

Sunken Assets 2007

by **Lloyd Borrett** (www.borrett.id.au)

On Sunday 19th August, the SCUBA Divers Federation of Victoria (SDFV), together with the RMIT Underwater Club, Heritage Council of Victoria, Heritage Victoria, the Maritime Archaeology Association of Victoria (MAAV) and the Dive Industry of Victoria Association (DIVA) all combined to put on Sunken Assets 2007 — a day exploring our magnificent maritime heritage. The day was organised to mark the 25th anniversary of Victoria's Historic Shipwrecks Act.

I happened to misread the event programme and ended up arriving at Storey Hall very early at 8:30 am, only to find Alan Storen and John Lawler already there helping to set things up. Alan created a mini-stand area to promote VSAG. During the course of the day we spoke to a number of people about the benefits of joining VSAG.

Alongside the VSAG area, Des Williams set up an impressive display promoting the Historical Diving Society SE Asia & Pacific (www.classicdiver.org). I got to meet Des for the first time, plus chat with both Des and Jeff Maynard about their organisation and some diving history.

Alan Beckhurst also arrived and set up an area to promote the GetUnder club. (We have a double agent in our midst!) Quite a few other VSAG members also attended the event.

As people arrived, interesting discussion groups were formed around the room. It was obvious that plenty of people were catching up with old friends. Newcomers to diving like myself were getting to meet some of the people they had only previously heard about.

Eventually we were all summoned to enter the auditorium and proceedings began, with Terry Laidler of ABC Radio fame as the master of ceremonies. The day's presentations included:

Learning to love intimacy — the relationship between concretions and iron shipwrecks, by **Dr Ian MacLeod**, Western Australian Museum.

Iron Zeppelin — The SS City of Launceston, **Ross Anderson**, Western Australian Museum.

Diving to Discovery — a history of Australia's underwater pioneers, **Jeff Maynard**, Historical Diving Society.

A shipwreck was a godsend to these people — the diverse impacts of the Loch Ard on a remote colonial community, **Kate Fielding**, Historian.

Decipher, Discover, Dive — Pioneers of Victoria's deep shipwreck discoveries, **Mark Ryan**, Southern Ocean Exploration.

Ying and Yang — divers, nature and wrecks, the Yongala experience, **Andy Viduka**, Museum of Tropical Queensland.

Preserving Ship Wrecks

For me, the presentation by Dr Ian MacLeod on the relationship between concretions and iron shipwrecks was the highlight. As Stuart and Helena Cannon had told us when they gave their presentation on the AE2 Submarine at a VSAG meeting earlier in the year, Ian certainly knows how to make this subject fascinating and entertaining.

Ian explained how they go about measuring the pH and voltage levels at various points on wrecks and are thus able to measure the rate of deterioration. He showed us how the rates varied at different locations on wrecks based on factors like the exposure to currents.

At the start of the lunch break, I offered to buy Ian lunch and he accepted. Thus John Lawler, Alan Storen and myself (all VARS volunteers) got to talk with Dr MacLeod over lunch about how we could extend the useful life of the HMAS Canberra as a dive site. We also asked him about ways to protect the existing iron shipwrecks in Victoria.

Ian told us how he had used aluminium engine blocks obtained for the price of a slab of beer from scrap yards as the basis for the anodes on many shipwrecks. The anodes are then attached electrically via sheathed copper cables to appropriate points on the wreck. He warned us that if the site was such that the anodes were likely to sink into the bottom, or be covered, then using zinc blocks for the anodes would work better.

VSAG has a long history of spawning other groups to tackle diving issues. Maybe it is time for us to take up the challenge of helping to preserve our ship wrecks. If we could make the subs and some of the other prime wrecks we dive on last a lot longer, so that they can be visited by future generations, it would certainly be worthwhile doing so. The methods that Dr MacLeod described certainly seem able to be deployed and monitored by volunteers. With some minimal financial assistance from the dive industry, it is a goal that should be achievable to the benefit of all divers.

Finding Ship Wrecks

The presentation by Mark Ryan, from Aquability, on how the Southern Ocean Exploration team (www.southernoceanexploration.com) go about finding wrecks was also fascinating. Certainly SOE are having a lot of success, having found wrecks like the SS Alert, Don Diego, Verulam, SS Queensland, TSS Kanowna, TSS Cumberland etc.

It would be exciting to be a part of such teams, though the diving they do to verify the typically deep wrecks they find is way beyond most recreational diver's capabilities (certainly mine).

The costs the volunteers cover are also very steep. The team members pay for the capital equipment they use, including the side scanning sonar and computers. Mark mentioned how the gas costs for some of the deep dives they do can be around \$200 per dive, and then they share boat fuel costs on what can be long and expensive outings.

Diving Pioneers

The presentation by Jeff Maynard on the history of Australia's underwater pioneers was a real eye opener for me. I learnt that while the Aqualung may have been invented in France, it had a combined first and second stage. The separate first and second stage system that the regulators we use today is based on was invented just a year or so later right here in Melbourne, Australia.

Apparently once the Aqualung company realised how much better the Australian system was, they came to Melbourne and purchased the manufacturing company. Then they created the brand US Divers to sell the Australian regulators overseas.

As Jeff pointed out, if some of the world firsts that were achieved here in Australia had occurred in the USA, the people involved would be known worldwide, and we'd probably have seen multiple feature movies and documentaries about their exploits.

It was shocking to learn that there are no significant displays covering diving history in the appropriate museums here in Victoria. It seems that the significant part played by Victorians to diving history is being totally overlooked by museum professionals. And so, once again, volunteers fill the need, but lack the resources to securely display the collections.

Regulating Ship Wreck Access

It was interesting to see the difference as to what the authorities deem to be the right level of protection of some shipwrecks. Andy Viduka's presentation on the management of the Yongala site in Queensland talked about the various measures they'd taken with regard to market buoys and mooring systems. He mentioned how they try to stress to dive operators that divers be told that good buoyancy control and not touching the wreck is essential. And yet I've been told that some dive operators take people doing their Open Water course to the Yongala, plus divers who have only just completed their Open Water course.

On the other hand, here in Victoria the SS City of Launceston is protected by the site only being opened up for diving at certain extremely limited times, by small groups of divers under direct supervision. Divers have to have 50 dives and be accompanied by a site supervisor.

One would hope that the most appropriate level of protection would be somewhere between these two extremes and that we'll get to dive overly protected wrecks like the SS City of Launceston more often.

Thank you

I don't know what the official attendance was at Sunken Assets 2007, but my guess is that there would have been about 150 people enjoying the day.

There were certainly many interesting discussions going on, and plenty of people catching up with others they hadn't seen in quite a while.

This certainly was a great day and congratulations to everyone involved in its organisation. Let's do it again sometime. Sooner rather than later!