

# Once-proud “Rowitta” is now an abandoned ship



The century-old steamer, “Rowitta”, as it appeared at the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village in 1999 when it was considered a prize exhibit. Image: FredV45 via Flickr.

**By Carol Altmann**

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] T  
his is a tale of two, century-old, sister ships with two very different fortunes: one is about to undergo a million dollar restoration in Tasmania, while the other is being scrapped at Flagstaff Hill in Warrnambool.

The *Rowitta* and the *Cartela* are both wooden steamer ferries built in Hobart by Purdon & Featherstone, with the *Rowitta* the older of the pair, being built in 1909, followed by the *Cartela* in 1912.

They are now among only a handful of river steamers left in

Australia and generate the sort of excitement among wooden boat enthusiasts that befit their rarity.

In the case of the *Cartela*, which has been converted from steam to diesel but has never been out of service, that excitement is only building.

A dedicated band of volunteers formed the [Cartela Restoration Project Trust](#) that lobbied for years to secure funding to restore the ferry to its original state, including its original 1912 steam engine. The project has come to fruition and, as of August last year, the *Cartela* [restoration has been the centrepiece](#) of the revitalisation of the port of Franklin, in the Huon Valley, as the home of wooden boat building.

For the *Rowitta* however, despite being one of the oldest vessels in the collection at the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village, it is the end of the road.



Full steam ahead: The Rowitta plying the Tamar River, Launceston, in 1922. Image: Museum Victoria.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] H  
[/dropcap]aving been brought to the fledgling Flagstaff Hill

back in the early 1970s as a hull, the *Rowitta* – which has also been known over its life as the *Sorrento* and *Tarkarri* – was the focus of a major restoration in 1989 under master boat builder, the late **Ron Stewart**, who's son, **Garry Stewart**, continues the craft in Port Fairy today.

The *Rowitta* became a jewel in Flagstaff Hill's crown, both as a popular venue for weddings, an educational tool for students and as a historic tourist attraction.

Tasmanian **Irene Atkins** wrote about her visit to Flagstaff Hill in 1998 and the thrill of seeing the boat she remembered from her childhood in Launceston being fully restored and taking pride of place on the lake.

"The first thing I said was 'You have got the right colours'. They replied that they had gone down several coats of paint to establish that information," she wrote in '*On the Tide*'.

One of the people to show Irene around that day was boat builder **Jeff McMurrich** who is still the main boat builder at Flagstaff Hill and who, in 2008, [gave a prescient interview](#) to the ABC's **Jeremy Lee** in which he warned that the *Rowitta* was in need of significant restoration work within 10 years, or it may not survive.

Sitting permanently in fresh water rotted the hull and required the *Rowitta* to be drydocked for proper repairs, which was difficult because it was part of the village's *Shipwrecked* sound and light show \*.

Instead, as Jeff explained, he did what he could with the "shoestring" budget Flagstaff Hill had to spend on such things. It was, he said, a case of "patching" rather than preventative maintenance – and this could only work for so long.



The rotting hull of the Rowitta, which has been off-limits to visitors to Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village for more than a year.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] D  
[ /dropcap]espite these dire warnings, the 100th birthday of the *Rowitta* in 2009 was met with cheerful optimism by Flagstaff Hill, with manager **Peter Abbott** [telling the local newspaper](#) that the ship was still a popular drawcard.

“It’s a great venue for many types of functions and its also part of our sound and light show so the *Rowitta*’s definitely got plenty of years left in her yet,” he said.

In fact the boat would not see out another decade.

Faced with mounting losses at Flagstaff Hill, the Warrnambool City Council decided a couple of years ago to discontinue all maintenance of the *Rowitta*, which sealed her fate.

Alongside this decision has been a subtle reconfiguring of *Rowitta*’s place in the Flagstaff Hill story.

No longer is the ship historic, but referred to by Flagstaff Hill in its correspondence as a “replica”.

Similarly, the ship’s story is no longer considered relevant to the village, yet the South Australian built boat, the *Reginald M*, which arrived at Flagstaff Hill at about the same time, is.

The *Rowitta*’s transition from treasure to trash is perhaps best captured in this line from the council’s February 15 meeting:

“*Rowitta* is a replica ship and deemed as surplus to the future of FHMV. Her removal will allow our limited wooden boat repair resources to focus on our real heritage vessels.”

Work on removing parts of the ship has already begun.

\*The consolidation of the wooden boat fleet is part of a [\\$3 million upgrade](#) of Flagstaff Hill to start later this year, including a \$2 million upgrade of the sound and light show.

**[box]We asked former Flagstaff Hill director PETER RONALD, now living in Tasmania, for his view on the destruction of the *Rowitta*. [Read his exclusive analysis piece here](#). Bluestone would also like to thank the Launceston Library for its assistance with the history of the *Rowitta*.[/box]**

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