

Box 994.03
WEB

THE AUSTRALIAN GOLD RUSHES

Gold Fever

Kimberley Webber

POWERHOUSE MUSEUM



Arrival in Australia

Many people were disappointed when they first arrived to find that the streets of Sydney and Melbourne were not paved with gold. Instead, most were muddy tracks winding between houses, tents, shops and hotels.

Tent city

So many people arrived in Melbourne in the 1850s that a huge tent city sprang up along the banks of the Yarra River. As many as 30 000 people lived there. The river soon became polluted. With no fresh water and no proper sewerage, the tent city was an unhealthy place to live.

Off to the diggings

Hopeful diggers did not want to waste time in town. They were keen to be off to make their fortune, but first they had to buy their kit. Most took just as much as they could carry, as cartage was very expensive. An 1852 guidebook recommended:

- strong boots
- sturdy clothes
- waterproof trousers and coat
- a roll of canvas to make a tent
- tin plates and mugs
- a cast iron pot for cooking.

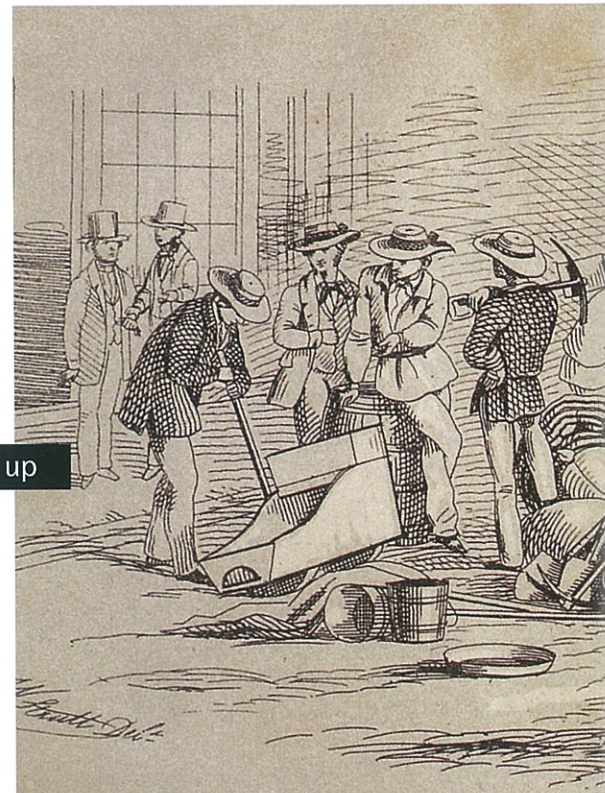
Diggers were always listening for news of fresh discoveries. If the news sounded promising, they would quickly pack up and go. This magazine illustration shows diggers frantically tying boxes, water barrels, tools and equipment to their drays, keen to be the first at the new goldfield.

Golden stories

Mrs Campbell's difficult trip

Mrs Campbell took 11 days to get from Melbourne to the Ovens goldfields where her husband was a government official. Her cart was often bogged down in mud. Crossing a river, it tipped over and she and her baby daughter were thrown into the water and almost drowned. Finally, the cart broke down completely and she had to walk the last 15 miles (27 kilometres).

Packing up

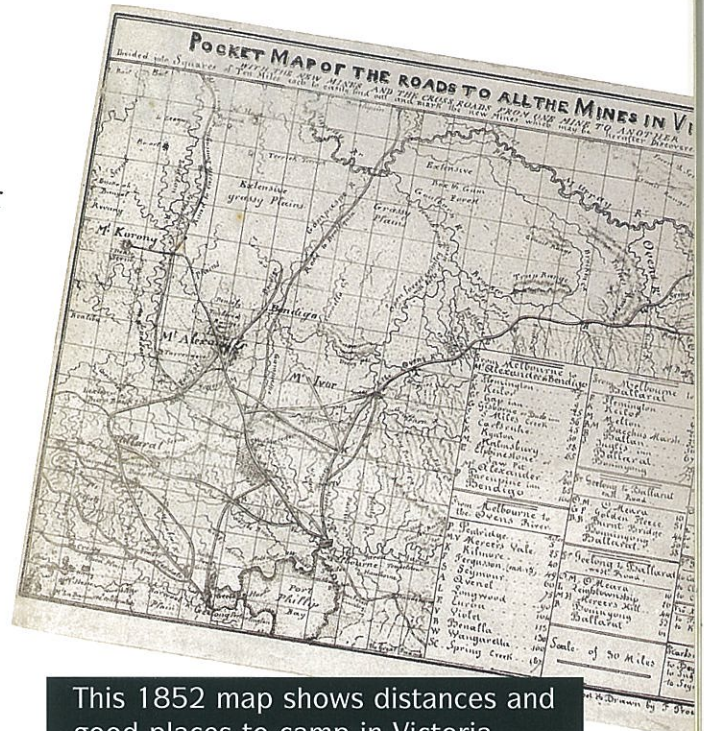


A long walk

Most people could not afford the cost of a carriage or horse to take them to the goldfields. They walked instead. It could take many days to get there because roads were rough tracks and few rivers had proper bridges. In good weather, diggers could walk 16 to 20 miles (30 to 36 kilometres) a day. In bad weather, the mud and potholes made travelling much slower.

Some people never made it. If diggers lost the track, especially in Western Australia, they could run out of food and water and die before anyone realised they were missing.

When the gold rushes began, there were no proper roads to many of the new fields. People followed rough tracks through the bush.



This 1852 map shows distances and good places to camp in Victoria

Golden stories

John Aspinall travels to Coolgardie

It took a very long time to get to the goldfields of Western Australia from Perth. The New Zealander, John Aspinall, went by steamer from Melbourne to Perth and then by train to the end of the line. There he organised a wagon and horses to take him to Coolgardie. It took days to get there and he wrote about his battle with the heat and the flies:

Dust and sands keep blowing into all the 'tucker' and you are continually grinding it between your teeth. Another feature of the country is the presence of flies ... they fly into your mouth, promenade all over your face, buzz into your ears, and keep rushing into your eyes until you nearly go mad.

(tucker – an expression meaning food)

(promenade – to walk)



Arrival at the diggings

After many days on the road, it was exciting when diggers at last reached the places they had heard so much about. The first hint that they were getting close was the noise. All day, six days a week, there was the sounds of digging, carting, crushing and washing dirt and rock. Sunday was the only day diggers did not frantically search for gold.

A licence to dig

When new diggers arrived, the first thing they had to do was buy a miner's licence. This allowed them to dig for gold in an area no bigger than a small room. The licence cost them 30 shillings each month. Because the mining area was so small, most diggers joined together to form partnerships.



Mining camp

A mining camp at Bathurst, painted by E. Tulloch in 1855. Trees have been chopped down, the ground dug up and diggers are hard at work seeking their fortune.

Golden stories

Caroline Chisholm

In the 1840s and 1850s, Caroline Chisholm worked hard to improve the lives of young men and women arriving in Australia as emigrants. Once the gold rushes began, she was concerned that the difficult journey prevented wives and children from joining their husbands and fathers. With some government support, and using her own money, Mrs Chisholm built cheap accommodation on the road to the Castlemaine diggings in Victoria. These 'shelter sheds' were a comfortable day's walk apart and could accommodate up to 30 single men, 10 single women and married couples with children.



Gold licence

The miner's licence was really a **tax** on a digger's right to dig for gold. Many thought it unfair, as miners had to pay whether or not they were successful.

Panning for gold

The simplest way to find alluvial gold was to pan for it. To do this a digger needed:

- a pick to break up the soil and rock
- a shovel
- a panning dish to wash the soil and rock.

At first diggers used any round dish they could find to pan for gold. The best types were the wide tin dishes used in dairies to separate milk and cream. Soon tinsmiths began making special pans with a wide base and shallow rim.

Some diggers found all their gold with pans. Other diggers used pans to see if the soil and rock they were digging up had any gold. Then they would use more efficient equipment to wash the **paydirt**.



Head of a miner's pick

To find gold using a pan

STEP 1

Dig up soil and rock from a creek or river bed.

STEP 2

Put small quantities into a panning dish.

STEP 3

Add water from the creek or river.

STEP 4

Swirl the dish around, washing the mud away.

STEP 5

Repeat this process until (hopefully) only grains of gold remain.

These men are using pans to search for gold

Cradling for gold

Another simple tool used to find gold was a cradle. This was a wooden box that looked like a baby's cradle. Like the panning dish, diggers washed the dirt and gravel with water until only the gold remained. Gold is so valuable that finding only a few flakes was enough to make up for all the hard work!



Rocking the cradle

In this illustration from a children's game, one man rocks the cradle while his partner shovels on mud.

To find gold using a cradle

STEP 1

Dig up some soil and rock.

STEP 2

Tip the paydirt into buckets and pour water on top.

STEP 3

Stir well with a spade to break up any lumps. This is called puddling.

STEP 4

Pour this muddy mixture into the top of the cradle.

STEP 5

Rock the cradle while someone else keeps pouring on water.

STEP 6

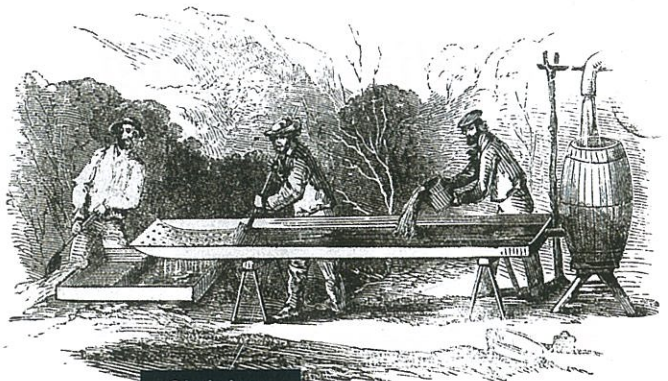
When all the mud and stones are washed away, any gold will be caught in the bottom of the cradle.

The cradle used by the Tom brothers

Edward Hargraves was the first to introduce Californian mining methods. He showed the Tom brothers how to build this cradle, which was the first to be used in Australia. Cradles were sold in shops on the diggings and in the towns.

Other ways of finding gold

As the rush for gold continued, diggers developed many ingenious ways of taking gold from rock. Where water was plentiful, they built long troughs called sluices. Water was poured down the sluice, which washed away the mud and left the gold behind.



Sluicing

A popular type of sluice was the 'long tom'. This one was used at the Bendigo diggings.

Hydraulic sluicing

Another method used when plenty of water was available was hydraulic sluicing. This was a quick way to find gold. A huge hose forced water against the rock and dirt, breaking it up and washing it into the sluice below.

In the early years of the gold rushes on the east coast of Australia, there was plenty of water. In Western Australia, gold was found in very dry areas where there was no water for panning or using a cradle.

John Aspinall, who prospected all around the Western Australian goldfields wrote in his diary about the shortage of water:

This is the country where you can learn the true value of water and how to be economical in its use. People in well watered countries can scarcely believe, I dare say, that it is possible to wash a plate in a teaspoon of water or cold tea and make it clean too!

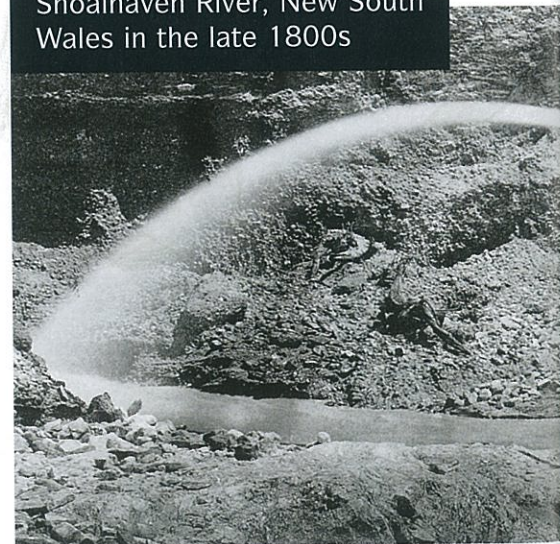
Dry blowing

Diggers developed ways of clearing away the dirt and gravel without water. One way was dry blowing. They attached a bellows to the cradle. Pumping it forced air over the paydirt and blew away everything except the heavier gold that remained trapped in the cradle.

A dry blower



Hydraulic mining on the Shoalhaven River, New South Wales in the late 1800s



Shafts

The thousands of diggers working on the goldfields quickly found all the alluvial gold. They then started searching for gold below ground. Digging a vertical hole called a shaft, they cut tunnels off to the side looking for gold.

It could take weeks and even months to dig these shafts. The painter and miner, Eugène von Guérard, worked day and night with his mates to dig two shafts 25 feet (six metres) deep. All they found was rock and as von Guérard wrote '...our only gain being a practice in digging!'

Digging shafts required a lot more work and skill than simply panning for gold. Trees had to be chopped down to provide timber to line the sides of the shaft. A **windlass** was built above the shaft to make it easier to lift out the stone and rubble. A roof was built over the top to keep out the rain. Even so, shafts often filled with water and many hours were spent pumping them out.

Golden stories

The dangers of shaft mining

Digging shafts was dangerous work. At Peg Leg Gully on the Victorian goldfields, four brothers were digging one when it began to collapse. The youngest brother went down the shaft to try and hold it up with timber and branches. He became stuck in the mud and his brothers were unable to get him out. Finally a rope was tied around him and everyone held it and pulled hard. Even then, he remained stuck fast. The shaft slowly filled with mud and rock, smothering the unlucky digger.



Gulgong miners

These miners were photographed at Gulgong, New South Wales in 1872. A flag flies above their shaft announcing that they have 'bottomed' and found rich gold deposits. Buckets of rock were hauled to the top by the horse on the right. The dray on the left took the rock away to be crushed and washed.

Company mining

At some diggings like Ballarat, Bendigo and Kalgoorlie, the real wealth lay underground. At one stage, Bendigo had the deepest goldmine in the world.

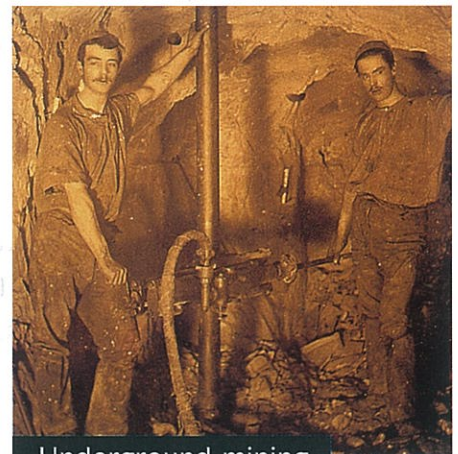
It was too expensive for small teams of diggers to search for gold deep underground. Instead, miners joined together to form large companies and sold shares to raise money. This paid for equipment to dig out the rock, and engines to carry it to the surface and crush the ore. Some companies made fortunes and continued paying their shareholders for many years. Others never found the deposits of gold they hoped for.

Many diggers ended up working for a wage in these company mines. This meant the end of their hopes of being independent. However by the 1860s, there was little choice. It was increasingly difficult for those working by themselves or in small teams to find gold.



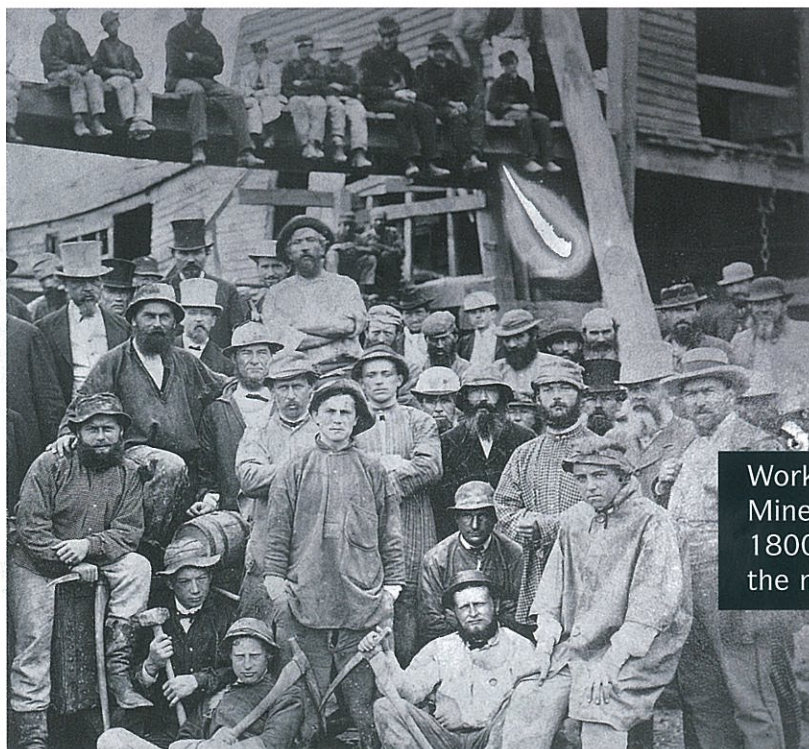
Share certificate G.S. London.

Shares were sold in this company to raise £100 000. The money was used to pay wages and buy equipment.



Underground mining

Underground mining required more sophisticated equipment. Drills were powered by compressed air piped underground into a flexible tube attached to the drill.



Workers at Ballarat Britannia Mine photographed in the late 1800s. Young boys worked in the mine too