

Investigation launched into Flagstaff Hill



Flagstaff Hill in Warrnambool is under investigation after revelations of missing and lost items, and damage to Loch Ard artefacts. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

EXCLUSIVE: Carol Altmann

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[/dropcap]he Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village in Warrnambool is under formal investigation by Heritage Victoria over missing items from its collection and damage to relics from the wreck of the *Loch Ard*.

As [recently reported in Bluestone Magazine](#), two of the 10 copper sheets from the *Loch Ard* (1878) that were loaned to Flagstaff Hill by the Federal Government have been cut.

It is believed that a large slice was taken from one of the sheets in recent years for use as a sculpture or trophy, while

the other has had a 10 x 10cm piece removed.

The *Loch Ard*, arguably Australia's most famous shipwreck, is listed as a wreck of state and Commonwealth significance.

It is an offence under Section 13 of the Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act to "destroy or cause damage to a historic shipwreck or historic relic" and can lead to a fine of up to \$10,000 or imprisonment for an individual, or a \$5000 fine for a body corporate.

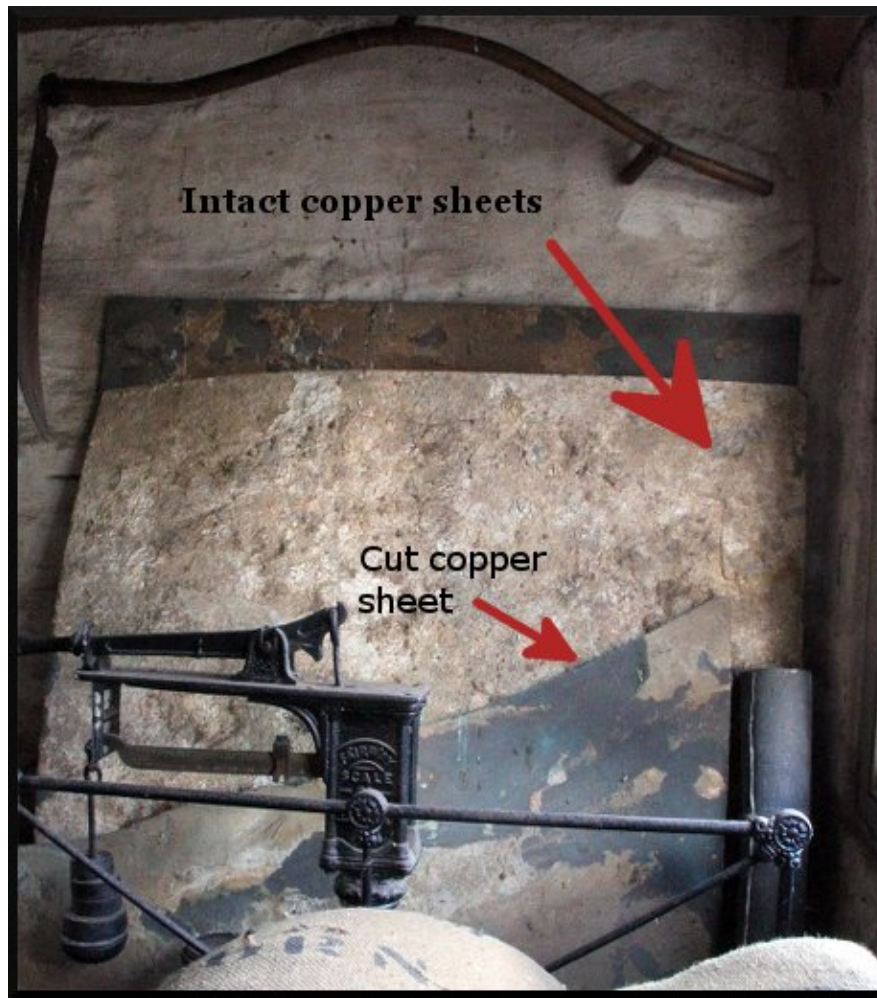
In addition, Flagstaff Hill manager **Peter Abbott** recently confirmed in a letter to the local newspaper that the museum had lost track of at least 129 items from its collection, including the brass ship's bell from the wreck of the *Newfield* (1892) that was once displayed in the Great Circle Gallery.

Heritage Victoria told *Bluestone Magazine* late Friday that, as a result of the revelations, it had opened an investigation into the collection practices at Flagstaff Hill.

"Tim Smith, Executive Director, Heritage Victoria confirmed Heritage Victoria is investigating the care and storage of items at Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum," a spokeswoman said via email.

Mr Smith was unavailable for further comment.

Heritage Victoria is responsible for the initial investigation into any potential breaches of the federal law governing historic shipwrecks. It is also responsible for investigating if there have been any breaches of the Victorian Heritage Act, which carries its own penalties.



An image of the copper sheets from the Loch Ard which clearly shows the bottom sheet severed from right to left.

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lagstaff Hill, which is accredited by the museum governing body, Museums Australia, has had the spotlight turned on its collection management processes after questions late last year by Warrnambool City Councillor **Brian Kelson**.

Mr Kelson's probing about gaps in the museum's online collection database led to revelations that 220 lead ingots from the *Loch Ard* could not be accounted for.

Flagstaff Hill was given custody of 872 lead ingots in 1984 as part of the same federal loan agreement that governed the copper sheets.

Mr Abbott and council chief executive officer **Bruce Anson** have

both since given assurances that the bulk of the missing ingots are in the hull of the derelict *Rowitta* ferry, although there has been no official count due to the poor condition of the vessel.

The ferry, which sits on the pond at Flagstaff Hill, is scheduled for demolition later this year.

Mr Abbott has [recently been caught up in a separate scandal](#), after he was named by the local newspaper as the author of several anonymous comments made to its online forums, in which he made personal attacks against Cr Kelson and **Cr Peter Hulin**.

Cr Hulin has since indicated he will move a motion of no confidence against CEO Mr Anson at the first council meeting of the year on February 2, citing his handling of Mr Abbott's behaviour as an example of why the Local Government Minister should be asked to intervene.

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