

SHIPWRECK DISCOVERY PROGRAM

UNKNOWN WHALER, MUELLER INLET
VICTORIA



Environment,
Land, Water
and Planning

OFFICIAL

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Acknowledgment

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.



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1. Introduction

In September 2021, Heritage Victoria commenced the Shipwreck Discovery Program aimed at facilitating the reporting of shipwreck discoveries by maritime industries. Initial focus was on the commercial fishing industry considered a key source of information on new finds due to its operational activities.

On this basis, Heritage Victoria approached Seafood Industry Victoria to seek their involvement in the program. To raise awareness, on-board stickers and cards with information on how to recognise finds was distributed to 580 commercial fishers.

Following is a report based on an interview with John Black an abalone diver. Reference to the interview was provided by Helen Burvill, Eastern Zone Abalone Industry Association as part of the Shipwreck Discovery Program fisher awareness activities on 23 January 2023.

2. Description

Possible wreck site of an unknown whaling vessel at Mueller Inlet, Victoria.

3. Status

Reportedly sighted by John Black (see information in Background) in the 1960s.

4. Background

The information on the wreck's possible location is derived from the transcript of an interview conducted by Kate Fielding with a former abalone diver called John Black as part of the Heritage Victoria East Gippsland Oral Histories project in 2003. Sourced from Culture Victoria (John Black Oral History).

John Black

“John Black is an abalone diver and licence holder. He began snorkel diving in Sydney around 1951 and was very successful in Australia's early spearfishing competitions. In the late 50s and early 60s he harvested and sold fish, abalone and crayfish on a small-scale amateur basis. He moved to Mallacoota to fish for abalone professionally in 1967, and was involved in the establishment and ongoing development of the Mallacoota Abalone Co-op.

“John has dived on various wrecks along the Gippsland coast including the Monumental City, Iron Prince, SS Riverina and the Schah – the 1837 wreck which John is credited with locating.”

5. Whaling in Gippsland

The earliest historical accounts of whaling in Victoria date to the 1830s. In Gippsland, temporary whaling stations extended along the coast from Western Port Bay to Mallacoota and Gabo Island (Morwell Historical Society 1975).

The nearest whaling stations to the wreck location are:

- Wilsons Promontory (Refuge Cove): Bay whaling operated at Refuge Cove in the late 1830s and a shore whaling station was established in 1841.
- Mallacoota: In the 1830s both Ben Boyd and the Imlay Brothers, who were whaling along the coast from southern NSW to northern Victoria, established Mallacoota Inlet as their major whaling station south of Twofold Bay (Aussie Towns Mallacoota).

6. Location

Transcript reference to the find at Mueller Inlet.

And as we come back towards Mallacoota there's –we call it now- Petrel Point's got the other Riverina on it and that's down south too. The place we call the Mueller River or the Mueller Creek it doesn't join up to the mainland, the reef itself, where we dive for abalone, it's slightly off shore and probably due south from that is Point Hicks.

This boat, whatever that's left of it there, it may have been anchored in the lee of Point Hicks and drifted off through the night and there's a fairly shallow reef there I come across some of those big old pots they used to boil the blubber down on the whales, those big cast iron ones and there's even the little triangle bits - and there was that, and that's about all that was there.

Iron pots and ammunition

And some of the little tiny gutters which I always had a look in, there'd look to be like old ammunition, old 303 cases or something like that. There was a bit brass in these little gutters which I didn't want to fiddle with or touch. There was some of these big iron pots there so, maybe they hit it and chucked that over to lessen the weight and get away from it. But that was at the Mueller River.

There the sort of things that I get interested in. I think how did this get here, or why did it get here, it just shouldn't be there. Like you're out off shore, there's no headland, nothing around and all of a sudden you've got these big cast iron pots sitting on the bottom. You can think up all sorts of stories, their exciting but they're good to look at.

How far off shore would they have been?

Aw, probably about a K, probably about a K, yeah, there's sand off the beach, then it comes out to a reef and there's two shallow spots on it which were very good for abalone diving. And it runs out – it's a fairly extensive reef, and it was probably in one of the shallowest spots that I was swimming around, as I said before, we were picking abalone and I was fishing on the inside edge of the reef, a bit of sand, a few little gutters and seaweed then I come across this gingery-looking coloured seaweed and made me look up and I looked up to the shallow and I thought 'I'll be darned.

One of them had a big piece broken out of one side of it like a corner, and I thought well maybe they've dumped it, but there was a couple of others there and I've seen lately that they used to make them in those segments so they could put them all together and make one big pot out of them. They were actually in segments so, it's either fallen off, or, I thought the one that was broken they may have just dumped it but it was unusual, it was on the shallowest bit of reef, and there was more than one there.

So, yeah, I've had a good look around and I found absolutely nothing else to indicate that a boat was wrecked there, just these big cast iron pots. Bit like old Captain Cook up there threw some cannons off to lighten his boat around Cooktown to get off. So they may have done the same thing. Gone in with a thump one night. But it was strange there was else there but these cast iron pots. They couldn't have drifted out from the shoreline because they were big heavy darn things.

Bottles

(Note: this is the next paragraph in the Mueller Inlet transcript but it's not clear if he is referring to the same site).

I had a dive on it once and jammed down in amongst everything there was - I could see these round looking things and I realised they were actually bottles. They were bottles of port or something or other, they were just jammed in this area and it was a real surge day so I couldn't spend much time but I heard later down the grape-vine somebody else found them and pulled the lid of one and they tasted like vinegar so I don't know what it was.

But one of boys must have seen them too and must have picked them up. I was going to go back one day but I never really got back there.

(John Black Interview 2003).



Mueller Inlet, Victoria

7. Assessment

The information looks highly credible given John Black's diving record including the discovery of the Schah, one of the earliest located wrecks in Victoria.

Based on the artefacts described in the interview, if it is a wreck site the vessel is likely to be an early 19th century whaler.

Whaler wrecks in Victoria are very rare, the only unknown whaler recorded is a French whaler (S801) reportedly wrecked at Cape Nelson near Portland.

8. Directions

Mueller Inlet is within the Croajingolong National Park in East Gippsland, Victoria. The location is approximately 7 kms from Point Hicks.

Mueller Inlet Campground is located approximately 39 km from Cann River and a 6.5 hour drive east of Melbourne. To access the campground, turn off the Princes Highway at Cann River and follow Tamboon Road before turning onto Point Hicks Road. One final turn onto Bald Hills Track will lead you there. The campground contains eight unpowered sites, three of which are walk-in only (Parks Victoria).

The nearest boating facilities are at Mallacoota Inlet (Gippsland Ports) and Cape Conran (Better Boating Victoria).

9. Finder Information

If the wreck site is found, please do not remove any artefacts. If possible, record the GPS co-ordinates or estimate the position on a map, take photos and call Heritage Victoria on 03 7022 6390 or email: heritage.victoria@delwp.vic.gov.au.

Information on how to identify shipwreck and artefact discoveries can be found on the Heritage Victoria website under “Shipwreck Discovery Program” [Commercial-Fishing-Industry-Victoria-Guidelines-For-Reporting-Shipwreck-Discoveries \(11\).pdf](#) , [Commercial-Fishing-Q-and-A \(20\).pdf](#).

Heritage Victoria welcomes the involvement of the diving community in identifying the exact location of the shipwreck. Discoveries can be formally acknowledged by Heritage Victoria with the inclusion of the discovery in official records and the awarding of a certificate.

10. References

- John Black Interview. 2003. John Black Oral History. Heritage Victoria East Gippsland Oral Histories Project. Culture Victoria. <https://victoriancollections.net.au/?cv-redirect=1>.
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