

## THOMAS CLARK'S PAINTING *THE MAHOGANY SHIP* WRECK OF THE *SALLY ANN* AT PORTLAND

*Murray Johns*

### **Abstract**

*There is a painting by Thomas Clark, titled The Mahogany Ship, in the Warrnambool Art Gallery. This paper examines the questions of who Clark was, where and when he painted that picture, what it portrays, and what its relationship was to the story of the 'Mahogany Ship' at Warrnambool. The picture was probably painted at Portland in about 1860, and most likely portrays the remains of the schooner, Sally Ann, wrecked there in 1844. The Sally Ann had been built in Bermuda of cedar. It remains uncertain who gave the painting its title. Apart from the painting's title, there is no direct connection with the 'Mahogany Ship' story at Warrnambool.*

SEVERAL ARTISTS who had previously established their reputations in the United Kingdom or continental Europe migrated to Melbourne in the 1850s. They included Eugene von Guérard (1812–1901), Louis Buvelot (1814–1888), Nicholas Chevalier (1818–1902), Samuel (S.T.) Gill (1818–1880), and Thomas Clark (c.1814–1883). All were pioneers of art in Australia, but Thomas Clark may be the least well known of them today. One of Clark's oil paintings, *The Mahogany Ship*, is now in the Warrnambool Art Gallery.<sup>1</sup> That painting is the subject of this inquiry.

Where and when Clark painted this picture, and which shipwreck it portrays, have been matters of conjecture. Because of its title, *The Mahogany Ship*, some people have assumed that it portrays the so-called 'Mahogany Ship' near Warrnambool, a wreck of unknown origin first discovered on the

coast west of Warrnambool in 1835–1836.<sup>2</sup> The wreck was seen by many people until 1881, when it evidently disappeared beneath drifting sands. In 1977, Kenneth McIntyre drew attention to this wreck in his book, *The Secret Discovery of Australia*.<sup>3</sup> He claimed that the ‘Mahogany Ship’ near Warrnambool was a 16th-century Portuguese caravel, one of a fleet of three on a secret voyage of discovery, and that it was wrecked on the Victorian coast after the fleet had mapped much of the northern and eastern coasts of Australia in about 1521. For the purposes of this discussion, we shall refer to this wreck as the ‘Warrnambool Mahogany Ship’. The present writer has recently revisited McIntyre’s thesis and reviewed the historical and scientific evidence about this much-discussed wreck in his 2011 article, ‘Facts, Speculation and Fibs in the Mahogany Ship Story, 1835–2010’.<sup>4</sup> His revised story of the ‘Warrnambool Mahogany Ship’ involves two unidentified ships, not one, built in Australia at the beginning of the 19th century. There is no evidence that either ship was a caravel or had anything to do with Portuguese exploration in the 16th century.

However, that story is not our primary concern here; rather, it is to investigate what seems to be a related mystery involving Clark’s enigmatic painting, *The Mahogany Ship*. The aim of the present investigation was to try and solve this mystery by examining biographical and other information about Clark, his work and travels as an artist, as well as investigating clues from the subject matter of this and other of his paintings, interpreted within a framework of the geology and maritime history of Victoria. The particular questions to be dealt with were

- Who was Thomas Clark?
- Where and when did Clark paint *The Mahogany Ship* picture?
- Which shipwreck does it portray?
- Why was the painting titled *The Mahogany Ship*?
- What was the relationship, if any, between Clark’s *The Mahogany Ship* and the ‘Warrnambool Mahogany Ship’?

### **The Artist Thomas Clark**

Thomas Clark was born into an artistic family in London in about 1814.<sup>5</sup> As a young man, he won medals from the Royal Society of Arts for landscape painting and engraving. In 1846, he was appointed headmaster of the Birmingham School of Design, and soon afterwards was also made drawing-master at King Edward’s School of Design. For reasons that are not

clear, Clark left Birmingham in 1851. Then, at the age of 38, he migrated to Victoria, arriving on the *Runnymede* in July 1852. Clark spent the first few years in Melbourne building his reputation locally at a time when gold and land settlement were the topics of most interest in the community. In 1857, Clark became drawing instructor at the newly formed School of Design attached to the Victorian Society of Fine Arts.<sup>6</sup> At first he taught in Carlton, in a schoolroom attached to ‘Mr Morison’s church’, but the school did not survive beyond 1858. However, by December 1857, Clark was displaying his own paintings among the 130 works by colonial artists in the first exhibition of the Society of Fine Arts at the Exhibition Building in Melbourne. He received modest acclaim. A reviewer at the time wrote that ‘Mr Clarke [*sic*] has several paintings in oil, possessing great merit as works of art, but defective in that he has failed to interpret the character of the scenery he draws’.<sup>7</sup>

Clark painted mainly in oils, less in watercolours. His pictures were representational, mostly landscapes, but with a few seascapes and portraits, typical of the English school of Romantic painting in which he had been trained. His early works included *Emerald Hill and Sandridge from the Government Domain*, and *Dights Falls, River Yarra*. Life was not easy for such artists, whose fortunes depended not only on their artistic skills but also on the interests and tastes of local people who were wealthy enough to buy artworks at the time. Sometime between 1858 and 1860, Clark travelled for the first time to the Western District of Victoria, where von Guérard had been before him between 1855 and 1858. He gained the patronage of the Henty brothers and painted a picture of their station, Muntham, near Casterton. At about the same time, he also painted the first of several pictures of Wannon Falls, near Hamilton, and of Samuel Winter’s station, Murndal, southwest of Hamilton. He visited Portland and painted there, probably in 1860. We know that Clark painted his seascape, *Portland Harbour*, during this period (see below). However, it is not clear how many other pictures he painted while in the Western District. Several of Clark’s Western District works were reproduced by Julian Faigan in 1984 in a book published by the Hamilton Art Gallery, but there has been little research on Clark and his work overall.<sup>8</sup> Clark seldom signed or dated his paintings, so it can be difficult to be sure when they were painted. Even their titles may be uncertain. Some of his paintings may have been bought by local patrons at the time and not displayed publicly in Melbourne or elsewhere. For example, *Portland Harbour* may have been commissioned

by Stephen Henty or bought by him when it was completed. It remained with the Henty family for many years until it was presented to the Port of Portland Authority, and it is now in the Maritime Discovery Centre at Portland. Two of Clark's other paintings that were definitely from the Western District were shown publicly in Melbourne in August 1860—a view of Wannan Falls from a cave behind the falls and a picture of Murndal station.<sup>9</sup> Thus, his first painting excursion to the Western District was no later than the first half of 1860.

By the early 1860s, Clark's reputation was growing and, in 1863, he was commissioned to paint a portrait of the out-going governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly, for which the Victorian parliament allocated the substantial sum of £500.<sup>10</sup> Clark returned to the Western District in 1865 and painted a picture of Koonongwootong Station near Coleraine, commissioned by the owner, William Swan. Clark also painted pictures of Coleraine township. A single painting, *The South Esk, Tasmania*, shows that he visited Launceston before November 1872, when that painting was shown publicly in Melbourne. He also painted briefly in the Adelaide Hills at about that time. In 1870, Thomas Clark was appointed the first drawing master in the new School of Design at the National Gallery in Melbourne. He was quite successful as a teacher, and his students included Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin.<sup>11</sup> When Clark became a full-time art teacher, he painted less. He retired because of ill health in 1876 and died at the age of 68, in Melbourne, in 1883. Against this background, we can now focus specifically on Clark's oil painting, *The Mahogany Ship*.

### ***The Mahogany Ship Painting***



*Figure 1: Thomas Clark's painting, The Mahogany Ship*  
Courtesy: Warrnambool Art Gallery Collection

By careful examination of this painting, we can glean a considerable amount of information—first, about the environment in which the shipwreck was located; and second, about what remained of the wreck when Clark painted the picture.

The painting shows the remains of a wooden ship standing on a sandy beach, with some rocks strewn about, in front of cliffs. There is a woman with a young girl and a dog at the water's edge, looking out to sea, and another two people, probably a man and a boy, crouched down and perhaps digging in the sand near the bow of the ship. The wreck is lying slightly on its side, not far from the cliffs or the water's edge, and the hull is partly buried in sand. There are some seagulls sitting on the timbers, with others flying around the wreck. Some large ship's timbers and part of a mast lie nearby on the beach. The timbers are a red-brown colour. The ribs seem bulky, and some are much shorter than others, suggesting that some of their timber has been cut off. The decking and most of the planks, the stern and sternpost are missing. There is no sign of any copper sheathing that many ships had to protect their hulls from marine organisms. If copper sheathing had been present initially, it would have been salvaged from the wreck. It was normal practice to recover readily reusable timbers, metal and other materials from a shipwreck that was on an accessible beach, but curved ribs may not have been so readily reusable. The fact that there were many ribs still standing indicates that the wreck was not very old when Clark saw it. Wave action would break up exposed parts of a wooden shipwreck within a few decades. There are no features to suggest that the ship had high superstructures such as an 18th-century (or earlier) European ship would have had. This was a wooden ship at an advanced, but not final, stage of disintegration. The cliffs in the background are a striking feature of the picture. They are predominantly white at the bottom, where they are nearly vertical, with a thinner and darker layer at the top. All of Clark's paintings were representational, but that does not mean that he simply copied what he saw in a photographic way. Nonetheless, it is likely that a wreck similar to the one portrayed in *The Mahogany Ship* painting did exist in an environment more or less as Clark has shown it. We shall now turn our attention to the coastal environment shown in the painting to see what it can tell us about the wreck's location.

### The Location of Clark's *The Mahogany Ship*

There is an important clue to be found in Clark's painting, *Portland Harbour*, referred to above. He painted that picture looking northwest from the lighthouse at Battery Point (Observatory Hill), at the southern end of the harbour. The lighthouse had only just been built there in 1859, so *Portland Harbour* was probably painted in 1860. The lighthouse was moved to its present location at Whaler Point in 1889–1890. In the background of *Portland Harbour*, Clark has portrayed the cliffs at the northern end of the harbour, extending as far as Anderson Point. These cliffs appear to be the same as those in *The Mahogany Ship* painting, which raises the possibility that the latter picture may also have been painted at Portland.

The cliffs and rock-strewn beach portrayed in *The Mahogany Ship* can also be compared to present-day features at the northern end of Portland Harbour, as shown in a recent photograph looking south towards Anderson Point (Figure 2). These cliffs are very similar to those in *The Mahogany Ship* painting, although Clark seems to have exaggerated the relative thickness of the pale-coloured rock in the lower part of the cliffs.



Figure 2: *The cliffs at the northern end of Portland Harbour, looking south to Anderson Point*  
Photo: M. Johns

These cliffs at Portland are 20m to 30m high, made up of white limestone at the bottom, with a darker layer of newer basalt at the top. The rocks on the beach are lumps of basalt that have fallen down when the relatively soft limestone has been eroded from beneath them by wave action over a long period. It is of note that Clark portrayed similar-looking rocks on the beach in *The Mahogany Ship* painting. He did not show any trees growing on the cliff tops in either his *Portland Harbour* or *The Mahogany Ship* paintings. A sketch of the foreshore at Portland by S.T. Gill in 1856 confirms that there were no trees growing there then. If there were any before that time, they had been cut down before 1856. The trees that grow there today were planted later.

There are no other coastal cliffs quite like the cliffs at Portland in Victoria. There are other cliffs in Miocene limestone facing Bass Strait at Port Campbell, Bridgewater, Torquay and elsewhere, but they do not have a layer of basalt on top of the limestone.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the geographical and geological evidence about the cliffs in *The Mahogany Ship* painting strongly suggests that Clark painted that picture at the northern end of Portland Harbour. Such evidence is quite contrary to the idea of the painting depicting a location near Port Fairy—where there are no such cliffs. It also contradicts suggestions of a location near Warrnambool, where the ‘Warrnambool Mahogany Ship’ was said to have been embedded in a sand dune (see below). A Portland location is also consistent with the historical evidence that Clark visited Portland and painted in the area in about 1860, whereas we have no evidence to suggest that he ever visited Warrnambool.

### **The Size of Clark's *The Mahogany Ship***

There are other features of *The Mahogany Ship* painting, relating to the size of the ship, that may help us identify it. Clark often included human figures and animals in his paintings but they seldom formed the focus of attention. They were usually portrayed diminutively, as if overpowered by the forces of nature, a common practice among artists of the Romantic school. Nevertheless, we can form a rough estimate of the size of Clark's ‘Mahogany Ship’ in relation to the size of the woman in that picture. We might reasonably assume that she was about 1.5m tall, but she was further away from the artist than the stern of the ship was. On that basis, the ship may have been about 5m or 6m wide and about 3m deep. Bearing in mind that these dimensions are only rough estimates, they would be comparable to those of a two-masted colonial schooner of about 60 tons. It is more

difficult to estimate the length of Clark's wreck because its stern is missing, but it may have been of the order of 20 metres long. Thus, Clark's 'Mahogany Ship' would have been larger than a two-masted ketch, e.g. *Ellen*, 10 tons, 9.8m x 2.8m x 1.3m, but much smaller than a three-masted barque e.g. *Elizabeth Graham*, 598 tons, 50.3m x 8.8m x 5.5m. Clark's 'Mahogany Ship' would have been comparable in size to the *Enterprise* (55 tons, 15.4m x 4.9m x 2.5m), the two-masted schooner in which John Pascoe Fawkner's party sailed up the Yarra River in August 1835 to begin permanent settlement at the site of what became Melbourne. This author has previously reported on the history of the *Enterprise*.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, a replica has been made of her, which can be seen sailing around Port Phillip.

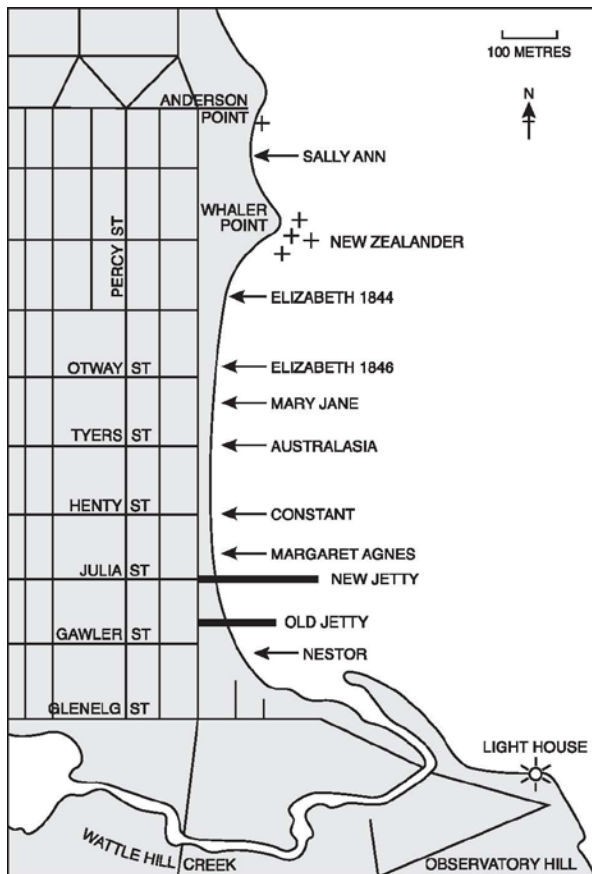
We might tentatively conclude that Clark's painting, *The Mahogany Ship*, portrays the wreck of a ship of about 60 tons on the beach at the northern end of Portland Harbour. We can now turn our attention to records of all known shipwrecks at Portland up until 1860 to see if any of them match the criteria of geographical location and size. We may then be in a position to identify Clark's ship.

### **Shipwrecks at Portland up until 1860**

By the end of 1860, thirteen ships had been wrecked at Portland. The majority were wrecked in the harbour after parting their moorings (their anchors failed to hold) and being washed ashore. Without a breakwater, the harbour was a dangerous place when a southeasterly gale was blowing. It is of interest that so many of those shipwrecks at Portland were 'foreign' vessels. Their fate was at least partly attributable to the inexperience of their masters and crews with the local conditions. The first harbour master, James Fawthrop, was appointed in April 1853 after three major shipwrecks within the preceding nine months. By then, Portland was becoming an increasingly busy port, with ships trading there from around the world. Several other ships were stranded in Portland Bay but were soon refloated, and we need not consider them here.

Figure 3 shows a map of Portland Harbour as it was in 1860, with the approximate positions of shipwrecks up until then. Those positions are based on verbal descriptions, not on survey findings, and may not be very accurate. Other vessels were wrecked outside the limits of the harbour, in Portland Bay (see below).





*Figure 3: Map of Portland Harbour as it was in 1860 showing the approximate positions of shipwrecks up until then. Other ships were wrecked in Greater Portland Bay, outside the Harbour.*

The characteristics of all ships wrecked either in Portland Harbour or Greater Portland Bay up until 1860 are shown in table 1.<sup>14</sup> All thirteen ships were of wooden construction, varying in size from 51 to 1309 tons. They had been built in various places around the world: the West Indies, USA, Canada, UK, India and Tasmania. They included three 2-masted schooners of between 51 and 59 tons, two 2-masted brigantines of 82 and 103 tons, two 2-masted brigs of 181 and 230 tons, five 3-masted barques of between 311 and 525 tons, and one fully rigged ship of 1309 tons.

**Table 1: Shipwrecks in Portland Harbour and Greater Portland Bay up until 1860:**

<b>Ship</b>	<b>When wrecked</b>	<b>Type of Vessel</b>	<b>Where &amp; when built</b>	<b>Wrecked near cliffs</b>	<b>Size &lt;100 tons</b>
<i>Elizabeth</i>	1844	2m schooner, 51t	Tasmania, 1837	Yes	Yes
<i>Sally Ann</i>	1844	2m schooner, 59t	Bermuda, 1826	Yes	Yes
<i>Elizabeth</i>	1846	2m brig, 230t	USA, (date?)	No	No
<i>Mary Jane</i>	1852	2m brig, 82t	Nova Scotia, 1846	No	Yes
<i>Margaret &amp; Agnes</i>	1852	2m brig, 103t	Melbourne, 1850	No	No
<i>Merope</i>	1853	3m barque, 311t	Bengal, 1818	No	No
<i>New Zealander</i>	1853	3m ship, 1309t	Canada, 1852	Yes	No
<i>Nestor</i>	1854	3m barque, 458t	UK, 1840	No	No
<i>Australasia</i>	1855	3m barque, 485t	UK, 1847	No	No
<i>Constant</i>	1855	3m barque, 525t	UK, 1843	No	No
<i>Victory</i>	1857	2m schooner, 52t	Tasmania, 1851	No	Yes
<i>Tamora</i>	1860	3m barque, 419t	Scotland, 1853	No	No
<i>Regia</i>	1860	2m brig, 181t	Cochin (India), 1835	No	No

Of particular relevance to the present inquiry, only four of those ships were less than 100 tons, and could have been the subject of Clark's painting, on the basis of size alone. Only three of the thirteen ships were wrecked near Whaler Point, where the cliffs are highest, at the northern end of Portland Harbour. There are no other cliffs like these elsewhere in Greater Portland Bay. Only two ships matched both criteria, of size and a wreck-site near limestone and basalt cliffs. They are the *Sally Ann* and the *Elizabeth* (1844).

### *Sally Ann*

In November 1844, after discharging her inward cargo but before taking on her outward cargo, the *Sally Ann* parted her moorings in Portland Harbour and was driven north, past Whaler Point, by the most severe southeasterly gale experienced up until that time.<sup>15</sup> She was wrecked at the northern end of the harbour, probably between Whaler Point and Anderson Point. She was severely damaged and could not be refloated. Her passengers and crew escaped but two men were drowned when attempting to assess damage to the ship during the storm next day. The *Sally Ann* was a two-masted schooner of 59 tons, built at Bermuda in the West Indies in 1826. She was 16.9m long, 5.1m wide and 2.6m deep, with a single deck and partial copper sheathing, and she was of unusually heavy construction, with a 'very deep keel'.<sup>16</sup> The wreck was auctioned a few days later, and a Mr Crouch bought it for £42. The sails and rigging, and much of the reusable timber and metal objects such as copper sheathing and iron anchors, would have been salvaged soon after.

The *Sally Ann* was very unusual in Australia because she had been built of Bermuda cedar, which was used for shipbuilding in the West Indies but never in Australia. Bermuda cedar, *Juniperus Bermudiana*, is not the same as Spanish cedar, *Cedrela Odorata*, or Australian cedar, *Toona Ciliata*.<sup>17</sup> The wreck that Clark portrayed in *The Mahogany Ship* painting is probably what remained of the *Sally Ann* in 1860, sixteen years after she had been wrecked, and after much of the wreck had been salvaged, but before her ribs had been broken up and scattered by the sea.

The *Sally Ann* was owned by Stephen Henty of Portland when wrecked.<sup>18</sup> She had originally been sailed from the West Indies to Fremantle in 1835 by her owner, Captain Howe. Stephen Henty bought the ship there in 1836. After Captain Howe was drowned in an accident, Henty sailed the *Sally Ann*

to Launceston himself with his new bride, Jane, whom he had just married in Fremantle. They had intended to visit Portland Bay on the way, to see about settling down there, but Stephen was a very inexperienced sailor, navigating by dead reckoning alone, and he sailed past Portland on that occasion. The *Sally Ann* subsequently plied mainly between Portland, Port Fairy and Melbourne, carrying passengers, stock and supplies regularly to and from the coastal ports.<sup>19</sup> She played a major role in the establishment of the Portland Bay settlement up until 1844. When Thomas Clark was looking for a subject to paint, hoping to sell his picture locally, he would have done well to paint a picture involving the *Sally Ann*.

### *Elizabeth*

The other two-masted schooner wrecked near Whaler Point was the 51-ton *Elizabeth*, built at Hobart in 1837.<sup>20</sup> She was based at Port Adelaide but had been chartered by Stephen Henty. In November 1844, after she had loaded much of her outward cargo of whale oil, tallow and wool at Portland, she was struck by the same gale that caused the wreck of the *Sally Ann*. The *Elizabeth* parted her moorings and was drifting towards the reef near Whaler Point when the captain beached her 'at the best part of the coast', to the south of Whaler Point. The wreck of the *Elizabeth* was said to be 'about two cables length' (that is, about 366m) from the wreck of the *Sally Ann*.<sup>21</sup> The wreck of the *Elizabeth* (1844) may have been of sufficient interest at Portland for Clark to have painted it in 1860, with some expectation of selling it locally. She was wrecked on a sandy beach near limestone and basalt cliffs. She was 15.0m x 4.5m x 3.1m, close to the estimated size of the vessel in Clark's *The Mahogany Ship*. However, the *Elizabeth* had been built in Tasmania, probably of blue gum, so there was no obvious reason for her to be called *The Mahogany Ship*. Based at Adelaide, she had only a temporary connection with the Hentys at Portland, and lacked the romantic association with the Caribbean and the exotic cedar timber of the *Sally Ann*.

### *New Zealander*

The third ship wrecked near Whaler Point was the *New Zealander*, a three-masted fully rigged ship of 1309 tons, much larger than the estimated size of Clark's 'Mahogany Ship'. About two weeks after discharging 464 migrants from Liverpool at Portland in November 1853, the *New Zealander* caught fire as she lay at anchor in the harbour. She was towed closer to the shore

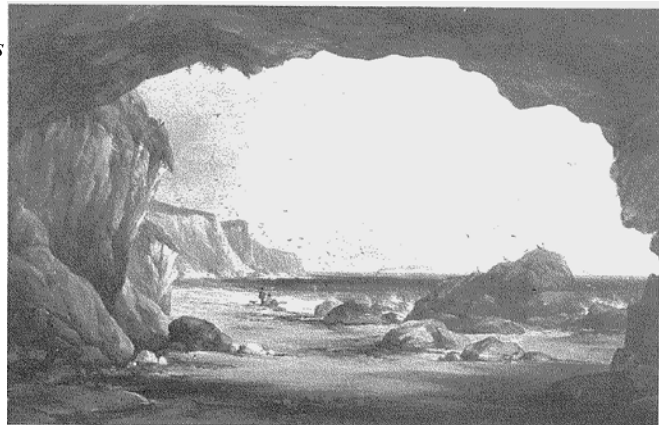
but burnt to the waterline on the reef, more than 100m from Whaler Point. Clark would not have been able to see any remains of the *New Zealander* above water in 1860.

The above evidence about shipwrecks at Portland, in relation to their size, location near identified cliffs and their special interest, indicates that it was most likely the remains of the *Sally Ann* that Clark painted as *The Mahogany Ship* in about 1860.

***A Coastal Scene with a Man and a Dog: Another Portland Seascape?***

Clark is said to have painted another seascape, *A Coastal Scene with a Man and a Dog*, which is also in the Warrnambool Art Gallery (Figure 4).<sup>22</sup> There is no shipwreck in this picture. It is not known where and when Clark executed this oil painting either. However, its coastal features bear a striking resemblance to the cliffs at Portland, just to the south of Whaler Point. A recent photo of those cliffs, looking north, shows the distinctive profile of Whaler Bluff in the distance, which Clark appears to have portrayed in *A Coastal Scene with a Man and a Dog* (Figure 5).

*Figure 4: Thomas Clark's painting, A Coastal Scene with a Man and a Dog*  
Courtesy:  
Warrnambool Art Gallery Collection



Clark's painting looks out from a cave towards cliffs that look similar to the limestone and basalt rockface in this photo. There is no cave on the foreshore at Portland today, but there may well have been one there in the mid-19th century that later collapsed as the relatively soft limestone at the bottom of the cliffs was eroded by wave action. In recent years the Portland Harbour Authority has dumped rocks on the beach to prevent further ero-

sion. Those piles of rocks were not there in 1860. There is a hollow in the cliff about 150m south of Whaler Point today where there may have been a cave in the past that has since collapsed. This may well have been the point from which Clark painted *A Coastal Scene with a Man and a Dog*. If so, what remained of the 1844 wreck of the *Elizabeth* would have been out of this picture, on the beach just behind him. We might reasonably conclude that Clark painted at least three seascapes at Portland—*Portland Harbour*, *The Mahogany Ship* and *A Coastal Scene with a Man and a Dog*. They may all have been painted in 1860, or perhaps 1865.



*Figure 5: Limestone and basalt cliffs at the northern end of Portland Harbour, looking north to Whaler Bluff*

*Photo: M. Johns*

### **Why the title *The Mahogany Ship*?**

There are several possible reasons why Clark's painting was titled *The Mahogany Ship*. It may be that Clark simply mistook the *Sally Ann*'s cedar timber for mahogany. It would probably have been difficult for anyone to distinguish those timbers by casual inspection.

It may also be that Clark called his picture *The Mahogany Ship* because of local speculation about Spanish or Portuguese discoveries in pre-colonial times.

It is true that some ships were made of mahogany from the Spanish colonies in Central and South America as early as the second half of the 16th century, including some ships in the Spanish Armada of 1588. Havana was a great shipbuilding centre in those times. However, most Spanish ships were made of European oak, especially oak from Bilboa, not mahogany. Nevertheless, it would be understandable for local people at Portland to associate an unusual ship like the *Sally Ann* with a fanciful Spanish and South American past. In 1859, Henry Kingsley reflected this sentiment in his novel *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, set in the Western District.<sup>23</sup> His fictional characters speculated about the wreck of a 'very, very old' ship on the Victorian coast being of Spanish, Dutch and even Chinese origin. Kingsley wrote a footnote in his novel, 'Such a ship may be seen in the eastern end of Portland Bay, near the modern town of Port Fairy'. Which of the shipwrecks in greater Portland Bay he was referring to is not clear, but the *Sally Ann* would have been a strong possibility.

A third possible reason for *The Mahogany Ship* title is that it was applied later, by someone other than the artist himself. The term 'Mahogany Ship' was not widely used in relation to any wreck in Victoria until the 1890s. A journalist, John James, alias 'The Vagabond', contributed to a misunderstanding in 1884 by calling the Warrnambool wreck the 'Spanish Mahogany Ship'.<sup>24</sup> Before that, it was known as the 'ancient wreck'. However, James made no connection between that wreck and another at Portland. When and who else may have applied the title, *The Mahogany Ship*, to Clark's painting remains uncertain.

### **'Warrnambool Mahogany Ship'**

In contrast to the limestone and basalt cliffs at Portland Harbour, there are sand dunes up to a few metres high at the northeastern end of Greater Portland Bay. They extend towards Port Fairy and then further round towards Warrnambool, where they sometimes rise to a height of 30m (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Sand dunes west of Warrnambool, where the story of the 'Warrnambool Mahogany Ship' has always been located

Photo: M. Johns

The 'Warrnambool Mahogany Ship' story has always been associated with such sand dunes. They are geologically very young, with a superficial cover of mobile sand, partially fixed by grass, over a fixed core of somewhat older (Pleistocene) calcarenite dunes. The latter have been quarried for building stone at Warrnambool. They are strongly bedded, light-brown rocks that are quite different from the limestone and basalt cliffs at Portland. There is no evidence that the 'Warrnambool Mahogany Ship' was related in any way to Clark's *The Mahogany Ship*, other than both being passed into folklore and incorporated into popular stories of Victoria's pre-colonial maritime mysteries.

### Conclusions on Confusions

Thomas Clark painted at least three seascapes at Portland in 1860 or perhaps 1865. One of those paintings is known as *The Mahogany Ship* but whether Clark gave it that title is uncertain. The evidence presented here suggests that this painting portrays what remained of the wreck of the *Sally Ann* in about 1860. She had been owned by the Hentys when wrecked at the northern end of Portland Harbour in November 1844. It is possible that



Henry Kingsley also referred to this same wreck in his novel, *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* in 1859. The *Sally Ann* would have been very unusual in Australia because she had been built in Bermuda, of cedar but not mahogany. That ship had no direct connection with the story of the 'Warrnambool Mahogany Ship'. There are two separate stories that have become confused, one based at Warrnambool, the other at Portland. Over the years, both stories have been embellished by unfounded speculation about European or Chinese ships from pre-colonial times. However, the *Sally Ann* and Thomas Clark's painting of her wreck at Portland both have an interesting and important place in the history of Victoria in their own right.

#### NOTES

- 1 Thomas Clark's painting has been in the Warrnambool Art Gallery since 1993 when it was presented by Karie Pty Ltd through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, accession No.1254/1993. It is not known who first acquired the painting from Clark, but it was owned by various private collectors in the Western District and Melbourne during the 20th century.
- 2 There have been three conferences at Warrnambool about the 'Mahogany Ship', in 1982, 1987 and 2005. The proceedings of the first two conferences have been published. They summarise much of the material available at the time: Bill Potter (ed.), *The Mahogany Ship: Relic or Legend?* Warrnambool, Mahogany Ship Committee and Warrnambool Institute Press, 1987; Mahogany Ship Committee, Warrnambool, *The Legend of the Mahogany Ship*, Warrnambool, Covell Publications, 1996.
- 3 Kenneth McIntyre, *The Secret Discovery of Australia*, London, Souvenir Press, 1977.
- 4 Murray Johns, 'Facts, Speculation and Fibs in the Mahogany Ship Story, 1835–2010'. *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 82, June 2011, pp. 59–85.
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- 8 Several of Clark's paintings from the Western District were reproduced in Julian Faigan's book, *The Colonial Art of Western Victoria*, published by the City of Hamilton Art Gallery in 1984.
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