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The Gold Rushes



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MILESTONES IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

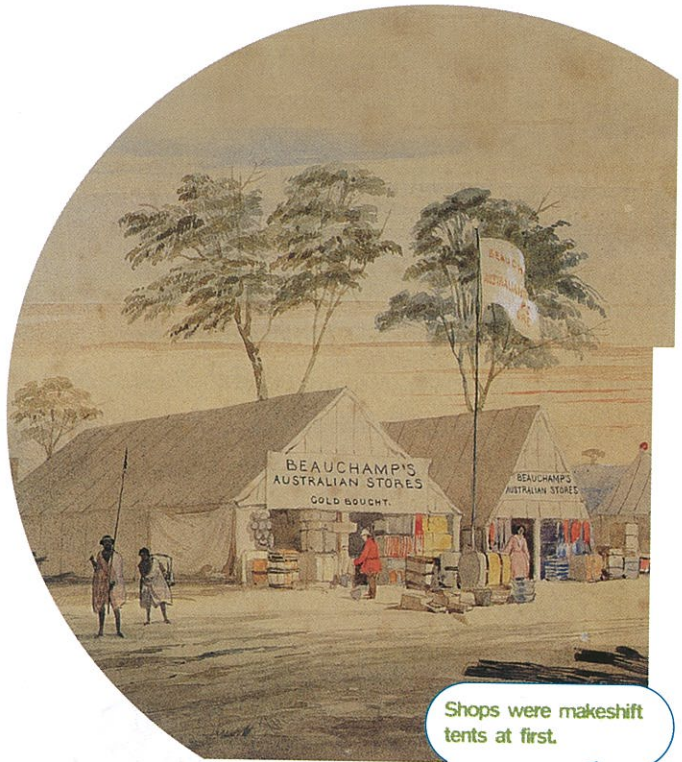
MILESTONES IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

At the goldfields

The miners who worked the diggings came from different backgrounds. They may have been office workers, teachers, sailors, shopkeepers, mechanics, farm workers, labourers, ex-convicts or ex-policemen. But all had one thing in common – they believed they could become rich. When they arrived at the goldfields, many found life different from the comfortable life they had led in the towns and cities.

Early days

When gold was first discovered in an area and the first miners arrived at a goldfield, there were usually no buildings or other services. Diggers lived in bark shelters, and travelled overland to the nearest town to gather supplies. By August 1851, conditions had improved. Permanent buildings had been erected, and merchants sold goods from makeshift shops. An English visitor wrote: 'Tents, bark huts and drays were ranged ... on each bank of the river. There were several stores of food, clothing and implements, and one or two butcher's shops.' (J. E. Erskine, *A Short Account of the Late Discoveries of Gold in Australia*, London, 1851)



Shops were makeshift tents at first.

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Sydney Morning Herald,
6 June 1851

The banks of the creek are very steep and rugged. There are at present about seventeen hundred diggers, and not above six women on the creek. Great order prevails amongst them, indeed far more so than could be reasonably expected, when the fact that there are no constables on the spot is taken into consideration ... The diggers are for the most part very badly housed, many of them lying in bough **gunyahs**, which afford but little protection against the cold, and none against the wet.

This newspaper report describes conditions on the goldfields at Ophir, NSW.



Established goldfields

At some goldfields, the gold ran out quickly and the miners moved on. At others, the supply of gold continued, and the miners stayed. Their houses became more permanent, and families moved to the goldfields to join their husbands and fathers. Shopkeepers established proper shops and roads were made.

Fine buildings were also erected in gold rush towns, and many can be seen today, including banks, court-houses and town halls. These buildings were large, and richly decorated, very different to the simple buildings built before.

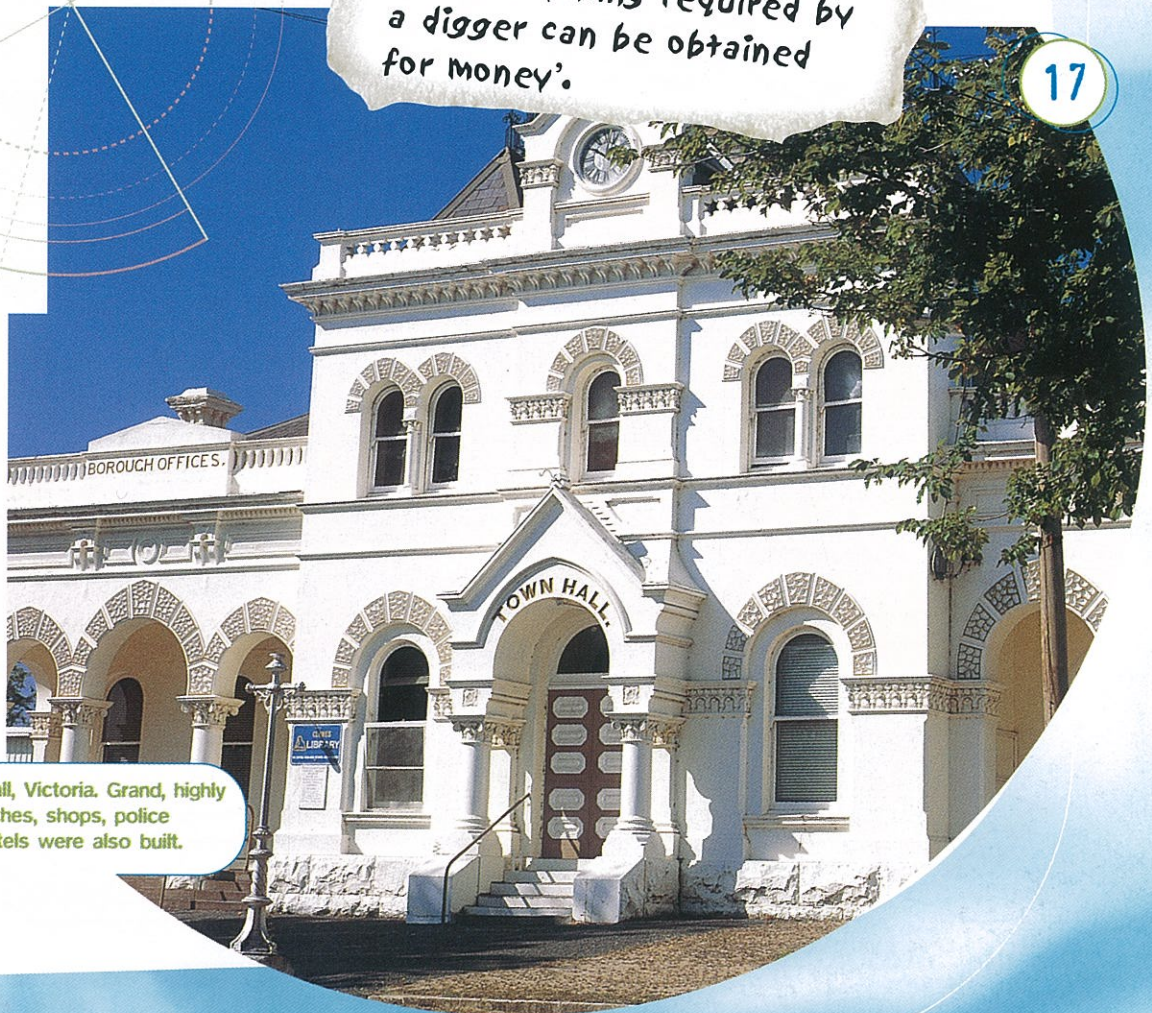
Eyewitness account

In *A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia*, published in 1853, Mrs C. Clacy described the tent 'boarding houses' used by some miners.

She wrote that they were:

'a tent set up with stringy bark couches, ranged down the side of the tent, leaving a narrow passage up the middle. The lodgers are supplied with mutton, damper and tea, three times a day.' She also described shops: 'The stores at the diggings are large tents, generally square or oblong, and everything required by a digger can be obtained for money'.

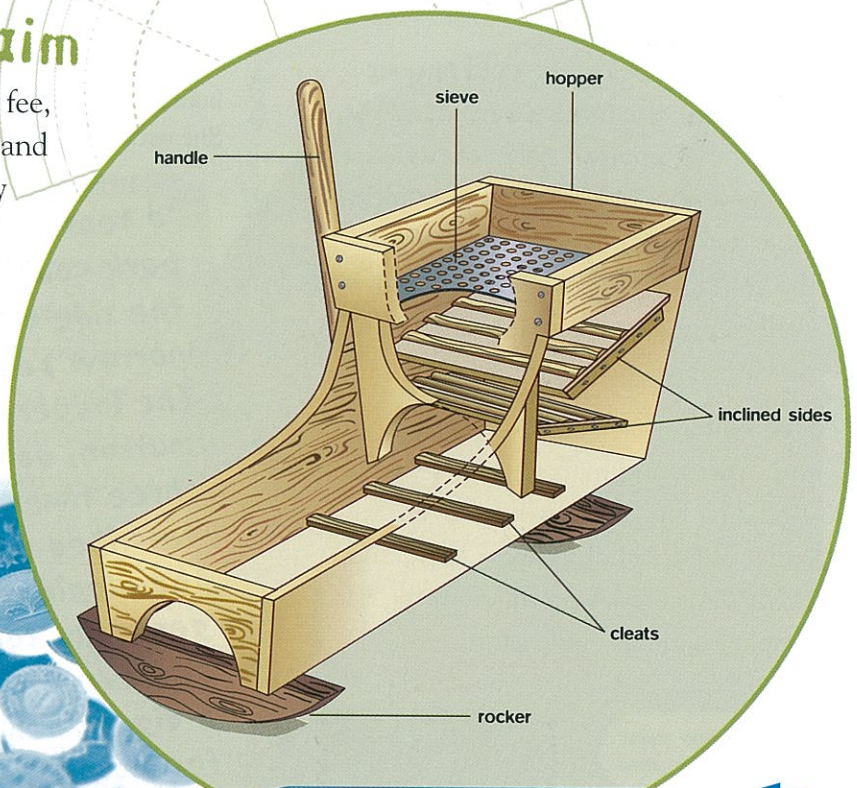
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Clunes Town Hall, Victoria. Grand, highly decorated churches, shops, police stations and hotels were also built.

Working a claim

In return for paying a licence fee, miners were granted a **claim**, and allowed to keep any gold they found there. A claim was a small patch of land (about two or three metres square). At first, all the gold discovered was **alluvial gold**.



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Alluvial mining

Alluvial gold was found using pans or cradles (above). To pan for gold, the miner put a small amount of soil, gravel or sand from the river bed into a pan, and swirled it with water. The gold specks sank to the bottom, and became visible as the miner swirled out the muddy water and sand. Cradles were wooden frames that washed lots of soil at once. Miners shovelled gravel and sand into the cradle, then rocked it back and forth, pouring water over it to wash away the soil. The mixture was strained through a screen that removed large rocks and gravel, leaving sand and gold. This mixture was panned to separate the gold.

Shaft mining

After the alluvial gold had been claimed, miners began to dig shafts into the Earth. The miners winched the soil (called 'wash dirt') to the surface in buckets. Then it was 'puddled' or washed in a large tub (left) to dissolve the sticky clay. This left a mixture of gravel, sand and sometimes specks of gold, which was shovelled into the cradle. The final method of recovering the gold was the same as for alluvial mining.

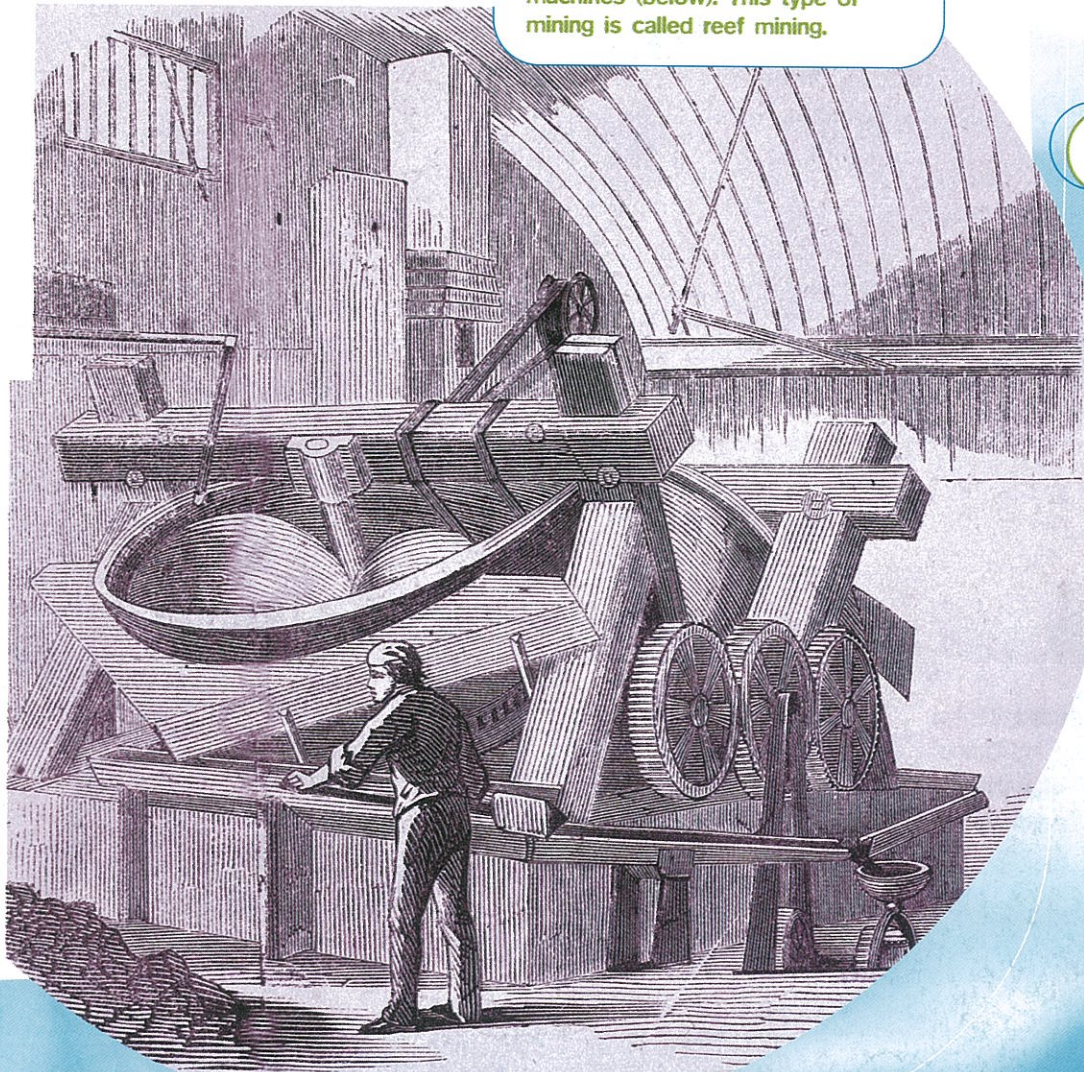
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Sydney Morning Herald,
6 June 1851

Miners generally dig in parties of three or six, who are distributed as follows: one digs and fills the buckets with soil; one carries the buckets of earth to the cradle at the creek; and the third works the cradle with one hand, and supplies it with water with the other. In parties of six they generally work two cradles. In some parties there are four persons, the rocky and heavy nature of the ground where they are requiring two persons to dig.

Reef mining

As the gold near the surface was recovered, shafts became deeper, tunnelling into the rocks below. This was expensive and time-consuming work, and was usually done by mining companies with many workers. Some miners who had worked alluvial goldfields became employees of mining companies after their claim was emptied. The gold was found deep underground in layers of quartz, a white rock that has veins of gold running through it. To recover the gold, the quartz was crushed and washed using large steam-powered machines (below). This type of mining is called reef mining.



Social cost of the gold rushes

The effects of the gold rushes were not all positive. Charles La Trobe, Governor of Victoria, reported to the British Government about the effect of the gold rushes on Melbourne.

'Day labourers, shopmen, artisans and mechanics of every description [have] thrown up their employments, and in most cases, leaving their employers and their wives and families to take care of themselves, run off to the workings.

Cottages are deserted, houses to let, business is at a standstill and even schools are closed.' The social cost of the gold rushes was high.

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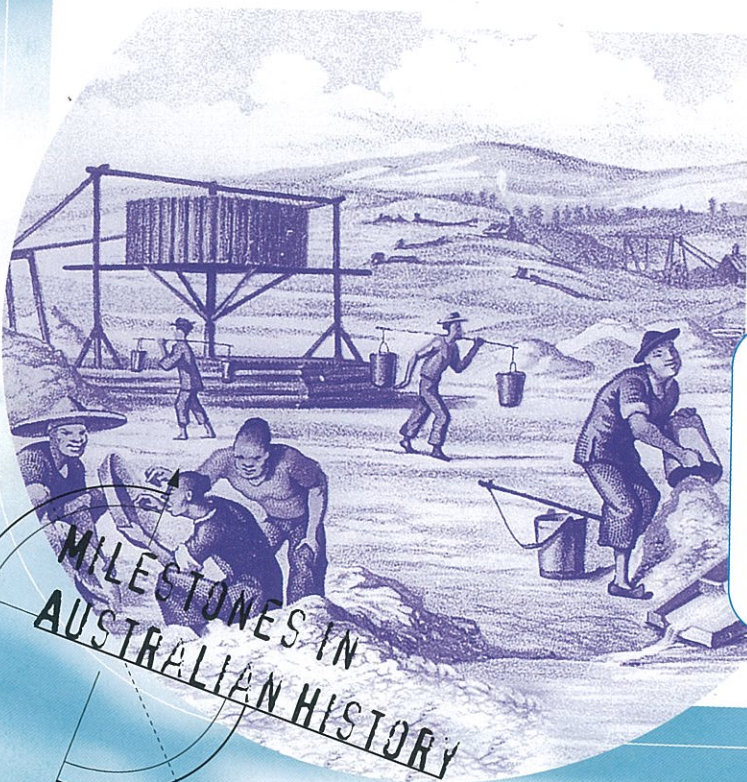


Effect on miners and their families

Searching for gold was a gamble. Each miner was given a tiny amount of ground. It may have contained a nugget that would make the finder rich, or enough specks of gold to allow the miner to pay his licence fee, or no gold at all. Many diggers left jobs and wasted money on equipment and transport, only to return empty-handed. Lucky miners found enough gold to pay for their journey, or realised the gamble was too great and went home.

Effect on people from other cultures

The gold rushes attracted people from many nations and cultures. The number of non-British miners alarmed the European settlers who thought of themselves as British. Then, racism was not considered to be wrong. There were acts of violence and discrimination against some immigrants, especially the Chinese (left).



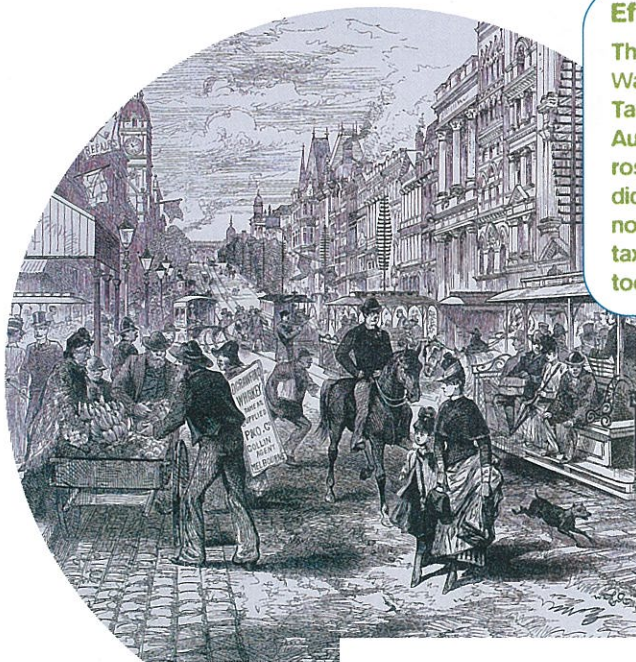
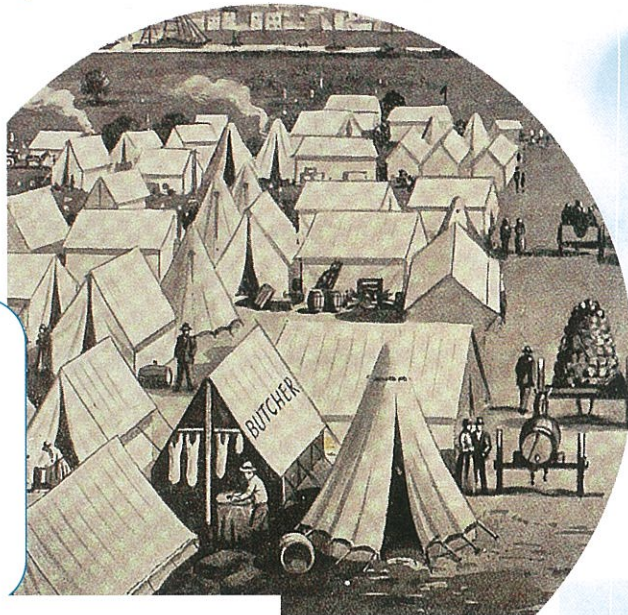


Effect on industry

The gold rushes affected many industries as men left for the diggings. Work on all Melbourne buildings stopped, and offices and shops had to close for lack of staff. As factories and warehouses closed, supplies of goods became scarce and prices rose. Ships could not unload or sail as their crews deserted. For several months, the situation was grave until enough disillusioned miners discovered that digging for gold was difficult, and returned to their jobs.

Effect on Melbourne and Sydney

Sydney and Melbourne became overcrowded, and the influx of people caused problems. Tent cities sprang up on city outskirts, creating health problems. In Melbourne, many people lived in tents on the southern bank of the Yarra River, in a settlement called 'Canvas Town' (right). The roads to the goldfields were tracks, and could not cope with the carts, horses and pedestrians using them.



Effect on other colonies

The effect of the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria affected other colonies. In Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, men left their jobs and families, and prices rose as goods became scarce. Also, these colonies did not benefit from the gold rush. They received no income from the sale of gold licences and no taxes from gold exports. Their populations dropped too, unlike Melbourne (left) and Sydney.

Effect on crime

The goldfields were lawless and violent places. Many diggers were ex-convicts, and gold was regularly stolen. Bushrangers such as Captain Melville, Ben Hall and Frank Gardiner (right) robbed travellers returning from the diggings, and held up gold escorts taking gold to Sydney or Melbourne. The police force was not big enough to handle the influx of people.

