

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

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## THISTLE



S669 Thistle PortFairy  
WoodenPosts



669 (1) Thistle 003.jpg



669 (1) Thistle 005.jpg



669 (1) Thistle 007.jpg



669 (1) Thistle 010.jpg



669 (1) Thistle 014.jpg

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### Location

Port Fairy

### Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S669

### Date lost

25/12/1837

### Construction material

Wood

### Hull

Carvel planked

### Propulsion

Sail

**Number of masts**

2

**Length/Breadth/Depth**

52.50 Feet / 16.25 Feet / 8.96 Feet

**Year of construction**

1825

**Built port**

Fort Gloster, Bengal

**Built country**

India

**Registration Number**

2 of 1832

**Registration Port**

Launceston

**Date lost**

25/12/1837

**Departure**

Port Fairy, Victoria

**Destination**

Launceston, Tasmania

**Cargo**

bark

**Owner**

J. Henty, M. Conelly & J. Griffiths

**Master**

Capt. John Mills

**Weather conditions**

## Cause of loss

Blown ashore

## Number of crew

5

## Statement of significance

Thistle, built in 1825 in Bengal, is an early example of an Indian-built vessel. Thistle is historically and socially significant to the settlement and early development of the state of Victoria as it carried the first permanent European settlers, members of the Henty Family, to Portland in November 1834. After Portland was settled, the vessel was one of the first ships trading between the northern shores of Bass Strait and Tasmania and has the distinction of carrying the first exported goods from Victoria - bales of merino wool. What remains of the wreck was considered to be reasonably well preserved in 1984, and Thistle has archaeological significance in future studies of early 19th century undocumented Indian shipbuilding techniques. Thistle is representative of these early 19th century shipbuilding practices in British India, providing comparative information with the other two Indian-built ships wrecked in Australian waters: the vessels Sydney Cove (1797) wrecked in Tasmania and Cumberland (1830) wrecked off the West Australian coast.

Significance assessed against criteria defined in Guidelines for the Management of Australia's Shipwrecks (1994)

**CRITERION 1: HISTORIC**

Thistle is significant to the settlement and early development of the state of Victoria as it carried the first permanent European settlers to Portland in November 1834. The vessel was one of the first ships trading between the northern shores of Bass Strait and Tasmania and has the distinction of carrying the first exported goods from Victoria - bales of merino wool.

**CRITERION 2: TECHNICAL**

Further archaeological studies of the wreck of Thistle may reveal technical details of Indian shipbuilding techniques that are innovative or unknown shipbuilding techniques.

**CRITERION 3: SOCIAL**

Thistle is highly significant to the people of Victoria, carrying the first settlers to Portland but also by opening up the area through trade and export of Victorian products. Thistle wrecked at Port Fairy before there was a permanent settlement in the area and there is some social significance in some of the community using parts of the wreck when building their houses.

**CRITERION 4: ARCHAEOLOGICAL**

Thistle is the third oldest known ship wreck currently located in Victorian waters. The last archaeological excavation, conducted in 1984, determined the hull remains were remarkably well preserved, with solid timbers and little evidence of toredo worm. As the remains of the vessel is commonly covered over by sand, it is expected that what remains of the wreck will be reasonably well preserved. Further archaeological work is affected by the difficult working conditions on the site, as the vessel is located in the surf zone with light sand making visibility difficult.

Some interesting Indian shipbuilding techniques were noted during the 1984 excavation including the use of wooden pegs instead of treenails and the existence of two large bilge stringers running either side of the keel with no keelson (Staniforth 1984:1).

Heritage Victoria holds 30 artefacts found on Thistle, including fragmented shell, ceramics, a champagne bottle, some metal artefacts and extensive remains of the vessel's last cargo; wattle bark (Strachan 1988:15). Further excavation could shed more light on the lifestyles of the sailors on these very early colonial trading vessels.

**CRITERION 5: SCIENTIFIC**

Thistle is not currently the subject of any scientific study. The vessel may have some significance in studies of the effect of surf zone and wave action on breakdowns of wreckage.

**CRITERION 6: INTERPRETIVE**

A recommendation to protect the Port Fairy shipwreck resource through area protection was put forward in 1988 (Strachan 1988). Thistle makes an important contribution to this resource of 18 shipwrecks covering Port Fairy's development, in particular, the whaling phase of the early settlement. In this regard, Thistle has interpretive significance demonstrating a period in the development of Port Fairy. There is some information on Thistle held at the Port Fairy Museum.

**CRITERION 7: RARE**

Thistle is the only Indian-built vessel wrecked in Victorian waters and one of three such vessels located in Australia to date.

**CRITERION 8: REPRESENTATIVE**

Thistle is representative of early 19th century shipbuilding practice in British India, providing comparative information with other Indian-built ships wrecked in other Australian states; the vessels Sydney Cove (1797) wrecked in Tasmania and Cumberland (1830) wrecked off the West Australian coast.

## VHR history

Thistle, a bringantine/schooner was built in Bengal in India in 1825. The ship visited Fremantle in 1830 and then circumnavigated Australia. Bought by the Henty family in 1831, the vessel was used as an inter-colonial trading vessel and a means to explore new areas for settlement and trade. In 1834, Thistle carried the first Europeans to settle in Portland - the voyage taking 34 days instead of the expected six due to bad weather - and subsequently traded between Victoria and Tasmania. In 1836, Thistle transported three bales of merino wool to Tasmania - the first recorded export of wool from Victoria. After loading a cargo of wattle bark at Port Fairy on Christmas Day 1837, the ship broke its anchor cables in a gale and was driven onto shore where it was declared a total loss (Staniforth 1986b: 51). Thistle gradually sank into the sand and the vessel's upper works broke away through natural forces or used to form parts of the houses in the growing settlement of Port Fairy. Members of MAAV located the vessel in 1984 at the south end of Port Fairy beach. It is covered by sand for the most part but occasionally is exposed due to weather and sand movement. Later, in the same year of discovery, the site was the subject of a test excavation to determine the extent of the wreck. The bottom part of the wreck still existed, 0.5 metres above the bilge. Some artefacts were raised at this time for conservation and possible display (Staniforth 1986a: 27). The vessel has been the subject of ongoing research into poorly documented shipbuilding techniques of Asian-built vessels. Thistle is the only example of an Indian built-vessel discovered in Victoria to date (Staniforth 1985b: 53).