



Are missing Loch Ard ingots the tip of the iceberg?

## Description



Ten of the original 872 lead ingot weights from the *Loch Ard* that were loaned to Flagstaff Hill by the Federal Government in 1984: more than 200 have since gone missing. Image: Bluestone Magazine

## OPINION – Carol Altmann

How did Warrnambool's Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village lose track of more than 200 lead ingots that were part of the most famous shipwreck in Australia – the *Loch Ard* – given to it by the Federal Government for safe keeping?

This is a question that has the Warrnambool City Council scrambling for answers but – so far – the explanations have only raised even more questions about how the maritime collection has been managed and whether more irreplaceable items may have fallen through the gaps. (\*Update: Flagstaff Hill has [since confirmed](#) more than 130 items are missing from its collection, including the Newfield bell from 1892.)

**Cr Brian Kelson** started asking about the location of all the *Loch Ard* (1878) ingots late last year and the information that has been provided since has been surprising, in terms of how loose the record keeping and storage has been around relics that should be considered precious.

In a written report to council at its December 1 meeting, the Flagstaff Hill advisory committee revealed

that **872** lead ingots and **10** copper sheets from the *Loch Ard* were loaned to the village by the Federal Government in 1984.

They have a written agreement to prove it, but unfortunately it would be almost 30 years – yes, 30 years – before Flagstaff Hill did a full count of the ingots, each of which weighs around 60kg but, because of their French-stick shape, can be carried by two people.

That count was in 2012 and they could only find **728** of the 872, meaning 144 had somehow vanished, which is not surprising given there was no proper audit for almost three decades.



Some of the Loch Ard ingots stacked alongside the lake at Flagstaff Hill in Warrnambool. Image: Bluestone Magazine

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #5C747D;"] T [/dropcap]he advisory committee admits that this number – 728 – wasn't cross-checked, but it was still added to the Flagstaff Hill database.

Another count was done in 2014 and could only locate **652** of the 728, meaning another 76 ingots were added to the already missing 144, bringing the total now missing to 220.

Oddly, however, Flagstaff Hill has brushed off the missing 144, saying it could have been an error in the original loan agreement, which I would say is unlikely, given it was an official government document that was dealing with maritime treasures. (*Update: see former FHMV director Peter Ronald's comment at the end of this piece, confirming the initial intake.*)

There has also been no mention of the 10 copper sheets – does Flagstaff Hill still have them?

The copper sheets were listed as item no. 3078 on its public database – that was until last November, when the listing disappeared. (*Update: the copper sheet listing has been reinstated, together with a copy of the federal loan agreement. You can [see both here](#).*)

The council's focus has been narrowed to finding the 76 ingots missing from the 2012 count, and this is where things have become quite bizarre.





Some of the 286 ingots that are stored inside the *Reginald M* moored on the lake at Flagstaff Hill. Image: Bluestone Magazine

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #5C747D;"] F [/dropcap]irst, at the same December 1 council meeting, council CEO **Bruce Anson** gave a verbal update to Cr Kelson in which he said that another count had been taken and 64 of the missing ingots had been found in a false floor of the *Reginald M*: one of two boats in the Flagstaff Hill lake.

A false floor? We took a look inside the *Reginald M* at the weekend and counted 286 ingots – the same number in the advisory committee report – and there were no signs of any ingots in a false floor (but, as an aside, plenty of signs of a rotting floor filling up with water).

Mr Anson went on to say that any remaining missing ingots were inside the hull of the nearby derelict *Rowitta*.

This [reassurance was repeated](#) in the local newspaper on December 23, although Flagstaff Hill manager **Peter Abbott** said it was too unsafe to actually count the ingots in the *Rowitta*, but his people could “peer in”.

Mr Abbott then revealed that some ingots could also be in the mud at the bottom of the lake, thrown there by night-time intruders. What? When did this happen and were police notified of a break-in at Flagstaff Hill?

More slivers of the puzzle came to light at the weekend [when the local newspaper reported](#) that some ingots were being used in Port Fairy while another, not necessarily from Flagstaff Hill, [may have been sold at a local clearing sale.](#)



A close-up of the *Loch Ard* ingots, each of which bear the maker's mark. These are among 10 on display in the Great Circle Gallery at Flagstaff Hill in Warrnambool. Image: Bluestone Magazine

S [dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #5C747D;"] S [/dropcap]o how many *Loch Ard* ingots have we actually got on display, in storage and in the mud at Flagstaff Hill?

I don't know, I am lost, but I counted a total of **647** when I was there on Saturday.

To throw a final curve ball into the mix, the council's director of city growth, **Bill Millard**, who sits on the Flagstaff Hill advisory committee, sent a memo to all councillors on December 10 saying that "the most recent count" identified the location of **802** ingots and he was "confident" that the ingot collection was intact.

Mr Millard may be confident, but the rest of us have a right to be utterly confused.

By any account, the audit of the *Loch Ard* ingots is an embarrassing mess caused by years of inaction to update the paper-based (yes, *paper-based*) collection system at Flagstaff Hill.

It is now being left to Peter Abbott – who, in what must be a vast role, is also head of council's tourism services – and his team of largely volunteers to untangle it.

Perhaps most troubling, however, is how many more precious objects have "gone missing" from the thousands collected by or donated to Flagstaff Hill over the last 40 years?

There are already rumblings about items such as *Newfield* bell, which once hung in the Great Circle

Gallery at Flagstaff Hill, but no longer even appears on its [collection database](#).

While the analogy may be more suited to the *Titanic* than the *Loch Ard*, I fear that the missing ingots may prove to be just the tip of the iceberg.

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