

In Britain

"Australia is one enormous gold field."

Liverpool Mercury, September 1851



Exciting news from their son in Australia. The £100 note that the man has in his hand will support them for the rest of their lives. Or perhaps it will enable the family to migrate to Australia. The notice on the wall suggests they are already considering emigrating. Perhaps a ticket is included.

On 9 September 1851, the editor of *The Times* enthusiastically informed the British public that Edward Hargraves had discovered gold near Bathurst in New South Wales. He predicted that the Australian goldfields could be bigger than the Californian goldfields of 1849.

Surely the reports were exaggerated. But then, in April 1852, six ships returned to Britain from Australia carrying eight tonnes of gold. The fabulous news was true. The scramble began to obtain a berth on a ship to Australia.

The poor

The desperately poor, however, had little hope of finding the £23 for the fare to Australia. Twenty-three pounds was more than one year's wage for a farm labourer or a mill worker.

Fortunately, there was some hope for the poor. The government paid the fare of 90,000 lucky workers to emigrate to the Australian goldfields. The government wanted to include farm workers to ensure that the huge increase in population could be fed.

Private organisations also worked to encourage migration, especially female migration, to the colonies. Caroline Chisholm wrote to the British government about "the frightful disparity of the sexes from which flows misery and crime."

The middle class

For the wealthier middle class, there was no reason to emigrate to a distant land full of convicts. Their life in Britain was comfortable and improving. Their meals were cooked by servants. Gas lighting was being installed in their homes. They could travel to the seaside by train. They could visit the Crystal Palace in London and see all the wonders of this new machine age, and witness the dominance of British commerce and industry. They could even, if they were male and owned property, have a say in the government of the country.

The migrants

Eventually, 350,000 people made the decision to emigrate to the Australian goldfields in the 1850s, and of these 300,000 came from Britain. They were mostly young, literate, skilled men. They were working people such as mechanics from Manchester, miners from Cornwall or printers from London.

These skilled workers were literate but they could not even vote. Their hopes that life in Britain would improve had been dashed in 1848 when the push to extend democracy and give working people the vote – the Chartist Movement – had failed.

In the 1840s they had experienced the suffering that resulted when trade in England declined and they lost their jobs. A tailor from the industrial town of Macclesfield wrote to his brother that, in England, "trade and wages are very bad ... there is little chance ... to rear a family with respectability."

Full of hope and courage, these skilled workers were eager to seize the opportunity for a better life in the Antipodes – the land on the other side of the earth. Emigration would be the greatest adventure of their lives.