

Life on the Goldfields

Lesson Focus: You will learn about different aspects of life on the goldfields.

Keywords: establishment, represent, immigration, contributed, illegal, lawlessness

The period between 1850 and 1900 was the time of the Australian gold rushes. Gold was responsible for opening up many parts of Australia and for the establishment of many country towns and communities. When gold ran out, people left to look for the next goldfield. Often, a community stayed to establish other industries or to support underground mining.

During these 50 years, the gold rushes contributed greatly to Australia's history and culture in many ways. In some ways the culture of the 'Aussie Digger' created the image of the hardworking, hard-playing Australian who would never say die. In other ways the happenings of this period are things we should feel less proud of. The poor treatment of the Aboriginal people was rarely reported but was something that greatly reduced the Aboriginal population as well as disrupting their culture and traditions. Other groups

Use the information about the goldfields to complete these.

1. Complete the table below.

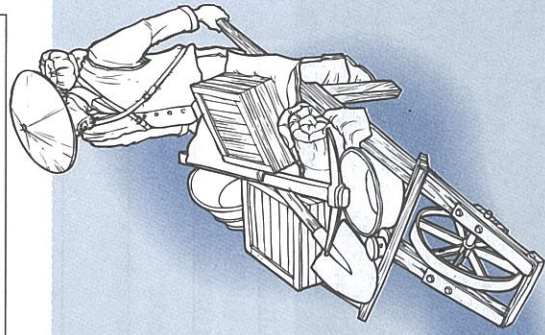
Positive contributions to Australian society	
Long-term effects	
Negative contributions to Australian society	
Long-term effects	

The People

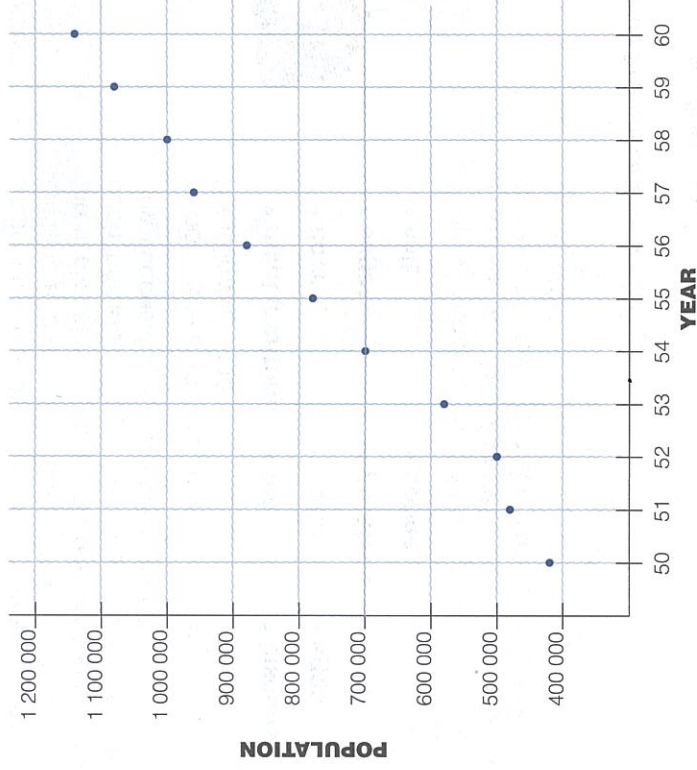
Gold rushes had the ability to attract a wide collection of people from all races and parts of society. On the goldfields, the wealthy and the poor would work next to each other, each with the common goal of finding their fortune. The Australian gold rushes attracted people from all over the world. This table of immigration to Victoria in the 1850s shows this. The majority of these people were attracted by the promise of gold!

Immigration to Victoria in 1850s

British Isles	82.3%
Europe	7.5%
China	5.4%
America	1.2%
India	0.4%
Others	1.2%



During this 10-year period, Australia underwent a huge increase in population, as can be seen from this graph.



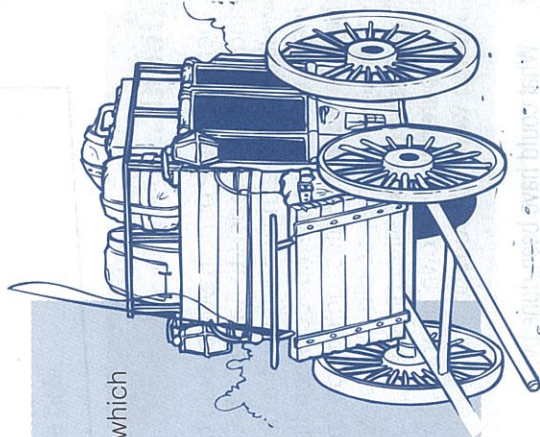
Use the information in the graph to complete these.

2. Why do you think more British immigrated to Victoria?

3. People tend to think the Europeans and Chinese are new to Australia. Is this true? Explain.

Transport

Once new settlers had arrived they had to find their way to the goldfields, which were all inland from the ports. The roads to the diggings were in poor condition as they had been carved out of the bush by the volume of traffic rushing to the goldfields. Most diggers travelled by foot, carrying their belongings in wheelbarrows or on their backs. Horses were very expensive and the tracks were often too poor for horses and carts. Bullocks were used to pull supply wagons. This was a slow process but more reliable than traditional horse-drawn vehicles. As a goldfield developed, so did the transport. American-made coaches (Cobb and Co) were imported to provide transport. These coaches were a sturdier than European coaches, which were unable to survive the harsh conditions.



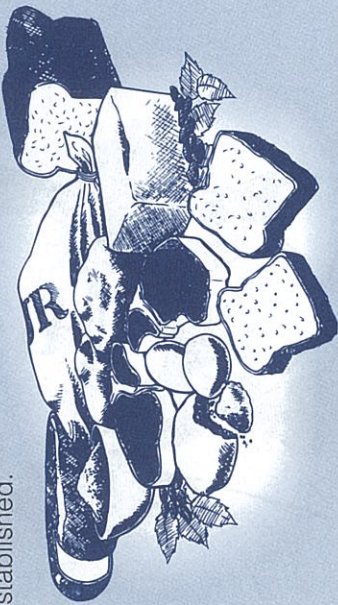
Use the information about transport to complete question four.

4. Why do you think bullocks were more reliable than horses and carts as a form of transportation?

Food

Most goldfields were some distance from settled towns and had to develop their own food supply. This meant that in the early stages of a goldfield, food supplies were very basic and consisted mainly of damper, mutton and tea.

As the goldfield grew and more diggers arrived, opportunity developed for businesses to be established.



Most of these supplied the basic needs—food, clothing and alcohol. If the field proved successful, the quality of food would improve. Of course, what each individual digger ate depended very much on how successful he was at prospecting.

A food store at the diggings would generally provide the following food.

- meat (mutton)
- flour
- sugar
- salt
- tea
- butter
- potatoes
- coffee
- biscuits
- eggs
- milk

Food was cooked on campfires on a digger's claim. Thieving was always a problem on the goldfields and diggers needed to protect their food supplies as well as their gold.

Use the information provided and your knowledge to complete the following.

5. What is your opinion about alcohol being classed as a 'basic need'?

6. Using only the food available at the goldfield store, develop a menu for one day.

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner

Health

There was little or no medical help on the goldfields and diggers needed to care for their own health and wellbeing. Health problems were directly related to the environment. Damp, cold conditions in Victorian and New South Wales' goldfields created constant medical problems, as did the hot, dry conditions of the Western Australian goldfields. Diggers also contributed to their own poor health. Showering and bathing were not common occurrences and fresh

vegetables and fruit were rare, especially in the early days of a goldfield.

This mix of conditions and attitudes created an environment where disease spread quickly. Diseases such as whooping cough, scarlet fever and measles resulted in consistent illness and large numbers of deaths. As a goldfield grew and conditions improved, so did the health of the diggers.

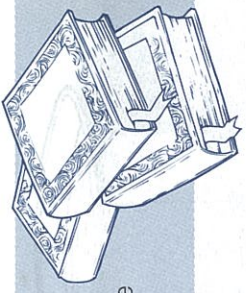
7. What could have been done by:

- (a) the diggers to improve their health? _____
- (b) the government to improve the situation on the goldfields? _____

Education

Formal education did not exist on the goldfields. Any children were educated by their parents and were expected to work hard on the family claim. As towns established in the diggings, schools were started, often by the churches, to provide a basic education.

8. Do you think education was valued at this time? Explain.



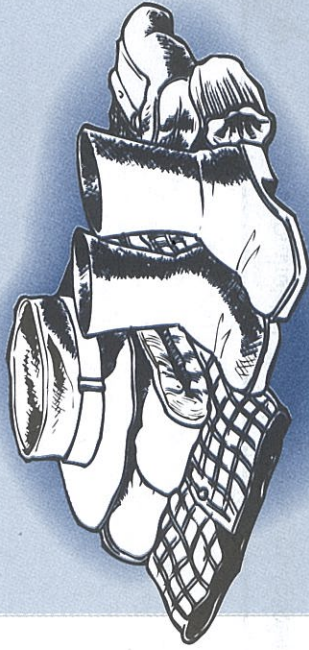
Clothing

A digger's needs were very basic. Working long hours in the diggings was extremely tough on clothes.

The most important pieces of clothing were a digger's hat and boots. A standard clothing outfit for a digger would include:

- hat (2)
- cotton shirts (2)
- socks (4)
- boots
- underclothes (2 sets)
- hard-wearing pants (2)
- rain protection (oil skin)
- woollen shirt (2)
- handkerchief (2)

A digger would often wear one set of clothes until they fell off and then replace them with a new set. Some had more than this list of clothes, while many had less.



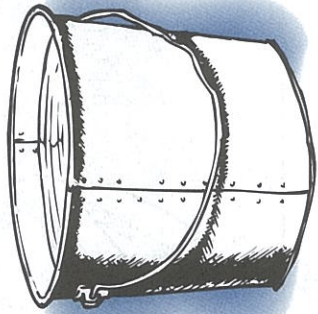
Law and Order

Law and order was always going to be a problem on the goldfields. Large numbers of men, including ex-convicts, thieves, bushrangers and others, were all grouped in one place with the common goal of finding gold—anyway they could. It was difficult to get police to go to the goldfields as they too would often leave their job and head to the diggings to find gold. Adding alcohol to this mix created a recipe for lawlessness. The government banned alcohol in the goldfields between 1851 and 1853 but this only served to establish an illegal supply business (called 'sly grog'). This situation fuelled a lot of violence, thieving, bribery and other illegal activities on the goldfields. The government added to this problem by demanding a licence fee from each miner. This created a situation where the police were more intent on collecting licence fees than maintaining law and order. The law and order issue reached a head with an uprising at Eureka in 1854, which was one of Australia's most famous historical incidents.

10. Do you think the government managed law and order on the goldfields properly? Explain.

9. Compare the digger's set of clothes to your own by completing the table.

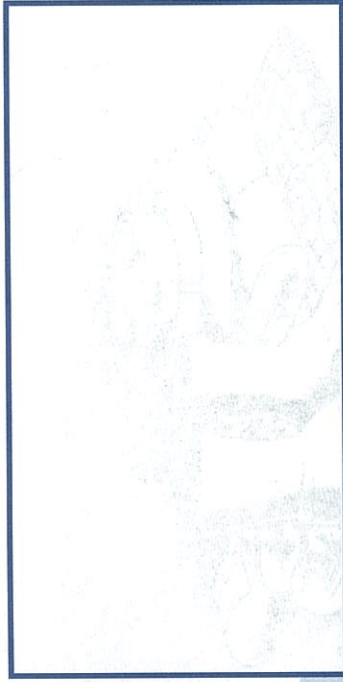
	The Digger	Me
hat		
shirts		
socks		
shoes		
underclothes		
trousers		
wet-weather gear		
jumper		
handkerchief		
pyjamas		
sports clothes		



Water

In the early days of the gold rushes in New South Wales and Victoria, the search for gold was centred on alluvial gold, which was found in riverbeds. This meant that water supplies for most of the year were good. It did mean that in the summer months, water became very precious, both for drinking and also for washing soil in the search for gold. The later goldfields in Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie had severe water shortages. This created many problems which eventually saw the building of a massive pipeline from Perth to Kalgoorlie, just to service the goldmining industry.

11. How could water have been stored for the summer months? Write your idea and draw a diagram complete with labels.



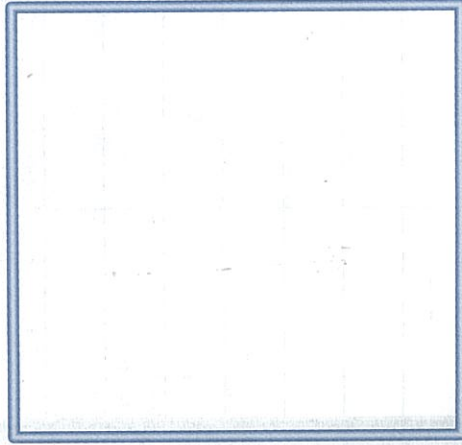
Housing

Housing on the goldfields was directly related to the age of the particular goldfield. The style of housing followed three basic stages.

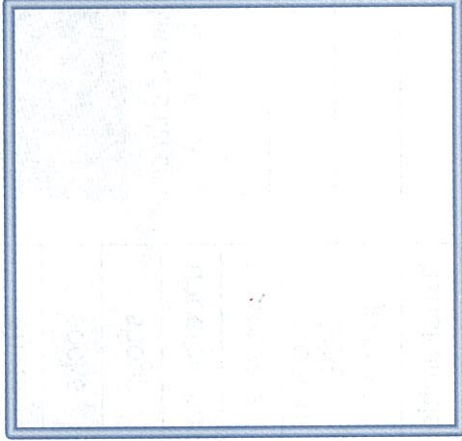
- Stage 1** Tents were the first form of shelter. Often the tent was constructed by the digger and was a simple dwelling of poles and cloth. Beds were often soft branches placed on the ground. In dryer areas, diggers would sleep under the stars until there was reason to establish a more permanent dwelling.
- Stage 2** Once a digger had established a profitable claim, his tent would develop into a hut. This was achieved by using logs, mud bricks, bark and other materials to make the hut stronger and waterproof. This transformation from tent to hut often occurred over time, as materials became available.
- Stage 3** A house was the next stage, but it resembled nothing like what we would call a house today. The house was the development of a hut. It had a solid floor, rather than dirt, a pitched roof and was normally one large room with a veranda. Furniture was often recycled boxes and barrels.
- Like most things, a digger's needs for housing were simple. The home had to provide a place to sleep and to shelter from the elements of the weather. It was only when a digger's family joined him that a need for better housing arose.

12. Draw a diagram complete with labels to show each housing stage.

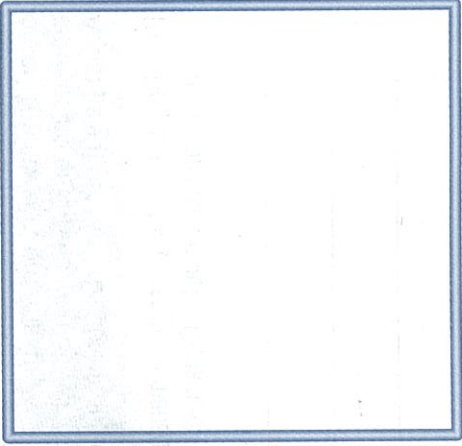
Stage 1



Stage 2



Stage 3



Topics for Discussion/Debate

Discuss the plight of the digger. How would things have been different on the goldfields with the technology that is available today?

Additional Activities

Using the headings from the text, prepare a comparison between life in Australia today and life on the goldfields during the gold rush period.

Search Engine Keywords

Life on the goldfields; discovery+gold+Australia