

Loch Leven 1871

“The unforgettable sight of a clipper ship under full sail, high and dry on the reef...”

GRAEME BROXAM AND MIKE NASH *Tasmanian Shipwrecks Volume 1*

Rushing the first wool clip of the season from Geelong to the early London wool sales, the *Loch Leven* was only two days into her journey when disaster struck. In heavy fog and boisterous seas, she was caught by the heavy current that rounds the northern tip of King Island and struck rocks at 2.30 am on 24 October 1871.

There was nothing that could be done to save the ship. The crew and passengers made it safely to shore, and were taken to the safe haven of the Cape Wickham lighthouse.

The next day, Captain William Branscombe made a fateful decision to try to retrieve the ship's mails. With a volunteer crew, he set out

for the wreck in the lighthouse whaleboat. In the words of one of the crew, King Islander William Hickmott, this is what happened:

All went well until we attempted to round Cape Wickham, when it was found impossible to stem the full force of the gale, and the attempt had to be abandoned ... on the return when off the point a huge sea broke right into the boat, completely burying her. The boat capsized. Three men managed to cling to the keel. The first officer Mr Mathews, the steward, the lightkeeper and the writer succeeded in swimming ashore, but Captain Branscombe was drowned.

Captain Branscombe was buried at Cape Wickham. You can see his grave at Victoria Cove.

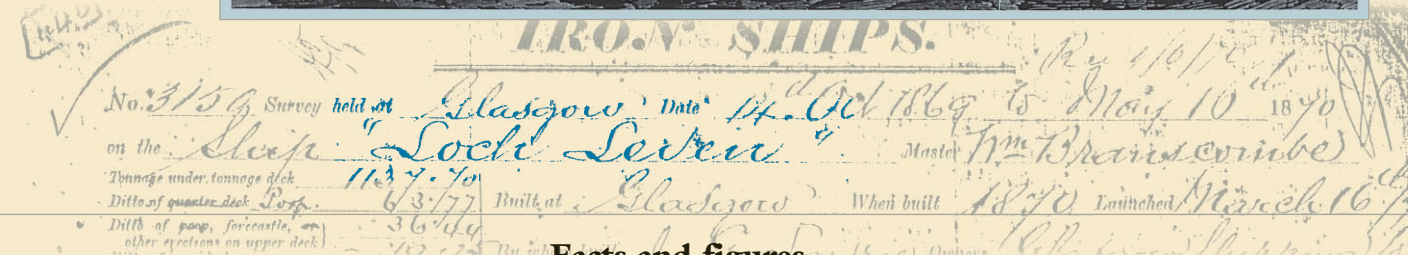
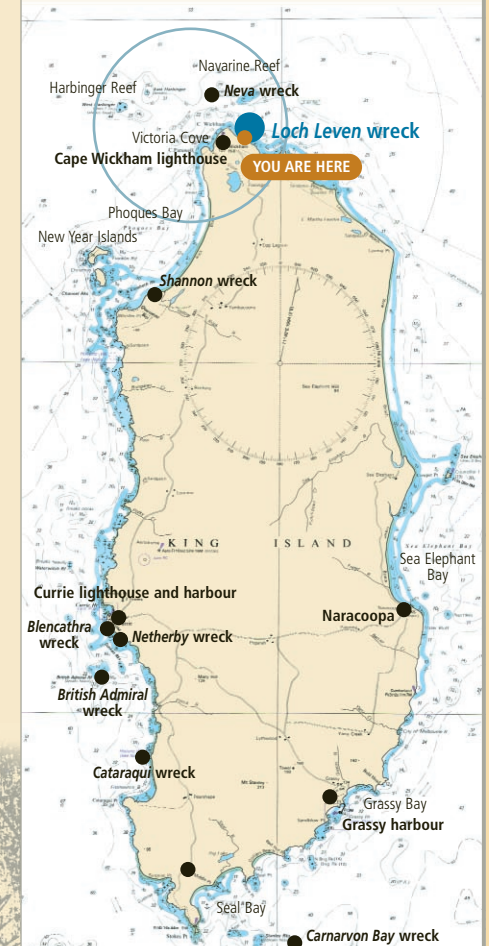


When Australia rode on the sheep's back

The *Loch Leven* carried a cargo of wool from Victoria. The 6500 bales on board were valued at £150,000—a huge sum at that time.

Although the ship was a total loss, two-thirds of the cargo was salvaged, largely unaffected by its drenching. The salvage crew removed unbroken bales from the wreck, aided by an unprecedented spell of fine, still weather, which lasted until mid-November.

To cope with the large quantities of loose wool washed up along the rocky shores, all the available labour on King Island was pressed into service to collect, dry and repack the wool for shipping to Melbourne.



Speed at what cost?

In 1867 William Aitken and James Lilburn of Glasgow set up the Loch Line with an eye on the lucrative Australian run. The *Loch Leven*, an iron clipper ship built in 1870, made “some very fine running” on her voyage to Australia, covering 8,000 miles in 30 consecutive days.

Described by the *Melbourne Argus* as “one of the finest vessels that has ever entered the bay”, she was racing her cargo back to London to catch the early wool sales.

But what cost did this emphasis on speed exact? Of the 25 ships built for the Loch Line, 17 were lost while still operated by the company, and the death toll from these disasters was high.

On the last major disaster in Bass Strait, the *Loch Ard* struck a reef off Mutton Bird Island near the Victorian coast in 1878, killing all but two of the 52 passengers and crew aboard.

Top: The wreck of the *Loch Leven*, still under full sail, as it appeared in the *Illustrated Sydney News* on 25 November 1871. —NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

Above: Detail from the *Loch Leven's* survey documents.

Facts and figures

Name	<i>Loch Leven</i>	Date	24 October 1871	Location	Cape Wickham
Rig	Ship	Construction	Iron	Tonnage	1257
Date built	1870	Place built	Glasgow	Place of register	Glasgow
Length	225.8'	Breadth	35.8'	Depth	21.5'
Owner	Loch Line (William Aitken, James Lilburn)			Master	W. Branscombe
Departure	Geelong, Victoria	Destination	London, UK	Cargo	Wool
Crew	32	Passengers	2	Casualties	1

