

By DAVID ADAMS  
Tuesday 23 January 2001

# Treasure Hunt



Picture: Marina Oliphant

From a deep cellar:  
Maritime archaeologist Ross  
Anderson examines a  
schnapps bottle and glass  
retrieved from the wreck.

“A 20 year bid to excavate and survey what is arguably Australia’s finest shipwreck remains thwarted by a lack of funding. Meanwhile, its treasures are being tarnished by the sea and stolen by looters, writes **David Adams**”

**T**here was no suggestion that its journey to Tasmania would be anything but routine when the SS City of Launceston slipped its berth from Melbourne's Sandridge Pier at 7.20pm on November 19, 1865.

Steaming out into Port Phillip Bay, the ship turned its bow towards the distant glow of the West Channel lightship. On board, its 38 passengers had probably started to relax: those in the saloon at the stern perhaps sipping at a glass of sherry as they watched the lights of Melbourne recede into the night, while in steerage the working class settled into less ornate surrounds for the 19-hour voyage.

But events would soon prove this was anything but a routine run. An hour after leaving Sandridge Pier, the City of Launceston would be fatally struck and slowly sink beneath the ice-cold waters of the bay where, after early unsuccessful salvage attempts, it would lie largely undisturbed until its rediscovery 115 years later.

**P**eter Harvey crouches beside a low, flat basin and pulls back a canvas cover to reveal the edge of a wooden dining table. About two metres long, but capable of being extended to five, the table is one of the prize finds of a three-week excavation of the wreck of the

City of Launceston - the latest step in a 20-year bid to survey and excavate what is arguably Australia's finest shipwreck and certainly one of its most intact.

The table is just one of about 80 artefacts that Harvey, a maritime archaeologist with Heritage Victoria's maritime unit, and a team of up to 30 maritime archaeologists, conservators, skilled volunteers and other experts recovered from the wreck on the trip late last year.

"Here we have probably the biggest repository in Victoria, if not Australia, of fabrics, people's belongings and they're in a ship," Harvey says of the City of Launceston.

"All maritime archaeologists have their favorites but this has got to be the most intact of its kind."

The story of the City of Launceston may not have the appeal of other famous shipwrecks such as the Swedish wreck the *Vasa* or England's *Mary Rose*, but in Australian terms the ship itself is a veritable treasure trove.

Each of the artefacts found on board - from the crockery still neatly stacked inside the remains of a cupboard and a porcelain vanity basin to a chest filled with fabric, bottles of schnapps and decorated porcelain chamber-pots - has a rich story to tell about Australia's past.

Working in murky conditions where visibility could be reduced to about a metre, teams of up to five people carefully recorded each item in situ. Using a water dredge to vacuum away silt, the items were then removed, tagged and brought to the surface before being taken to the excavations base at Portarlington.

Carefully packed, they were then transported to a Melbourne lab where the process of preservation - which for some wooden artefacts can take several years to complete - began. As well as the latest finds, the lab has an array of others brought up on excavations carried out over the past few years: buttons, champagne bottles and portholes. Perhaps the most famous is the blue and white porcelain toilet believed to be one of the original flushing water closets manufactured by Englishman Thomas Crapper.

**T**he City of Launceston was rediscovered still sitting upright on the seabed in March 1980 by a group of enthusiasts led by Geelong diver Terry Arnott, at the time a committee member of the Maritime Archaeologists Association of Victoria (MAAV). The group also included scallop fisherman Bill Cull, hydrographer Harry Reed and fellow diver Barry Heard.

Arnott, who is now a maritime archaeologist with the Department of Environment and Heritage in South Australia, recalls first crawling about the deck of the ship after a 12-month search, unaware that he was actually on board the vessel he had sought for so long.

"It was dim and dark and I could see fragments of material around me and I thought that I was on the starboard side," he says. "I thought the shipwreck must be around here somewhere, I must be close to it, and as I was crawling on my hands and knees. That's when I fell off and dropped about five metres into the silt. It gave me one hell of a fright but exhilaration as well as I realised the ship was intact and standing upright."

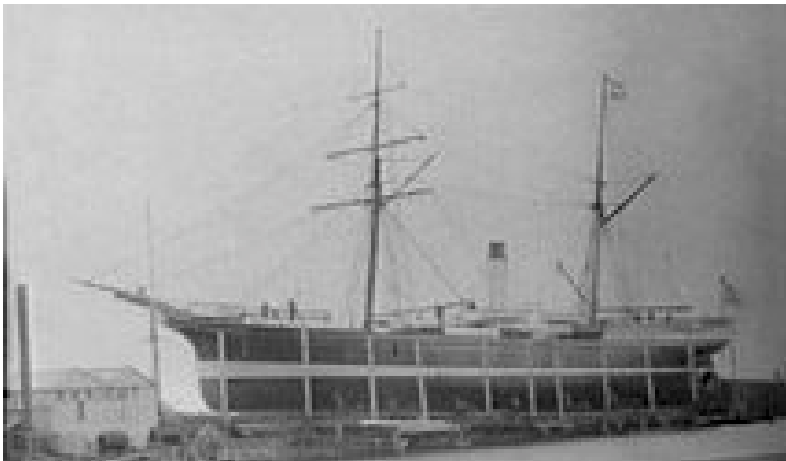
Arnott and his colleagues at the MAAV had launched their search for the City of Launceston because they believed it might still be relatively intact and its discovery would show the importance of protecting ships wrecked in state waters. At the launch of their search, there was no legislative protection for ships in bays and inland waters.

But he says the find far exceeded their expectations. "It really tells us an enormous amount about these early Bass Strait trade and the passenger trade, about ordinary people back in the 1860s. It's the stories it can tell us about individuals and the communities at the time."

The rediscovery of the City of Launceston led to the enactment of the state's first shipwreck heritage legislation - the 1981 Historic Shipwrecks Act. The City of Launceston was the first ship to be gazetted under the act.

**H**arvey says that because most of the excavation work has been concentrated on the ship itself, not much is yet known about the passengers. "What we have found is that it was quite luxuriously appointed, with beautiful carpet, timber paneling, gilded swinging lamps, plush furnishings, curtains - we've found curtain rods with the rings still attached - frosted glass with patterns etched into it," he says. "It was a really well put together ship. These ships, at the time, were the pinnacle of technological achievement."

Built in Glasgow shipyards to order for the Launceston and Melbourne Steam Navigation Company in 1863, the 55-metre, 368-tonne City of Launceston was designed to ply the waters between Melbourne and Launceston. It could accommodate up to 188 passengers. The vessel first arrived in Hobson's Bay on September 16 1863 after a speedy 102-day passage from Britain. In October it was taken to Williamstown to be fitted out for the intercolonial passenger trade, which involved converting the brig-rigged sailing ship into a schooner-rigged steamer.



**“Here we have probably the biggest repository in Victoria, if not Australia, of fabrics, people's belongings.... All maritime archaeologists have their favorites but this has got to be the most intact of its kind.”**

**The City of Launceston.**

Picture: La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library

The ship's wrecking is well documented. An hour out from Melbourne it was rammed in the starboard side by the 500-tonne SS Penola, a steamship on a voyage from Adelaide to Melbourne, apparently after confusion over which side they would use to pass each other.

Whatever the cause of the collision, the Penola's bow penetrated the captain's cabin and water rushed in, quickly filling the vessel. The collision was fatal, but it took about 45 minutes for the ship to sink, giving Captain William Nelson Thom the time he need to ensure the 38 passengers and 24 crew could safely evacuate to the Penola with no loss of life.

Salvage attempts began two days later. The ship had been carrying a general cargo of brandy, port wine, rum, tea, cigars, boots, hats, drapery, glassware, sheepwash, lead and spouting as well as 56 cases of English mail and six cases of Victorian mail. The English mail was recovered, but only a few other items - a bag, a parcel, five boxes of passengers' belongings and two cases of merchandise - were ever retrieved.

There were also attempts to raise the stricken vessel, one of which centred on the use of newly patented Maquay lifting devices. Working in hard helmets with no light and being pumped air through a long tube to the surface, men positioned the devices - no more than drums containing sulphuric acid and zinc cuttings - along the ship. When the acid was released, hydrogen gas was produced that inflated large canvas bags. The bags managed to lift the wreck, but only partly, and it soon fell back to the bottom where it lay until its rediscovery.

The looters came some time around May last year. ignoring the buoy identifying the area as an protected zone and forbidding people from anchoring or diving in the area, they took a small craft to the site and, probably under the cover of darkness, it is believed that up to four scuba-divers dropped over the side of the vessel and made their way to the wreck.

In what would be pitch darkness, they began to rummage clumsily and hurriedly among the ship's remains in the search of readily transportable trinkets.

Whether they were simply trophy hunters in search of a piece of pottery for their mantelpiece or a few gold coins or whether they were more organised black-market traders remains unknown. How much they have taken also remains unknown. But what is certain is that the damage they caused is irreparable.

"What has been lost is a huge amount of information," Harvey says. "These people have been just going to the site and pushing their hands into the silt and feeling an object and pulling it up. Of course, that pulls through layers of context, disturbs objects and smashes fragile ones. It just completely destroys things. Fragile timber and other things are just thrown over the side."

Since the attack water police have stepped up their patrols of the area and Heritage Victoria has also had its own enforcement measures strengthened. There is also some small solace in the fact that many of the items, particularly the ceramics, bear the insignia of the Launceston and Melbourne Steam Navigation Company, meaning they are easily recognisable as stolen items. While the wreck has been picked at for various artefacts over the years by looters, it was the attack last May - as well as the effects the natural corrosive work of the sea was having on the iron of the hull - that convinced Harvey something had to be done to preserve and record what was left on the wreck.

Harvey says Heritage Victoria is now looking for some corporate sponsorship to continue working on the wreck and it hopes eventually to mount an exhibition of its finds.

He only hopes the ship can be excavated and preserved before any more damage is done. "It's a bit of a race against time."