

# **The Mahogany Ship Story: Re-examining the Evidence**

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## **Introduction**

With this 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference on the “Mahogany Ship”, and after the publication of scores of journal articles, books and newspaper stories over a period of more than 150 years, we could be forgiven for thinking there is nothing more to be said on this subject until the wreck is found. That is not the case, as I hope to be able to show you.

My interest in the “Mahogany Ship” began in 1959 when I was a geologist with the Geological Survey of Victoria. Far less information was available then about the “Mahogany Ship” than there is today, much of it having been summarized in the previous Conference Proceedings, the 1st in 1980, revised in 1982 (1), and the 2<sup>nd</sup> in 1987 (2). There is also the detailed analysis of much of the evidence up until 1980 by J.W.Powling whose report, “The Mahogany Ship: A Survey of the Evidence”, was not published until 2003 (3). Nevertheless, many topics have still not been investigated adequately and much confusion remains.

Some of that confusion must be attributed to Kenneth McIntyre who wrote “The Secret Discovery of Australia” in 1977 (4). McIntyre was very influential in putting a case that the Portuguese had discovered and mapped much of Eastern Australia in about 1521. In fact, a similar but less well developed argument had been put by George Collingridge in 1895 (5). McIntyre used his version of the “Mahogany Ship Story” as an important part of his evidence which was based predominantly on the nature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Dieppe maps. He believed those maps showed the eastern and southern coasts of Australia as far as Warrnambool, mapped by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Unfortunately, McIntyre's general hypothesis has been accepted by some as history. In particular, that component of McIntyre's evidence relating to the "Mahogany Ship" seems to have been accepted by many, perhaps because no plausible alternative hypothesis has been proposed. However, much of the other evidence, in addition to the "Mahogany Ship Story" that McIntyre assembled to support his hypothesis about the Portuguese discovery of Australia has been seriously challenged on several fronts (6-8). For example, Richardson has made a plausible alternative argument, based mainly on the place-names on the Dieppe maps, that they represent the coast of Vietnam rather than Australia (6). The so-called "ruins" at Bittangabee Bay in Southern NSW have been shown not to be the remains of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese fort as McIntyre believed (4). They are the foundations of a house that was started by the Imlay brothers in about 1843-44, but was never finished (7, 9). The Imlays had a whaling station there, and presumably wanted to expand that operation to include a new building. However, they became financially distressed and two of the three brothers died. The foundations of their intended building remain to this day, surrounded by piles of stones that were to be used to build the walls (7).

For those that accept McIntyre's hypothesis, the "Mahogany Ship" was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese caravel, one of three on a secret voyage of discovery led by Mendonça, which was wrecked near Warrnambool. Many have accepted this hypothesis, to the point of having a padirão erected at Warrnambool (7). In the past, a padirão marked the farthest point of arrival in distant lands by Portuguese navigators, particularly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was not a memorial to their past endeavors. The inscription on the padirão at Warrnambool avoids a direct claim that the Portuguese discovered Australia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but its presence there has implications that could be easily misinterpreted (7).

If McIntyre's hypothesis could be substantiated, the "Mahogany Ship" might well have looked like the caravel in Fig 1. This is a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting of one of Cabral's ships that sailed from Lisbon to India in 1500 (10).

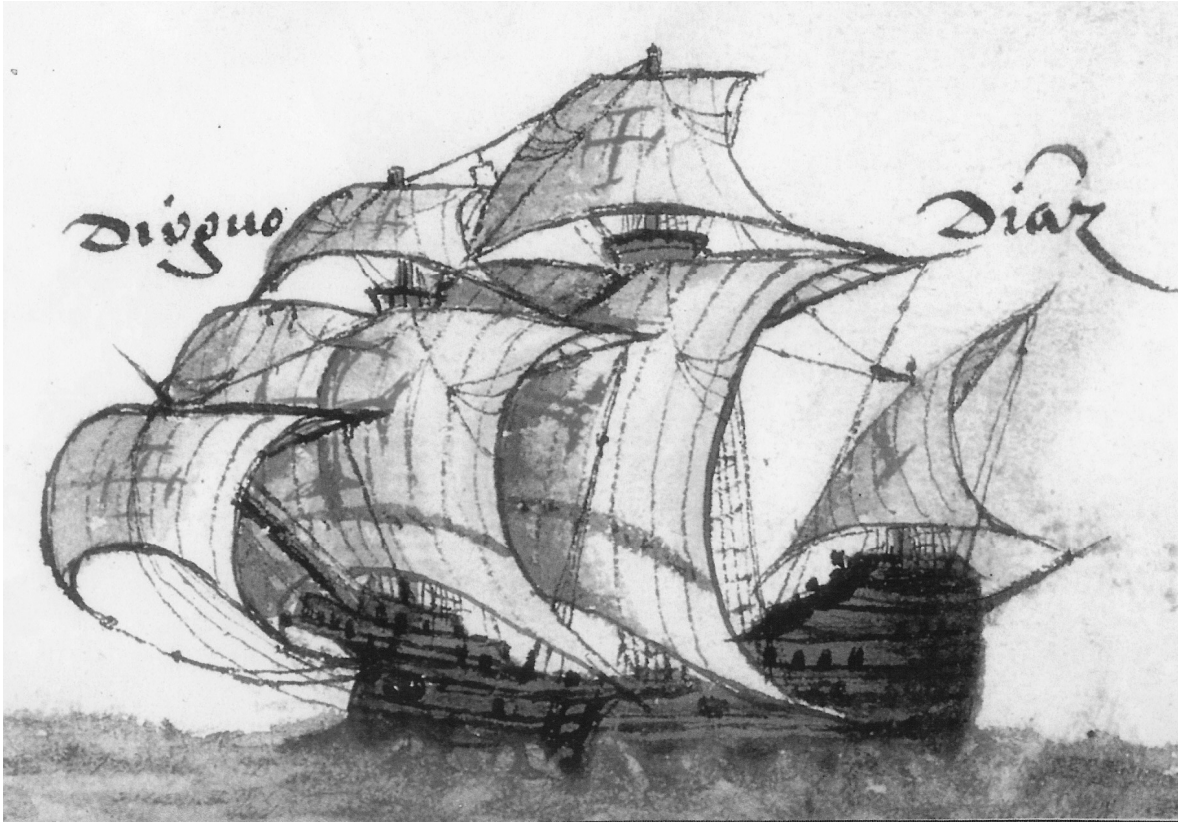


Fig. 1. A caravel that sailed from Lisbon to India in 1500 as part of Pedro Alvares Cabral's fleet (10).

Both the bow and stern of the caravel had a raised castle. The sails and rigging varied somewhat from vessel to vessel, but included a mixture of square and lateen sails (diagonally across the mast) (11). The hull would have been of carvel construction (see below), most probably of oak, not mahogany. These were not very large ships, perhaps 100 tons.

Others, apart from McIntyre, also contributed to the confusion about the "Mahogany Ship" by ignoring many of the primary sources of information, of which there were about 40, relying instead on later selective opinions about what was initially reported. The recent idea of Gavin Menzies, that the "Mahogany Ship" was a Chinese junk from the

15<sup>th</sup> century, arises from that confusion (12). Another major source of confusion and misinformation has been identified in recent years by the genealogical research of Jenny Fawcett (13). She has shown that Hugh Donnelly, who was previously thought to be a major primary source of information about the “Mahogany Ship”, simply made up much of his story. By his own admission in 1881, he never actually saw the wreck, but remembered others talking about it in later years (presumably John Mills and others). But by 1888, Donnelly had greatly embellished his own story that falsely placed him as a key player in the drama surrounding the 1836 discovery of the “Mahogany Ship” (14). He repeated this embellished story many times up until his death in 1903. This became a critical feature of the “Mahogany Ship Story” which must now be rewritten without relying on Hugh Donnelly. It is time for us to return to the primary sources to see what they said.

My objective here is to pursue only a few lines of investigation based on primary sources of information, - the whereabouts of the wreck in relation to the sea, beach and sand dunes, and the nature of its timbers and construction as reported by the people who saw it. Then I want to refer to the scientific identification of several pieces of timber said to have come from the “Mahogany Ship”. Finally, I want to propose a new hypothesis to explain the “Mahogany Ship Story” in an entirely new light.

### **Reports from people who saw the “Mahogany Ship”**

There were reports from many people who said that, at some time between 1836 and 1881, they saw a wreck that became known as the “Mahogany Ship”. It was somewhere between Levy’s (?Levi’s) Point and Gorman’s Lane to the west of Warrnambool and south of Tower Hill (1-3). Those reports implied that the wreck was of unknown identity and predated European colonization of Victoria, thought to begin with whalers in about 1828. The reports were collected by Joseph Archibald in 1890 (15), and later by E.P.Cleverdon and Gordon McCrae independently in 1909-11 (16). Only some were ever published, but copies of letters and manuscript documents are available in various collections, including the Flagstaff Hill Museum and the South West TAFE.

## **Position of the wreck in relation to the sea and sand dunes**

One important issue that arises from the primary sources is the position of the wreck in relation to the sea, the beach and the sand dunes facing the beach. Table 1 shows that the reports from primary sources fall into three separate groups. The approximate date for each sighting is shown in brackets.

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### **Observers Who Placed the Wreck in the Sea**

W.J.Murray (1853-4) “only visible at low tide”  
James O’Connor (1850s) “in the water and not inshore as supposed”  
Fred Best (1855) “10-12 ribs visible 6 to 8 feet above water”  
John Connors (1854) “one chain out to sea”

And others too: P. Doherty, P. Joyce, etc.

### **Observers who Placed the Wreck on the Beach**

Mrs T. Manifold (ca 1850) “high up on the shore”.  
Mr A. C. Kell (ca 1847) “not on the hummocks”.. “up on the beach”.  
James Stevens (ca 1853) “on the open beach, outside the hummocks”  
W. McGrath (ca 1879) “not far above high water mark” [with]“a high hummock behind it”  
Hugh Donnelly (He said the wreck was on the beach, but he did not see it himself).

### **Observers who Placed the Wreck in the Dunes.**

Capt John Mills (via J.A.Lynar) (1843-47) “well in the hummocks”  
John Mason (ca 1847) “embedded high and dry in the hummocks”  
James Jellie (ca 1846) “could not be seen from the beach”  
Richard Osburne (ca 1847-8) “high in the hummocks”  
Mr H.O.Allan (1840s) “on the summit of a hummock”  
Alex Rollo (1854-55) “not visible from the beach”  
Francis Saul (ca 1862) (near a fence he built on the dunes/common)  
John Begley (ca 1864) “in a lane formed by hummocks”  
John Davis (ca 1865) “at the end of a gap between the hummocks”  
Mr M.C.Donnelly (ca 1881) (“at the top of a dune”, but seen by moonlight)

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Table 1. Three groups of observers who differed in their reports about where the “Mahogany Ship” was in relation to the sea, the beach and the sand dunes.

There were at least 8 people who reported seeing a wreck in the sea, either near the water's edge or about "one chain" (20 metres) out to sea and only visible at low tide. There were other reports of a wreck high up on the beach, perhaps near but not in the dunes, and with a high dune ("hummock") behind it. These reports were quite clear that the wreck was not in the sea. It was well above high water mark (horizontally), but not far above sea level (vertically). These included reports from Hugh Donnelly that were presumably secondary reports from others, especially John Mills, with whom Donnelly worked in the local whaling industry between 1843 and about 1850. Other people again said they saw a wreck in the dunes, which was either not visible from the beach or was visible in a "lane" or "gap" between the dunes. What seemed strange to these observers was how high the wreck was above sea level, and they marveled as to how it could possibly get there.

Within each of these three groups the reports are consistent, but they are not compatible between the groups. It is unlikely that such an important detail as the wreck definitely being in the water or definitely not in the water would be wrongly recalled by so many people. This suggests that the reports were referring to more than one wreck. This was confirmed by several other people who lived and worked nearby, who reported that there was indeed more than one wreck in the area in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Those people included James Stephens, a farmer on the Farnham Survey south of Tower Hill, John Crowe who lived near Dennington, and W. McGrath who was assistant herdsman on the common just to the north of the dunes. McGrath specifically said there was an older wreck near Levy's Point and a more "modern" wreck about two miles further west. Similarly, James Stephens said there was a wreck with its bulwarks visible, but with the hull largely filled with sand, situated to the southwest of Dennington, and another wreck nearer Gorman's Lane. Powling's analysis led him to a similar conclusion in 1980 (3).

We can make an important point about the "Mahogany Ship Story" that changes it dramatically from what Kenneth McIntyre and others have said. The story must account for more than one wreck, one in the sea within 20 metres of the water's edge, another well up on the beach, above high tide (horizontally) and mostly covered by sand, and a

third high above sea level (vertically) and embedded in the sand dunes further from the sea than the other two. There may even have been more than three unidentified wrecks in the area. We do not have time here to examine all the evidence about the likely locations of these wrecks along the coast (3). However, we can summarize that by saying that they fall into three poorly defined but separate areas, one near Levy’s Point, another further west towards Sandfly Rise, and a third closer to Gorman’s Lane, running south from Tower Hill (Fig 2). Which wreck description relates to which area remains a matter of contention.

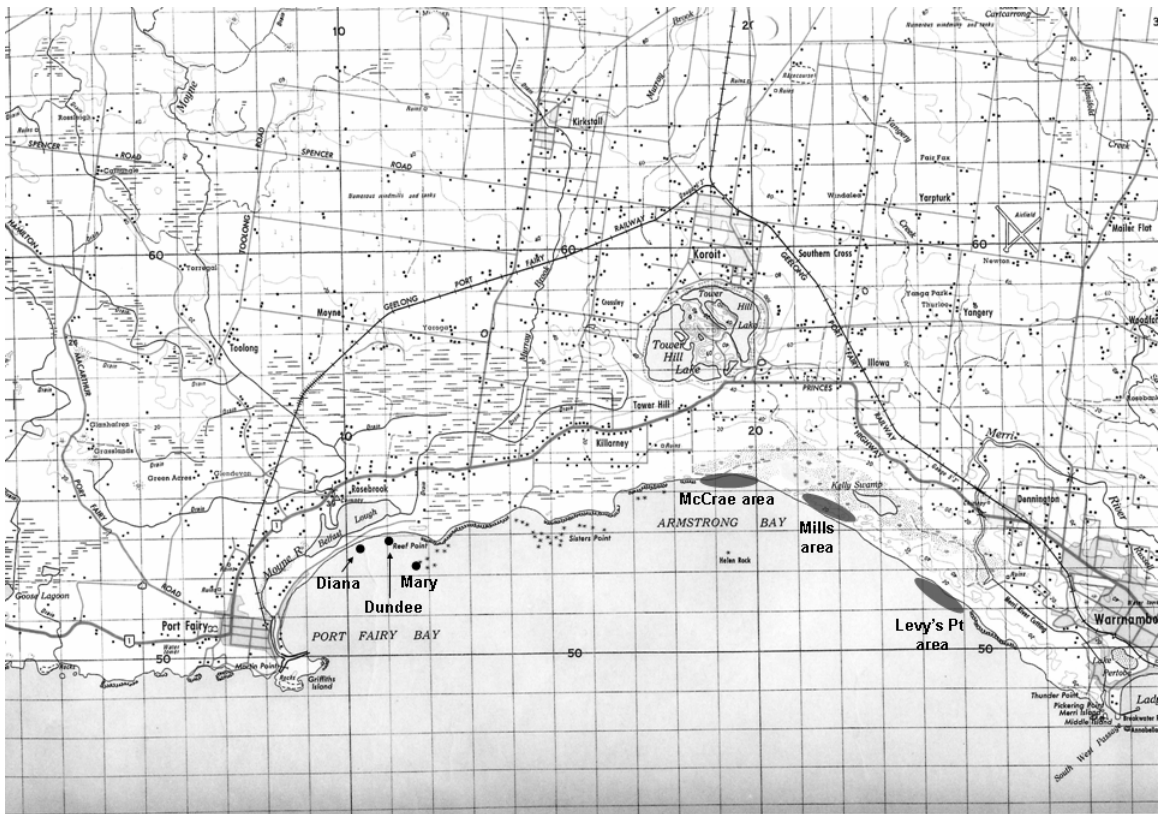


Fig. 2. A map of the Warrnambool and Port Fairy districts showing the three areas in which unidentified wrecks have been reported as well as the sites of three known wrecks nearer Port Fairy that have been implicated in the “Mahogany Ship Story”.

### Descriptions of the “Mahogany Ship”

McIntyre placed a lot of emphasis on one particular description of the “Mahogany Ship”, that of Mrs Thomas Manifold, who reported seeing a wreck high up on the beach some time about 1850, when she was a young married woman (4). ‘The sides, or bulwarks, [were] after the fashion of a paneled door, with mouldings (as in a door) stout and strong’. McIntyre thought the wreck was of carvel construction, although no one actually said it was. To explain what carvel construction is, Fig 3 shows such a wooden vessel with its planks attached edge to edge to the frame, being repaired (17).



Fig. 3. The carvel construction of a wooden ship under repair, with its planks attached edge-to-edge to the ribs (17).

McIntyre wrote that ‘The wreck of one of Mendonca’s caravels should show flush planks in this design [carvel construction]. It was probably this unusual feature [being carvel-built] which led Mills and Mason to feel that the design was unusual, antique, not in accord with the rules of modern boat building’ (4). Somehow McIntyre convinced himself that this matched the description of a 16<sup>th</sup> century caravel. He wrote that ‘Nothing could



describe a Portuguese caravel better' (4). McIntyre completely misunderstood the significance of carvel construction. While it is true that 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese caravels were of carvel construction, so were most larger wooden vessels built over the last five hundred years. Smaller boats were often clinker-built, with their planks partially overlapping. In addition, McIntyre and others completely ignored several other descriptions of the "Mahogany Ship" from primary sources that tell a very different story.

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John Mason. "like a local lighter, though of greater dimensions" (crude construction).

Richard Osburne "like a large lighter, but not of special interest"

W.J.Murray. "like a coal barge"

G. Gallagher. "like a sea-going fishing boat"

A.C.Kell. "like an old flat-bottomed punt"

T.H.Osburne. "not a blubber punt as suggested by some".

M..C.Donnelly. "about the size of the lumber boats towed by tugs...on the Upper Shannon"

Any resemblance to a 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish or Portuguese ship was specifically denied by John Mason, Richard Osburne and A.C.Kell

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Table 2. Descriptions of the "Mahogany Ship" given by observers other than Mrs Manifold.

We have at least seven other descriptions of the "Mahogany Ship" from primary sources, as shown in Table 2. None of them involved a detailed description, and we cannot be sure which of the several wrecks they each referred to. However, they all share some similarities in referring to a wooden vessel like a large lighter, a big sea-going fishing boat, a coal barge, a flat-bottomed punt, or like the barges towed by tugs on the River Shannon in Ireland. Any resemblance to a 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish or Portuguese ship, with high castles, was specifically denied by John Mason, Richard Osburne, and A.C.Kell (3). In addition, Mason commented that the wreck was of "crude construction", made with little knowledge of wooden ship construction (18). This is unlikely to have been a feature of a Portuguese caravel. It is also of note that Governor LaTrobe reported seeing the "stranded boat" to the west of Warrnambool in about 1844, but evidently did not think it of great enough significance to comment further (19).

Lighters were the wooden boats about ten metres long (some a little less, some more), used to load and unload passengers and cargo from sailing ships before wharves were built into deep waters in our coastal ports. A photograph taken by Adamson in 1895 shows lighters on the beach at Portland, probably no longer in use by then (20). They would have been run ashore at high tide and later loaded or unloaded on the beach at low tide. They would mostly have been towed to and from ships moored some distance from the shore.

The descriptions of the “Mahogany Ship” in Table 2 (whichever one they were referring to) suggest that it was not a lighter, but a larger vessel that shared some of the characteristics of a lighter. A Sprintsail barge would have been such a vessel that would have been much more familiar to people in Australia in about 1850 than today. They were very common then in Western Europe, particularly in the UK and Ireland, carrying cargo on the rivers and between coastal ports. They were carvel-built with a flat bottom, and would have been larger than the lighters in Australia. The flat bottom would have made it possible to beach the vessel without it tipping on its side. Fig 4 shows the plans of such a barge, about 15 metres long, that was built on the Thames (UK) in 1870. However, such barges were generally considered unsuitable for ocean sailing between the coastal ports of Australia (20).

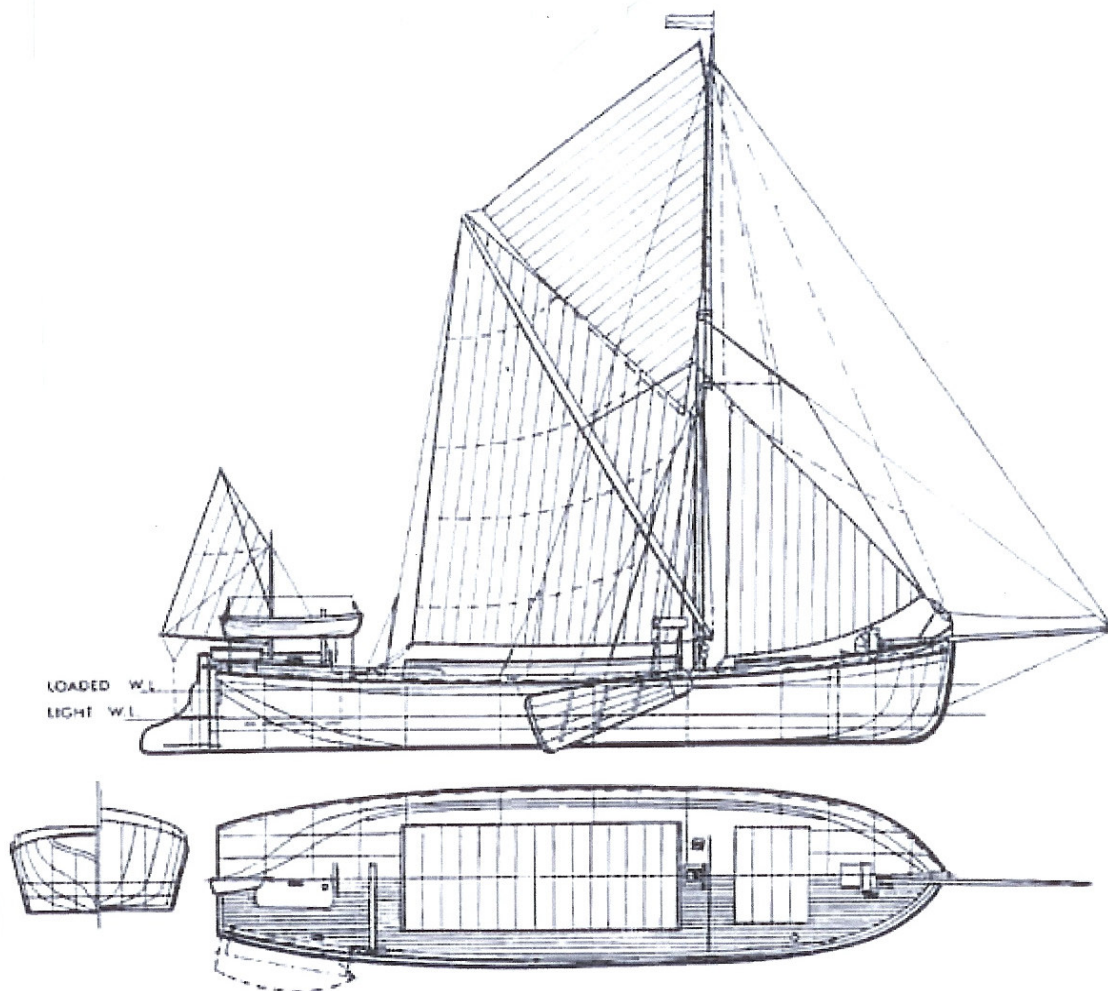


Fig. 4. The plans of a spritsail barge built on the Thames in 1870.

A hallmark of the Spritsail barge was its angled spar (sprit) carrying a four-sided sail, attached to the mast in a unique way. However, they did not always have sails, and would then have been towed. There are still some of these barges in existence today on the Thames, sought-after as collectors' items and pleasure boats. In the 1840s and 50s in Victoria, many people would have had knowledge of, or even personal memories of seeing such barges in the UK or Ireland. Since our primary sources in the "Mahogany Ship Story" mostly referred to the wreck as like a barge, it would certainly not resemble a Portuguese caravel. Nor would it be typical of Australian coastal trading vessels or whaling ships. One might reasonably ask, why have the many descriptions of the "Mahogany Ship" shown in Table 2 been neglected, not only by McIntyre who may not

have had access to those records in the mid-1970s, but by almost all other commentators and writers?

### **Descriptions of the “Mahogany Ship” timbers**

In his letter to the editor of the Warrnambool Standard in 1876, John Mason recalled seeing a wreck in the dunes high above sea level to the west of Warrnambool in about 1847 (18). He speculated that this may have been the wreck of an unknown Spanish or Portuguese ship from very early times. He commented then that the timber of the wreck was dark, resembling either cedar or mahogany. However, in another letter in 1890, Mason clarified his statement by saying that many Australian hardwoods would have looked the same under those circumstances, and he did not think the wreck was made of mahogany at all (21).

The term “Mahogany Ship” was introduced by John James (alias Julian Thomas), a journalist who wrote for the Argus under the pen-name of “The Vagabond”. In 1884 he wrote an article about the supposed “Spanish Mahogany Ship” wrecked to the west of Warrnambool (22). James provided no evidence that the wreck was made of mahogany, apart from his supposition that it was a Spanish ship, from which he seems to have assumed that it must therefore be made of Mahogany derived from the Spanish colonies in Central and South America. In fact, the majority of Spanish and Portuguese ships were made of oak. Once launched, the “Mahogany Ship Story” had its own momentum based largely on journalistic speculation.

However, there were other descriptions of the wrecks’ timbers from primary sources. In summary, they said the timber was unusual and not familiar to the observers at the time. It was dark red-brown in colour and very hard to cut. Some said it could have been Australian hardwood, like red gum, NSW ironbark, or blackwood. John Mills tried to cut some of the timber from the wreck with his knife when he “stood upon its decks” in either 1843 or 47 (3, 15). It was so hard that his knife slipped and cut his hand. The timber showed little grain when planed. It showed surprisingly little decomposition, even though the circumstances of the wreck’s occurrence led many people to believe that it

must be very old, pre-dating local European occupation. John Davis and Mr Cooper, the lighthouse keeper at Port Fairy, also cut some of the timber but, unfortunately, we cannot be sure which of the “Mahogany Ship” wrecks the timbers were cut from. There are two pieces of timber in the National Library, Canberra, that are recorded as coming from the “Mahogany Ship”, and which are part of the Archibald collection. I can confirm that this timber is not in an advanced state of decomposition (see below). Evidently McIntyre reached the same conclusion when he examined this timber after his book was published.

In a letter to *The Age* in 1963, Mr A. Penfold of Colac described how his mother’s brother lived in the Warrnambool district between 1870 and 1890 (23). He had found the “wreck of the Mahogany Ship” on one of his beach excursions and, because of the nature of its timbers, he removed a piece and later carved it into souvenir pen handles. They were eventually handed down in the Penfold family (see below).

With regard to the hardness of the timber, a very similar report was made about timber from another wreck, the *Enterprize*, wrecked in Lady Bay, Warrnambool, in 1850 (24). That wreck was soon covered by sand, but was exposed again after severe storms in 1887. Samples of timber were then cut from the wreck which would then have been buried for 37 years. In November 1887, the Warrnambool Standard reported that “the timber looks sound and hard, a penknife scarcely making any impression”. For many years there was confusion about the identity of that ship. Most people believed it was the wreck of John Pascoe Fawcner’s *Enterprize*, which had sailed from Tasmania to Victoria bringing the pioneer settlers to Melbourne in 1835. In fact, as I documented in 1985, the Warrnambool wreck was of an entirely different ship, also called *Enterprize*, but built in New Zealand in 1847 (24). Fawcner’s ship had already been sold to a Captain Sullivan in 1845 and was wrecked on the Richmond River in Northern NSW early in 1847. In 1985 a piece of timber from the local *Enterprize*, which had been kept at the Warrnambool Museum since 1892, was identified histologically as a New Zealand timber, not Tasmanian timber such as blue gum from which Fawcner’s *Enterprize* would have been built in 1830. This confirmed the identity of the Warrnambool *Enterprize*. It also emphasized that timber undergoes changes when it is under the sea or buried in

sediments for some years, depending on the nature of the chemical environment in which it is buried. For a piece of buried timber to be dark brown and very hard to cut is not reliable evidence about its age or origin. However, there are sophisticated techniques nowadays that can identify timber microscopically, even when it is partly decomposed. That is how the Warrnambool *Enterprize* timber was identified scientifically. The same technique has also been used to identify timbers said to come from the “Mahogany Ship”.

### **Scientific Identification of “Mahogany Ship” timbers**

Several people reported that they had cut pieces of timber from the “Mahogany Ship” near Warrnambool, but which one is uncertain. They included Johns Mills, Johns Davis, Mr Cooper, the lighthouse keeper at Port Fairy, and Mr A. Penfold’s uncle. In recent years, David Hamilton said he had a cylindrical “ruler”, allegedly made from “Mahogany Ship” timber that had been given to the Rutledges (?by whom). In 1980 that timber was shown to be of Australian origin, genus *Syncarpia*, commonly called turpentine, which grows in northern NSW and Queensland. It is not indigenous to southern Australia or anywhere else in the world. The two wooden “pen handles” owned by the Penfold family (26) have been identified as *Eugenia* sp, now called *Syzygium* sp, and commonly known as grey satinash. This timber only grows in northern Queensland. The two pieces of timber described as having come from the “Mahogany Ship” that are in the National Library in Canberra as part of the Archibald collection were originally one piece of timber that was sampled for radio-carbon dating. This timber has been identified as *Eucalyptus* sp.(26).

The provenance of the latter pieces of timber is uncertain, so we cannot place too much reliance on the above findings as evidence for the origins of the “Mahogany Ship”. However, what is interesting is that they are all Australian timbers, one from Northern NSW, one from Queensland, and the third that cannot be accurately localized. This gives no support to the idea that the “Mahogany Ship” was of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch or even Chinese origin.

### **Other Artifacts Excavated from the Sand Dunes West of Warrnambool**

During the many organized searches for the “Mahogany Ship” since 1890 several other artifacts were recovered, but any connection to a particular wreck must be speculative (26). In 1943, a ceramic amphora was found in the dunes near Levy’s point. This has been examined by pottery experts who say it is of a type commonly made in North Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even to this day. Thermoluminescence studies dated this amphora to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (26).

In the year 2000, a slab of timber about two metres long was excavated from the sand dunes near Sandfly Rise. It was identified as White oak which grows in Europe and North America (27). This greatly encouraged those who are still looking for a Portuguese caravel. However, the shape and state of the slab made it clear that it had never been part of a ship. It was concluded that it was probably flotsam, part of a shipment of oak washed overboard and then ashore, to be covered in due course by sand dunes. A likely source of such oak was the *Falls of Halladale*, a ship wrecked near Peterborough in 1908, that was known to be carrying a cargo of oak at the time (27).

### **Other Wrecks Implicated in the “Mahogany Ship Story”**

Several other wrecks outside the area of concern here have been implicated in the “Mahogany Ship Story” in the past. They should be mentioned here only to discount their relevance to our story.

### **Wreck of the *Sally Ann* and Thomas Clark’s painting, “Mahogany Ship”**

Thomas Clark was an English artist who migrated to Victoria in the 1850’s. He traveled to Western Victoria in about 1860 to paint under the patronage of wealthy squatters such as the Hentys. Clark painted representational pictures of their homesteads and properties (such as Muntham owned by the Hentys) in a manner typical of the English school of painting in which Clark had been trained. One of Clark’s paintings is titled “Mahogany Ship”, although when that title was applied and by whom is uncertain. He also painted a harbour scene of Portland Bay in about 1860. After careful comparisons between the limestone and basalt cliffs that Clark painted in the distance at Whaler’s Point in his

Portland Bay picture and the similar cliffs painted close-up in his “Mahogany Ship” picture, I concluded that both pictures were painted at Portland.

In 1844, Stephen Henty owned the *Sally Ann* when she was wrecked at Portland, on the reef below the present lighthouse and in front of high limestone and basalt cliffs (28). The *Sally Ann* was a schooner of 58 tons, 16.9 metres long, 5.1 wide and 2.6 deep, and the hull was “partly coppered” (29). She was said to be of unusually heavy construction with a “deep keel”. Several things made this ship especially interesting. Before being wrecked, she played a major role in the establishment of the Portland Bay settlement by the Hentys. She was also unusual in having been made of cedar in Bermuda in 1826 (28). The *Sally Ann* wreck and its cargo were auctioned within a few days and, as was usual when it was feasible, her materials would have been salvaged and reused on other ships or resold as building materials.

In his “Mahogany Ship” picture, Clark shows the heavy ribs of a hull that may be 15 metres long (in relation to the size of man nearby) on a rock-strewn beach, but little else of the wreck. That is probably what the remnants of the *Sally Ann* would have looked like in 1860 after most of her timbers etc had been salvaged, but before the ribs had been broken up and scattered by the sea. Certainly the cliffs shown behind the wreck in the picture are very similar to the cliffs near Whaler’s Bluff in Portland Bay. I believe the wreck of the *Sally Ann* at Portland was the subject of Clark’s “Mahogany Ship” painting. Presumably Stephen Henty, who owned the *Sally Ann*, would have been very interested in buying this painting, or may actually have commissioned it of Clark. Its early provenance is unclear. It may be that Clark genuinely mistook the cedar of the *Sally Ann* for mahogany in 1860. Few people could reliably distinguish cedar from mahogany in a shipwreck. However, it is also possible that the title of the painting was only applied after “The Vagabond’s” article in 1884 mentioned a “Spanish Mahogany Ship”.

### **Wreck of the *Sally Ann* and Henry Kingsley’s Novel, *Geoffry Hamlyn***

It is also likely that the wreck of the *Sally Ann* at Portland was referred to by Henry Kingsley in his novel, *Geoffry Hamlyn*, written when he visited Australia between 1853



and 1857 (31). That novel included a shipwreck scene involving a “very, very old” wreck which was either “Dutch, Spanish or Chinese, pre-dating British discoveries and settlement”. Kingsley’s footnote said that his fictional wreck was just like an actual wreck at the northern end of Portland Bay (31). For him, the *Sally Ann* may have had a romantic connection because of its cedar construction and association with Bemuda, although local people would have know very well that she had been wrecked only a few years earlier. Given this scenario, it is very unlikely that either Clark’s painting, the “Mahogany Ship”, or Kingsley’s novel, *Geoffrey Hamlyn*, has any direct connection with the “Mahogany Ship” near Warrnambool.

### **Wreck of the *Diana* at Port Fairy and the James “Galleon”**

Another ship owned by the Hentys, the two-masted brig *Diana*, was also wrecked in 1844, near Port Fairy (32). She had been built at Hobart in 1840 and was 75 x 20 x 14.6 feet. ( 23.1 x 6.2 x 4.5 metres), of about 103 tons. The wreck site, which is shown precisely on early maps, is about 100 metres from the shore, in line with the Belfast Borough boundary. Between 1909 and 1911, a builder from East Brunswick, Mr W.J.James, claimed in newspaper letters and articles that he had discovered a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch or Spanish “galleon”, or perhaps “an old Spanish merchant vessel”, or even a “pirate vessel”(32,33). Some people wondered whether this was another “Mahogany Ship”. The position of his “galleon” was precisely the same as the wreck of the *Diana*, although James didn’t seem to be aware of that at the time. James said that an un-named “University Professor” had identified the ship’s timber as walnut. The vessel’s copper sheathing was of “pure copper” and had particular chisel marks, which James thought indicated a 17<sup>th</sup> century age. He said the vessel was 75 feet long with a single mast, and the name *Safriana* was still legible on the hull (32,33).

This illustrates how easy it is for such matters to become confused when there is wishful thinking on a background of limited knowledge. In fact, the *Diana* was built of Tasmanian timber (probably blue gum), not walnut, and was only 65 years old, not 300, when James “discovered” it. The *Diana* had two masts, not one, but she was 75 feet long, as he said. Whatever chisel marks there were in the copper sheathing would have been

made in about 1840, not in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. James had misread the name of the *Diana* as *Safriana*. He and his story of a 17<sup>th</sup> century “galleon” seemed to disappear from public view after 1911, perhaps because he then became aware of the wreck of the *Diana*. This wreck had no connection with the “Mahogany Ship” near Warrnambool.

### **Wreck of the *Mary* and the “Mahogany Ship” of Olive Mills**

Olive Mills was the granddaughter of Charles Mills. Charles had retired from whaling and had built a house called Woodbine on his farm near the coast to the southwest of Tower Hill, living there until he died in 1855. His brother, Captain John Mills, was also engaged in the whaling industry in the 1830s and 40s and then became the first Harbour Master of Port Fairy (then called Belfast) in 1853, before retiring in 1870. John Mills was reported to have seen the “Mahogany Ship” twice, in 1843 and 47, and gave approximate directions for its location (15). His wreck is likely to have in the middle one of the three search areas shown in Fig 3

In 1960, Olive Mills wrote a biography of the Mills brothers titled *Why Should Their Honour Fade?* (34). In it, she described how, one day when John Mills was on “active duty” (ie as Harbour Master between 1853 and 1870), he borrowed a horse from his brother’s farm (Woodbine) to ride out and inspect “what appeared to be a very old wreck, which was visible at low tide from the shore”. He attempted to cut the timber which was dark coloured and very hard, so his knife glanced off and cut him. Olive thought this referred to John Mills’ visit to the “Mahogany Ship”, and she recalled his directions for locating this wreck: “From the Catholic Church on the hill and Parson Baker’s church (now demolished) and in a line with the sisters, and so many leagues out to sea” (34). In fact, Parson Baker’s church (long since demolished) was built in 1855 at the angle of a side road on the highway at the southern edge of Tower Hill. There was also an old Catholic church at the northern end of Gorman’s lane. This bearing places Olive’s wreck to the southwest of Tower Hill, towards Mills Reef (also known as Reef Point), not near any of the three areas of interest in the “Mahogany Ship Story” above (Fig 3).

There is a known wreck on this bearing. It was the barque *Mary*, 330 tons, wrecked on Mills Reef in 1840 (35). Several commentators have mistakenly referred to this ship as the *Mary Ann*. John Mills was active in the local whaling industry based at Port Fairy at the time and he would have known about the wreck of the *Mary*. It is unlikely that he would have mistaken it for a “very old wreck” only a few years later. There was another wreck further west of Mills Reef, the *Dundee*, but she wasn’t wrecked until 1854 (35, 36). Mills would have been well aware of the *Dundee* also, because he would have been involved with an inquiry into the wreck as the local Harbour Master at the time. Olive Mills may have confused two stories about John Mills, first about him visiting the unidentified wreck ( the “Mahogany Ship”) further east, and second about him riding out to sea to a identified wreck (probably the *Mary*) near Mills Reef. Of many identified wrecks at Portland, Port Fairy and Warrnambool, none are directly concerned with the “Mahogany Ship Story”.

### **Our conclusions so far about the “Mahogany Ship Story”**

The “Mahogany Ship Story” is becoming clearer. It involved at least two, and possibly three different unidentified wrecks along the coast between Levy’s Point and Gorman’s Lane, south of Tower Hill, near Warrnambool. They were seen by many people between 1836 and 1881, particularly in the 1840s and 50s. Most of those observers were of the opinion that th wreck(s) pre-dated European settlement of the area which began with whalers in about 1828. One wreck was in the water, only visible at low tide. Another was high up on the beach A third was in the sand dunes, not always visible from the beach, and was surprisingly high above sea level (horizontally and vertically). The timber was dark brown in colour, very hard, and unfamiliar to the observers. At least one wreck was said to have been constructed crudely. The only timbers that were said to come from the wreck(s) have been scientifically identified as Australian, although the provenance of those pieces of timber remains uncertain. There were many brief descriptions of the “Mahogany Ship”, but which wreck they were referring to is not always clear. Those descriptions suggest that at least one wreck was bigger than a local lighter or fishing boat and was like a barge, but nothing like a 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish or Portuguese ship. A Sprintsail barge matches the descriptions. Such barges were very common during the 19<sup>th</sup>

century in the UK and Ireland, but were not common in Australia. Some other wrecks at Portland and Port Fairy that have implicated in the “Mahogany Ship Story” in the past are not directly relevant.

There is no direct evidence that the “Mahogany Ship” was made of oak, mahogany, or indeed anything other than Australian timbers. Nor is there any direct evidence that the wrecks had anything to do with the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch or Chinese. Kenneth McIntyre’s story about the “Mahogany Ship” is simply misleading and does not support his hypothesis that the eastern coast of Australia was mapped by the Portuguese in about 1521 (4). The “Mahogany Ship” should not be cited as evidence in any discussion about the nature of the Dieppe maps – they are separate issues. Despite the paucity of detail, there is sufficient commonality among reports from many different people who claimed to have seen the “Mahogany Ship” for us to conclude that the story was based on fact. However, it has become confused and embellished because of the journalistic imagination of “The Vagabond” (22) and others, the wishful thinking of Kenneth McIntyre (4) and others, and the fibs of Hugh Donnelly (13). Nevertheless the questions remain, what were these wrecks, and how and when did they get where they were? These must surely be important questions for the history of Victoria and Australia. There is another, entirely different explanation for the “Mahogany Ship” that we can now turn to, which throws a new and very different light on the story.

### **A new explanation for the “Mahogany Ship Story”**

My new explanation for the “Mahogany Ship” is based on several different lines of historical evidence that have not been invoked in this discussion previously. They concern ships that were built by ship-wrecked sailors, and others that were stolen or pirated by escaped convicts during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Piracy was the crime of stealing a vessel on the high seas, but this did not apply to vessels stolen in port, which was regarded as theft. Their relevance to our story may not become clear until the threads are drawn together and the new hypothesis is presented.

### **Vessels Built by Shipwrecked Sailors**

The *Betsy and Sophia* sailed from England on a sealing voyage in 1830. She was wrecked on Kerguelin Island (Desolation Is) in the Southern Ocean early in 1831(37). The crew saved the some of the stores and equipment before the ship broke up. They had to dive repeatedly into the icy waters to recover planks from the *Betsy and Sophia*, and eventually salvaged enough timber from the wreck to make a new 20 ton sloop, named *Liberty*, which they launched in October, 1831. Within about a year they had built a new, seaworthy vessel out of the wreck and had sailed 3000 miles in 43 days to safety in Tasmania (37). This was not an isolated incident for ship-wrecked seamen of those times. Some American whalers, whose ship was wrecked on Kangaroo Island (South Australia), built a new 35 ton schooner, the *Independence*, from the wreck in 1804 (38). The *Independence* remained in service within the Pacific for some time. The important point is that it was entirely possible for a small group of seamen (perhaps 10 to 20) to salvage the timbers from a wreck and, with the tools at their disposal from the wreck and possibly with some extra local timber, to make a new (smaller) vessel within a few months that was capable of sailing across the oceans.

### **Ships Stolen or Pirated by Convicts who are Known to have Sailed Away from Australian Waters**

Between 1805 and about 1835 many ships and small boats were stolen or pirated from Tasmania waters (39, 40). Some were soon recaptured, but others escaped and were later known to have reached distant lands. The *Venus* was a 45 ton colonial brig belonging to Robert Campbell, carrying a substantial cargo of flour, salt pork and “other private stores” when it was stolen from Port Dalrymple (Launceston) in 1806 by a group of male and female convicts (40). They sailed away and reached New Zealand where the *Venus* was scuttled and burnt. The escapees tried to enlist help from visiting ships, but several were captured by the masters of the *Britannia* and the *Brothers* that happened to visit the Bay of Islands on their whaling voyages. However, one of the convict women escaped and was seen ten years later in the Tongan Islands (4).

There was a similar story with the *Young Lachlan*, a 44 ton colonial schooner (40). She was on the Derwent in Tasmania in 1919, laden with freight and provisions and ready for a voyage to Port Jackson (Sydney), when sixteen convicts stole her and sailed away. They eventually reached Java, where they scuttled and burnt the *Young Lachlan* before presenting themselves as shipwrecked mariners to the Dutch authorities there. When inconsistencies began to appear in their stories, they were suspected of piracy and were imprisoned. No less than eleven of the sixteen escapees died in the Dutch prison before the remainder were handed over to British authorities and sent back to England. The five survivors were eventually returned to Hobart where there were put on trial again. They defended themselves on a charge of piracy with the technicality that the ship was in port when they stole her originally, so their crime was one of theft (40). They were all “lifers” already.

This pattern of escapes suggests that convicts knew very well they could not simply arrive at any port, in Australian waters or elsewhere, in a stolen or pirated ship without identifying documents, and get away with it. Their chances of receiving help to escape finally would be much better if they could claim to have been shipwrecked. That was repeated with the brig *Cyprus* when she was in Recherche Bay, south-east Tasmania, on her way to Macquarie Harbour with a batch of convicts in 1829 (41). The convicts mutinied and pirated the *Cyprus* before sailing her to New Zealand, then to the Tongan Islands and finally to Japan, where they scuttled her and claimed to be shipwrecked mariners. Another such story of escape involved the barque *Frederick* that was stolen by convicts from Macquarie Harbour in 1833 and was sailed to South America before being wrecked (40). These stories of successful navigation to distant lands by escaped convicts who may otherwise be thought of as ignorant and lacking the necessary skills, knowledge and navigation equipment, simply show how resourceful they were.

Sometimes the timbers and other materials from a ship that had been stolen and then wrecked by escaped convicts was salvaged so they could make a new vessel, with the intention of sailing away to a safe haven and claiming to be shipwrecked sailors who had lost their identifying papers. This is what happened to Simeon Lord’s brig, *Trial*, that was

stolen from Sydney by thirteen convicts in 1816 and was wrecked 350 km to the north, at a place now called Trial Bay (42). They evidently built another vessel from the wreck, but were drowned when it was upturned in the surf as they tried to escape finally.

### **Vessels Built Secretly in Tasmania by Escaped Convicts**

At the end of 1833 there were 14,990 convicts in Tasmania. However, 275 others had absconded and were missing (43). Some absconders remained in the bush and became local bushrangers. Others were taken aboard visiting whalers and sealers as crew, or became the “desperadoes” of the Bass Strait Islands. A few were known to have built their own escape vessels secretly in Tasmania. In 1814, what was described as “a strange lugger-rigged craft” that had been built by escaped convicts at South West Cape (SW Tasmania) was intercepted by the authorities as it was sailing past Bruny Island (44). In 1817, the authorities discovered another vessel with a keel 36 feet (11.1 metres) long being built secretly by convicts at Deceitful Cove, on the banks of the Tamar, for the purpose of escape (45). This was done without the benefit of materials salvaged from a wreck. Both of these attempts failed, but who is to know how many other attempts succeeded without ever being detected.

### **Ships that were Stolen or Pirated from Tasmania and then Disappeared**

Several of the ships that had been stolen or pirated from Tasmania by escaped convicts disappeared and were never heard of again (40). It was assumed by the authorities that they would all have perished at sea. However, the fact that several ships were sailed to distant lands by escaped convicts belies that assumption. Some may have perished, but others may have survived and escaped into hiding somewhere in the world. For example, the 36 ton schooner *Unity* was pirated by seven armed convicts near Hobart in 1813 (39). The provisions on board at the time were very limited. Under those circumstances in particular, the convicts were considered “not equal to the conducting of a vessel to any remote coast”. The *Unity* was never seen or heard of again. She had been built in northern NSW in 1808 and would have been a typical coastal schooner of that time, about 14 metres long and built of local timbers (29).

### **Escaped Convicts in Victoria before 1830**

There is little documented evidence that there were escaped convicts in Victoria before European settlement began with the whalers at Portland in about 1828. Yet there probably were some escapees living here secretly from the very earliest times. In 1797, when George Bass first entered Bass Strait in his boat, Tom Thumb, he met seven escaped convicts on one of the small islands near Wilson's Promontory (46). They had stolen a boat from Sydney, hoping to reach the recently wrecked *Sydney Cove* in Bass Strait with its cargo of rum and the opportunity it presented to salvage the wreck and escape by sea. They did not succeed and were stranded before crossing Bass Strait. Bass took a few of the escapes back to Sydney with him, and left the others on the Gippsland Coast. They may have become the first European "residents" of Victoria. Then there was William Buckley who escaped from Sullivan's Cove near Sorrento in 1803, and who lived with the aborigines for more than thirty years. In addition, there were many escapees from Tasmania living on the Bass Strait Islands from as early as 1805 (44, 45).

In 1828, Captain Wishart of the *Fairy* was burying a sailor who had become ill and died on Lady Julia Percy Island. They had previously picked up a gang of seven escaped convicts from a Bass Strait Island. When Wishart and his crew were otherwise occupied, the escapees stole the *Fairy's* whale-boat and made off. During the chase in another whale-boat that ensued, Wishart's crew entered Port Fairy for the first time and named it after their ship. However, they could not find the escapees who had disappeared somewhere along that coast (47). One might speculate that the escapees had some prior knowledge of the area, reported by earlier escapees or sealers.

In his novel, *Geoffrey Hamlyn* which was set along the Victorian coast, Henry Kingsley included a scene in which his characters reported seeing an unusual small vessel with a Sprintsail sailing towards the coast (31). They concluded from its appearance that it must have been carrying escaped convicts from Tasmania. This highlights two points of relevance to our story. Firstly, Kingsley was well aware of the significance of the Sprintsail as being unusual in Victorian waters. Secondly, he associated that kind of sailing vessel with escaping convicts from Tasmania. Those opinions may well have been based



on local talk that Kingsley heard in Victoria in the late 1850s. No one else has ever commented on Kingsley's observation.

### **The New Hypothesis to Explain the “Mahogany Ship Story”**

We now have some new historical evidence, based on contemporary published records of the day, that may be very relevant to our story. Many convicts absconded and went missing in Tasmania between 1805 and 1833. Some built their own escape vessels secretly, and probably quite crudely, from whatever materials they could gather locally. Others stole or pirated ships, some of which were recaptured quickly, but others again managed to reach distant lands before being apprehended. A recurring theme in their stories was that the ships were beached and often scuttled so the escapees could claim to be shipwrecked sailors. However, some built a new, smaller vessel from their wreck, presumably hoping to sail away and make a final escape while claiming the status of shipwrecked seamen without the necessary identifying documents. A few ships were stolen or pirated by escaped convicts and were never seen or heard of again.

An important question arises from this evidence. Could some of the escaped convicts from Tasmania have sailed their stolen or pirated ship, or a ship they had secretly made themselves, across Bass Strait to the coast of Victoria? An even more telling question would be, why would they not have done so? Officially there were no permanent residents in Victoria before about 1828, at Portland. However, the Bass Strait Islands were well known and were frequented by escaped convicts as well as by sealers and whalers that were based either locally (Sydney, Hobart or Launceston) or internationally, from Britain, France or USA (44). And we know there were some escaped convicts in Victoria from as early as 1797 that George Bass had seen.

My new hypothesis was first published in outline in 2000 (48). It is that escaped convicts stole the schooner *Unity* from Hobart in 1813 and sailed her across Bass Strait before purposely beaching her just to west of Warrnambool. They did not have sufficient provisions to go any further. They salvaged the *Unity's* timbers and proceeded to build a new ship with the intention of finally escaping in it. A ship under construction has to be

high on a standingway, well above sea level, so it can be slid down a slipway to the water. This would explain why one “Mahogany Ship” was so high above sea level. The escapees may well have chosen a gap between the dunes in which to build the new ship, out of sight to maintain its secrecy. Because they probably would not have had all the materials, tools, knowledge and facilities they required, the end product of their labours would be a crudely constructed vessel. Much of its timber may have come from the *Unity*, and hence from northern NSW, but some other local timbers may have been incorporated as well. Because of their desire for secrecy, their new vessel may have been too far from the water’s edge for it to be launched easily. Alternatively they may not have finished building the new vessel, for whatever reason.

To summarize this hypothesis, the “Mahogany Ship Story” involves

1. The remnants of a wreck near the water’s edge, the *Unity*, that had been pirated by escaped convicts from Tasmania in 1813 and was purposely beached near Warrnambool.
2. A new vessel being constructed secretly by the escapees was above high water mark in a gap between two sand dunes (and was presumably later covered by the dunes) so it could not be readily seen from passing ships. It would have been well above sea level (vertically) so it could be launched down a slipway. It was either not completed or was not able to be launched.
3. Because most convicts came from England or Ireland, they would have been familiar with Sprintsail barges that were very common in Western Europe, but not in Australia at the time. That was the kind of vessel, of fairly simple construction, they were likely to build.
4. Because of limited materials, tools and manpower, the new vessel would probably have been crudely constructed. The timbers at hand would have included some that was salvaged from the *Unity*, which probably included Syncarpia (turpentine) from northern NSW, that has been identified as having come from the “Mahogany Ship”. There were known to be some trees behind the dunes to the west of Warrnambool in the 1840’s, but it is unlikely that they would have provided much timber that was suitable for shipbuilding. The new vessel would

have been no more than 23 years old when it was first seen by the whalers from Port Fairy in 1836.

5. There may have been a third vessel, high up on the beach but not far above sea level, that may have been the wreck of a second pirated/stolen ship that had been beached.
6. There was ample time for this ship-building activity between 1813 and about 1830.

This new version of the “Mahogany Ship Story” has no room in it for a 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese caravel or a 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese junk, and it has nothing to do with the Dieppe maps. However, it gives a plausible explanation for what has been a puzzle in Australian history for more than 160 years. Nevertheless, what I have proposed is a hypothesis. It is not yet history until one or more of the wrecks is uncovered and the story confirmed. The most definitive finding would be the remnants of a ship on a standingway or slipway, some of which may be preserved beneath the sand dunes.

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