

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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SACRAMENTO



S601 Sacramento
PortPhillipHeadsLonsdaleReef
NamePlate PF



S601 Sacramento
PortPhillipHeadsLonsdaleReef
Chart

Location

Lonsdale Reef, Port Phillip Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S601

Date lost

27 Apr 1853

Construction material

Wood

Hull

Yellow metalled, copper fastened. Classified Lloyd'sA1, 1852

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

0.00 Feet / 0.00 Feet / 0.00 Feet

Year of construction

1850

Built port

Sunderland

Built country

England

Registration Port

London

Date lost

27 Apr 1853

Departure

London

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

60,000 pounds specie, approx. 30 tons cargo, mainly spirits

Owner

Teighe & Co.

Master

Captain William Holmes

Weather conditions

Wind: W; force 2; fine night; ebb tide

Cause of loss

Foundered

Passenger comments

Approximately 300- 450 government immigrants

VHR history

The Sacramento was a 430-ton net (447-ton gross) three-masted wooden barque built in Sunderland, England and owned by Teighe & Co. of London, having previously been owned by Pryde & Co. of Liverpool. It was well built, being yellow-metalled and copper-fastened and classified A1 by Lloyds dimensions are not known.¹ Its captain, William Holmes, described the Sacramento as...her being a fine barque; a better vessel of her tonnage never left England, or more adapted to the passenger trade, or any other mercantile purpose, being nearly a new vessel, classed A1 for 12 years, and a fast sailer.

Bound from London to Melbourne, the Sacramento was carrying about 300 (various reports say 250/350/400) government immigrants, 30 tons of spirits and ale and £60,000 in gold sovereigns.

At this time the British Government offered such incentives as cheap fares and land for prospective emigrants to Australia, a form of sponsorship to ensure that the colony would have a supply of labour for the various industries. Gold fever further encouraged potential emigrants, usually the working class poor in search of a better life, and incredible reports such as the following were not unusual in British newspapers:

This is the El Dorado of the world. Money is actually so plentiful here that men do not know how to get rid of it. You will laugh when I tell you as a matter of fact that two men, at a Public House in Melbourne, destroyed two ten-pound notes after this fashion: one put a ten pound note between bread and butter and ate it, remarking that he was rather fond of a rich sandwich; the other lighted his pipe with the note. These are not singular instances. Men that never were worth £5 in their lives are now possessed of fortunes, and the yoke is burdensome, and they scatter the money like chaff. The whole country for miles is one immense gold field.³

Hundreds of ships left the ports of London and Liverpool, the main ports of embarkation for emigrants. They had become so by the necessity of finding new markets and destinations to replace the declining slave trade between Africa and the Americas and West Indies, in which they had once been involved. Advertising comfortable and fast journeys, shipping companies, including the famous Black Ball Line and White Star Line, grew to have fleets of large ships, most of which made regular return journeys to Australia and anchored in Hobsons Bay, Melbourne.

The Sacramento had nearly completed a safe voyage despite the deaths of the surgeon (10 days out) and a number of infants along the way. It arrived about 15 miles off Port Phillip Heads at about midnight on 26 April 1853, in a light westerly and on a flood tide. It was a clear night and Captain William Holmes went below leaving the chief mate James Donahoo on watch with orders to be called every hour to check the weather. The vessel was hove to westward, awaiting daybreak, and was fast drifting closer to the shore with the tide when the watch called out breakers ahead. Captain Holmes was called on deck and attempts were made to bring the ship around but it was too late. A jib stay parted and the ship would not answer its helm, so that three minutes later, just after 3 a.m., the Sacramento drifted on to Lonsdale Reef, close to the spot where the Conside and Portland had been lost.⁴ It was lying well up on the reef on its port side. There was still no lighthouse at Point Lonsdale, and the wreck of the Sacramento on a clear, moonlit night led to further calls for a light to mark this dangerous area.

Fortunately, the passengers and crew were all landed safely by the ships boats. Pilot vessels that were on the scene had to leave since there were 23 ships requiring assistance to enter the Heads that morning, and the lifeboat was involved in a collision with the Sacramentos longboat, which put it out of action. The Customs boat that was first to go to the rescue was carried out to sea by the ebb tide and its crew narrowly escaped drowning,⁵ while a longboat carrying most of the Sacramentos crew was later picked up floating out to sea. Adding to the emigrants distressed state at being shipwrecked so close to their destination, was the loss of most of their possessions, as little was saved other than small personal items they were able to carry on to the boats and the clothes they were wearing. In the case of most of the women, it was just their nightdresses. At first they were looked after by the pilots at their dilapidated Shortlands Bluff quarters, though there was insufficient food and accommodation. Later they were taken to Melbourne by the steamer Aphrasia. The Sacramento broke up so fast that the captain was unable to save the ships papers or nautical instruments. The masts had gone overboard within 24 hours, and the ship had broken in two and disappeared within a week.

With regard to the salvage of the gold, Pilot Mansfield took Captain Holmes, the carpenter and three boat crew to the wreck and retrieved the specie from the captains strong room. Mansfield then deposited it in his own bank account and claimed salvage. Mansfield, a pilot of only six weeks standing, received an award of £5000 and left the pilot service. One of the crew, James McIntyre, received £1500 and invested his reward in a brig, Montezuma. In 1884, with H.R. Reid, McIntyre amalgamated with his cousin Captain James Deane of Deanes Towage and Lighterage Company to establish the Melbourne Coal, Shipping and Engineering Company, which later became the Melbourne Steamship Company. In 1962, in a deal worth £1.5 million, it was taken over by the Howard Smith Steam Ship Company.

The first mate on watch at the time of the wrecking, James Donahoo, was tried in the Supreme Court for misdemeanour, neglect of duty and causing destruction of a ships, was found guilty and sentenced to four months imprisonment. Captain Holmes was discharged from his trial for neglect of duty due to the absence of two witnesses. The timber remains and cargo of the Sacramento that drifted ashore were heavily salvaged by drays from the neighbourhood of Indented Heads and not even a bit of driftwood or copper bolt remains of the hull,⁶ though a part of the bow was buried in the sand between Point Lonsdale and the Bluff. Among artefacts recovered from the reef in the 1960s were luggage name plates and name stamps, which

have surnames discernible that match names on the passenger manifest, positively identifying them as coming from the Sacramento. A ships log, crockery and bottles recovered near this area may have also belonged to the Sacramento. No more substantial wreck remains have been located or reported.