

Getting to the Goldfields

Mass migration

As news of the fabulous gold discoveries spread around the world, people everywhere thought about what they could do if they found some. English, Irish, Scottish, Italians, Chinese, French, Polish, Hungarians – everyone it seemed sold up what they had and booked a passage to Australia. Many men left families behind, hoping to return with a fortune, or to earn enough to bring them out later.

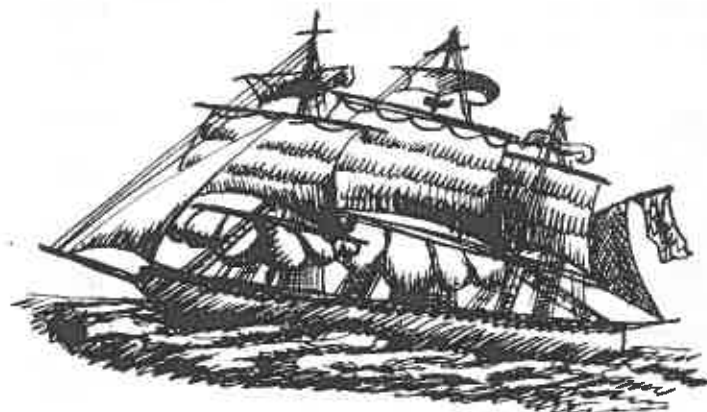
Why?

Many of these would-be gold diggers were keen to escape misery in their own countries. Revolution in France, civil war in Italy, war in Europe, poverty and oppression in Ireland – all combined to give these people the urge to look for a new life in the new world. Many saw the prospect of finding gold not only as a chance to obtain riches and financial independence which would be impossible in their own countries, but also as a chance to live a more free and just lifestyle. All they had to do was work.

The voyage to Australia

However, getting to the goldfields was not for the faint hearted. Migrants were rightly fearful at the prospect of the half-way-round-the-world journey. It would take four months to get there. Sailing ships of the time were dark, wet, overcrowded, smelly and often unseaworthy. Most ships were old naval warships, some dating back to the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). One vessel was in such bad shape that the passengers and crew spent most of their journey bailing out seawater.

The long sea voyage to the colonies was not only dangerous. The cramped quarters made the journey most uncomfortable. There were no doctors. There were old men, young boys and girls, gentlemen in suits and frockcoats, craftsmen, mothers with babies, shop-men, clerks, farmers, Cornish miners etc. And the trip was not a holiday. All passengers were expected to 'swab the deck' using buckets, brushes and mops and rags. All bedding had to be aired each day on deck, then beds remade. Cooking was shared by all. Washing was done using seawater. Bedpans (potty toilets) needed emptying, and so on.



The Cairngorm sailed to Melbourne in 1851. Its journey was long, arduous and difficult. Records show there was only one bath on board.



Most of the people who joined the race to the Australian goldfields were men, hoping to strike it rich with a view to returning home. Some families came together. The expense, the great distance and the transforming experience of a new land often meant that many diggers never saw their families and friends again.