



Flagstaff Hill: a museum in transition or a mess?

Description



The cracks in Flagstaff Hill's museum collection are being revealed as a result of persistent questioning by those concerned about missing items. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] W [/dropcap]arrnambool's Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village has finally admitted that it has lost more than 100 items from its collection in what is a clear indication that all is not well down on the hill.

Privately, people who have had a long association with the village either as former staff members, volunteers, or long-term supporters are questioning how has it all gone so wrong and, more importantly, can it be fixed?

In response to my [piece last weekend](#) in which I asked if the missing *Loch Ard* ingots were the tip of the iceberg (they were), FHMV manager **Peter Abbott** wrote a letter to the local newspaper in which he confirmed that at least 129 items donated to the museum could no longer be accounted for.

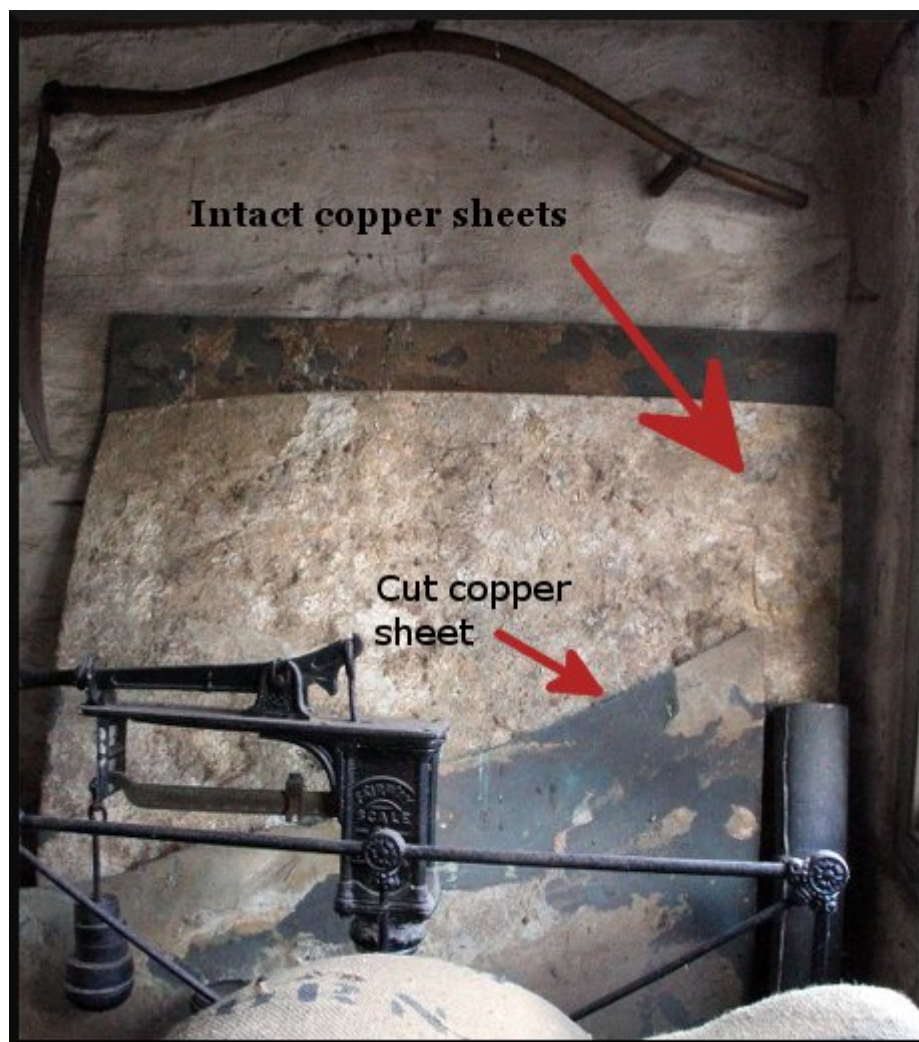
This is not about a clerical error on a database, this is about losing irreplaceable items that were given to Flagstaff Hill for protection. Put simply, despite being an accredited museum, Flagstaff Hill has no idea where these objects are because of years of poor record keeping and poor storage.

As to be expected, Mr Abbott used his letter to downplay the issue, referring to a missing bar of soap and a "small tin", but even a single button can be valuable depending on who wore it: that's what museums are about.

The 129 missing objects are [not a comprehensive list](#).

Bluestone has since learned, for example, that the very first items donated to Flagstaff Hill back in 1973 are also missing. They are a lamp that is believed to have come from the *Loch Ard*, and a police lamp, believed to have been used in the search for survivors from the *Loch Ard*.

These are not insignificant items.



Copper sheets salvaged from the wreck of the *Loch Ard* have been damaged since coming into the possession of Flagstaff Hill, including a large cut to one sheet in the Bond Store.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] I [/dropcap]t should also come as a shock to learn that while the copper sheets from the *Loch Ard* (1878) are not missing, some have been *cut up*.

As I wrote last week, these 10 sheets were given to the village by the Federal Government in 1984 and were supposed to be housed under a loan agreement that, until recently, had been forgotten about.

The [online listing](#) for the copper sheets confirms: "One sheet appears cut or severed in a diagonal line downwards from its top left hand corner. One sheet has a 10cm X 10cm square cut out of its top right hand corner."

The sheet that has been virtually sliced in half can be found inside the Bond Store.

When asked about these two sheets, Mr Abbott referred me to a third sheet, now housed at the Port Campbell Tourist Information Centre, that had a small drill hole added so that it could be secured to the wall (the people responsible apologised to Flagstaff Hill in 1993 for their mistake.)

Mr Abbott didn't explain why these more recent and much larger cuts were made, but it has been

suggested that at least one piece was used to create a copper sculpture.

FHMV also considers it acceptable to store some of the remaining sheets – those twisted by the blast during their salvage – outside in the weeds near the Barracks, as if they were storing bits from Bunnings, rather than relics from the *Loch Ard*.



Buckled copper sheets (centre) from the wreck of the *Loch Ard* are “stored” among the weeds and an assortment of other items outside the Barracks. Image: Bluestone Magazine

[dropcap style=”font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;”] M [/dropcap]r Abbott also used his letter to confirm that the brass bell from the wreck of the *Newfield* (1892) has disappeared after being removed during renovations in 2002 – 13 years ago.

Bluestone has been told that Flagstaff Hill was alerted to the missing bell back in 2009, but did nothing: there was certainly [no public call for its return](#).

In fact the whistleblower who first raised concerns about the security and integrity of the collection management process has since left Flagstaff Hill in frustration.

None of this, it must be said, is the fault of the volunteers who provide countless hours of unpaid labour to try and fix problems that have been years in the making. They are doing their best and I saw that first-hand during a visit last Friday.

The volunteers, however, are history enthusiasts, not experts. Mr Abbott, similarly, comes from a tourism management background rather than a curatorial one.

Indeed one of the few people on staff who had a qualification in cultural heritage management, **Helen Sheedy**, has this year left Flagstaff Hill to work elsewhere in the council.

It is hard to imagine the Warrnambool Art Gallery being managed with so few expert hands and I can just imagine the outcry if it lost more than 100 artworks along the way.

In the meantime, Flagstaff Hill has gone from being a profitable venture – where it *made* money for the council – to one that now loses about half a million dollars a year.

Whether Flagstaff Hill is given the resources it needs to operate a well-oiled museum like it did in the 70s, 80s and 90s remains to be seen, but the cracks are starting to show and, for those who donated their items in good faith, the revelations of the past few days will be shocking.

[box]If you would like to do a Flagstaff Hill back-of-house tour of your own, you can join the free tour this Wednesday Jan 14 at 11.30am and 6pm. [/box]

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Category

1. Archive

Tags

1. collection
2. copper sheets
3. Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum
4. ingots
5. Loch Ard
6. museum.
7. Peter Abbott

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