# Historic Lady Elgin gold pocket watch returns to UK after 130 years underwater



After languishing for over a century in Lake Michigan’s depths, an extraordinary gold pocket watch has returned to its rightful home in the United Kingdom. This unique artifact is connected to a tragic event in maritime history: the sinking of the steamship Lady Elgin, which claimed approximately 300 lives in 1860—the most deadly shipwreck in the Great Lakes' storied past.

On the fateful night of September 8, 1860, the Lady Elgin was making its return voyage from Chicago to Milwaukee when a sudden storm struck. Visibility plummeted as the ship collided with the unlit schooner Augusta, leading to a catastrophic sinking that swallowed many passengers, primarily Irish immigrants, in mere minutes. Among the deceased was Herbert Ingram, a noted British journalist and politician, who perished alongside his son. Ingram had been a pivotal figure in the advancement of public services in Boston, Lincolnshire, and was the founder of *The Illustrated London News*, recognised as the first publication to feature images, thus earning him the title of the father of pictorial journalism.

According to Valerie van Heest, a historian based in Holland, the pocket watch was discovered in 1992 during a dive at the wreck site, which lies just off the Illinois shore. The artifact was found in remarkably good condition, likely due to the cold and low-oxygen environment of the lake that had inhibited corrosion. Van Heest, who has been documenting the wreck for years, noted that her team’s initial explorations were spurred by a leaking location that led other divers to uncover the watch, still adorned with its chain.

For over three decades, the discovery of the 16-carat gold pocket watch remained a closely guarded secret among divers until they approached van Heest for assistance. Determined to connect the watch back to Ingram's lineage, she eventually discovered that his descendants were alive and that a museum in his hometown was preparing an exhibit in his honour. "I very quickly came to the realisation it doesn’t belong in America," she stated, asserting its rightful place is in Boston, at the Boston Guildhall museum.

Ingram’s legacy, marked by a statue in his honour in Boston, attests to his impact on the community, where he was influential in securing vital infrastructures such as gas and railway connections. As the museum's arts and heritage manager, Luke Skeritt, expressed, “This find is truly a once-in-a-lifetime discovery.” He noted that objects like this are typically found in textbooks, rather than surfacing unexpectedly via email.

The pocket watch, with its historical ties and craftsmanship, not only belonged to an influential figure of the 19th century but stands as a poignant reminder of the human tragedies tied to maritime disasters. Van Heest remarked on the significance of the watch as a personal artifact that offers a tangible connection to the lives lost on that tragic night, enriching our understanding of the past and the people affected by it.

This meticulous effort to return the watch to its ancestral roots serves as a testament to the enduring connections between history, heritage, and community. It illustrates how artefacts can resonate through time, forging links that transcend generations, while highlighting the personal stories behind what might simply be seen as historical remnants of a disaster long forgotten.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14769527/historic-gold-pocket-watch-lost-shipwreck-returned-home.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PS_Lady_Elgin)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14769527/historic-gold-pocket-watch-lost-shipwreck-returned-home.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://dbpedia.org/page/Herbert_Ingram)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.historytools.org/collectible/elgin-pocket-watch-value), [[6]](https://www.schmitt-horan.com/auctions/1018/html/lots_1601_-_1700.htm)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.treasurenet.com/threads/question-lady-elgin-owner.10185/), [[7]](https://www.marks4antiques.com/price-guides/vintage-elgin-ladies-watch)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14769527/historic-gold-pocket-watch-lost-shipwreck-returned-home.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PS_Lady_Elgin)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14769527/historic-gold-pocket-watch-lost-shipwreck-returned-home.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PS_Lady_Elgin> - The PS Lady Elgin was a wooden-hulled sidewheel steamship that sank in Lake Michigan off the coast of Illinois on September 8, 1860, after a collision with the schooner Augusta. The disaster resulted in the loss of approximately 300 lives, making it the deadliest shipwreck in Great Lakes history. The wreck was discovered in 1989, and in 1992, a reconnaissance survey was conducted by the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago. The ship's owner, Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard, received a $12,000 payment from his insurance company, but neither he nor the insurance company accepted abandonment of the ship. The captain of Augusta, Darius Malott, was arrested and tried in Chicago but found not guilty of navigational negligence. The Lady Elgin disaster remains the greatest loss of life on open water in the history of the Great Lakes.
3. <https://dbpedia.org/page/Herbert_Ingram> - Herbert Ingram (27 May 1811 – 8 September 1860) was a British journalist and politician, considered the father of pictorial journalism through his founding of The Illustrated London News, the first illustrated magazine. He was a Liberal politician who favoured social reform and represented Boston for four years until his early death in the shipwreck of the Lady Elgin. Ingram was instrumental in bringing fresh water, gas, and railway connections to the community. A statue of him stands in the city centre of Boston, Lincolnshire, England, since erected in 1862, honouring his contributions and legacy.
4. <https://www.historytools.org/collectible/elgin-pocket-watch-value> - Elgin pocket watches are highly valued by collectors due to their craftsmanship and historical significance. The market for mid-range pieces in the $1,000 – $5,000 range is particularly strong. Notable Elgin watch owners include President Abraham Lincoln, who owned an 18-size Elgin watch gifted to him by a group of Chicago citizens in 1861, and jazz legend Duke Ellington, who was rarely seen without his Elgin Legionnaire pocket watch. Elgin provided over one million military watches to Allied forces during World War I and produced special 'Battleship Maine' commemorative watches after the ship's sinking in 1898. Owning an Elgin watch with a historical connection can greatly increase its value and prestige.
5. <https://www.treasurenet.com/threads/question-lady-elgin-owner.10185/> - The original owners of the PS Lady Elgin were the Hubbard Meat Packing Company of Chicago. The name 'Lady Elgin' was used due to a connection with the Elgin Watch Company. The ship was involved in a tragic shipwreck after a collision with the schooner Augusta, resulting in the loss of many lives. The wreck has been the subject of various discussions and research, with artifacts from the wreck displayed in museums such as the Lake County Museum. The ship's owner, Gurdon Saltonstall Hubbard, received a $12,000 payment from his insurance company, but neither he nor the insurance company accepted abandonment of the ship.
6. <https://www.schmitt-horan.com/auctions/1018/html/lots_1601_-_1700.htm> - An auction lot description from Schmitt Horan & Co. features an Elgin Watch Co. lady's gold pendant watch from around 1890. The watch is a 0 size, 13 jewels, stem wind and set, with a damascened nickel plate movement and lever escapement, housed in a 14-karat yellow gold hunting case. The back of the case is engraved and diamond set with a fleur de lis. The watch has a white enamel dial with Roman numerals and a seconds subdial. The serial number is 3577958, and the total weight is 44.8 grams. The condition report notes fine scratches on the outer and inner surfaces of the case, a missing crystal, and minor scratches on the movement plates. The watch is in running order, winding, setting, and ticking.
7. <https://www.marks4antiques.com/price-guides/vintage-elgin-ladies-watch> - Vintage Elgin ladies' watches are collectible timepieces that showcase the brand's craftsmanship and design. One example is a 14K gold and diamond lady's Elgin watch with a fancy hunter case, featuring a floral engraved case, white enamel dial with Roman numeral hour markers, and a movement serial number of 3780746. The case is approximately 36 mm in diameter and weighs 39.8 grams. This particular watch was part of the estate of Dr. Penelope Campbell, a former professor at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia. The estate proceeds are intended to fund a scholarship at Agnes Scott College.