

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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SPECULANT



S626 Speculant CapePatton
HistoricPicture 1911



S626 Speculant CapePatton
Anchor



S626 Speculant CapePatton
Plaque



S626 Speculant CapePatton
SiteView

Location

Cape Patton

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S626

Date lost

10/02/1911

Construction material

Steel

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

Length/Breadth/Depth

147.00 Feet / 27.00 Feet / 11.40 Feet

Builder

Cumming and Ellis

Year of construction

1895

Built port

Inverkeithing

Built country

Scotland

Registration Port

Warrnambool

Date lost

10/02/1911

Departure

Portland

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

140 Sand ballast

Owner

P. J. McGennan and Co., Warrnambool

Master

Capt. James Jacobsen

Weather conditions

South east gale; mist; rain, storms, coastal setting current, Apollo Bay area flooded and bridges washed away

Cause of loss

Blown ashore in a gale, careless navigation

Number of crew

9

Crew comments

First Mate: James Munro; Second Mate: John Scerling; Cook: B Bond; A. B. s: V. Sundring, H. Hansen, B. Melson, H. Johnston, T. Trumblen; Ordinary Seaman: R. Thompson

Statement of significance

The Speculant is historically significant as the largest ship to have been registered in Warrnambool, and is believed to have been the largest barquentine to visit Melbourne. It is evidence of the final days of large commercial sailing vessels involved in the Victorian and New Zealand timber trade.

VHR history

The barquentine Speculant had previously been involved in the timber trade between the United Kingdom and Russia, until sold to its Warrnambool owners Messrs. F.J. McGennan & Co. in 1906 for 3000 pounds. As timber merchants, McGennan & Co. operated the Speculant trading white pine from Kaipara, New Zealand to Warrnambool. It was the second vessel to have been lost by McGennan & Co. , who also owned the La Bella (Age 13/2/1911), tragically wrecked with the loss of seven lives after missing the entrance channel to Warrnambool harbour in 1905. It appears that the Speculant was bought to replace the La Bella, which had been employed in the same trade. While there fortunately no loss of life, the Speculant's voyage and wrecking was nevertheless a perilous experience for the crew. The Speculant had been attempting to depart Warrnambool for almost the entire month of January to undergo docking and overhaul in Melbourne. A month of east and south-easterly winds had forced the Speculant to remain sheltered in Lady Bay, Warrnambool with the exception of one morning of northerlies when an attempt was made to round Cape Otway, but it had to return and seek shelter in Portland after failing to make any headway (Age 13/2/1911). With only 140 tons of sand ballast aboard, the ship would not have been easy to handle, but despite this Captain Jacobsen and his crew of mainly Swedes decided to make for Melbourne and left Portland Harbour on 5 February 1911. By the 9th they had reached Cape Otway, and encountered a black night with no moon, constant heavy rain, and a heavy sea with a south-easterly wind blowing. After safely rounding Cape Otway the course was changed to east, then north-east to take the vessel to a point six miles off Cape Patton following the orders of Captain Jacobsen, who told the crew to be very careful with the steering, as the wind and sea was running to leeward. The patent log (used to measure speed) had been out of order for the last four months as no-one in Warrnambool was able to fix it, and it was intended to have it repaired in Melbourne. In the meantime the crew used to measure the vessel's speed by looking over the side and estimating wind strength (Age 15/2/1911). This was to compound the difficulties experienced by the crew with the weather, heavy wet sails and imprecise positioning, as the strong cross wind and sea were acting on the lightly laden vessel to steadily drive it towards the shore. At 3.30am on Friday 10 February Captain Jacobsen and the first mate were looking over the side of the vessel when they heard the sound of breakers and suddenly struck the rocks - the crew immediately knew they were in a hopeless position with no chance of getting the Speculant off, and attempted to rescue themselves by launching the lifeboat, which was instantly smashed to pieces by a heavy sea . One of the crew then volunteered to take a line ashore, and the rest of the crew were all able to drag themselves to shore, some suffering hand lacerations from the rocks. Once ashore they began to walk along the coast towards Lorne, believing it was the nearest settlement (Loney, 1979). Realising their mistake as dawn broke they returned westwards to Cape Patton, and found a farm belonging to Mr C. Ramsden, who took them in and gave them a change of clothes and food. After resting for a day and returning to the wreck to salvage some of their personal possessions, at 10am on Saturday they set out for Apollo Bay, a voyage that took them six hours, sometimes wading through flooded creeks up to their necks. The Age described them as : "...all well, and none the worse for their experience", while the wreck was "listed to starboard. All the cabin is gutted and the ballast gone. There is a big rock right through the bottom of her, and there is not the slightest hope of getting her off" (Age 13/2/1911). A Board of Marine inquiry found that Captain Jacobson was guilty of careless navigation by not taking steps to accurately verify the position of the vessel with respect to Cape Otway when the light was visible and by not setting a safe and proper course with respect to the wind and sea. It suspended his certificate for 6 months and ordered him to

pay & costs. Meanwhile McGennan and Co. were reported to have placed an order for another sailing vessel with their agents in Melbourne, Messrs. R. & D. Blair (Age 10/2/1911).
The location of the site for a long time was marked by two anchors on the shoreline, until in 1970 the larger of the two anchors was recovered by the Underwater Explorers' Club in 1970 and mounted on the foreshore at Apollo Bay. The bell from the wreck was also donated to the Apollo Bay Surf Lifesaving Club but is recorded to have been stolen (Loney: 1979).
Rusting remains of the wreck can still be found on the shoreline on the southern side of, and directly below Cape Patton, along with more recent wrecks of car bodies that have suffered equally perilous voyages since the Great Ocean Road was built. However parts of the Speculant site have been buried by rubble from construction and maintenance works to the Great Ocean Road, as well as by naturally occurring landslides.