

WA Museum rejects Abbott's claims of lost items

EXCLUSIVE: The Western Australian Museum has rejected claims by Flagstaff Hill director Peter Abbott that it could not locate more than 6600 items in its collection...

Are missing Loch Ard ingots the tip of the iceberg?

In our first Opinion piece of the year, we ask if the Loch Ard ingots missing from Flagstaff Hill are just the tip of the iceberg...

“Flaggy” at a \$15 million crossroad



Warrnambool's Flagstaff Hill is at a crossroads and requires a long-term commitment of \$15million to prosper. Image: letsgotravelaustralia.com

OPINION

With all the excitement [around the sale of the Warrnambool Fletcher Jones site](#), important details on the future of another prominent site in the city – Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village – have slipped by virtually unnoticed.

But despite the distractions, we *do* need to talk about Flagstaff Hill – or “Flaggy” as it is called by those closest to the action – because unlike the FJ site, which was privately owned, this one is costing *us* money.

At the moment, the Warrnambool City Council is absorbing an annual deficit of around \$500,000 for the 40-year-old Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum due to falling visitor numbers that have tumbled from 80,000-plus a year to below 60,000. As I [have written before](#), the village needs *at least* 80,000 visitors a year to break even.

While profit is not everything when it comes to community assets, something significant needs to be done to turn things around, or – it has now been confirmed – **the site will cost the council (ie. ratepayers) almost \$9 million in “losses”**

over the next 20 years.

It is crunch time and the crunch is that almost \$15 million must be spent in the next three years on Flagstaff Hill to make any real difference to its future.

This is the conclusion reached by consultants, [Coffey Sport and Leisure](#), who were paid \$90,000 to prepare a masterplan that mapped out how to turn the site around and whose final report was recently made [public](#).



The masterplan includes images of what a new interactive discovery centre might look like at Flagstaff Hill.

The masterplan set out a number of scenarios – from do nothing, which would eventually see the site close – through to an all bells-and-whistles affair that would cost almost \$26 million.

The report ultimately recommended a middle ground that would cost \$14.8 million over three years and, potentially, turn the site into a profitable venture by doubling the number of visitors over the next 20 years.

The “middle ground” plan includes broadening the whole theme of the centre to the Great Southern Ocean (which, to some extent, has already begun); building a new, sexy interactive

discovery centre that captures the stories of the Great Southern Ocean (from indigenous history, to whales, to shipwrecks); upgrading the existing sound and light shows; giving *free* access to the colonial village; adding another cafe and introducing food/wine events; and linking the whole site up with Lake Pertobe and Cannon Hill.

To make it happen, the council would need to chip in 25% of the total cost – ie. around \$4 million – and the remainder come from state and federal funds, which, given the harsh cuts within the last Federal Budget, would be difficult.

The most important point, however, is that the report makes it clear that this plan is the *very least* that is required if Flagstaff Hill is to remain relevant and viable.

In other words, unless we are able to find almost \$15 million in combined ratepayer and taxpayer funds, we are pretty much wasting our time and delaying the inevitable.



Another image from the masterplan report that shows how Flagstaff Hill might improve its displays which were described as “uninspiring and static”.

The council knows this, but it also knows that trying to find a spare million or two in its budget right now is almost impossible.

As a result, it [recently agreed](#) to contribute \$500,000 in 2014-15, and another \$500,000 the following financial year toward a \$3 million upgrade of the very-dated *Shipwrecked* sound and laser night show, plus some other minor improvements. It hopes the state and federal governments will at least chip in another \$2 million between them.

It is a Band-Aid on an oozing knee, but the council somewhat optimistically hopes that this will lift visitors to its night show by 30%.

I say optimistically, because sound and light shows were a big deal in 2002 – when *Shipwrecked* began – but people now have access to such technology in their own lounge rooms and will expect something pretty special.

Still, it is a start, but the conversation that still needs to be had is whether the community wishes to see up to \$15 million spent on the site over the next three years.



Cashed up private investors like Dean Montgomery, who recently bought the Fletcher Jones site, may prove critical to the long-term survival of Flagstaff

Hill.

The council sought public feedback on the masterplan last year, and while the 145 people who responded said they wanted to see Flagstaff Hill continue, it is only now being laid out in black and white as to what funds will be required to make that happen in any robust way.

Indeed, the total cost of the long-term plan is rarely mentioned at all, but instead its is framed as a “staged development”. (There was certainly no mention of \$14.8 million in the council’s most [recent media release](#) on the issue.)

There is also regular reference to the council seeking private investment for the site, in the hope that – once again – a cashed up white knight will come and save the day for Warrnambool.

Unfortunately a **Dean Montgomery** only comes along once in a blue moon and he has grabbed hold of the Fletcher Jones site where, unlike Flagstaff Hill, the conversation became very public, very frank and, ultimately, very productive.

So, do we spend \$15 million on Flagstaff Hill in the next three years to turn its fortunes around, or not?

Over to you.

Flagstaff Hill in danger of

missing the boat



What does the future hold for the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village that turns 40 later this month?

OPINION

It's two years since the Warrnambool City Council announced a review into the future of the **Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village** – which turns 40 later this month – but we are still none the wiser as to what its future holds.

The \$90,000 masterplan, funded by the council and State Government, has resulted in a draft document that is yet to be released publicly and there is no indication as to when this will happen.

It is no secret that the colonial village and maritime museum is in trouble: it is struggling to find its place in a rapidly shifting world of tourism tastes that are vastly different to those of 1974 or even 1994.

The on-site accommodation at Flagstaff Hill has been popular, but overall visitor numbers have been falling and costing the council around \$500,000 a year to meet the shortfall (a shortfall that would be much greater if it weren't for volunteer staff).

Council CEO Bruce Anson recently told a media briefing that the village needs 80,000 visitors a year to break even, but is recording around 60,000: this is a lot of lost ground...and the competition is about to get a lot hotter.



One of the images from the [Shipwreck Coast Masterplan](#) depicting what might be possible at Port Campbell or Peterborough.

I have [written previously](#) how I believe Flagstaff Hill has had its day and recreated colonial villages are out of step with the boom in eco-tourism, 'experience' tourism, and 'indulgence' tourism based around food, wine and luxury accommodation.

This is exactly the sort of tourism that is being talked about – and mapped out – just down the road under the dynamic [Shipwreck Coast Masterplan](#).

I say dynamic, because while the Flagstaff Hill draft

masterplan remains under wraps, the Shipwreck Coast Masterplan hit the ground running last year and will release its draft plan for public feedback in April.

The [detailed Shipwreck Coast Masterplan](#) is being developed by Parks Victoria, Tourism Victoria, the Moyne Shire Council and the Corangamite Shire Council and, last year, held a number of packed community forums to thrash out priorities and ideas.

Remarkably, the “Shipwreck Coast” at the centre of all this energy and excitement does not include Warrnambool – it is barely mentioned outside of the plan’s maps – and the Warrnambool City Council is not a formal partner.

Instead, the focus is firmly on managing and enhancing a 28km stretch of coast from Peterborough to Port Campbell and Princetown and the hinterland around these three towns, including places like Timboon and Simpson.

The WCC told me that its tourism manager, Peter Abbott, had provided input to the plan and would be speaking with Parks Victoria in coming weeks and that, overall, it supported any moves to improve the Great Ocean Road that would help bring tourists our way.

Despite this optimism that we will pick up tourists almost by default, when the masterplan does cast its eyes further afield, like in its suggestion of a first-class golfing circuit, it leap-frogs right over Warrnambool and suggests golfers visit Peterborough, Port Fairy and...Robe.



The portion of the Shipwreck Coast that is at the centre of a draft masterplan to be released next month.

This passing over of Warrnambool – which often happens when talking about the Great Ocean Road – is even more frustrating because of the potential for Warrnambool to be a hub of fine food, wine, eco-tourism and ‘experience’ tourism.

But let’s stick with Flagstaff Hill for the moment.

Aside from the focus and energy around Peterborough and Port Campbell in the Shipwreck Coast Masterplan, a potential knock-out blow for Flagstaff Hill is a proposed \$100-\$150 million interpretive and education centre at Loch Ard Gorge.

Such a centre would locate the *Loch Ard* story and a significant chunk of the shipwreck coast story at Loch Ard Gorge – there would be even less incentive to travel further down the coast to Warrnambool to see it recreated, hence the WCC has started to talk about Flagstaff Hill “telling the story of the Great Southern Ocean”, whatever that entails.

The idea of a first-class visitor centre at Loch Ard Gorge has been bubbling away [since it was flagged in 2010](#). The Victorian Tourism Council listed it as a priority in 2011 and, in 2012, the [Great Ocean Road Destination Management Plan](#) (funded by the State and Federal Governments) gave it number one billing in its list of eight 'game changer' projects.



Parks Victoria told me last week that the centre remains a “proposal”, and perhaps we will know more when the Shipwreck Coast masterplan draft is released in April, but there is no doubt that improving visitor facilities at Loch Ard Gorge and the nearby 12 Apostles is a top priority at the highest levels.

Given the importance of the Great Ocean Road to national tourism, I would suggest it is not a matter of *if* the Loch Ard Gorge centre will be built, but *when*.

Flagstaff Hill is not naïve: [it is aware of the threat](#) from this potential development as one of many challenges it faces

in trying to chart its new course against stiff winds of change.

Despite this, and despite Flagstaff Hill occupying one of Warrnambool's most prominent locations, there is still no sense of urgency or real excitement about its future or how the site might look and operate in five, 10 or 15 years time.

If we want to remain a relevant and appealing part of the "Shipwreck Coast", we need to start moving on Flagstaff Hill *now* and generate some of the same energy, excitement and forward thinking that is happening between Peterborough and Princetown.

To do otherwise is to risk missing the boat and watch Flagstaff Hill slowly sink into obscurity.

[Until last year, Warrnambool was the base for Shipwreck Coast Tourism, but this body has been wound up as part of a new Great Ocean Road Tourism Board that will cover Geelong to the SA border.]

Close Flagstaff Hill; save Fletcher Jones

If there is one thing Warrnambool needs to get right, it is the preservation of Pleasant Hill and the Fletcher Jones site...so why are we spending so much time, money and effort on Flagstaff Hill instead?