

Peter Ronald on the destruction of 100-year-old 'Rowitta'



Fading away: the 100-year-old wooden steamer, Rowitta, is being pulled apart after it was decided by Flagstaff Hill to discontinue all maintenance. Image: Amanda Turnidge-Jones.

Bluestone invited the former director of Flagstaff Hill, PETER RONALD, to write on the imminent destruction of the *Rowitta*, one of the oldest vessels at the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village:

ANALYSIS – Peter Ronald

The *Rowitta* has involved some difficult decisions for Flagstaff Hill over the years, but [it seems the vessel](#)

will soon no longer exist. (*The WCC has since announced the removal of the Rowitta began on April 20, 2015.)

The destruction of historic ships is an unusual pursuit for maritime museums and accordingly, I have been asked by *Bluestone Magazine* to contribute my opinion on the issue.

I do so with some reluctance, but perhaps it is timely to put some matters on the record. I have always sought to grace an honest question with an honest answer; that is simply my aim here. Anybody seeking my views on this issue would have received precisely this same answer.

The vessel's hull was originally purchased and moved onto the site with the idea of creating the impression of a sailing ship as the centrepiece of the village. This initial concept was – without any disrespect to those responsible – primarily about creating atmosphere rather than the noble goals of maritime heritage conservation.

As I attempted to steer Flagstaff Hill from “maritime village” to “Maritime Museum”, it became essential to reassess the role and significance of this primary centrepiece: the *Rowitta* hull. Options for the hull were clear; to pursue the “atmospheric” notion, restore the vessel to its original configuration, return it to the ocean (for sale/use elsewhere), or just let it rot (a “caged” shipwreck on the Shipwreck Coast).

I suspect that these may have been the sorts of options reconsidered by current Flagstaff Hill management. The underlying question however is, why?

Why, some 20 years after the decision to restore and preserve the vessel, was the matter revisited? Why does total destruction of the *Rowitta* now seem like a good idea? The answers are clear, but it is not a pretty story.



The Rowitta in her prime as a steamer on the Tamar River, Launceston, shortly after her launch in 1909. Image: On the Tide (Vol 1), reproduced courtesy of Launceston Reference Library.

Historic ship preservation is a well practised activity around the world and typically involves a period of extensive restoration, followed by meticulous maintenance. Through the research, hard work, and amazing skills of the late Ron Stewart, the hull was ultimately restored to its former glory as the historic steamer, *Rowitta*.

When I left Flagstaff Hill, the restoration was largely complete (the reconstructed aft cabin being used as an education centre/classroom) and maintenance was ongoing.

What happened next, in my view, is that Flagstaff Hill entered a “dark age” from which it is yet to recover.

Let's be clear, under the planned and precise direction of the City's then Administrators (and followed by subsequent Councils), the ethical constraints of the museum philosophy

which had guided development for a decade, were abandoned in favour of a “tourist” focus.

The logic was that a change in emphasis from museum to tourist facility would herald even higher levels of economic success. Well, the scores are now on the board in relation to that failed experiment, and the *Rowitta* is symbolic of the collateral damage.

No longer an historic object in the care of a Maritime Museum, maintenance lapsed under the new direction. The high standard of restoration that had been achieved was simply eroded through neglect. That splendid work, so diligently accomplished by Ron Stewart, apparently deteriorated to the point that it was no longer even safe to enter the vessel.



The rotting Rowitta: the boat has been off-limits to Flagstaff Hill visitors for some time after it was considered unsafe to board. Image: Bluestone Magazine

The debate around “historic” ship or mere replica, raises a relevant and well studied aspect of historic ship

preservation. It is true that any historic vessel preserved in an open-air environment will, as the result of basic maintenance, require the replacement of original fabric.

Over time, the percentage of original fabric present in any such vessel will therefore, effectively diminish: this is particularly true of timber vessels. In the *Rowitta's* case, the hull is of completely original configuration and, I would argue, of primarily original fabric.

The deck has been renewed and the upper-works have been replicated. The end result of this equation, however, and by the standards of international maritime museum practise, is that the *Rowitta* was – and remains – an historic vessel.

To suggest otherwise is simply an argument of convenience used to justify a predetermined outcome.

Curiously, if the vessel was positioned just 350 metres to the south (ie. on the beach) it would now automatically be afforded the full protection of Historic Shipwreck legislation.

With the above background, I can only sympathise with present management. I believe the current manager is again pursuing museum goals for Flagstaff Hill, and for this I commend him, but the policy decisions of the past make the task a truly formidable one.

It should never have come to this: Flagstaff Hill's "dark age" was unnecessary and, in any case, lasted far too long.

In the *Rowitta* example, the cost of the failed experiment will now be born by future generations through the loss of a piece of Australia's maritime heritage: a 100-year-old historic ship.

I observe with sadness that Warrnambool's maritime museum has been taken to the point of "burning the furniture"; one of

it's oldest and largest historic artefacts. Flagstaff Hill may never recover from the "dark age", but there are foundational lessons to be learned from this current humiliating predicament.