

Finders Keepers:

Amnesty collections reveal historical impact of looting on Australian shipwreck sites



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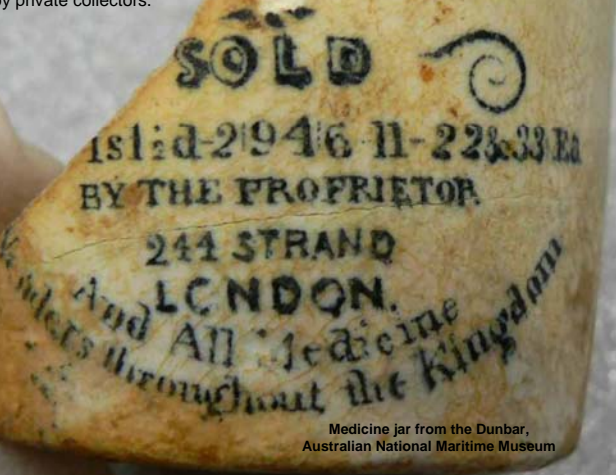


INTRODUCTION

During the 1950s and 60s, spear fishers and divers recovered a significant volume of artefacts from shipwrecks around Australia. Part of the culture then was that any diver who discovered a 'new' wreck consequently considered that they 'owned' that wreck and he or she could salvage whatever they wanted from it. Many divers also felt that they should recover as much material as they could to prevent 'irresponsible' divers retrieving these objects or the sites being destroyed naturally. This resulted in some wrecks being almost completely stripped of their entire portable artefacts. In the mid 1980s, the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* was amended to include a 'blanket protection' for all wrecks and associated relics in Commonwealth waters that were at least 75 years old, whether or not located. In order to recover information that would otherwise be lost forever, an amnesty was thought to be the best means by which authorities could record details about shipwrecks and associated relics being held by private collectors.

BACKGROUND

The amnesty was declared on 1 May 1993 and applied to anyone who discovered the location of a shipwreck in Australian waters, or gained possession of a relic prior to May 1993 but had yet to declare it. In response, thousands of objects were declared by divers, fishers, coin dealers, schools and small regional museums which had accepted donated objects from divers over the years. In addition, around 30 new shipwrecks were reported in a diverse range of locations across the country.



Medicine jar from the *Dunbar*, Australian National Maritime Museum



Painting of the immigrant Ship *Dunbar* (1857)



Objects from the *Dunbar* (1857), Australian National Maritime Museum. A diver recovered over 3,000 objects over 20 years, estimated by Sotheby's in 1994 to be worth AUD\$50,000-\$70,000.

Deadeye from *Victoria Tower* (1869), Heritage Victoria



Bottles from *Sepia* (1898), Western Australia, privately held



Ship's log from Pt Lonsdale Reef, Victoria, privately held



Metal bolts from *South Milton* (1886), Heritage Victoria



Scuttle from *SS Conside* (1852), Victoria, privately held



Cutlass from a *Batavia* (1629) grave site, Western Australian Museum

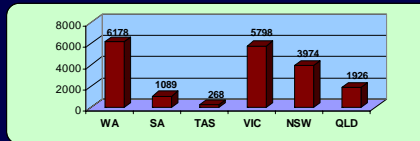


Ceramic candleholders from *Fiji* (1891), Heritage Victoria

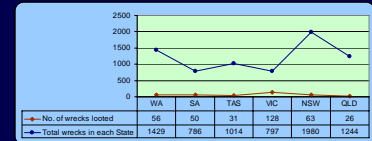


IMPACT ON SHIPWRECKS

The overall volume of artefacts declared revealed the level of early looting on shipwrecks. The methods divers used to recover relics (hand fanning, dredging, hammer and chisel or dynamiting) also highlighted the impact of their activities on those sites affected. One of the resulting challenges for authorities was to identify contemporary and modern forgeries. Unfortunately, it is believed today that many people still hold protected and undeclared historic shipwreck relics and are, therefore, at risk of being prosecuted.



Number of amnesty objects declared in each State

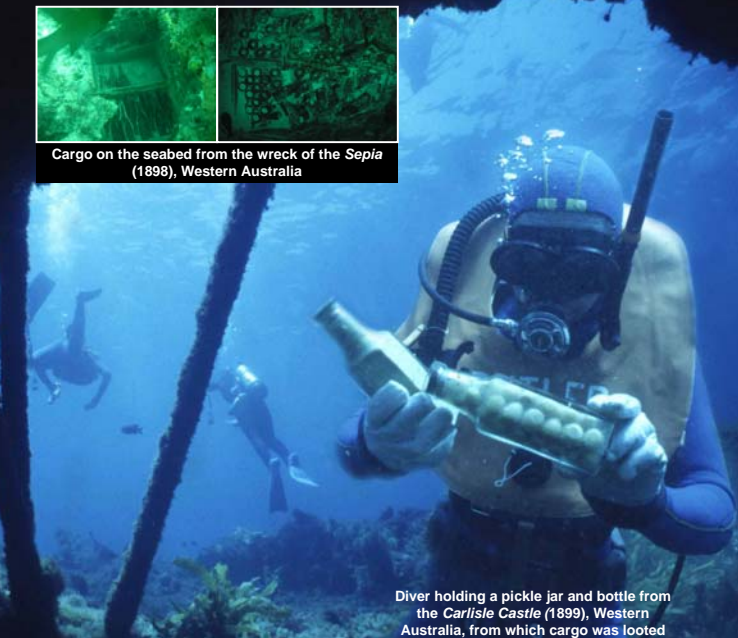


Percentage of shipwrecks affected by looting

- Glass tumblers from *Sepia* (1898), Western Australia, privately held
- Glazed teapot from *Light of the Age* (1868), Victoria, privately held
- Toast holder from *Loch Ard* (1878), Heritage Victoria
- Blue glass from *Sepia* (1898), Western Australian Museum
- Scuttle from *Inverloch* (1902), Heritage Victoria
- Spikes from *Light of the Age* (1868), Victoria, privately held
- Ceramic plate from *Ontario* (1853), Victoria, privately held



- Porcelain artefacts showing chipped surface effects after removal from saltwater with no conservation treatment applied
- Jug from *Sacramento* (1853), Victoria, privately held
- Container from the *George Roper* (1883), Victoria, privately held



DISCUSSION

Material and other useful information that surfaced during the amnesty have enabled many sites to be more thoroughly investigated and relevant data recorded. The range of objects represented in the collections reflect what people collected and also the aesthetic nature of things to which they were attracted. The collections have allowed for a greater understanding of communities that were affected by the loss of ship's cargo; the economic benefits that shipwrecks had for some nineteenth-century remote coastal communities; revealed insights into the early diving culture of pioneer divers who searched for and discovered shipwrecks; and shown potential in many of the objects for public displays and interpretation.

The interpretation of archaeological sites is always problematic because of disturbances following initial deposition. Collecting artefacts, in particular, is a widely recognised problem. For many years divers have visited wreck sites and collected all kinds of material, which has resulted in information being lost into private hands. Archaeologists will usually not associate themselves with looted objects. The amnesty collections, therefore, although looted objects, provide archaeologists with a resource to better understand what has been removed from Australia's shipwreck sites, the degree of impact on the archaeological record, and the collecting behaviour associated with early divers and private collectors.