

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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SAPPHO (H.M.S.)



S605 HMSSappho BassStrait
Drawing

Location

Bass Strait, between Warrnambool and Cape Howe.

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S605

Date lost

18/02/1858

Hull

Cost to build - 21 pounds 4 shillings & 4 pence per ton. Sappho carried 16 guns Built with 12 guns

Number of masts

2

Length/Breadth/Depth

100.65 Feet / 32.40 Feet / 15.20 Feet

Builder

Devenport Naval Dockyard under the supervision of Sir William Symonds, Surveyor of the Navy

Year of construction

1837

Built port

Plymouth

Built country

England

Date lost

18/02/1858

Departure

Cape Town

Destination

Sydney

Cargo

None

Owner

Royal Navy

Master

Commander Fairfax Moresby

Weather conditions

Strong NE winds

Cause of loss

Foundered at sea and lost without a trace

Number of crew

147

Statement of significance

<p>The HMS Sappho is historically significant as one of Australia's maritime mysteries, and is one of only a handful of Admiralty wrecks in Australian waters including the HMS Sirius(1790) and HMS Pandora (1791).</p>

VHR history

The Royal Navy brig HMS Sappho operated as a slaver-catcher off the west and east African coasts for nine years. Thomas Fraser was in command when the SAPHHO captured the slavers CAMOONS and ISABELITA. It

was refloated after running onto a reef off Honduras in 1841. After erroneously detaining and arresting a suspected slaver in 1857, Commander Moresby was transferred with the SAPPHO to the Australian Station where his excessive zeal could do less damage. He had only been married six weeks when the vessel left England; little is known about the crew. The Sappho left Cape Town bound for Sydney and was last seen about 20 miles west of Cape Otway by the mate of the brig Yarra , William Belither, as the vessel entered Bass Strait. Some time after 18 February 1858 the Sappho disappeared with all hands and was presumed to have sunk. Strong NE winds were reported between Port Phillip and Cape Howe at the time the Sappho disappeared. Gratings recovered on Flinders Island may have come from the vessel. The master of the schooner Little Pet reported seeing two masts projecting from the sea between Cape Liptrap and the Glennies. This may indicate that the vessel foundered off the Gippsland coast.
 The Sappho was last seen as it entered Bass Strait in February 1858. Despite a search of the strait and the islands, no trace was ever found of the vessel or its crew of 147.