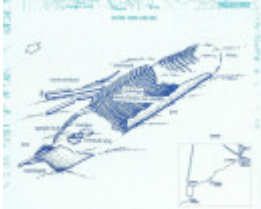


Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 03/10/24

VICTORIA TOWER



S698_Victoria
Tower_SitePlan_diveinfosheet

Location

Point Impossible, west of Thompsons Creek, Breamlea

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S698

Date lost

17/10/1869

Construction material

Iron

Hull

1 bulkhead, anchors and chains proved. A1 classified, iron, cemented 1869, 2 decks, 8 11" iron keel, steel (iron) framework 18" thick 7, built for 25,000 pounds Was rigged with single top gallants and royals

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

247.00 Feet / 39.00 Feet / 24.00 Feet

Builder

Evans

Year of construction

1869

Built port

Liverpool

Built country

England

Registration Port

Liverpool

Date lost

17/10/1869

Departure

Liverpool

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

2300 tons general, bottled beer, slates, iron pipes, hardware

Owner

White Star Line, T. Ismay

Master

Captain Kerr

Weather conditions

Hazy; squally weather, thick, clearing at times

Cause of loss

Ran ashore in thick weather, careless navigation

Number of crew

Statement of significance

The Victoria Tower is archaeologically significant as the wreck of an international inward-bound passenger and cargo vessel. It is educationally and recreationally significant as a coherently intact example of a British built iron clipper ie: representative of a class or type. Along with the wrecks of the Light of the Age (1868 - American-built wooden clipper ship) and Sussex (1871 - Blackwall frigate) nearby these vessels represent the three major design classes, and span the evolution of commercial and immigrant sailing ships used by the British in the colonial Australian trade in the last half of the nineteenth century.

VHR history

Named after one of the two towers of the British Houses of Parliament, the iron clipper Victoria Tower was an equally magnificent construction, and its wrecking was described as "...a loss to the White Star Line, and to commerce generally" (GA 18/10/1869). Like the four-masted iron barques George Roper (1883) and Holyhead (1890) wrecked on Lonsdale Reef also while approaching Port Phillip Heads, the Victoria Tower had been built in Liverpool for the Australian trade, and was wrecked on its maiden voyage.

Of this stage in the evolution of sailing ships it seemed as if iron and steam were already marking the decline of sailing vessels, however as the (British) maritime historian Basil Lubbock states "...yet sail continued to flourish for 50 years after the advent of iron, and up until the late nineties no finer ships had ever been built or sailed than the iron clippers from the Clyde and other British shipyards. ...It was in the Australian trade that the iron passenger ship was to be seen in her perfection. She succeeded the great Liverpool clippers [eg; Light of the Age (1868)] and the little Blackwall frigates [eg; Sussex (1871)], and she was as beautiful and perfect as any of her wooden sisters" (Lubbock, 1975: 163, 168).

The use of iron hulls, masts, yards and steel wire cable for the standing rigging allowed sailing vessels to be driven harder and faster than ever, though the drawback was that this led to over-masting and carrying of sail. Many new clippers were dismasted on their maiden voyages, including the Loch Ard (1878) which was dismasted twice on her maiden voyage due to excessive rig, the first time before it had even cleared the land (Lubbock, 1973: 165).

The Victoria Tower made landfall after a voyage of 85 days from Liverpool, and headed towards the Port Phillip Heads pilot boarding ground. It had been an uneventful voyage despite some contrary headwinds (causing the long voyage) and problems with the compasses, that could not be relied upon. The weather was hazy, with gale force winds and heavy rain squalls. Reaching the pilot ground Captain Kerr fired rockets and burned blue lights to attract attention, but met with no response. Sighting the Cape Schank lighthouse he sailed towards it, then wore the Victoria Tower onto a port tack in a westerly direction. No soundings nor observations were taken, as Captain Kerr was confident he was on a safe course and knew his position tolerably well. However, an hour later after wearing the ship, at 12.40am....

"The first intimation to the contrary was her striking on the shore between Bream and Spring Creeks, about half a mile from the former....The night being as dark as pitch, Captain Kerr let go his anchors to keep the ship from drifting inshore, When she struck heavily, the second mate and four seamen were ordered into the starboard lifeboat ready to land the ladies; no sooner however, was the boat lowered than the foremast 'went by the board' and the crew were compelled to leave to get out of the way of the falling mass. They made fruitless efforts to regain the vessel, but were eventually compelled to run ashore. They landed in safety, and went inland to seek assistance. Passing through swamps, not knowing how soon they might get over their depth, the boat's crew wandered for four hours through darkness until they fortunately came across a fence. This they followed up until they came to Mr Stoke's, who immediately sent word to Mr Noble, and the latter proceeded to the beach, where, obtaining the assistance of a fisherman named Pierce and his partner, he sent the whaleboat back to the ship. The feelings of the people on board the ill-fated vessel during the long hours of suspense, may be better imagined than described. Their apparently only hope, another lifeboat, had been carried away; the ship, for all they knew, might break up at any minute, and they knew not whether the men who risked their lives to save them had reached the shore. They, however, without exception, looked death in the face, trembling, but trusting, the weaker sex proving that weakness was not their forte" (GA 18/10/1869).

After an unsuccessful experiment with a floating raft and line during the early hours of the morning, at daylight the whaleboat was launched from shore, and took off all the women and children. By 3pm all the passengers and crew had been safely landed and taken into care by local residents. Local and Geelong residents, upon hearing the news hurried to the wreck with food and supplies including bread and alcohol.

The ships agents Messrs. Lorimer, Harwood and Rome despatched the tug Resolute to the scene. The tug Titan later was able to recover most of the passengers' luggage and ship's fittings in calm weather in the days following the wreck. By this time it was obvious that the Victoria Tower was lost, and the 25,000 pound hull and cargo were sold at auction for 6500 pounds. Nearly four years later large quantities of slates and iron pipes were still being

recovered as the action of the sea gradually removed obstacles that had previously hindered salvage divers' attempts to reach inaccessible parts of the wreck (Argus letters file 5/11/1969).

The summary of the Marine Board Inquiry held on 27 October 1869 was that the wreck of the Victoria Tower "...was attributable to the fault of Capt. Kerr in not having, under the circumstances of the case and the state of the weather, sooner hauled his ship to the S.E. on the starboard tack, and further for not taking occasional casts of the lead for the purpose of verifying his position". After considering Captain Kerr's long service and good character the Board passed a lenient sentence and suspended his certificate (No. 274, Board of Trade, 1861) for six months (Victorian Marine Board Inquiries 1857-1876).

For divers the legacy of this disaster is the most intact historic shipwreck accessible between Point Lonsdale and Cape Otway. The iron construction has borne up well over the last 130 years, and the dimensions and features of the wreck are easily identifiable. Nearly all of the intact portable artefacts have been removed by recreational and commercial salvage divers over the years, but much broken slate, ceramic material and bottles remaining on the site lend it further interest.

There are only seven shipwrecks in Victoria that have had more than 100 objects recovered from them reported as a result of the Commonwealth Amnesty held in 1993-94. These are the Loch Ard (1878), Schomberg (1855) and Fiji (1891) - all situated along the western district 'Shipwreck Coast' - and the George Roper (1883), Light of the Age (1868), Joseph H. Scammell (1891) and Victoria Tower - all situated along the short section of the 'Surf Coast' between Point Lonsdale and Torquay. This statistic reflects these wrecks' large size, extent of remaining or abandoned cargoes, popularity as diving destinations and proximity to diving population centres. Taken as a group, it can be seen that the Great Ocean Road area wrecks constitute an extremely rich resource of historical and archaeological information.