

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated on - 05/01/26

## ALERT



S17 SSAlert BassStrait  
Article



S17\_SSAlert\_BassStrait\_PrintC  
unknown



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unknown

## Location

Bass Strait, between Cape Schanck and Port Phillip Heads

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S17

## Date lost

28/12/1893

## Official number

76169

## Construction material

Iron

## Hull

Built for Huddart Parker Ltd. 1 Single deck, 3 masted, barque rigged,elliptical stern, clincher built, iron framed, 6 bulkheads, easy bilge,fine lines, very narrow for its length.

## Propulsion

Steam - Screw

## Engine specification

(D love 2006) 90 n.h.p compound steam with 24 & 26 inch cylinders and 26 inch stroke

## **Engine builder**

Rankin & Blackmore of Greenock, Scotland.

## **Number of masts**

1

## **Length/Breadth/Depth**

169.00 Feet / 19.60 Feet / 9.85 Feet

## **Builder**

Robert Duncan & Co

## **Year of construction**

1877

## **Built port**

Renfrew, Port Glasgow

## **Built country**

Scotland

## **Registration Port**

Melbourne

## **Date lost**

28/12/1893

## **Departure**

Lakes Entrance via Port Albert

## **Destination**

Melbourne

## **Cargo**

25 tons wattlebark, 40 bales wool, 20 bags maize, 14 empty casks, 55 sheepskins, one box tools and 20 packages of furniture. In all estimated 44 tons (from J Arbuckle Reid 1896).

## **Owner**

Huddart Parker Ltd

## Master

Captain Mathieson

## Weather conditions

Alert faced a large south west swell and a strong south east wind as it rounded Cape Liptrap. By the time the ship rounded Cape Schank the wind was gale force from the south west. Heavy squalls and thick fog so bad that Alert sank without being seen by the lighthouse.

## Cause of loss

As Alert rounded Cape Liptrap the ship encountered a large south west swell and a strong south east wind. By the time Alert rounded Cape Schank the wind was gale force from the south west. Captain Mathieson attempted to turn Alert to the north west towards Port Phillip Heads but as the vessel came about, a wave crashed over the port side. Water poured in through stoke hole covers and a pantry door in the galley. The water put the fires out in the ship's boiler room and the Captain gave the order to abandon ship.

## Passenger comments

J Newton (saloon passenger)<br /> W Stewart (steerage passenger)<br /> - Page (steerage passenger)

## Number of crew

13

## Crew comments

Albert Mathieson (Captain)<br /> J Mattison (second officer)<br /> J Thompson (chief engineer)<br /> JG Hodges (chief engineer)<br /> W Thompson (fireman)<br /> J Kilpatrick (second engineer)<br /> J Dodd (Steward)<br /> J Williamson (AB)<br /> T Thompson (AB)<br /> J Arthurson (AB)<br /> J Coutts (AB)<br /> D McIvor (fireman)<br /> Robert Ponting (Cook)<br />

## Statement of significance

<p>SS Alert is historically significant as one of the worst maritime wrecks in Victorian history, with the deaths of 15 of the 16 people on board the vessel. It is archaeologically significant as no official salvage has taken place and the ship still contains the crew and passengers' personal effects, enabling an understanding of life at sea on a coastal trading vessel. It also carried a small but varied cargo which may provide information about general coastal trading at the end of the 1800s. Further study of the hull may reveal technical details of iron shipbuilding as shipbuilders were known to deviate off ships' plans at this time. Developments in diving and scientific equipment mean Alert is scientifically significant as a subject for national and international shipwreck corrosion studies. SS Alert is a rare example of an iron coastal trading vessel that has not been officially salvaged, scuttled or looted and representative of the iron vessels engaged in coastal trade around the southern coast of Australia in the late 1800s.</p> <br /> <p>Significance assessed against criteria defined in Guidelines for the Management of Australia's Shipwrecks (1994).</p> <br /> <p>Criterion 1 Historic</p> <br /> <p>SS Alert has historic significance as one of the worst maritime disasters in Victoria's history, when 15 of the sixteen men aboard were drowned in the wreck.</p> <br /> <p>Criterion 2 Technical</p> <br /> <p>SS Alert may demonstrate technical significance in iron shipbuilding as iron shipbuilders are known to have deviated off ships plans.</p> <br /> <p>Criterion 3 Social</p> <br /> <p>SS Alert has local social significance with some of the bodies buried in Sorrento Cemetery. The wrecking of the Alert is also a major maritime disaster in Victoria.</p> <br /> <p>Criterion 4 Archaeological</p> <br /> <p>The wreck of the SS Alert is archaeologically significant as no official salvage of the vessel was undertaken after it sank. The removal of the propellers does indicate some illegal salvage may have taken place since the ship was wrecked, although they may have come away due to the strength of the storm and the wrecking. The archaeological remains have the potential to tell the story of shipboard life on a passenger/cargo steamer at the turn of the century.</p> <br /> <p>Criterion 5 Scientific</p> <br /> <p>SS Alert is not currently the subject of any scientific studies. However, as a part of the iron ship

resource in Victoria, the wreck could contribute information to the ongoing national and international corrosion measurement studies.

Criterion 6 Interpretive

A monument has been erected at Sorrento cemetery to remember the sailors who are buried there and those that were never recovered. Advances in 3D technology will potentially allow 3D renderings of the hull remains and individual artefacts.

Criterion 7 Rare

SS Alert is a rare example in Victoria of a maritime disaster on such a scale. The wreck is also a rare example of an iron shipwreck that has not been officially salvaged or stripped bare by looters.

Criterion 8 Representative

SS Alert is representative of the fleet of smaller iron ships that transported mainly cargo around the coastline of Australia towards the end of the 19th century. The wreck is also representative of the disaster that befell many such ships in treacherous seas and heavy winds.

\*There is a 1000m diameter Protected Zone around Alert centred on position -38.4869444 144.7505556 WGS84. No entry is permitted unless a Permit has been authorised by Heritage Victoria. \*

## VHR history

The Scottish-built Alert was a small iron steamer that was used for many years in Port Phillip Bay, running general cargo between Melbourne and Geelong. SS Alert's owners, Huddart Parker and Co., specifically commissioned the building of the vessel by Robert Duncan in Glasgow in 1877. While designed as a steamer, for the ship's journey out to Australia, SS Alert was converted to a three-masted schooner with its funnels stored in the hold. Leaving Scotland on 3 January 1878, the crew had such difficulty sailing the steamer-turned sailing ship, that they mutinied and the ship was forced to dock in Cardigan Bay, Wales. The crew were jailed while a survey of the vessel was undertaken. The surveyor determined the vessel was unseaworthy and the crew were subsequently released. As a result the eight man crew demanded a monthly wage of £3.15s at the time the highest wages ever paid for crew of a coaster. It took some time for the weather to soften enough for the Alert to finally leave Wales and the vessel arrived in Melbourne on the 30 May 1878. The SS Alert was overhauled and refitted back to a steamer and was put on the regular route between Melbourne, Port Arlington and Geelong. For the next sixteen, mostly incident-free, years the Alert plied the waters of Port Phillip. At the end 1893, on 23 December, SS Alert made a routine trip from Melbourne to Gippsland, arriving in Bairnsdale on Christmas day. Loaded up with 44 tonnes of cargo, a light load, SS Alert began the return journey in calm conditions on 27 December. Conditions were so calm, Alert was forced to stop near Wilson Promontory as the fog was too dense to see the light from the lighthouse at Cliffy island. Once the fog lifted, Alert rounded Cape Liptrap to encounter a large south west swell and a strong south east wind. By the time Alert rounded Cape Schank the wind was gale force from the south west. Captain Mathieson attempted to turn Alert to the north west towards Port Phillip Heads but as the vessel came about, a wave crashed over the port side. Water poured in through stoke hole covers and a pantry door in the galley. The water put the fires out in the ship's boiler room and the Captain gave the order to abandon ship. Alert was last seen from the Cape Schanck lighthouse at 3:40pm before disappearing into thick rain and squalls. The steamer sank stern first at about 4.30 in the afternoon in weather so terrible that no-one saw the vessel founder. Robert Ponting, the ship's cook and only survivor, was in the water hanging onto some wood for more than sixteen hours before being washed up at Jubilee Beach at Sorrento. Four ladies, out walking after breakfast looking for seashells, saw what they initially thought was a drunken man lying on the beach. When they moved in closer, they saw that he had a lifebelt on and he was dropping in and out of consciousness. Two stayed with Ponting, while two went to raise the alarm. They came across Mr Ramsay, a well-known local dentist, who coincidentally had been a medical officer on several ships in his previous occupation. He had a flask of brandy on hand, the recommended stimulant for potential drowning victims, and poured some down Ponting's throat and kept moving his limbs to get his blood flowing. Another man, Stanton, saw the group on the beach and bought his large St Bernard, Victor Hugo, down to help out by getting the animal to lie down next to Ponting to share his body warmth. On 2nd February, 1894 the Court of Marine Inquiry found that SS Alert had too much freeboard and insufficient stability due to the light cargo load for the conditions. They thought Captain Mathieson should have sought shelter in Westernport Bay. However, the Inquiry also found that no blame could be attributed to anyone or anything, with the Captain having used every precaution in handling the vessel. There was a series of court cases after the sinking of the Alert. These were cases brought by the families of the dead against the owners of the vessel. Robert Ponting also bought a case against Huddart, Parker & Company. Their arguments were that the ship was not suited to ocean going conditions and owners were guilty of gross negligence. Only one was successful and on 20 May 1897, Lucy Kilpatrick, widow of crewman, John Kilpatrick was awarded legal expenses. A large iron wreck was reported to Heritage Victoria in 1993, after a fisherman's trawl net snagged it. However, the wreck remained unidentified until 2007 when Southern Ocean Exploration (SOE) relocated and dived the

wreck for the first time in 114 years. As the wreck was largely intact and there is the possibility of human remains still within the hull, SS Alert was placed inside a protected zone, which limits access without a permit issued by Heritage Victoria.