

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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SUSSEX



S636 Sussex BarwonHeads
HistoricPrint



S636 Sussex BarwonHeads
PrintOfSalvage

Location

Thirteenth Beach, Barwon Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S636

Date lost

31/12/1871

Official number

23228

Construction material

Wood

Hull

Wood, felt & yellow metalled; copper fastened 1855, 1861;cemented
 1867; 'Blackwaller' - frigate built , two decks and a poop, ship rigged,
 standing bowsprit, square sterned, carvel built, quarter galleries,
 female bust figurehead, cl

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

174.20 Feet / 32.20 Feet / 21.00 Feet

Builder

Money Wigram and Son

Year of construction

1853

Built port

Northam Yard, Southampton

Built country

England

Registration Number

187/ 1853

Registration Port

London

Date lost

31/12/1871

Departure

Plymouth, England

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

Iron, brandy, rum, champagne, general, softgoods; value quoted as between 20-50,000 pounds

Owner

Money Wigram & Sons
Charles Hampden Wigram, shipbuilder of Blackwall, Money Wigram and Clifford Wigram, shipbuilders of Middlesex 48/64 shares
Henry Loftus Wigram, shipowner of Middlesex 16/48 shares

Master

Captain John Deane Collard

Weather conditions

SW wind, night, sharp squalls from SSW, starry night, haze over land

Cause of loss

Navigational error, careless navigation

Number of crew

47

Crew comments

Chief Officer Sladden; Surgeon William Walsh,

Statement of significance

<p>The Sussex is historically significant as an immigrant ship that made a number of voyages from England to Australia carrying thousands of immigrants. It is archaeologically significant as the remains of the vessel and abandoned cargo buried in sand are likely to be well preserved. It is technically significant as the remains of a "Blackwaller" clipper ship built specifically for the Australian trade, ie: representative of a type.</p>

VHR history

The Sussex was described as a London built Blackwall frigate. 'Blackwallers' were a distinctive class of vessel built for the East Indies trade, deriving their name from the fact that a number of famous shipbuilders had yards at Blackwall on the Thames River, including Money Wigram & Sons' shipbuilding yard. This yard was begun by Robert Wigram (1743 - 1830), who was later made a lord and baronet and Chair of the East India docks, and had seventeen sons. One of these sons Money Wigram went on to take over the Blackwall Yard, and built the Sussex in 1853 (Lubbock, 1973: 30-36). In fact the Sussex was actually built at Money Wigram's Northam Yard which he acquired in 1850 (Rance, 1981), but in build and appearance it was a Blackwall vessel. Money Wigram & Sons specialised in building vessels for the Australian gold rush passenger trade. The Blackwallers were favoured by first and second class passengers even though they were smaller than the later, larger and faster Liverpool owned clippers, because they were not as crowded. The Sussex had a sister ship the Norfolk. It had previously made a number of voyages to Australia including Port Adelaide and Port Phillip, and was described as "...one of the most popular vessels in Messrs. Money Wigram's Anglo-Australian line" (Argus 2/1/1872).

 Following the recent wrecks of the Light of the Age (1868) and Victoria Tower (1869) there was an outcry over the loss of yet another fine ship being lost on the coast at Port Phillip Heads, and lives lost as a result.

 On its 28th visit to Australia after a voyage of 82 days, on 31 December 1871 the crew and passengers of the Sussex were eagerly anticipating their arrival in Australia and the New Year. Moonlight Head was the first land sighted by Captain John Deane Collard (on his fourth visit to Port Phillip), at 7.30am that morning, Cape Otway being rounded at 2.30pm (GA 10/1/1872). The Sussex was then set on a north-east by north course for Port Phillip Heads in a fresh south-westerly wind, with the vessel under topgallant sails and stunsails. Approaching the pilot ground Captain Collard ordered the mainsail furled, and the watch to keep a sharp look-out for any lights. A flashing light was sighted at 9pm, and it was reported to the captain, who said it was the Cape Schanck light - though it was on the wrong bearing according to his calculation of his position, and he thought there must have been something wrong with the steering. More bright lights were sighted, and the captain ran below deck to look at his charts. Suddenly fearful that he was on the eastern coast and in danger of being wrecked there, he altered the ship's course to north-north-east, at which point the cry of 'land close ahead' and 'breakers ahead' rang out. The helm was put down hard a-starboard to get the Sussex off the shore, but the vessel struck heavily sometime between 9 and 10pm. It bumped as it came around, lifting the rudder and breaking the wheel chains (Argus 8/1/1872). Blue lights and distress rockets were fired to attract attention, which the pilot boat Rip saw but mistook them for a New Years Eve fireworks display on shore (Argus 10/1/1872). The Sussex continued bumping as heavy breakers lifted and broke around her. All the passengers were ordered into the cuddy and on the poop.

The carpenter reported 11 feet of water in the hold, and by 11.30pm the lower deck was flooded. Realising it was now hopeless to attempt to get the Sussex off, Captain Collard then ordered the helm ported and yards squared, in order to drive the Sussex ashore as far as possible to save lives. At this point the Chief Officer Sladden asked Captain Collard if he wanted to send the ship's cutter to get help, which after some hesitation due to the conditions he agreed to have a crew stand by to man the boat if required. At 1am after the wind and sea had dropped somewhat, the ship's boat with six crew and the Third Officer launched from the wreck into the heavy sea, but the ship lurched down on it and all the men except for two jumped out. Another crew was assembled and the boat headed off into the darkness attempting to reach Queenscliff. However after travelling part of the way the Third Officer changed his mind and thought to return to seek shelter in the lee of Barwon Heads. About 3/4 of a mile from Barwon Heads the boat was sent broadside onto the sea and capsized by a succession of two heavy rollers, the men swimming out from underneath and clinging to the keel, but a third wave washed them all off the boat. The only survivor of the party of six, James Labdon, stripped and began swimming for land, after getting away from one of the drowning crew, Graham, who was clinging to his legs. He made it ashore exhausted and walked two miles to a farm to get assistance. The body of another of the seamen, Samuel Feast, was later found lodged in rocks by three little girls who told their parents (Coroner's inquest, Argus 11/1/1872). Aboard the Sussex at daylight on New Year's Day, the ensign was hoisted upside down, and shortly afterwards the pilot tug Titan came to investigate, and was able to take the women and children off, followed by the male passengers and the crew as Captain Collard gave orders to abandon ship. The Queenscliff lifeboat and the tug Warhawk also attended to render assistance in getting off passengers and cargo. Many of the immigrant passengers were left destitute and in some cases their washed up luggage was ransacked by the crowds of local and Geelong residents who attended the wreck. Pilferage was reported as rife in spite of efforts by police and Customs officers. However for the most part, the crowds were content to merely watch the spectacle of the salvage operations underway, and buy refreshments from the tent city and itinerant fruit and cake sellers vending their wares (GA 15/1/1872). The Sussex held together well for the course of January and February, during salvage operations that included the use of divers, lumpers, steam tugs, boats, rafts, bullocks and drays and the construction of a tramway over the dune to raise goods from the beach to the high ground (GA 13/3/1872, 15/1/1872). The wreck was bought for 6,800 pounds by a syndicate calling themselves the 'Sussex Company'. They eventually realised a profit of 11,900 pounds after expenses. The remaining hull was later sold for 375 pounds to men who had worked on its salvage, but became a total loss before it could be pulled to pieces, and settled in 20 ft (6m) of water. Captain Collard was found culpably negligent and had his ticket suspended for 6 months by Steam Navigation Board. The facts centred on the mistake of Captain Collard's identifying the pilot boat Rip's flashlight (which was shone 3 times in 15 minutes) with the revolutions of the Cape Schanck light, which shone once every two minutes. In a subsequent Criminal Court case Collard was found guilty of criminal negligence and was sentenced to a month's imprisonment. The findings of the Court were that Captain Collard had navigated carelessly by not properly making sure the light he saw was the Cape Schanck light, and that he steered for lights on his port bow after discovering that his assumed position showed some great error in the steering of the ship (Victoria Marine Board Inquiries 1857-1876). Newspaper editorials also commented on the necessity for pilot boats to make themselves better known, and noted "...the necessity which exists for the preparation of a regular code of danger signals" (Argus 10/1/1872). The site today is difficult to locate and largely buried in sand, some small artefacts and an anchor (Nayler) have been recovered by divers but it is predicted that there are large sections of the wooden hull with any remaining contents. This end of Thirteenth Beach tends to accrete sand rather than be scoured, as seems to occur more towards the Barwon Heads Bluff end. The wreck of the Sussex is significant as evidence of the immigration trade to Australia.