

Effect of the Gold Rushes on the People

Aboriginal People

Because of its mild climate and abundant resources, the south-eastern corner of Australia was the area which was most densely populated by Aboriginal people prior to colonisation. Aboriginal people had been displaced by the squatters, but usually had access to some of their land. The great influx of immigrants and widespread mining in New South Wales and Victoria robbed Aboriginal people of their lands and means of existence. Sacred sites were destroyed.

Growth in Population

The discovery of gold affected people living in the cities as well as those on the gold fields. Many people in cities left their jobs to look for gold. This caused a loss in the number of permanent people living in the cities. At the same time there was an increase of temporary

residents, who lived in tents while they were waiting to go to the gold fields. Gold miners also came back to the cities for short periods to spend their earnings, and then permanently when the surface gold had been mined.

The population of Australia increased rapidly during the 1850s because of gold prospectors and the businesses which grew up to supply their needs.

In the first 60 years of European settlement the non-Aboriginal population reached 405,000. In the next 10 years the population almost trebled, to over a million. Victoria's population multiplied by six from 87,000 to 540,000 in the 1850s. New South Wales and Victoria were unprepared for this rapid growth. They did not have sufficient housing, transport, food and other essentials in the cities or on the gold fields. In 1861, two-thirds of Victorians lived in tents or huts. The colonies lacked the necessary police, public servants and government departments to deal with crime, business activities and health matters.

In 1851, about 45 per cent of the population was Australian-born. The flood of new immigrants temporarily reduced the proportion of Australian-born people in the community. The immigrants were mainly British, of middle-class origin. A very large proportion of the immigrants were men in their twenties. In 1861 there were three times more men than women of marrying age in the colonies.

In 1852 the British Government ceased the transportation of convicts to eastern Australia. There was no point in sending convicts to a land of gold!

