

Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 12/07/24

SEA

Location

Point Nepean, Port Phillip Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S613

Date lost

30/05/1853

Construction material

Wood

Hull

Constructed with a single deck, of Oak, hackmatack, Birch, Pine and Larch. Assigned 4 years A1,48 by Lloyds.

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

152.00 / 31.00 / 22.00

Builder

John Storm

Year of construction

1847

Built port

St John, New Brunswick

Built country

Canada

Registration Port

Liverpool

Date lost

30/05/1853

Departure

Melbourne

Destination

Callao, Peru

Cargo

Ballast

Owner

J.S. De Wolf & Co.

Master

Captain James McKay

Weather conditions

Strong SW wind; half flood tide

Cause of loss

Reckless navigation, attempting to depart Port Phillip against Pilot advice

Number of crew

26

VHR history

The Sea was a 841-ton (new measurement), three-masted ship built in St Johns, Newfoundland, of wood and sheathed in felt and yellow metal. It was sold to Liverpool owners in 1847, was sheathed and yellow metalled in 1848, and at the time of its wrecking was registered in Liverpool to owner J.S. de Wolf & Co. Its master was newly married Captain James McKay, and it was travelling from Melbourne to Callao, Peru, in ballast probably to obtain a bulk cargo such as fertiliser/ nitrates in the form of seabird guano which was a major export of Peru at this time. The Sea had transported English, Irish and Scottish emigrants to Melbourne on at least two voyages, one had arrived in August 1851 with single men and married couples under charter to Her Majesty's Emigration Commissioners, and the other (its last voyage before being wrecked) had arrived in

Melbourne 93 days out on 14 May 1853 with 382 government emigrants, including 92 single women. Of its earlier 1851 voyage, a report in the Argus ran; The Sea, with emigrants, arrived yesterday from Plymouth; on the passage five births and six deaths occurred, all infants, and from casual diseases. The emigrants, as usual, consist of nearly equal numbers of English, Irish and Scottish.1 On Thursday, 26 May, with 26 crew on board, the Sea weighed anchor to depart from Hobsons Bay, but due to gales was forced to anchor in Swan Bay. At 4 p.m. on Tuesday, 31 May, in gale conditions with a tremendous sea running, Captain Taylor of the pilot schooner Boomerang advised Captain McKay against negotiating the Heads on a strong south-westerly wind and half-flood tide. But Captain McKay ignored Pilot Taylors warnings and was determined to attempt to sail the Sea out of the Heads. It was later alleged that he was intoxicated and that some of the crew were in irons to prevent them leaving for the goldfields, thus leaving the vessel shorthanded (in comparison, it had sailed from Liverpool with 40 crew in 1851). At about 6 p.m. while endeavouring to clear the Point Nepean Reef, she got on it, just inside where the Isabella Watson struck last year. Immediately, both anchors were let go with about 30 fathoms of chain and the crew clewed up the sails, cut away the port rigging on the fore and main masts allowing them to go over the side, and cleared away the boats, but only one lifeboat was saved. The poop and midships deckhouse were washed away, seriously injuring the second mate. One seaman, Antonio Majora, found Captain McKay after hearing cries for help and wrapped him in blankets after finding him half dead. At about 8 p.m., he placed the captain in a boat where he asked for some rum, but when the Majora returned at 10 p.m. he was gone and the boat was half full of water. The carpenter was fortunate to be picked up by the outward bound vessel Signet when he was found clinging to a timber he told his rescuers another man had been with him but, exhausted, had been swept away. Seven of the crew got away in the lifeboat and landed at Shortlands Bluff at about 2 a.m. None of the rest of the crew apparently desired to leave in the boat as they were drinking rum. Pilot Taylor had feared an accident would occur and, when lights were seen from Point Nepean at 7 p.m., a whale-boat with six men was sent to investigate. They found the Sea grounded on the reef and, unable to assist in the darkness, rain and heavy surf, stayed on Point Nepean overnight in tents (erected for the Frisk, wrecked the previous week) and lit a fire. The next morning, 1 June, with the flood tide and large seas, waves were breaking over the decks of the Sea and a rescue attempt was made by the whale-boat. At about 11 a.m., one crewman, William Owen, swam to the vessel with a line and as he did so one of the crewmen of the Sea jumped overboard. In an attempt to rescue him both Owen and the crewman were drowned. Owens body was lost in the surf but washed in and was recovered at 2 p.m.. At 3 p.m., the Sea started to break up; the stern section went first and within a quarter of an hour was in pieces. The remainder of the crew were swept off of the 26 on board only 10 were saved. Of the 16 drowned only two bodies were recovered, a total of 17 dead, including the unfortunate rescuer Owen. The loss of the Sea was estimated to have cost £6000, the amount of salvage activity is not known, although wreckers were reported to have plundered anything that was valuable and removable. ON WRECKERS Wrecking at the Heads. We are assured that this offence has become quite habitual, and that Port Phillip Heads have long been notorious as a den of wreckers, the impunity with which their depredations are committed adding daily to their audacity. A vessel is no sooner in a disabled state than she is surrounded by bands of men who can be no better described than as so many pirates plundering the vessel of all that is valuable and easily removed. Not long since the unfortunate purchasers of the Sea and Will o the Wisp were robbed by these rascals of all that could be easily taken away; even anchors, chains, copper sheathing, from the bottom, and in these cases the loss will amount to many hundreds. It is stated that a vessel has been stopped by information, at Williamstown, with plunder from the wreck of the Ontario, to the amount of many hundred pounds; and report says a thousand pounds worth is now buried in the sand at the Heads, awaiting an opportunity of being bought secretly to market. It is unnecessary to say that this ought to be immediately seen after, and put a stop to. The site of the Sea has to date not been positively located or identified some unidentified material including an iron wheel (possibly part of the steering gear), and a large wooden rudder have been found in separate locations on Nepean Reef that may be wreckage from the Sea.