

Chapter 12 -Defending Victoria

As any attack on Victoria would ultimately culminate in the bombardment or capture of its capital, Melbourne, it was obvious that all routes to Melbourne needed to be protected. In 1860 Colonel Scratchley identified three possible routes by which to attack Melbourne. ⁱ

1 – The obvious and most likely route was through the Heads (entrance to Port Phillip) and along the west or south channels to Melbourne. Whether the land forces were positioned to protect Hobson's Bay (the northern end of the Port Phillip) or the entrance to Port Phillip, the navy could train for both scenarios.

2 – A second, but considered to be an unlikely route by which to attack Melbourne, was by landing troops near Barwon Heads and advancing on Melbourne via Geelong.

3 – A third, and also unlikely possibility, was for the enemy to land a force on the shores of Western Port and to then advance overland on Melbourne.

Port Phillip

In the late 1870s the forward defence doctrine was adopted with the heavier shore defence guns being moved from where they had previously protected Hobson's Bay, to positions at the Heads where they could protect the entrance to Port Phillip. The argument of how to best protect Melbourne, and hence where to place the most powerful guns, was not as crucial to the Victorian Navy. Its mobility meant that it could operate at either or both ends of Port Phillip.

After the arrival of the gunboats and torpedo boats, most exercises took place just inside the entrance to Port Phillip. Here the Victorian Navy would have the advantages of working with the forts, being able to operate from the various bays and smaller channels inaccessible to larger attacking ships and with their knowledge of the location of the torpedo fields.

Not only were the deeper South and West Channels accessible to the Victorian Navy but so too were the shallower Loelia, Symonds, Cole's and Pinnacle Channels.

Various schemes of defence were adopted over the years with the Jervois Report recommending a first line of defence involving Fort Nepean, Fort Queenscliff and Cerberus and then a second line with *Cerberus* falling back on the South Channel Fort and its torpedo fields.

The expansion of the Navy in 1884 allowed for a far more sophisticated approach involving the gun boats and the torpedo boats operating from their Swan Island Depot. It was even suggested that one of the hopper barge gun boats could operate from the unfinished Pope's Eye Fort using the protection of the rock annulus.

Western Port

The Barwon Heads scenario was dealt with by eventually constructing more gun emplacements west of Queenscliff. In 1859 HMCS *Victoria*, with Lieutenant-Colonel Pasley (working with Colonel Scratchley) on board, toured the Victorian coast as far east as Wilson's Promontory, including examining Western Port, to determine whether an enemy force could be landed to the east of Port Phillip. As mentioned earlier, HMCS *Victoria* again examined Western Port defence possibilities in 1868.

Between HMCS *Victoria* leaving naval service in 1869 and HMVS *Nelson* entering naval service in 1878, Western Port was, of necessity, ignored by the Victorian Navy. The Easter cruise of 1882 involved the *Nelson*, with her own crew, the crew of the *Cerberus*, and 200 of the 216 men of the Naval Reserve on board. This was the first time that *Nelson* had left Port Phillip since her arrival in Victorian waters in 1868. *Nelson* steamed to Cowes in Western Port where she was opened to inspection by the locals and fired two broadsides from her nineteen 64 pounders. Five of Nelson's boats were taken up the North Arm of Western Port and landed at Sandy Point on the way back to the ship.

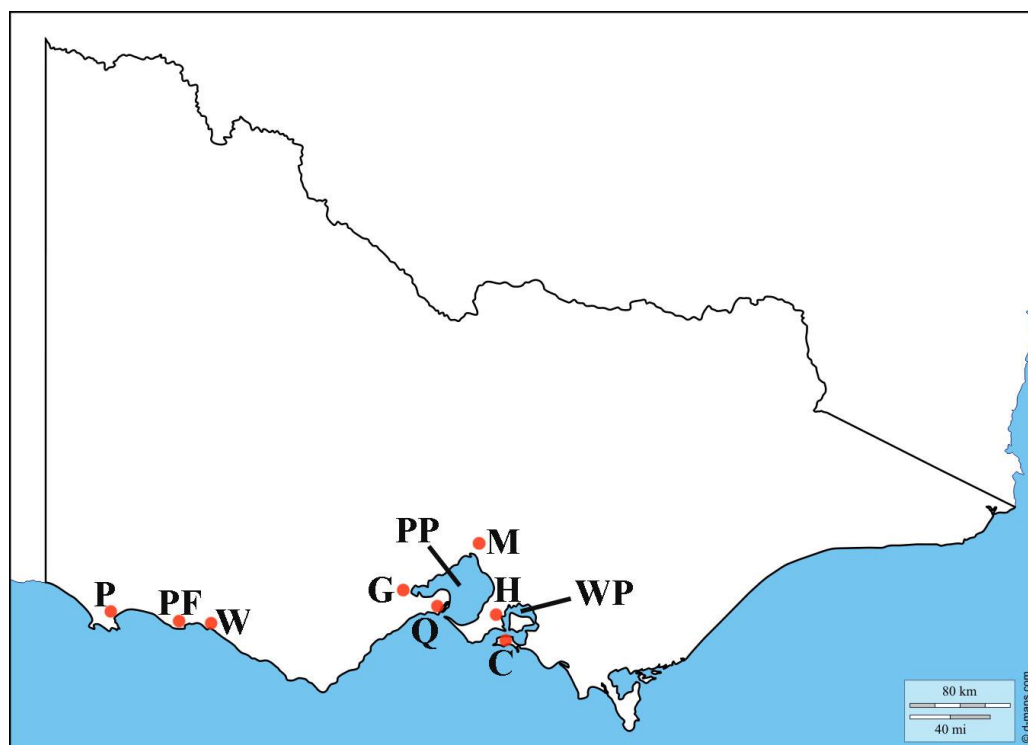


Figure 1 - Locations in the Colony of Victoria

Base map: d-maps.com

C Cowes on Phillip Island
G Geelong
H Hastings
M Melbourne
P Portland

PF Port Fairy (Belfast)
PP Port Phillip (Port Phillip Bay)
Q Queenscliff
W Warrnambool
WP Western Port (Western Port Bay)

The expansion of the Victorian Navy in 1884 saw more activity in Western Port including the 1886 visit by *Batman* mentioned on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.** Prior to disguising his ships in 1888 (page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), Captain Fullarton took his three gunboats (*Victoria*, *Albert* and *Gannet*) into Western Port where he was hailed from Flinders. On being asked “What is the name of the gunboat”, he had a flag similar to the Dutch flag raised on each vessel and proceeded to Sandy Point, where an “attack” on Flinders and Crib Point was plannedⁱⁱ.

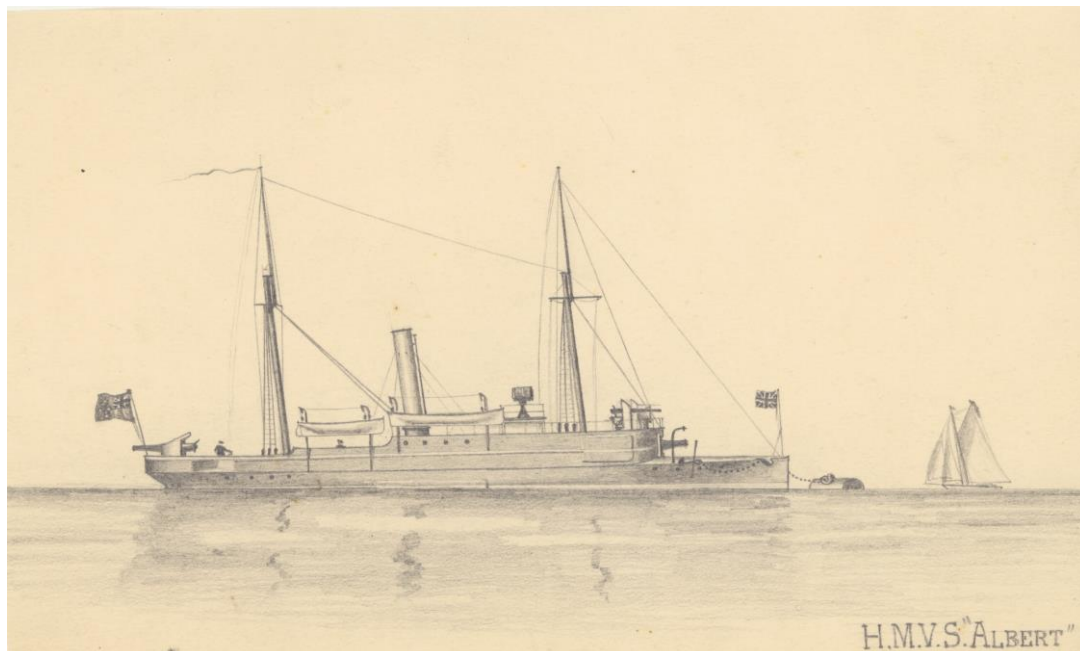


Figure 2 - H.M.V.S. *Albert* with 6 inch Stern Gun & 8 inch Bow Gun

Drawing: Allan Green Collection, State Library of Victoria.

1893 saw both gunboats surveying Western Port for at least two, and possibly six weeks.ⁱⁱⁱ The Admiralty charts, although excellent, were not of the scale required for the intimate knowledge that would give a defending force a decided advantage. The officers were also able to familiarise themselves with the bay’s channels. Good relationships with the locals saw the men provided with dozens of mutton bird eggs, with shooting on French Island and fishing further supplementing their diet. More familiarisation visits were made in 1894 and 1895 before the gunboats were disposed of in 1896.

A Defence Department memo of 1889 argued the case for acquiring another, but larger, first class torpedo boat, specifically in order to “provide more effectually for the defence of Western Port”^{iv}. After *The Countess of Hopetoun* arrived, under the command of Lieutenant

Hamilton RN, she explored the creeks and inlets of Western Port and visited Flinders and Cowes. Surprisingly, after this initial interest, the torpedo boats do not seem to have filled the gap left by the gunboats until after federation, when *Childers* and *The Countess* again showed the flag in Western Port. Perhaps the 1890s depression cost cutting temporarily precluded visits outside Port Phillip.

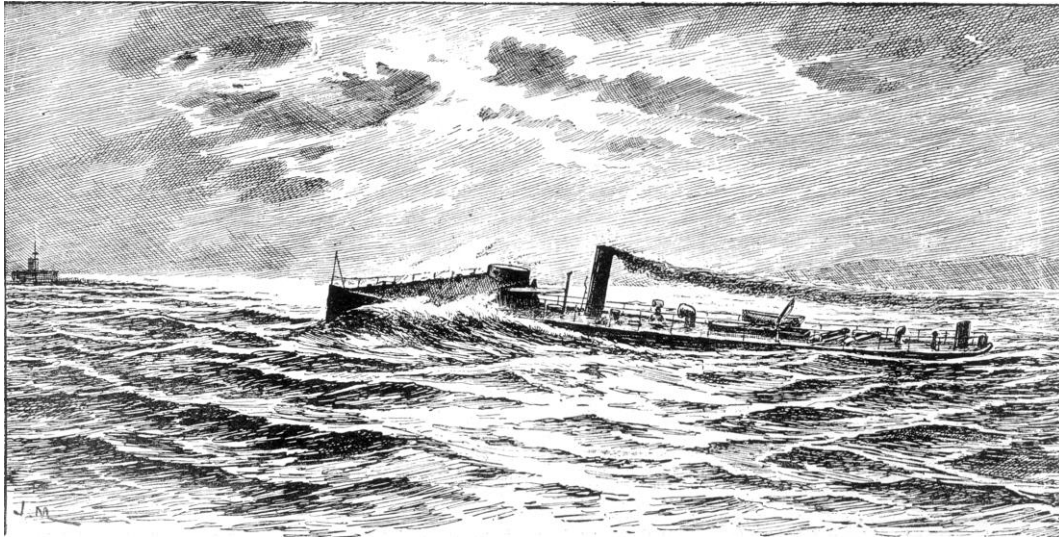


Figure 3 - *The Countess of Hopetoun* on Manoeuvres

Engraving: *Illustrated Australian News*, 1 May 1893. State Library of Victoria.

The Western Ports

Although HMCS *Victoria* had visited the Western ports of Warrnambool, Port Fairy and Portland in the 1860s and “bombarded” Portland in 1862, since *Victoria*’s retirement in 1869, no unit of the Victorian Navy had steamed west of Port Phillip.

As anticipated by Captain Mandeville, the opening of the railway to Portland, introduced a third means by which an enemy force could advance on Melbourne. Prior to 1877 there was no point in landing at any of the Western ports, as, although troops might be landed, they could not easily move to Melbourne. The railways expansion to Portland via Ararat in 1877 and to Warrnambool and Port Fairy via Geelong in 1890 changed that situation. Now, as well as having to be able to operate in Port Phillip and Western Port, the Western ports also had also to be protected, not only by their own shore defences, but also by the Victorian Navy.

ⁱ Colonel Scratchley’s Report on the Defences of Melbourne, *The Argus*, 30 November 1860

ⁱⁱ *The Australasian*, 7 April 1888, p. 39.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Diary of James Bryant Conder*, www.cerberus.com.au/manuals

^{iv} Defence Department memo, *The Argus*, 31 July 1889, p. 4.