

**City of Launceston**  
**Trial Public Access Program 2006**



Cover image: SS *Penola*'s bow stuck in the starboard hull of the SS *City of Launceston*.  
Photo: M. Whitmore

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### **Introduction**

The *City of Launceston* is one of Victoria's most significant historic shipwrecks, and one of the most accessible wrecks of a steamship in Australian waters. The site's archaeological deposit has exceptionally high integrity, with extraordinary evidence of intercolonial trade in nineteenth century Australia. The entire ship's hull is intact to deck level with silt mounded up to the original water line.

The site is historically and archaeologically significant and also very fragile, as such it has been closely protected for research and scientific purposes. There are no other known sites of this period or type in Australia comparable with the *City of Launceston*. The site has been a gazetted protected zone almost since its discovery in 1980, controlling recreational diver access to the site.

Historical information and details about the research program conducted on the *City of Launceston* are available in two publications: 'Silts in the Sight Glass: Protectors and Raiders of the SS *City of Launceston*', by Shirley Strachan (Strachan, 2000), and a forthcoming Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology Special Publication which will be available in 2007 (Anderson, 2007, in press). The Heritage Victoria website also contains information about the site ([www.heritage.vic.gov.au](http://www.heritage.vic.gov.au)).

The updated Conservation Management Plan for the site noted that a public access program would need to be developed as a 'niche marketing approach', and suggested the use of Nautical Archaeology Society (NAS) trained volunteers to assist visitors to gain a 'unique maritime heritage visitor experience' (Strachan, 1999:13). From March to June 2006 Heritage Victoria instigated a pioneering short-term Trial Public Access Program (the Trial) to enable qualified and experienced SCUBA divers to visit the site of the *City of Launceston* in Port Phillip Bay. The purpose of the Trial was to allow divers to experience this unique archaeological site and to monitor the impacts of recreational diving on the conservation management of the site. Limited access was allowed by permit only during the trial period and conditions for access were strict.

The program has been extremely beneficial from an educational perspective and has enabled maritime archaeologists at Heritage Victoria to re-establish links with the diving community. As a result, feedback from the program has been overwhelmingly positive. The trial was a bold initiative that was not endorsed by some members of the archaeological community and there have been some shortcomings. This paper outlines and reviews the program to date, and presents issues and recommendations for improvement to the program should access continue in the future.

### **Initiation and development of the Trial Access Program**

During the early 1990s the Historic Shipwrecks Advisory Committee (HSAC) and Heritage Victoria's Maritime Heritage Unit (MHU) were subject to increasing pressure from scuba divers and the diving industry to allow access to the historic shipwreck *City of Launceston*. This led to a program of works on the site, commencing with a preliminary conservation management plan prepared for the MHU by Dena Garrett (Garrett, 1991). Work on the site consisted of monitoring, remote sensing and corrosion studies for several years, until the Heritage Council of Victoria awarded a grant to the MHU to undertake more extensive research on the site in 1996 (see Anderson, 2007).

The funded field program continued for ten seasons, with the research-based fieldwork complete in April 2002. In early 2003 the HSAC returned to the idea of allowing some form of access to the site for recreational divers. At this time a feasibility study was initiated on behalf of the HSAC to assess the economic viability of an access program and investigate some of the basic issues around access.

Heritage Victoria and the HSAC ran a forum on protected zone access for divers, with more than 30 representatives from a range of dive clubs, charter operators, industry groups and maritime archaeology volunteers. Attendees were given the opportunity to have input into the forum, with questions about access, risk, and cost all raised. Results of the forum were disseminated to participants and their groups, and HSAC used them to develop recommendations regarding access to protected zones for the Heritage Council of Victoria. The results were also used to create the permit conditions (see appendices).

The feasibility forum noted that access may result in damage to the site and theft of artefacts, and that the release of the precise location could increase illegal visitation. The forum didn't want damage to occur to the site, and were opposed to uncontrolled access. They requested a simple permitting system be established enabling access for commercial and private operators under the supervision of Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology/Nautical Archaeology Society (AIMA/NAS) trained guides. They also asked that the program be reviewed and the site monitored during and following access. Most importantly, the forum identified the great benefits of access, in particular the opportunity to engage with the diving community through education and interpretation, and also the goodwill generated by Heritage Victoria through allowing access to new and interesting maritime heritage sites.

In early 2005 the MHU wrote a discussion paper for the HSAC which looked at the range of issues for the site and outlined recommendations for possible future access (Heritage Victoria, 2005). The MHU and HSAC's main concerns were regarding site security, permit administration, restriction on visitor numbers, site guides, risk, liability and diver behaviour. The paper proposed a number of access options, including the establishment of a permanent mooring system to facilitate safe access to the protected zone. The permit costs associated with permanent moorings would have been high to assist in cost recovery, which may have resulted in fewer divers accessing the site than projected. The HSAC and MHU decided that permanent moorings were too costly, especially in the event that the program was discontinued before funds could be re-couped through the permitting system.

In September 2005 an alternative access arrangement was put to the HSAC. The MHU proposed to undertake a short-term public access trial on a 'live-boat' basis, prohibiting any anchoring within the protected zone. This would reduce costs substantially as expensive site infrastructure would be unnecessary in the short term. The proposal also allowed the HSAC and the MHU to discontinue the program at short notice if access proved significantly detrimental to the site's conservation, with minimal financial impact.

The HSAC approved the new access proposal, and the MHU began working on the permit conditions and applications for access. Members of the Maritime Archaeology Association of Victoria (MAAV) and the HSAC all had input into the development of the permit conditions, and MAAV members agreed to assist with site interpretation for divers.

In February 2006 Heritage Victoria publicly announced the trial access program through the HSAC, MAAV, and the story was broadcast by ABC news in Melbourne. Information sessions for MAAV volunteers and prospective applicants were conducted during February, and divers were presented with an outline of the conditions for access.

To limit numbers on the site Heritage Victoria decided to open the site for only four weeks over March and April, with access on three days per week, totalling 11 access days and 22 permit periods. Access was limited to two groups per day, with 12 divers plus a site interpreter per group. This would allow a maximum of 264 divers on the site.

The MHU dived the site numerous times in the weeks leading up to the Trial to prepare the site for access, and as such were very familiar with environmental conditions during the season. It has been documented throughout the research program that the biology of the site alters throughout the year, with different biota inhabiting the site according to a variety of environmental factors. At the time of the Trial the site was relatively free of weed, visibility was at least five metres, and features on the site were clear and easily identified. In addition, the site appeared to have a light dusting of fine silt all over.

The MHU replaced the original yellow survey tags around the perimeter of the hull with new tags to assist with navigation and interpretation. Video footage was filmed using a High Definition (HD) digital camera, kindly supplied and operated by an AIMA/NAS graduate. Dr Ian MacLeod from the Western Australian Maritime Museum undertook corrosion potential and pH surveys of the site immediately prior to the commencement of the Trial. Heritage Victoria aimed to visit the site frequently throughout the program to review site conditions, diver impact and undertake compliance duties.

With many divers interested in the program, Heritage Victoria was aware that there would be more interest than the available places. To enable fair allocation of access periods, a 'lottery' was conducted, and formal 'Expressions of Interest' were requested from dive clubs, groups and charter operators to access the site. All applicants were aware of the permit conditions and the possibility that they may not be successful in the lottery. Even if a group was successful in the lottery, this in itself did not guarantee access as the ensuing permit applications also needed to be approved by Heritage Victoria.

All groups who entered the lottery were notified of the results, and allocated a date for access. Upon reviewing the applications, Heritage Victoria felt that some groups and individuals abused this process, submitting multiple applications under different group names, enabling a single person as a dive leader to potentially dive the site more than once. This would have reduced the total number of individuals allowed to access the site. Some charter operators also submitted applications on behalf of a number of affiliated shops, without the express permission of those shop owners or managers. Heritage Victoria contacted all of the shops to verify that they were interested in applying for permits before including them in the lottery.

Two types of permit applications were created, one for the group, club or charter leading the dive, and another for individual divers. Groups were required to submit the individual diver's applications along with the group's application, with the result being sometimes up to 13 permits to process for a single access period. This resulted in a high administrative burden on Heritage Victoria but meant each diver had to acknowledge they understood they were legally bound by the strict permit conditions prior to access being granted. It also enabled Heritage Victoria to track who was diving the site, therefore assisting with compliance should the need arise.

Permits were issued electronically via email and the groups were provided with laminated site plans, which identified the survey tags and significant features on the site, for distribution to divers to enhance their visit.

### **Risk management and mitigation**

To fulfil the government's risk mitigation and risk management policies, Heritage Victoria was required to provide as much information as possible on the site conditions to the charter operators, groups and individual divers. Information included a description of the site conditions, noting the exposed location, depth, distance to nearest landfall and visibility underwater. The dangers of the site were also outlined, such as the presence of marine creatures and sharp objects; the possibility of siltation reducing visibility; the fragility of the site, particularly the danger of hull remains breaking away; the possibility of sudden adverse weather conditions; and the likelihood

and strength of current on the site. To reduce some of these risks, a simple site plan was provided to divers to assist on-site navigation.

Permit applicants were required to have \$10 million public liability insurance, which could be through club or business insurance or by having a dive master or dive instructor in charge of activities on the site. Each diver was required to declare that they had undertaken a minimum of 20 hours of diving in at least 20m depth. This level of diving experience was deemed necessary to help ensure diver buoyancy control, so that damage to the wreck would be minimised, and a resulting reduction in risk of siltation due to poor buoyancy.

### **The Trial program and impacts**

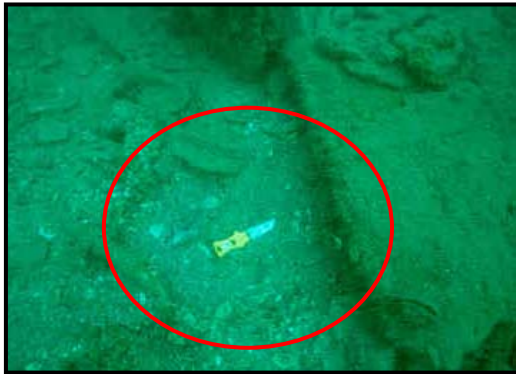


**Image 2: Divers and a charter vessel on site during the public access program. Photo: Heritage Victoria**

On 23 March 2006 the Trial was officially launched, and two groups of divers, (one charter operator and one dive club) accessed the protected zone under a permit process for the first time in since the 1982 declaration. The MHU arrived on site during the first dive and undertook an inspection. Several permit conditions appeared to have been breached during the first dive. The impacts included a small hole dug in the deck on the port side of the funnel, a piece of concretion knocked off of the ice chest near the galley, and an old survey tag moved from the sea bed several metres off the starboard side of the wreck up onto the deck. While minor, the damage and impact was obvious, and it was immediately apparent that the divers were not taking sufficient care and did not understand what interference and did not understand what was meant by no interference with the site, as written in the permit conditions for site access.

Heritage Victoria's enforcement officer boarded the dive vessel and in conjunction with an MHU staff member, spoke with the divers and operator. It was pointed out to the group that the breaches of permit conditions could end the entire program after just a single dive, and would prevent many other divers from ever accessing the site. While the carelessness and impact was extremely disappointing, Heritage Victoria opted to continue with the program and undertake routine monitoring to note further impacts. The permit conditions were re-iterated on the letter sent with the permits, reinforcing what was meant by "no interference". It appeared that divers still thought a little hand

fanning and removing and replacing artefacts were harmless, despite the emphasis placed on these activities during the information sessions.



**Image 3 (left): hole dug through hand fanning on the deck. Photo: Heritage Victoria**  
**Image 4 (right): concretion broken off of corner of trough. Photo: Heritage Victoria**

Other minor impacts were noted during the trial, such as bottles and ceramics being moved from beneath the stern, wiped clean of silt and placed side by side for photographs, and several fragments of ceramic on the portside moved forward and aft some 15 metres during the program. In addition, the fine dusting of silt was slowly kicked off the deck, however this was not viewed as a major impact and was predicted to occur prior to the trial.

Given its exposed location, wind speeds usually need to be less than 15 knots with swell below 1.5 metres, particularly for small boats to access the site. Unseasonably poor weather during April saw the initial four week program extended through to late June. During this four month period, 15 groups accessed the site, with 146 individual divers. Five groups were blown out by inclement weather conditions, four of which are presently awaiting better conditions over summer 2007 to reschedule. One group could not locate the site but chose not to reschedule; an interstate group is awaiting a favourable timeslot; a local group gave up trying to get good weather, and withdrew from the program; and one group cancelled due to other boating commitments. Four groups that were successful in the lottery failed to submit their applications

Heritage Victoria is currently assessing the short and long-term impact on site by the Trial program. Several visits to the site since June 2006 have indicated that the site has coped well with the diver impact, and at present it does not appear that illegal visitation is occurring. The Trial is considered to be complete, and Heritage Victoria will work with the remaining four groups who are awaiting access to the site. Heritage Victoria and the HSAC will review the program during 2007, and continue monitoring the site to determine whether illegal visitation is occurring. Corrosion measurements will be taken to compare with pre-Trial conditions, however given that the access program was spread over a longer period than predicted and diver numbers were reduced, a significant change in corrosion rate is not expected.

### **Future Access Possibilities**

If Heritage Victoria and the HSAC decide to open the site again based upon the success of the Trial, the MHU will need to review and refine the access program to minimise administration and enable easier access. The major issues and related recommendations are outlined below.

## Issues

### 1) Permit process

Despite attempts to make the permit application process as simple as possible, the administration was time-consuming. Applicants often had to be contacted where information on their application was insufficient. In order to retain control over the process Heritage Victoria opted to be heavily involved in the processing of applications and correspondence with the groups and divers. Consequently the administrative burden was considerable.

Under the permit conditions, charter operators and groups were supposed to submit lists of the divers who accessed the protected zone to Heritage Victoria within 3 days of the use of the permit. In practice none of the groups fulfilled this requirement. As feedback was often received from the organiser or site interpreter the MHU elected not to follow this up.

### 2) Site Interpreters

Feedback from the divers and groups indicated that the presence of site interpreters was valued and very useful to the diver's enjoyment and understanding of the site. Heritage Victoria acknowledges the outstanding contribution that the MAAV volunteers made to the program. They did a fabulous job coordinating their attendance with the groups and Heritage Victoria is aware that this volunteer role took time out of the members daily lives. The volunteers took leave from work or spent days away from their other commitments, as well as supplying their own gear and air if they were diving. As a once-off for the trial, this volunteer role was seen as a contribution that the MAAV could make to helping protect and manage Victoria's maritime heritage. As an on-going activity it is unsustainable, and Heritage Victoria cannot expect volunteers to continually set aside time to assist with the program.

### 3) Site monitoring and conservation

Heritage Victoria must continue to monitor the site to identify major impacts on the structural integrity of the hull, particularly around the counter stern where the hull plates above the propeller aperture may collapse and spill the contents onto the seabed. Falling hull plates near the bow and stern may pose considerable entrapment risk to divers, and during the Trial program divers were requested to avoid the area beneath the stern for their own safety.

Since the late 1990s research into corrosion on the site has indicated that the site is not capable of sustaining heavy tourist visitation. The shipwreck continues to actively corrode, with little sound metal remaining in the hull plates. Some areas retain no sound metal at all (MacLeod, 1999). In 1999 Dr Ian MacLeod predicted that structural members and hull plates would corrode to the point of being incapable of retaining the integrity of the hull within five years (*ibid*). It was expected that the areas affected would be aft of the bow, in the midships and near the stern. Inspections on the site have shown that this is occurring (see image 5 below).



Image 5: Hole in starboard hull plate near bow. Photo: J. Santospirito

## **Recommendations**

### **1) Permit process**

If access is offered in the future the permit process requires refinement. The final processing and approval of access permits must rest with Heritage Victoria, however the charter operators/clubs or dive organisers could take the responsibility for compiling all of the individual applications and sending submitting them together with the group application and fees. Some groups did this for the Trial and it helped streamline the process.

Dive charters and groups need to adhere strictly to the permit conditions, including the post-dive reporting that was not followed during the trial. Heritage Victoria should work with the charter operators and dive groups to set up a simple permit and reporting system.

### **2) Site Interpreters**

The MHU should use the AIMA/NAS maritime archaeology training program to train staff and divers from shops and dive clubs to undertake the role of site interpreters for their own groups. Heritage Victoria could tailor a shorter, one-day course to deal specifically with the *City of Launceston* protected zone access. Groups would still require a site interpreter and Heritage Victoria should develop a reporting mechanism for site interpreters to provide feedback from the dive.

### **3) Site monitoring and conservation**

Heritage Victoria should continue to monitor the *City of Launceston* throughout 2007/2008. The monitoring should assess two primary factors: illegal visitation and ongoing environmental impacts. As the location of the site has now been released to boat operators during the Trial, Heritage Victoria needs to determine whether divers are illegally visiting the protected zone.

It is apparent that recreational fishers currently access the protected zone illegally; recent anchors have been found on the seabed near the site, fishing lines have been found entangled with the hull remains, and Heritage Victoria staff have approached people fishing in the protected zone on numerous occasions.

Visitation by fishers needs to be addressed through an education program aimed at the recreational fishing industry through bodies such as VR Fish. Reducing and eliminating illegal visitation will help to conserve the site, in particular protecting it from anchor damage, and will reduce the entanglement risk to divers from lost fishing lines and hooks. Heritage Victoria should work with Victoria Police (Water Police) to ensure that the site is monitored for visitation more frequently than is possible by Heritage Victoria staff.

Heritage Victoria should continue monitoring the corrosion on the site in conjunction with the MAAV and Western Australian Maritime Museum. The MAAV are conducting a project with the MHU and WAMM on corrosion in Port Phillip and the *City of Launceston* is one of the sites in this project.

## **Summary**

Drawing upon the research that has been undertaken on the *City of Launceston* over the past ten years, it is apparent that the site cannot sustain uncontrolled access and high visitation. The results of corrosion potential surveys and periodic wreck inspections provide evidence of the continuing deterioration and fragility of the site.

It is clear that some damage was sustained by the site during the Trial Access Program. Of primary concern was the interference with artefacts, disturbance of protective silt layers and research infrastructure. Given the number of people who accessed the site

during the program, this damage is considered to be negligible. Once the damage was noted and relayed to divers and groups it appeared that this form of interference ceased.

If the recommendations above are implemented and the ensuing site monitoring shows that the site has not suffered excessively from the access program and is relatively stable, the diving community should be consulted about on-going access to the site.

Heritage Victoria needs assess the administrative costs involved with developing a longer-term access program for the *City of Launceston* protected zone. In consultation with the diving community, a permit process may be developed to spread this burden, perhaps with a group nominated to undertake the primary processing. Heritage Victoria and the Victorian diving community should look at the Society for Protection of Reef and Yongala (SPRAY) model in Queensland and assess whether a similar group could be established in Victoria. The Scuba Diver's Federation of Victoria (SDFV) and/or the Dive Industry Victoria Association (DIVA) may be able to create a subcommittee to manage the program. Heritage Victoria should consult with these two organisations to assess the options for such a program.

The Trial Access Program is considered a great success, in particular for its role in re-establishing links between Heritage Victoria and Victoria's diving community. The divers demonstrated that they were capable to treating the site with care and respect, and they also showed a sense of stewardship and ownership over this unique heritage site. While there were some delays, frustrations, and administrative issues, the Maritime Heritage Unit found the process very rewarding and appreciated the positive feedback that was received during the program (see below).

If divers and the diving industry can sustain the costs involved in sending groups to the site, the HSAC and Heritage Victoria should consider continuing an access program to the *City of Launceston* on a periodic basis. This could mean divers can access the site through a permit process for one month every couple of years, until monitoring indicates that visitation is no longer possible, or other management considerations rule out access.

### **Diver feedback**

Several dive clubs and charter groups provided feedback to Heritage Victoria about the program, and there were several postings about the *City of Launceston* to the Dive Oz Discussion Forum ([http://www.diveoz.com.au/discussion\\_forums/default.asp](http://www.diveoz.com.au/discussion_forums/default.asp)). Feedback indicated that divers very much enjoyed the opportunity to access such a significant, intact shipwreck, and that the time spent organising access was worth the effort. The use of site interpreters to brief divers on the history, features and condition of the wreck was valued, as was the provision of site plans. Divers expressed their gratitude to Heritage Victoria for conducting the Trial and also persevering with getting divers access despite the adverse weather conditions.

### **Acknowledgements**

The Trial involved a group of MAAV members (Scott Allen, Adrian Brewer, Tony Gregory, John Howell, John Monro, John Osmond, James Parkinson, Mark Ryan, Peter Taylor, Martin Tozer, Malcolm Venturoni, Mick Whitmore and Des Williams) who were site interpreters for the program. The Trial could not have taken place without their efforts, and Heritage Victoria is extremely grateful for the contribution of their time and energy. In addition, HSAC member Kent Clifton-Bligh, AIMA/NAS graduates Agnes Milowka and Mick Paul, and the site interpreters assisted in preparing the site for access and undertaking monitoring during the program.

Thank you to the divers who provided feedback on the site following their dive, and also sent in photographs and video footage taken of the site for Heritage Victoria's files. Some excellent photographs were taken during the program, particularly by Mick Whitmore, Agnes Milowka and Jason Santospirito, some of which have been used in this paper. Also thank you to the divers who responded to the variety of questions sent to Dive Oz by prospective permit applicants.

Finally Heritage Victoria would like to thank the clubs and operators for their patience and perseverance with the application process and unpredictable weather conditions. A special thank you also goes to the divers who treated the site with the respect it deserves as significant part of Victoria's maritime heritage.

## **Appendix 1: Permit Conditions (Charter/Boat operator)**

The *City of Launceston* is a Historic Shipwreck protected under the Victorian *Heritage Act 1995*. Access to the protected zone is by permit from Heritage Victoria only. Any interference whatsoever with the archaeological site or any other objects located within the protected zone is strictly forbidden and heavy penalties apply – ‘look but don’t touch’.

- The permit must be carried aboard the dive vessel at all times when within the Protected Zone.
- The permit holder must be in possession of their individual Access Permit whilst aboard [the vessel]. An Inspector may request the permit holder to produce their permit and personal identification for inspection
- The permit is valid only for allocated (am/pm) session on the specified date.
- The permit holder must be present during any activities authorised by the permit.
- The charter/boat operator must provide a list of the names and addresses of divers who were present in the protected zone to Heritage Victoria within 3 working days of the execution of the access permit.
- Divers must be in possession of their individual Access Permits whilst aboard the dive vessel. An Inspector may request the diver to produce their Access Permit for inspection.
- The Access Permit allows for a maximum of 12 divers to undertake recreational diving operations in accordance with Regulation 5a of the *Heritage Act (Historic Shipwreck (General Regulations) 1995* in the *City of Launceston* Protected Zone.
- A site interpreter must be present for each scheduled dive within the Protected Zone for interpretation and education purposes related to the *City of Launceston*. Site Interpreters need to be allocated 15 minutes to give diver’s an introduction to the site’s history prior to the dive.
- The dive vessel will not anchor in the Protected Zone or on the wreck site.
- Once the dive vessel has located the site, a shot line should be deployed in a controlled manner by lowering it to the seabed or onto the wreck.
- Personal and/or portable GPS Units must not be taken into the Protected Zone. Divers, passengers and crew aboard the dive ship are prohibited from possessing any form of personal portable GPS Unit within 2km of the Protected Zone.
- Permit holders must not disclose the GPS position provided for the shipwreck to any other party. The GPS position must be stored in a secure location and must be erased from any electronic storage systems and destroyed upon cessation of the Trial Access Program.

## **Appendix 2: Permit Conditions (Individuals)**

The *City of Launceston* is a Historic Shipwreck protected under the Victorian *Heritage Act 1995*. Access to the protected zone is by permit from Heritage Victoria only. Any interference whatsoever with the archaeological site or any other objects located within the protected zone is strictly forbidden and heavy penalties apply – ‘look but don’t touch’.

- The permit holder must be in possession of their individual Access Permit whilst aboard [the vessel]. An Inspector may request the permit holder to produce their permit and personal identification for inspection.
- The permit allows access the permit holder to undertake recreational diving operations in accordance with Regulation 5a of the Heritage Act (Historic Shipwreck (General Regulations) 1995 from the [the vessel] in the City of Launceston protected zone.
- The permit holder will not touch, interfere with, damage, disturb or remove the shipwreck, any relics and/or part/s of the shipwreck, or other objects located within the protected zone.
- A site interpreter, endorsed by Heritage Victoria, must be present for each scheduled dive within the protected zone for interpretation and education purposes related to the City of Launceston.
- The ship will not anchor in the protected zone or on the wreck site. Once the dive ship has located the site, a shot line should be deployed in a controlled manner by lowering it to the seabed or onto the shipwreck.
- Boat operators in possession of a valid permit may use a Global Position System Unit (GPS) in order to navigate to the wreck site. Personal and/or portable GPS Units must not be taken into the protected zone. Divers, passengers and crew aboard the dive ship are prohibited from possessing any form of personal portable GPS Unit within 2km of the protected zone.
- The permit holder must not disclose the position of the SS City of Launceston to any other party. The GPS coordinates must be stored in a secure location and must be erased from any electronic storage systems and destroyed upon cessation of the Trial Access Program.

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