

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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W.B. GODFREY



S718 WBGodfrey Lorne
SideView



S718 WBGodfrey Lorne
Grave



S718 WBGodfrey Lorne
IronFrame



S718 WBGodfrey Lorne
JoinDetail



S718 WBGodfrey Lorne
PipeInWater

Location

Godfrey Creek, near Artillery Rocks, west of Lorne

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S718

Date lost

08/03/1891

Official number

43683 (MIN)

Construction material

Wood

Hull

Full rigged clipper ship built under special survey (Section 28 Lloyds Rules and Regulations), wooden with iron beams, early stage in development of composite vessels/ clippers.
 Teak, felt and yellow metalled, copper fastened, large repairs in 1867,

Propulsion

Sail

Number of masts

3

Length/Breadth/Depth

175.00 Feet / 30.00 Feet / 19.00 Feet

Builder

Robert Steele & Co., Greenock

Year of construction

1861

Built port

Greenock

Built country

Scotland

Registration Port

Honolulu, Hawaii

Date lost

08/03/1891

Departure

San Francisco

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

396,455 super feet of assorted cut timber; 150,000 feet long sugar pine, 150,000 feet of rough clear redwood, 25,000 feet of special sizes, 95,000 feet of door stock (Argus 10/3/1891)

Owner

1861-1877: Capt. Alexander Roger
1877-1883: J. Ewing & Co., Glasgow.
1884-1888 :A. Picken & Co., Greenock.
1888-1891: Mr J.J. Moore, San Francisco, Capt Charles Davis, and a syndicate of Hawaiian citizens J.T.R Foster, Elias Well

Master

1878-1883: Capt. A.M. McCoig
1884: Capt. C. Bowen
1886-88: Capt. Plage
1888-: Capt. Dabel
1891: Capt. Charles Davis

Weather conditions

Hazy; land obscured by bushfire smoke; fresh moderate breezes swinging from NW-N then SW-W.
Easterly winds and westerly current (Argus 11/3/1891)

Cause of loss

Bushfire smoke causing bad visibility and navigational error

Passenger comments

Captain s wife and child; Messrs F. Titus; George Stephens; Edward Hunter; Henry Wright; D.G. Parker.

Number of crew

13

Crew comments

John Garthley, First Mate, William Young, 2nd Mate, cook, steward, a boy, 8 seamen including John Edwards, Gus Hornburg.

Statement of significance

The W.B. Godfrey is historically significant as the then named Min it had previously been one of the great tea clippers of the 1860s-1880s, racing against other clippers such as the Fiery Cross and Thermopylae. It was built by Robert Steele of Greenock, who was famous for his fast clipper ships and was an early builder of composite ships. It is technically significant as having been constructed of wood with iron beams under Lloyds Special Survey experimental rules, and represents an early stage in the development of composite built (iron framed and wooden planked) hulls ie:it is a unique example of a class of vessel. It is archaeologically significant as the surviving iron components of the hull can reveal details of this form of construction, as no plans or models exist for the Min. It is recreationally and educationally significant as it is one of the only shipwrecks along the Great Ocean Road that can be seen from dry land, lying in the intertidal zone.

VHR history

The W.B. Godfrey was originally built in Greenock, Scotland by Robert Steele and Co. as the wooden clipper barque Min. The Min had been involved in the great era of the tea trade when fast clippers such as the Cutty Sark, Fiery Cross and Thermopylae and their competitive captains raced each other from China back home to Europe with their lucrative leafy cargoes. Of the Min and its sister ship Guinevere it was said that they "did not satisfy the ambitions of either their owner or their builder" as far as speed was concerned. Nevertheless in 1886 the Min was the first ship home from Shanghai back to London, while in 1864 the Guinevere beat the clipper Eliza Shaw in a race "for high stakes" (Lubbock, 1973: 133) . It was also said that "these two ships undoubtedly taught the Steeles (their builder) a great deal, for they were followed by the Greenock firm's masterpieces Serica, Taeping, Ariel and Sir Lancelot" (ibid).

The Min is recorded to have had large repairs in 1867 (after a collision in 1866 while negotiating the notorious 900 mile river voyage to Hankow), and repairs for damage in 1871 and 1874 (Lloyd's Register). In 1888 the Min was sold to Hawaiian owners and renamed the W.B Godfrey, and sailing under the Hawaiian flag was one of the 'Planters Line ' of packets sailing from the USA to Pacific

Islands. Its narrow beam and deck made it unsuitable for the transport of cattle in that trade though, and its owners found work for it in the Australian trade, on this occasion carrying five passengers and 356,455 feet of timber across the Pacific from San Francisco to Melbourne (Alsop, 1968). Also travelling with Captain Davis were his wife and child.

 After departing San Francisco on 11 January 1891 relations between the crew and passengers were strained particularly due to the unruly nature of the first mate, John Garthley who according to Captain Davis was "extraordinarily remiss in performing his duties". As a result Captain Davis claimed that the fore-castle crew went about their work unwillingly with signs of insubordination, while the crew later made "vague charges of misconduct against the captain" (Argus 11/3/1891). The Second Officer was ill with rheumatism for most of the voyage, and Mrs Davis had been called upon to take watches and navigation duties.

 Approaching Melbourne 56 days out of San Francisco, and after several days of heavy seas and high winds since leaving Lord Howe Island made it difficult to obtain a position, the weather cleared and Captain Charles Davis was able to fix his position. He was not able to take another fix for 24 hours, but by the following evening using dead reckoning he believed himself to be in the vicinity of Cape Schank - he was not inexperienced and this was his seventh trip in Victorian waters.

 Captain Davis recalled that:

 "On Sunday night at 7 o'clock I was on deck keeping watch....the wind was about south-west, and a little off the port quarter. As I cast my eyes round I saw what I thought was a squall coming up from the north-east. It was dark at the time, and I now know that what I saw was the smoke from the bush fires driving down the ranges. The man on the look-out sang out something, and I thought he said 'Light on the starboard quarter', but I afterwards learned that he said 'Land on the starboard quarter'. I determined to ware the ship, and I put the wheel hard up, but though she generally answered the helm very readily she would not go off before the wind at all this time. At last she seemed to have come round, then hung for a minute, and then dropped back again as the current got hold of her. A second or two afterwards she touched the ground lightly a couple of times in succession, and then bumped heavily and struck. I tried to get her off by working the wheel and putting more sail on her, but it was no good. I also jettisoned about 10,000 feet of timber. Some of the passengers were below at the time, and others were on deck. She kept bumping all Sunday night, and we had an anxious time of it" (Argus 11/3/1891).

 Davis still thought they were near Cape Schank and it was not until a boat went ashore that Garthley learnt from a swagman the surprising news they were in the vicinity of the Otway Ranges. In a curious coincidence the ship had drifted onto the rocky coast near the mouth of the Godfrey River, so named after an early settler (Alsop: 12).

 The local ketch Jessie that had left Lorne for Apollo Bay was sighted and hailed, and the the passengers were taken off and landed at Lorne, the next day returning to pick up the belongings of the crew. The S.S. Casino also stopped and lowered boats but was not required so continued on its voyage.
 The tugs Racer and Lady Loch steamed down from Melbourne but the ship was so firmly embedded after breaking three hawsers the captain ordered its abandonment.

 A subsequent Marine Enquiry noted that Captain Davis did not hold a Certificate of Competency on 20 March 1891, but did not pass judgement as it was a foreign owned vessel.

 The hull and cargo were auctioned off and sold to Mr Henry Honour who paid 420 pounds for it. Salvage efforts involving vessels, rafts and about 40 men - who were based in Lorne - led to pleas by the local temperance community to the Premier for a police constable to be permanently stationed in Lorne. However their arguments were dismissed "...as the men casually employed in wreck salvage are neither numerous or troublesome" (Alsop: 9)

 There was no road access to this remote location until the construction of the Great Ocean Road in 1930, and the W.B. Godfrey salvage effort had to be carried out by sea in often dangerous and difficult conditions. A series of accidents in the ensuing months saw the deaths of five men involved in the difficult salvage work. In April 1891 the barquentine Chittoor was being used to salvage the W.B. Godfrey. While trying to land on shore in one of the Chittoor's boats, the boat overturned drowning a seaman John McIntyre. The mate of the Chittoor Abraham Robert Pleace (who had for many years been a Port Phillip Pilot and the Geelong Harbour Master) reached the side of the W.B Godfrey but a wave dashed him against it knocking him unconscious. The crew on board the vessel recovered his body but were unable to revive him (Pleace's body was later taken to Melbourne and buried in the St Kilda cemetery). Two months later Charles Boulter was drowned and the other men in the boat had to swim for their lives, in a similar accident when another boat from the Chittoor was overturned in the surf.
 Three months later another vessel the Clara was being used to salvage the W.B. Godfrey when a boat from it too was upset by a wave and threw all the men into the surf. Captain Gortley (who had previously also been one of the salvage crew on the Chittoor) and a Frenchman Victor Godfrey (another curious but unrelated Godfrey link) were drowned as a result. It was originally intended that the bodies of Gortley and Godfrey be taken away for burial, but in yet another accident while towing the coffins out to the Clara the line broke when it fouled the wreck of the W.B Godfrey. It was too dangerous to take the boat into the surf to recover them, so it was decided to bury the men on the cliff overlooking the wreck (Alsop: 12)

 In 1930 when the Great Ocean Road was being constructed, the men of the Country Roads Board Camp at Wye River subscribed to the cost of building a marble tombstone to the men who were lost. The Great Ocean Road was built directly over the graves and no effort was made to disturb the graves or exhumate the remains. The information on the headstone was subsequently found to be inaccurate after research by Country

Roads Board supervisor Peter Alsop - only three names are shown, one of which has no relation to anyone in connection with the wreck or salvage incidents, and the wording seems to indicate that their deaths occurred when the W.B. Godfrey was wrecked.

The site of the W.B. Godfrey is technically and archaeologically significant as there are no plans nor builders models surviving of the early Steele built ships that included iron beams in their construction (Min, Guinevere and possibly the Serica) (MacGregor, 1983:136-138, 249), out of the total of sixteen tea clippers built by Steele. The Guinevere was wrecked in the Yangtze River in 1866, and the Serica was wrecked on the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea with the loss of 27 out of 28 lives. The Min represents an early stage in the development of composite construction (iron framework planked over with wood and copper sheathed and fastened) which was still classified as "experimental" by Lloyds until 1867, when they published their own rules for composite construction (MacGregor: 138, Sexton, 1991). It is also one of the few opportunities for visitors along the Great Ocean Road to easily access and appreciate an historic shipwreck site, lying in the drying, intertidal zone just metres from the road.

The site visible on the shore platform in the intertidal zone consists of a 22m sheared off section of the bow deck plating, with a capstan and a windlass. This wreckage usually lies in knee deep water at low tide. It is surrounded by a hawse pipe, iron beams, frames and T-section deck beams. An anchor with protruding stock visible lies 7.6 metres seaward of the bow. Further south 41 metres away is a section of deck framing with bitts (bollards) attached. Wreckage belonging to the stern and remaining 34 metres of the vessel lies in deeper water beyond the surf, and consists of iron frames, wooden hull timbers, and some scattered copper alloy fastenings (MHU wreck report 5/11/1986). It appears that the W.B. Godfrey lay beam on to the rock shore platform and subsequently broke up, the bow deck section washing over 90 degrees onto the rock platform and the stern sinking into deeper water.