

A SPECIAL WATCH RETURNS

Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village were successful in purchasing a beautiful 1814 Mc Cabe Gold Watch known as The Carmichael Watch in 2011. This exquisite timepiece is certainly special even without its amazing story of survival and the way it symbolizes our shipwreck heritage. Now on display in our Great Circle Gallery it stands pride of place beside The Loch Ard Peacock.

What is the Story of Carmichael's Watch?

The Carmichael Watch, like the famous Loch Ard Peacock, is not only a rare and beautiful object in its own right, but also a miraculous and poignant material survivor from the Shipwreck Coast. The wreck of the 'Loch Ard' was Victoria's greatest maritime disaster, involving the loss of 52 (there has been various reports of numbers due to some Dr Carmichael being listed as both a passenger and the ships surgeon. It is generally accepted 52 lives were lost, with the 2 survivors) 49 lives. Carrying a 3,000 ton cargo of luxury and household goods - from pianos to perfumes, from clocks to confectionary - as well as railway ties, cement, lead and copper, and with 18 passengers and a crew of 36, the iron clipper ship left Gravesend on 2 March 1878, making landfall on the Victorian coast at the end of May.

But in the early morning of 1 June, unable to see the Cape Otway light, deceived by heavy fog and by probable inaccuracies with the ship's compasses (the load of railway iron may have caused magnetic interference), the captain sailed too close to the cliffs of the 'Shipwreck Coast.'

When the fog lifted and the predicament was discovered, the ship could be neither turned nor anchored; it ran aground on a reef, and sank within 15 minutes. Everyone on board drowned except for two: crewman Tom Pearce, a 18 year old apprentice sailor (midshipman is a Royal Navy term - Tom was a merchant sailor so was regarded and reported as Apprentice Sailor) midshipman, and passenger Eva Carmichael, a 18 year old doctor's daughter from Dublin. The sensational story was quickly taken up by the press and in the popular imagination. This is hardly surprising. To begin with it had the theme of shipwreck so beloved of the island nation of Great Britain and Ireland, intertwined with family tragedy; Eva Carmichael lost both her parents and four siblings in the wreck.

Furthermore, the published narrative also incorporated a range of those sentimental anecdotes so beloved of the Victorians, from the newly-married ship's master, Capt. Gibb, asking Eva to tell his wife 'that I stood to my ship to the last, and went down with her like a sailor,' to the finding of the drowned body of passenger Reginald Jones, with Miss Carmichael identifying a ring as a gift from Jones' fiancée, and arranging to return it to her. But perhaps the most poignant (and prurient) aspect of the story was the tale of the two survivors themselves: how Tom Pearce saved himself by surfing into the Loch Ard Gorge clinging to an upturned lifeboat; how then, hearing a cry for help, he swam out to rescue Eva Carmichael, who had floated inshore on a hen-coop and a spar; how he revived her with salvaged brandy before settling her in a bed of grass in a sea cave; how he made an heroic ascent of the 50 metre cliffs to find help; how when he and a search party returned they found that Eva had strayed; how when she was finally found 'in a mass of sandy brushwood', she moaned 'I'm dying; where is Thomas Pearce?' ; and how, after a short time together recuperating at 'Glenample' station, the two young people separated, never to meet again.

This watch itself has a significant place in the Loch Ard legend. According to family tradition, it had originally been intended as a gift from the Corporation of the City of Dublin to mark his visit to the city, but 'the King had failed to send for it' and it was subsequently bought by Dr Evory Carmichael (Eva's father) for 100 guineas. Highly valued, the watch was evidently snatched up by Mrs Carmichael when the ship foundered; when her body was washed ashore, it was found secreted in the waistband of her dress. The watch was returned to Eva, who subsequently gave it to her husband Thomas Townshend, whom she married in 1884; his name is engraved on the rear movement cover.

As for Tom Pearce, he was the man of the hour and the darling of the colonies, forced to travel in the guard's van on the train to Melbourne to avoid being mobbed. He was awarded the first medal of the Victorian Humane Society; Warrnambool photographer Charles Hider did a brisk trade in portrait postcards; Coleman Jacobs even composed a new dance in his honour: 'The Young Hero Schottische.' Over £1,000 was raised to his benefit through public subscriptions in Victoria and New South Wales, and on 19 June, His Excellency the Governor, Sir George Bowen, presented Tom Pearce with a reward on behalf of the government, 'a slight token of the respect and admiration in which your noble conduct is held by all classes in this colony.' Ironically, it was a gold watch.

How Did The Watch Come To Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village?

The Townsend family placed the watch to auction at Sotherby's Melbourne in October 2011. Flagstaff Hill was supported in the purchase of the watch by a number of local Trusts and the Australian Federal Government Cultural Heritage Account. This was made possible due to the Carmichael Watch being declared an item of National Significance - making it eligible for federal funding support. Townsend Family Thanks We sincerely thank the Townsend family for so wonderfully preserving this amazing piece of our nations heritage. The Townsend family have held this watch since it returned to Ireland and was gifted by Eva Carmichael to her husband Thomas Archilles Townsend. Whilst in Australia the watch is linked to Eva Carmichael and is therefore known as Carmichael's Watch, we acknowledge the Townsend family for their dedication in preserving this beautiful gold watch.

The Townsend family have acknowledged their support for the watch finding a home here at Flagstaff Hill. They are proud to know that their family heritage will be preserved in the collection of Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village - Warrnambool. Media Reports of the Era Alexandra and Yea Standard, Gobur, Thornton and Acheron Express (Vic. : 1877 - 1908) Saturday 8 June 1878 It appears that the property of Dr and Mrs Carmichael has been mostly recovered, a box containing their valuables having been washed ashore. A draft for £4000 on the Union Bank, papers of value, and a watch with other trinkets belonging to Mrs Carmichael have also been recovered. The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser (NSW : 1843 - 1893). Saturday 8 June 1878. Page 15. The most singular thing of all is the fact of a quantity of things belonging to the Carmichael family being recovered. Miss Carmichael spoke of a desk of her father's, containing valuables, and search was made. One part of the desk has been found, containing many valuable documents, family photographs, and a draft on the Union Bank for £4000.

On Mrs. Carmichael's body was found a watch, which was much valued. It is said to have been made for George III, and for which Carmichael gave £100. A locket, also, was found on the body. These are much prized by Miss Carmichael. It is considered rather strange that so much connected with the Carmichael family should have been saved, and nothing recovered belonging to anyone else.

The South Australian Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1858 - 1889) Monday 10 June 1878
Extracted from the Age of June 6. A considerable amount of property has been saved, and most singular of all is the fact that a quantity of things belonging to the Carmichael family were recovered. Miss Carmichael spoke of a desk of her father's containing valuables. A search was made, and part of the desk was found, containing many valuable documents, family photographs, and a draft on the Union Bank for £4000. On Mrs. Carmichael's body was found a watch much valued, said to have been made for George III, and for which Mr. Carmichael gave £100; also a locket. These are much prized by Miss Carmichael.

The Launceston Examiner (Tas. : 1842 - 1899) Tuesday 11 June 1878
WRECK OF THE LOCH ARD (From the Age Correspondent.) GLENAMPLE, June 6.
Miss Carmichael spoke of a desk of her father's containing valuables. A search was made, and part of the desk was found, containing many valuable documents, family photographs, and a draft on the Union Bank for £4000. On Mrs Carmichael's body was found a watch much valued, said to have been made for George III., and for which Mr Carmichael gave £100; also a locket. These are much prized by Miss Carmichael. The special reporter of the Argus writes from Glenample station : Another somewhat strange coincidence is the fact that amongst the earliest wreckage found on the beach was Miss Carmichael's desk, in which were portraits of her father and mother, and these are the only papers that have yet been found.

The Capricornian (Rockhampton, Qld : 1875 - 1929) Saturday 15 June 1878
FACTS And SCRAPS. (from the papers) (mostly from The Age article) The most singular thing in connection with the wreck of the Loch Ard is that most of the luggage belonging to the Carmichael family has been recovered. Miss Carmichael described a desk belonging to her father, which she asserted contained valuable documents. A minute search was made amongst the wreckage, and the result has been the recovery of a portion of this identical desk.

The portion recovered contains several valuable documents, family photographs, and a draft on the Union Bank for £4000. Mr. Carmichael's body has been recovered. On his person was found a watch, which was greatly valued. It is said to have been made to order for George III. A locket also found on him is valued at £100. Evening Post, Volume XVI, Issue 149, 22 June 1878, Page 2 (New Zealand) . . . It is somewhat remarkable that several important documents, letters, portraits, trinkets, and her father's gold watch (made for King George IV., and which her father purchased for (100 guineas from a nobleman) should have been washed ashore, and brought to her a short time after expressing to Mrs. Gibson her desire that they might not be lost. Hawke's Bay Herald, Volume XXI, Issue 5112, 27 June 1878, Page 2 (New Zealand) THE LOCH ARD DISASTER.

A vivid description of the Loch Ard disaster written by the Rev Mr M'Intyre, missionary for Heytesbury Forest, appears in the Warrnambool Standard. . . .
. . . It is somewhat remarkable that several important documents, letters, portraits, trinkets, and her father's gold watch (made for King George IV., and which her father purchased for 100 guineas from a nobleman) should have been washed ashore, and brought to her a short time after expressing to Mrs Gibson her desire that they might not be lost.