The Shipwreck Coast

Compiled by Geoff Walker

In the State of Victoria, Australia, there is a notorious stretch of coastline that has been dubbed **"The Shipwreck Coast"**. This is a treacherous stretch of coastline which stretches between **Cape Otway** to **Port Fairy**, a distance of 80 miles. The **Shipwreck Coast** is also the home to the limestone formations called The **Twelve Apostles**, which lay to the east of Loch Ard Gorge. **Captain Matthew Flinders**, the English Navigator, Explorer, and Cartographer is said to have commented "seldom have I known a more fearful section of coastline", stretching along the coast of south western Victoria**.** The dangerous waters of the Southern Ocean were an important shipping route for trade and transport, but many ships ran into trouble in the rough seas when making their landfall, earning it the ominous name the **Shipwreck Coast**. Navigation in the 1800s was not as accurate as today.

There are approximately 638 known shipwrecks along Victoria's coastline, although only around 240 of them have been discovered and recorded. Most were caused by gales, human error and, in some cases foul play, which was the underlaying reason for many of these ships to become wrecks. It has an infamous history of sending ships to an early, watery grave.

The Shipwreck Coast of Victoria

The **Shipwreck Coast Line** running between **Port Fairy** and **Cape Otway** on the southern coastline of Victoria, is a very inhospitable stretch of coastline, frequently confronted with severe gales and huge swells that originate from the Southern Ocean, often carrying through into the Bass Strait.

The Twelve Apostles were formed by erosion from the sea, wind, and other climatic elements. The harsh and extreme weather conditions from the Southern Ocean gradually eroded the soft limestone, to form caves in the cliffs, which then became arches that eventually collapsed, leaving rock stacks up to 50 m high. One of the stacks collapsed in July 2005, leaving only 7 of the 8 originally standing off the coastline.

Due to wave action eroding the cliffs, existing headlands are expected to become new limestone stacks in the future. The stacks were originally known as the **Pinnacles**, and the **Sow and Pigs** (or Sow and Piglets, with Muttonbird Island being the Sow and the smaller rock stacks being the Piglets), as well as the Twelve Apostles. The formation's name was made official as the **Twelve Apostles**, despite only ever having had eight limestone Pinnacles.

The Twelve Apostles and rugged coastline of the Shipwreck Coast.

(Unknown Photographer)

In the 1600s and 1700s there were a huge number of ships in the area, both trading and bringing convicts and settlers to Australia. The vessels were mostly wooden and quite small, in comparison to today's ships, and they relied on the strong trade winds to fill their sales and the stars to guide them, or in some cases, the latest charts and maps which were often incomplete and inaccurate. The shipwrecks were mostly caused by a combination of strong winds blowing the ships off course and into uncharted or dangerous waters. A lack of lighthouses meant there was little warning of reefs, rocky outcrops, or small islands. This triggered a series of inquiries in the mid - 1800s, which led to the construction of lighthouses.

Perhaps one of the most well-known shipwrecks is probably the **Loch Ard**, a clipper which was lost in 1878, on route from England to Melbourne. As the ship approached Australia, a heavy fog descended, causing the captain to mistakenly believe he was further away from land than he was. The ship struck **Mutton Bird Island**, just east of **Port Campbell** and despite frantic rescue efforts only two people survived. A young woman named Eva Carmichael and a cabin boy named Tom Pearce were swept into a nearby cove where they spent the night before being rescued the next day. The cove is now named **Loch Ard Gorge** and is popular with tourists and wreck hunters.

One of the most easily accessible shipwrecks is at Godfrey Creek near **Apollo Bay**. Here there is a memorial called **The Lone Sailor's Grave** which marks the place where the **WB Godfrey** was wrecked in 1891 on its way from San Francisco to Melbourne. Incredibly, there was no loss of life on the ship itself, however sadly five men drowned during salvage operations.

Not far distant is a sweeping beach called **Wreck Beach** where, at low tide, you can see the old anchors of the **Marie Gabrielle** and **Fiji**. Caution must be taken to ensure exploring only at low tide and in permissible weather conditions, otherwise it can be dangerous.

Image taken at Wreck Beach, showing anchors of shipwrecks seen at low water..

(unknown Photographer)

Left, the **Falls of Halladale** is best known for her spectacular demise near Peterborough in 1908. Due to a navigational error made onboard, she sailed directly onto rocks in dense fog. The crew of 29 made it safely to shore by boat, leaving the ship foundering with her sails unfurled. For weeks after the wreck large crowds gathered to view the ship as she gradually broke up and then sank in the shallow water to an unworthy grave.

(Unknown Photographer)

Also, near Apollo Bay is the wreck of the coastal steamship **SS Casino**, which sank during more recent times in 1932, while trying to dock in rough seas.

SS Casino was a three mast, riveted iron single screw coastal vessel with a length of 160 feet. She was a single deck, iron framework, schooner rigged coaster, with an inverted compound two-cylinder, 65 horsepower coal fired steam engine driving one shaft, with a single boiler, and 3 furnaces. She had her machinery and boiler room located aft. The ship also carried sails and during her early days, she was sometimes rigged as a topsail schooner as the ship's large spread of canvas helped improve her speed, thus reducing the amount of coal she consumed. She also had a capacity to carry 25 passengers.

Port Fairy was busy with competing steamers from various other companies in the early years, transporting a variety of general cargo and passengers, but the **SS Casino** became a premier vessel on the west Victoria coastal route, especially amongst the passengers that used her services.

On 10th July 1932, off Apollo Bay, near Cape Otway in Victoria, she keeled over and sank after striking the seabed, whilst attempting to berth at Apollo Bay jetty in heavy seas. Unknowingly her hull had been pierced with the fluke of her anchor. She put about again and headed for the beach but sank. The steamer was subsequently wrecked about three hundred yards from the shore, with the loss of 10 lives.

From a crew of 16 plus 2 passengers, there were only 8 survivors. The ship had become renowned for her longevity of service to Victoria's western coastal trade – sadly meeting her demise on the eve of celebrating her 50th anniversary. The ship had a colorful history, spanning some 2500 voyages.

A memorial to those who died when the **SS.Casino** ran aground in bad weather at Apollo Bay in 1932. This memorial displayed the original propeller, the ship's bell and a barometer. The wreck bell was removed in later years because of continuous ringing by mischief makers and the barometer also was removed.

(Port Fairy Historical Society archives)

A service is held every year at 11 a.m. on July 10th to commemorate the loss of the ship. The names of the nine people who died is inscribed on a plaque on the side of the stone memorial.

An old photograph of the SS Casino, taken whilst she was at sea ca 1924.

(Port Fairy Historical Society archives)

Following their catastrophic loss, owners of the **SS Casino**.the Belfast and Koroit Steam Navigation Company stopped its vessels from using Apollo Bay as a port. The loss of SS Casino was a death knell to coastal cargo and passenger transport in Victoria generally, when only a few years later in 1936, their steamer **Coramba** whilst on a passage from Port Fairy to Melbourne, disappeared without trace and loss of 34 crew, in a fierce gale.

The Belfast and Koroit S. N. Co ceased to operate in 1939 with the advent of substantially improved road transport and communications. The **SS Casino** was a grand little ship that served the State of Victoria very well over a prolonged period. Regrettably, she met an undignified end, but nevertheless her memory continues to live on in local history and, nostalgia.

Obituary to some of ships wrecked on the Shipwreck Coast.

Thistle (1837), Children (1839), Unknown French whaler (1841), Lydia (1843), Socrates (1843), Cataraqui (1845), Enterprise (1850), Essington (1852), Freedom (1853), SS Schomberg (1855), John Scott (1858), Golden Spring (1863), Marie Gabrielle (1869), Young Australian (1877), Loch Ard (1878), Napier (1878), Alexandra (1882), Yarra (1882), Edinburgh Castle (1888), Fiji (1891), Joseph H. Scammell (1891), Newfield (1892), Freetrader (1894) La Bella (1905), Falls of Halladale (1908), Speculant (1911), Antares (1914), SS Casino (1932), City of Rayville[8] (1940)

With its history of being a treacherous stretch of coastline along Australia's southern shores, it surely is most aptly named the **"Shipwreck Coast".**

End.