

Steam-Powered Grab-Dredge - *DANDENONG* - Found:

By Des Williams

The steam-powered Priestman grab-dredge, *Dandenong* was built at Williamstown, in 1891, it was 270 tons and measured 30.47 x 7.25 x 2.31 metres. In 1907 it was owned by the *Port Phillip & Hobson's Bay Quarrying & Sand Co. Ltd.* and used for raising sand and stone that was sold as ballast for sailing vessels.

In 1913 the nascent Royal Australian Navy was carrying out construction operations at its Flinders Naval Base in Westernport Bay, including dredging operations to deepen the harbour at Hanns' Inlet. The RAN purchased the dredge for £1,400 and on 8th February 1913 and engaged the tug *Racer* to tow the *Dandenong* from Melbourne to Western Port.

It appears the dredge had never left the relatively quiet waters of Port Phillip Bay, and once out amongst the ocean swells in Bass Strait, it very quickly began to take on water. The RAN crew of three on board, worked the pumps all night, but by next morning, as they entered Westernport, the dredge began to settle. Alarmed at the situation, the naval crew quickly transferred to the tug and the tow was resumed. Shortly there-after, whilst off McHaffie's Reef on Phillip Island's west coast, where the tidal stream runs at up to 6 knots, the *Dandenong* filled and sank rapidly, stern first.

A series of unsuccessful salvage attempts by the RAN and its divers followed over the following few months. The torpedo boat HMAS *Countess of Hopetoun*, the gunboat HMAS *Protector* and the light cruiser HMAS *Encounter* and their crews were all involved. The press of the day ridiculed the RAN's extravagant salvage efforts, reporting the cost of the operation had outstripped the purchase price of the ageing dredge. In a last ditch attempt to recover the dredge, well-known Melbourne salvage diver George Beckett was contracted to continue with the salvage work, but he too was unsuccessful. The wreck was abandoned and forgotten.

In February 2014, students attending a Flinders University (SA) maritime archaeology field-school at Phillip Island, were joined by a combined group of Heritage Victoria maritime archaeologists and members of the Maritime Archaeology Association of Victoria (MAAV) conducting a side-scan survey search for the wreck of the *Dandenong*. It was decided to search a number of possible locations for the lost dredge, which had been obtained by MAAV members Des Williams and Peter Taylor following their meticulous research at the Australian National Archives. It had been a long held ambition of both Des and Peter to locate this unusual wreck-site.

The field school provided an ideal practical opportunity for the students to conduct both a remote sensing exercise and receive training in side-scan operations and search grid techniques in real time, under the tutelage of Heritage Victoria's maritime archaeologist Peter Harvey and MAAV volunteer Peter Taylor.

The resultant grid-search digital data compiled from the field work provided the students with a further opportunity to learn more about the use of side-scan software and most importantly, to interpret the data. A couple of potential targets were noted, but due to time constraints no diving was conducted during the field-school work.

In late March 2014, three members of the MAAV, Mick Whitmore, Des Williams, Peter Taylor and boat driver Mick Paul set out to inspect the two mostly likely targets. A shot-line was dropped on the first target, where the tidal ebb stream was running at over 4 knots. In Westernport, slack-water is a very short affair lasting only a few minutes. The

divers waited until the stream had slowed sufficiently, before descending, to find only a sponge-covered reef, but no wreckage, so the dive was terminated without delay.

The three divers decided to waste no time and immediately inspect the second target site, which was very close by. The shot-line was dropped on the site and in a 2 knot stream, the divers again made their way down to the seabed. The visibility was quite poor, but on nearing the bottom a steel beam (crane-jib?) and other wreckage was observed: this was the *Dandenong* alright. Also seen on site were a steam boiler and a heavy steel upright column about 2.4 metres high, attached to a cogged turn-table. More large wreckage was scattered around, thickly covered with sponges and weed. As the flood tide made its way into Westernport, the stream velocity increased, making it harder to maintain station. Relief from the current could be gained by dropping down into the lee of the wreckage, but having confirmed the wreck-site, the divers wasted no time in making their way safely back to the surface.

Since the MAAV initial archive research on this wreck began in 1989, it had taken some 25 years to be in the right place, at the right time, with the right group of people to achieve a result. This was a truly a co-operative effort by the three groups involved: Heritage Victoria, Flinders University (SA) and the MAAV.

In January 2016, another MAAV team, consisting of divers Peter Taylor, Mick Whitmore, Priya Cardinaletti and Steve Cartlidge visited the *Dandenong* wreck once again. On that occasion, they were able to positively identify the previously seen objects and located the distinctive Priestman grab bucket, lying amongst a field of coal strewn on the seabed. This very unusual wreck is significant in that it is the only wreck of a steam Priestman grab dredge in Victoria and has a connection with the early history of the RAN, albeit only for a brief period of time.



