

Gold rush!

In 1848, in California, in the United States of America, a carpenter called James Marshall discovered gold nuggets in a stream. People flocked to California from around the world, in the hope of instant wealth. The first gold rush had begun.

Millions of people were infected by 'gold fever'. They came to California on foot or horseback, by ship or wagon. Some people abandoned their families and jobs to join the rush. That gold could be found gave many people hope of a better life. Gold was no longer the exclusive property of royalty – it was now available to anyone.

Discovery in Australia

One miner at the Californian goldfields was an Australian called Edward Hargraves, who gained valuable mining experience. He searched areas of New South Wales for gold and found it near Bathurst in February 1851. It was a discovery that would change Australia.

Some colony officials wanted to keep Hargraves' discovery a secret. They feared that Australians would desert their farms to search for gold and that industry would come to a standstill. They worried that the lure of gold would cause convicts to try to escape from prison.

However, some New South Wales politicians welcomed Hargraves' discovery. They knew that a gold rush could bring great prosperity. When thousands of miners went to California, they created immense wealth and job opportunities. New towns were established, and the city of San Francisco became a bustling centre of industry.

Rush for gold

People swarmed to NSW to find gold. They came from many backgrounds: there were ex-convicts, doctors, farmers and office workers. People also came from California because they believed all the gold there had been mined.

In Victoria, James Esmond discovered gold at Clunes in June 1851. Towns such as Ballarat and Castlemaine joined Bathurst, NSW as the world's most popular goldfields. The colonies' population doubled, and with the influx of people came improvements in transport and communication. Better roads were laid, and there were more ships and wagons. New post offices opened, and businesses grew as diggers went on spending sprees.

What was 'gold fever'?

People obsessed with finding gold during the gold rush were said to have 'gold fever'. Gold fever made people do strange things. It made them leave stable, well-paid jobs to mine in dark shafts and pan in icy streams. It made them give up the comforts of home to sleep in huts or tiny tents. It made them talk of nothing except for the riches that would come with finding giant golden nuggets. With everybody heading to the goldfields, Victorian politicians began to panic. 'Gold fever has completely disorganised the whole structure of society,' moaned one. At the Ballarat diggings in 1852, one journalist thought that gold fever had driven people crazy! He wrote: 'Gentlemen are foaming at the mouth, ladies are fainting and children are doing somersaults, all because gold is coming out of Ballarat.'



The Californian gold rush brought immense wealth and prosperity to the city of San Francisco.