

PORT ELLIOT

Maritime Heritage Trail

PORT ELLIOT

SEAPORT FOR THE RIVER MURRAY TRADE

The Murray is Australia's major river. Its development as a significant inland transport route required by-passing the hazardous mouth and establishing a rail link between Goolwa and an anchorage in Encounter Bay. In 1850, despite controversy and criticism, Governor Young selected Port Elliot as the coastal outlet for the river trade.

The first trading vessel arrived in July 1851 with construction materials for the jetty, and by 1866 more than 500 vessels had used the port. Unfortunately costly harbour improvements could not prevent many groundings and the loss of seven vessels between 1853 and 1864.

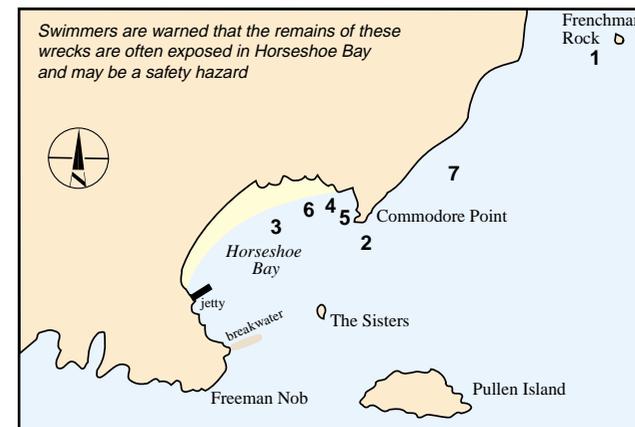
In May 1853 tragedy struck the settlement with the loss of the schooner *Emu* and its four crew. While the vessel's loss was attributed to unfavourable weather conditions, the accident did little to enhance the port's reputation as a safe harbour.

Memories of the ill-fated *Emu* faded and local confidence in Port Elliot's future grew, with a peak occupancy of 85 vessels during 1855. That year also saw the arrival of the first vessel from overseas, the brig *Lady Emma*.

Unfortunately in 1856 optimism gave way to despair as four vessels came to grief in or adjacent to Horseshoe Bay.

Horseshoe Bay based on a view circa 1860.

Sketch by Russell and Doris Mitchell, courtesy Port Elliot National Trust



SHIPWRECKS OF PORT ELLIOT: 1. *Emu* 2. *Commodore*
3. *Josephine Loizeau* 4. *Lapwing* 5. *Harry* 6. *Flying Fish* 7. *Athol*

The first tragedy occurred in February when the schooner *Commodore* anchored in an exposed position, dragged its anchor in gusty conditions and struck the rocky promontory now known as Commodore Point.

In July Port Elliot's reputation was again tarnished when the *Josephine Loizeau* broke from its moorings during a gale and was driven ashore. A later inspection revealed that the vessel had mistakenly shackled to the buoy chain instead of the mooring cable.



In September disaster struck once more, when the ketch *Lapwing* drifted inshore during a storm, having shared its mooring with another vessel, *Swordfish*. Local opinion blamed the loss on the inadequacy of the moorings.

Although it could be argued that these wrecks were avoidable, three vessels lost in seven months gained Port Elliot a reputation as a 'ship-trap'. The government laid down a set of substantial new moorings in October, but Port Elliot's misfortune continued.

In December the fully laden brig *Harry* was moving to the outer anchorage when the swell carried it inshore. Some of the cargo was saved but the vessel became a total loss.

The impact of the 1856 wreckings was considerable. A government report released in 1857 recommended Victor Harbor as an alternative to Port Elliot. Shipping arrivals dropped and steamers began trading directly between Goolwa and Port Adelaide through the Murray Mouth.

However, with the loss of the paddle steamer *Melbourne* at the Mouth in 1859, trade began to swing back to Port Elliot and the number of vessels using the port steadily climbed. Unfortunately a violent storm in December 1860 caused another shipwreck, the schooner *Flying Fish*. Port Elliot was no longer viable as a major port and the railway was extended to Victor Harbor.

In March 1864, one week before the opening of the new railway, strong gales swept through Encounter Bay. Port Elliot's deficiencies as a port were confirmed with the loss of yet another vessel, the brigantine *Athol*, which dragged its anchors and grounded.

In February 1866 the schooner *Io* was the last vessel to officially use the facilities at Port Elliot.

Shipwrecks are protected under Historic Shipwrecks legislation.
For further information or to report a wreck or shipwreck relics contact:
Heritage South Australia
Department for Environment and Heritage
GPO Box 1047 ADELAIDE SA 5001

Seven vessels were wrecked at Port Elliot between 1853 and 1864.

EMU 1847-1853

Two-masted schooner; wooden hull; 21 tons gross
Length 11.9 m; Breadth 3.5 m; Depth 1.8 m
Built: 1847, Leschenault (Bunbury), WA
Lost: 2 May 1853
Cargo: wheat (outgoing)
Captain and three crew presumed drowned

COMMODORE 1818-1856

Two-masted schooner; wooden hull; 61 tons gross
Length 16.9 m; Breadth 4.4 m; Depth 3.0 m
Built: 1818, Dartmouth, Devon, England
Lost: 29 February 1856
Cargo: general stores (incoming)

JOSEPHINE LOIZEAU 1841-1856 *

Two-masted brigantine; wooden hull; 94 tons gross
Length 21.5 m; Breadth 5.2 m; Depth 2.9 m
Built: 1841, Mahe Island, Seychelles
Lost: 10 July 1856
Cargo: general stores and passengers (incoming)

LAPWING 1808-1856 *

Ketch; wooden hull; 63 tons gross
Length 18.5 m; Breadth 6.0 m; Depth 3.0 m
Built: 1808, Mevagissey, Cornwall, Britain
Lost: 6 September 1856
Cargo: wheat and timber (outgoing)
Two crew drowned returning to vessel

HARRY 1842-1856 *

Two-masted brig; wooden hull; 199 tons gross
Length 26.2 m; Breadth 6.2 m; Depth 4.3 m
Built: 1842, Bridport Harbour, Dorset, England
Lost: 9 December 1856
Cargo: wool and lead ore (outgoing)

FLYING FISH 1843-1860 *

Two-masted schooner; wooden hull; 111 tons gross
Length 26.4 m; Breadth 6.3 m; Depth 3.0 m
Built: 1843, Hobart, Tasmania
Lost: 3 December 1860
Cargo: part consignment of wool (outgoing)

ATHOL 1853-1864

Two-masted brigantine; wooden hull; 215 tons gross
Length 31.6 m; Breadth 7.7 m; Depth 4.0 m
Built: 1853, Nova Scotia, Canada
Lost: 20 March 1864
Cargo: wheat (outgoing)

*** Swimmers are warned that the remains of these wrecks are often exposed in Horseshoe Bay and may be a safety hazard.**

Shipwreck remains are a fragile and non-renewable resource. The Port Elliot shipwrecks provide a unique window into the past - a time when ships were the major means of transport and communication.



Flying Fish off Sydney Heads 1846

courtesy Maritime Museum of Tasmania

Maritime Heritage Trails have been developed in many coastal areas of South Australia and along the River Murray to promote the State's maritime history and to encourage community involvement in the protection and conservation of historic shipwrecks and related sites.

This brochure and the five interpretive signs - placed on the foreshore of Horseshoe Bay - have been designed to promote the maritime heritage of Port Elliot.

Suggested reading for further information about Port Elliot:

John Perkins (1988) *The Shipwrecks of Port Elliot 1853-1864*

Lorraine Pomery (1997) *Port Elliot A History in Words and Pictures*

Cosmos Coroneos (1997) *Shipwrecks of Encounter Bay and Backstairs Passage*

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Front cover: Rudder and rudder pintle on the *Harry* wrecksite.

Photograph: B. Jeffery. Brochure text: Robyn Hartell

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