How do you find out about the history of a shipwreck?

Vessels have been built since the beginning of earliest civilisation. These early boats are remembered today through their depiction on rock carvings, through paintings in tombs, historical documents with the development of writing, and through located historic shipwrecks. Researching watercraft from the earliest civilisations such as ancient Egypt and neighbouring Mediterranean Bronze Age cultures (from c.4000BC), is a difficult task with only fragmentary records surviving. This is so for all early cultures around the world. Often the data is biased, for example many of the Egyptian records survive only for vessels of the royal fleets, not the everyday craft used by the general population. Gaps in the record can sometimes extend into several centuries with no knowledge of what was achieved in these periods.

Luckily for those learning about vessels that operated in Australian waters from colonial times, ie during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there are a host of other documents to discover. These later periods saw the widespread written recording of vessel types, ownership, insurance, and daily working life. It is possible to still view original building plans and inspection reports for many vessels, and see examination certificates for captains, mates and other specialist crews. There are sometimes actual photographs taken of vessels in operation or at time of loss, together with other graphic representations, including pencil sketches, lithographs and colour paintings. The daily newspapers, particularly through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, had dedicated sections recording the movement of vessels, cargoes and passengers, and sometimes detailed descriptions of their loss. Government agencies, such as Customs, kept detailed logs of vessel arrival and departures at key ports and lists of crews, including convicts! Other agencies undertook the official investigation of crews following shipwreck events, the reports making fascinating reading today.

These records survive as an invaluable aid for the shipwreck researcher trying to piece together the history of a vessel, the company that it belonged to, modifications over time, and trades that it was engaged in. Like any historical document though, we need to be careful when accepting them as always accurate and factual. Often the nineteenth century newspaperman was not at the scene of a tragedy, was relying on eyewitness reports for his story, and may have had no formal background in seafaring and ship construction. It is common to find different papers referring to the same event and misspelling a ships' name, the date of the tragedy or even the exact location! This is true also for illustrative material such as line drawings and paintings - they could sometimes be made without ever viewing the actual vessel, or without attention to detail in vessel form, rigging and construction. Like any records, there are always gaps or insufficient material at hand for the modern historian to work from.

Why leave shipwrecks alone?
This is why the archaeological remains comprising the shipwrecked vessel, its cargo, and artefacts associated with the passengers and crew are so important. Often these fragile reminders from a past time are our only true record for a particular period or event. Shipwrecks are often referred to as time capsules, and this is rightly so. Unlike most other archaeological sites, a shipwreck was deposited on the seafloor or river bottom at an exact moment in time and with no other immediate disturbance. This means that everything that was on the vessel, including all the information that it
contains about design, construction, engineering, use, life on board, and activities that it was engaged in, is recorded in one discreet location. Undisturbed shipwreck sites are therefore an historical treasure trove - a museum beneath the sea that can provide a professionally trained archaeologist and other specialists a fascinating opportunity for detailed study and scientific examination. A vessel that sank for example off Sydney in 1828, would hold important information on the design of vessels of that period, of the materials and techniques used in its construction, and an important record of artefacts used by the crew to undertake their tasks aboard ship. Sometimes it is impossible to gain this complex level of detailed information from any other source, such as surviving historical records.

**Disturbing shipwrecks is vandalism**

Historic shipwrecks today are protected from disturbance by legislation introduced so that they can be kept intact for scientific study, careful visitation and appreciation. When divers or others damage a shipwreck by removing artefacts, they are tampering with the historical record, destroying the association of material within the wreck structure and therefore the links between various objects and specific areas of the vessel. Disturbing the important marine growth covering shipwrecks also leads to a change in the corrosion rates of different materials and can lead to the long-term destabilisation of the historic structure. Improper conservation of relics once on land and removed from the saltwater or wet environment, can lead to advanced deterioration and loss of the object, without specialised materials conservation expertise. A shipwreck should be "left as you see it".