

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 19/09/24

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## P.S. THISTLE



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 003.jpg



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 004.jpg



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 008.jpg



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 009.jpg



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 016.jpg



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 017.jpg



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 020.jpg



670 (1) PS Thistle Ross  
Anderson 021.jpg



Historical - Painting -  
u0027Thistleu0027, with her  
sister ships Rose and  
Shamrock, was an iron ship  
built on the Thames, England  
in 1840 for Australian coastal  
trade [photographic image].



Perilous situation of  
u0027Thistleu0027 steamer  
in a gale at Sydney, N.S.W.  
(Sydney : W. Baker], 1848.

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## Location

West bank of Port Albert entrance

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S670

## Date lost

23 Nov 1859

## Official number

32284

## Construction material

Iron

## Hull

Two masted schooner; 45 ft engine room; one deck, round stern, clinch built, mock gallery, woman figurehead

## Propulsion

Steam - Paddle

## Number of masts

2

## Length/Breadth/Depth

148.70 Feet / 19.50 Feet / 11.00 Feet

## Builder

W. Fairbairn & Co

**Year of construction**

1840

**Built port**

Poplar, Middlesex

**Built country**

England

**Registration Number**

32 of 1859

**Registration Port**

Melbourne

**Date lost**

23 Nov 1859

**Departure**

Melbourne

**Destination**

Port Albert

**Cargo**

General cargo: timber, alcohol, flour

**Owner**

R. Turnbull, W. Bayles, D. Turnbull, W. White & J.B. Sydserff

**Master**

Captain J.B. Sydserff

**Weather conditions**

As PS Thistle left Port Phillip Heads, there was a SE wind blowing slowly. When they passed Cape Liptrap, the SE wind was getting stronger and the seas were increasing. PS Thistle sheltered in Oberon Bay and searched for more firewood, the seas continued to rise and the wind began to shift around further east. When they hit the Port Albert Bar, the wind was all easterly. As the crew struggled to get the ship off the bar, the winds became squally, described as coming from all directions.

**Cause of loss**

PS Thistle left Melbourne on 21 December 1859, heading for Port Albert with general cargo and passengers, including the Victorian Attorney General and the local Member for Gippsland. Forced to steam into a head wind the entire way and running low on coal, Captain Sydserff was forced to begin burning the cargo and even the passengers belongings in an attempt to get enough steam up to beat the weather. Unfortunately, PS Thistle hit the west bank of the Port Albert Bar at dusk on the evening of 23 December 1859. All passengers were eventually saved (some having to spend all night up in the bridge to avoid the water over the decks). PS Thistle broke up and disappeared within a week of the wreck. An inquiry into the wrecking found the Captain was negligent by not ensuring there was enough coal, trying to cross the Port Albert Bar at low tide and for not being fully prepared for an emergency event. He was, however, praised for his conduct after the wrecking.

## Passenger comments

21 Cabin and 15 Steerage passengers including: Mr. J. Johnson Esq. Member for North Gipps Land  
Mr. John Wood - Victorian Attorney-General  
Mr. Fellows  
Mr. & Mrs. Harris and their 13 year old son (importing cargo to set up a business in Port Albert)  
Mr. Muir (importing alcohol for his son who was setting up hotel in Tarraville)  
Mr. Robert Amos

## Number of crew

21

## Crew comments

Robert Spence - Mate  
George McWilliams - Second Mate  
Robert Cunningham - First Engineer  
John Hendry - Second Engineer  
Robert Kennedy - Carpenter  
John Knox - Coal Trimmer  
John Shaw - Able Seaman (heaving the lead at the time of hitting the bar)  
Other mentioned (but unnamed crew):  
2 x Firemen  
1 x Coal Trimmer (other than Knox)  
1 x Steward  
1 x Stewardess

## Statement of significance

Thistle was a mid 19th century iron paddle steamer and has historical significance for being at the forefront of the Hunter River Steam Navigation Company's establishment and push further into the Hunter region. Within the Victorian wreck resource, Thistle is a rare example of the types of vessels that began to ply the Australian coastline as companies began to move away from wooden sailing vessels to increase speed and profit. There is some social significance attached to Thistle's contribution to the development of Port Albert. Thistle demonstrates potential for high archaeological significance as the moving sand banks of the Port Albert entrance is likely to have protected much of the lower hull. Thistle therefore may provide unknown technical details of early iron shipbuilding and the techniques developed by pioneer engineer William Fairbairn. Thistle may also hold information pertaining to life on board an early iron paddle steamer.

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

CRITERION 1. HISTORIC

Thistle has historical significance as one of the first vessels of the Hunter River Steam Navigation Company established in 1839 (a company that existed in various iterations into the 1960s). Three iron paddle steamers were purchased for the company in 1840: Thistle, Rose and Shamrock. The Hunter River Steam Navigation Company opened up the coastal trading routes into the Hunter Region. Thistle was bought into the Australian coastal trade at the forefront of the change from wooden paddle steamers to iron ones. Thistle was also involved in completing the first submarine telegraph cable joining Tasmania to the mainland.

CRITERION 2. TECHNICAL

Thistle may demonstrate technical significance as an early example of iron shipbuilding. The vessel was built by William Fairbairn, who was a pioneering engineer working extensively with iron. Iron shipbuilders are known to have deviated off ships plans so Thistle may have technical significance demonstrating any changes. Thistle's machinery was also adjusted on arrival into Australia to speed up travel time between Sydney and Newcastle. After these modifications, Thistle was 2 hours faster than Rose.

CRITERION 3. SOCIAL

The wrecking of PS Clonmel in 1841 was instrumental in the settlement of Gippsland and the establishment of Port Albert, Tarraville and Alberton. Thistle is socially significant to the developmental era of the area. By the time Thistle made its last voyage at the end of 1859, the area was beginning to expand and its fortunes improve. Thistle's passengers at the time included the Victorian Attorney-General, the member for North Gippsland and passengers and cargo intended for the

establishment of new business ventures in Port Albert and Tarraville.

**CRITERION 4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL**  
Port Albert has a reputation for being one of the more difficult and dangerous entrances on the south-east coast as the sand is highly mobile and the sand bars often shift, due to this PS Thistle has significant archaeological potential. Located on a sandy bottom, one engine and boiler are the only visible elements of the vessel that extrude above the seabed. It is expected that the hull below the sand is potentially well preserved. Thistle was built by William Fairbairn, an early adopter of iron to build ships, and as such the archaeology may demonstrate previously unknown details of early iron shipbuilding. Other technical details may also be found in the archaeological record such as adjustments made to the vessel's machinery and boilers to speed up the vessel upon arrival into Australia. As the vessel was not salvaged, there may also be archaeological remains to show what life on board a passenger/cargo paddle steamer was like.

**CRITERION 5. SCIENTIFIC**  
Thistle is not currently the subject of any scientific studies.

**CRITERION 6. INTERPRETIVE**  
PS Thistle is not currently the subject of any interpretation. Thistle does lie close to SS Blackbird which makes up part of the Underwater Shipwreck Discovery Trail (Lomdahl 1992) and Thistle could be added to this trail if it is updated.

**CRITERION 7. RARE**  
Thistle is a rare example of a mid 19th century iron paddle steamer used in the cargo/passenger trade found in the Victorian wreck resource.

**CRITERION 8. REPRESENTATIVE**  
Thistle is representative of the fleet of paddle steamers that plied their cargo trade along the Australian coastline and into the major rivers such as the Hunter River. Thistle is also representative of the type of vessel that was the major stepping stone from the wooden sailing ships initially employed in the cargo/passenger trade to the bigger iron and then steel screw steamers that would take over towards the end of the 19th century.

## VHR history

PS Thistle (1840 - 1859) career lasted less than 20 years, yet in that time the vessel was associated with some significant events and prominent people in Australian steamship history.

PS Thistle (along with Rose and Shamrock) was commissioned by the Hunter River Steam Navigation Co. the first fully Australian-owned steamship company established in 1839. PS Thistle was built by William Fairbairn & Co in the period when ships were transitioning from wooden sailing vessels to iron steamers. Fairbairn was a well-known pioneering engineer working extensively with iron. Thistle was an iron paddle steamer with two side lever engines and rigged as a two-masted schooner. It was 45 metres long and almost 20 metres wide, with a draft of 3.35 metres.

On arriving in Australia (after 130 days travel from England) Thistle's engineers tinkered with the vessel's engine machinery and Thistle became the quickest vessel to travel from Sydney to Newcastle managing the distance two hours faster than its nearest rivals.

PS Thistle's regular route was the Sydney to Melbourne run, carrying general cargo and passengers. Occasionally, the vessel also travelled the Moreton Bay, QLD to Newcastle run. During its time with the Hunter River Steam Navigation Co., Thistle travelled to and from Newcastle more than 1200 times.

In June 1859, PS Thistle was sold to the Port Albert Steam Navigation Co. for travel mostly between Melbourne and the west coast of Victoria. The vessel is associated with the laying of the first telegraphic cable between mainland Australia and Tasmania, when it was commissioned to help make repairs to the cable on King Island in December 1859.

Thistle was wrecked on Port Albert Bar on 23 December 1859 and quickly disappeared.

Thistle, along with Rose and Shamrock, made a significant contribution to the development of Australia's maritime trade. Thistle was one of the earliest steam powered vessels in Australia after the Surprise in 1831. The new paddle steam technology revolutionised coastal travel and trade, signalling a period of rapid advancements in marine engineering.

Thistle's location was reported by Terry Arnott and Harry Reed in 1984, however due to the wreck's location on the Bar and the difficult site conditions, the wreck wasn't inspected until 1997. It was confirmed as the wreck of Thistle from its location and the remains of the sidelever engines and boiler.