate. We pilots were severely questioned as to where we were and what we did. The newspapers made so much of everything that we were put apparently for some time under a shade, and the saloon passenger who knelt down on the poop deck and thanked God for the mercies He had shown them in sending to their rescue two such able men as Rich and myself who had shown such decision in destroying all the grog on board thereby preventing the danger of drunken frenzy and riot seizing on many amongst them and likely ending in death - never came forward (sic) during the enquiry and assisted us in the slightest way by repeating before the Board the able assistance we had rendered as he had acknowledged in the poop in the presence of all" (Draper n.d.).
As well as cancelling Captain Porter's certificate the Board also commented severely on the carelessness of the ship being supplied with incomplete charts and not furnished with lifeboats (GA 31/1/1868).
The steam tugs Resolute and Titan took the crew to Melbourne and returned with lighters and a salvage crew, however by 17January strong southerly winds had "the

effect anticipated" on the Light of the Age, lying broadside to the waves, and it began to break up. 'Rich pickings' were also anticipated by wreckers, who found the beach littered with wreckage and smashed cases. The wreck was sold on 20 January 1868. Salvage operations were disrupted when the ketch Phoenix was driven ashore during salvage operations but was later refloated. A more tragic incident occurred during the final days of the salvage effort when one of the boats capsized, drowning six men including two salvage divers (Denmead).
The Light of the Age does not appear in Lloyd's Register, as it was registered with the French Bureau Veritas.
Subsequent to the wrecking of the Light of the Age marine concretions and corrosion products formed a cement capping over the cargo, stabilising and protecting it. The site of the Light of the Age was found by divers in late 1960s, and soon became a popular diving site. Huge amounts of intact crockery were removed from the wreck by boatloads of divers, including distinctive brown glazed teapots with legs (one diving author named it 'the Teapot Wreck' (Denmead, 1973: 78-82), 'Greek Key' patterned transferware, Cooper & Wood Portobello black glass three piece bottles, and sauce, preserve and condiment bottles often with contents (gooseberries, raspberries, olives) and seals intact. Larger items including a signal cannon and an anchor were removed from the site, while divers seeking souvenirs commonly used cold chisels to chip objects free of the concretion 'cap' which had stabilised and protecte the remaining cargo for so long. In 1982 this situation was drastically changed when someone used explosives to further break concretions. However the charge was too powerful resulting in the site's complete destruction and the remaining items to become scattered and broken. Abraded and worn ceramic objects washed up on the beach are invariably collected by beachgoers, including fragments of crockery, figurines and animal figures used for 19th century household decoration and toys.
The site today consists of the remains of a winch, iron fittings and mastbands, and an approximately 30m square scatter of crockery with various designs and patterns, slate, glass and coal, concretions and even remains of rope, in a sandy gutter between two reefs running parallel to the beach. A large sand mound lying in shore is reputed to cover the existing remains of the vessel. An Admiralty type iron-stocked anchor in the stowed position lies beyond the outer reef, with the winch against the inner reef inshore of it. The site is subject to surge and can only be dived on calm days, with low swell and northerly winds.