

# 1851 GOLD FEVER!

## *Contents*

New South Wales .....	2
Victoria .....	3
Queensland .....	6
Western Australia .....	10

## New South Wales

Modern Australia was conceived at a creek near Bathurst, 270 kilometres west of Sydney, on 12 February 1851 when Edward Hammond Hargraves, eagerly watched by his young guide, John Lister, washed a panful of earth in a waterhole and found a small nugget of gold.

‘Here it is’, he exclaimed, and then washed five panfuls in succession, obtaining gold from all but one. Hargraves was ecstatic. ‘This’, he told Lister, ‘is a memorable day in the history of New South Wales. I shall be a baronet, you will be knighted, and my old horse will be stuffed, put in a glass case, and sent to the British Museum.’

By early May it was clear that gold was present in payable quantities. Hargraves rushed to Sydney with about 120 grams recovered by his assistants, Lister and the brothers William and James Tom.

On 10 May the *Bathurst Free Press* reported the discovery at Ophir, as Hargraves had named the site. But it was only when the story was reprinted five days later in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the importance of the find became widely enough known to start a major rush.

On 22 May Governor FitzRoy proclaimed the Crown’s ownership of all gold found in the colony, and the following day announced the introduction of a digger’s licence costing thirty shillings a month. But nothing could deter the multitude clambering over the Blue Mountains with the glitter of gold in their eyes. Even Hargraves was aghast, and on 27 May wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* imploring caution:

*Having passed on my road from Bathurst from 800 to 1000 people who are off to the diggings, to say nothing of the inability of a great portion of these people to endure the necessary labour to obtain gold, not ten per cent of the whole have any tools to work with, or a single pound to support themselves on their journey to the mines... I regret exceedingly to hear many poor people have left their employment for the purpose of seeking their fortune in the precarious occupation of gold digging. I venture to predict a very small percentage will do good, and a very great amount of human misery must be the result of this reckless digging mania... I beg of you to warn those who have employment in the more useful occupations of life, not to leave it, as they will be better off than the gold seekers in the end...*

By early June about 1700 men and six women were moling into the earth at Ophir. Every day more diggers arrived as word spread of other, even richer, finds in the neighbourhood. In July an Aboriginal shepherd found a huge nugget containing 39 564 grams of gold. 'Bathurst is mad again', reported the *Bathurst Free Press*. 'The delirium of gold fever has returned with increased intensity.'

## **Victoria**

In Victoria the Government, obviously concerned at the rival colony's sudden prosperity, offered a reward of 200 guineas for the discovery of a payable goldfield within 320 kilometres of Melbourne. Only sixteen days after the new colony was proclaimed, the committee appointed to investigate claims reported 'unquestionable evidence' of 'gold in considerable quan-

tity’.

Names such as Bendigo, Ballarat, Mount Alexander, and Clunes flashed around the globe as their fabulous deposits became known. Within three years the colony’s population quadrupled to over 300 000 people and imports soared from £750 000 at mid-century to £18 million by the end of 1854. In the first ten years the Victorian goldfields disgorged a third of the total world production — nearly 709 000 kilograms worth over £100 million at the time.

Gold fever affected every sector of society. The *Argus*, with a circulation of 625 and advertising income of £13 a week in 1848, increased this to 5000 copies and £300 in less than a year after the discovery of gold. Two months later, in July 1852, advertising revenue reached £800 a week, the newspaper’s size doubled, and the price was slashed from threepence to two-pence a copy.

But for Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe and the newly-elected Legislative Assembly, meeting in an almost deserted Melbourne, too much was happening too fast. By December 1851 an official report warned that the postmaster ...

*apprehends an entire disruption of the business of his Department, unless remedial measures can be taken. The Surveyor-General is of similar opinion. The Deputy-Registrar thinks that all his subordinates will leave their occupation. The Superintendent of Police states that, though in accordance with authority he offered high rates of pay to his force, fifty out of fifty-five constables have determined to go to the gold-fields... The Crown*

*Solicitor apprehends complete embarrassment. The Denominational School Board fears loss of teachers...*

So many able-bodied men had hotfooted to the goldfields that businesses were grinding to a halt, Melbourne sporting clubs were being disbanded, and even the annual Queen's Birthday Ball had to be cancelled.

On the goldfields, living and working under conditions of extreme hardship, some diggers did find their fortunes. The Melbourne *Daily News* told of two miners, James Regan and John Dunlop, who 'procured in five days 4 ounces 104 grains of very excellent gold.

Another party has got 14 ounces since the new ground was opened. Among it are nuggets the size and shape of split peas, and in some of the lots there are nuggets of even greater dimensions. Some lumps of half an ounce are talked of.'

But, reported the *Sydney Morning Herald*, many of the lucky ones spent their new-found wealth 'with a degree of recklessness'. Liquor, although prohibited on the fields, was the main attraction, with diggers thinking 'nothing of giving a shilling for a glass of rum or a pint of cider, at any of the numerous grog shops, which, tempted by the enormous profits of the trade, were, in spite of the risk of seizure, to be found in all directions'.

One innkeeper near Mount Alexander was reported to have made £6000 profit in the first three months after gold was discovered in the area.

For many thousands, however, Hargraves' warning became a terrible reality as they delved desperately into the arid earth for the lucky strikes that never

came. How many lie buried in unmarked graves will never be known.

As for Hargraves, although he never became a baronet, nor Lister a knight, and his old horse died unremembered, he certainly fared well enough financially.

The New South Wales Government paid him £10 500 for being ‘the first discoverer of gold in Australia’ — a completely unwarranted honour, as several other men had found traces of gold before him, only to have their discoveries hushed up by the authorities — and in 1877 he was granted a life pension of £250 a year. The Victorian Government awarded him £2381 and he was presented to Queen Victoria when he visited London in 1854.

In Melbourne in the same year, an important newspaper was established by a group of stockowners and merchants. In its first leading article, on 17 October, the *Age* noted that the ‘feverish excitement engendered by the gold discoveries, and by the consequent rush of immigrants from the four corners of the globe, has subsided. The new social system to which these heterogeneous elements have contributed is rapidly consolidating...’

Less than two months later, amid gunfire and death at the Eureka claim in Ballarat, this new order would assert itself in the most important armed rebellion to take place in Australia.

## Queensland

JAMES MULLIGAN has found a river of gold! The dramatic news, flashed by telegraph from the small Cape York Peninsula settlement of Georgetown

in August 1874, created a frenzy in Brisbane.

Gripped by dreams of instant wealth, men threw up their jobs and headed for the distant Palmer River, their fear of savage cannibals overcome by visions of the beckoning El Dorado. So began the greatest alluvial gold rush in the history of north Queensland.

Then aged 36, James Venture Mulligan was an Irishman with a great sense of adventure. He had read with interest a report written in 1872 by William Hann, leader of a government exploration party, which indicated there might be gold in the vicinity of the little known Palmer River.

Undaunted by dire warnings to all but the most experienced bushmen to avoid the treacherous country, Mulligan and five fellow prospectors set out for the Palmer, which they reached about 2 kilometres above the present-day settlement of Palmerville on 23 June 1873.

Very soon they found alluvial gold in their prospecting dishes. Even greater quantities were found as they worked their way up the Palmer and its tributaries. Within six weeks they had found several hundred ounces. Forced to replenish their supplies, the five headed for Georgetown, determined not to say a word about their lucky strike.

But one of them, after a few drinks too many in the local pub, could not contain himself. The secret was soon out — and Mulligan had to telegraph news of the find to Brisbane to assure his party of the reward offered by the government for the discovery of a payable gold field.

The first diggers followed Mulligan's track to the Palmer, where scores of

shanty town settlements with descriptive names like German Bar, Revolver Point, and Echotown soon mushroomed. Many more travelled from the south by sea as the government, eager to cash in on the find, established a harbour at the mouth of the Endeavour River.

The settlement which arose almost overnight was called Cooktown: within months the river was choked with hundreds of vessels, some from as far away as China.

The Palmer field at first lived up to its promise: in 1875 alone, 250,400 ounces of gold were officially exported and a vast amount smuggled out.

From Cooktown, diggers tramped for more than 200 kilometres through swamps, jungles and mountain passes with terrifying names like Hell's Gates to reach the alluvial gold fields.

Many fell victim to cannibals, who were said to have preferred rice-fed Chinese flesh to that of meat-eating Europeans! Newspapers were full of horror stories about Chinese hung up alive by their pigtailed for days before they were eaten. But even that did not put off the diggers who continued to pour in by their thousands.

Cooktown, the port and supply centre for the vast goldfield, boomed. On April 15, 1876, the town was large enough to be declared a municipality, with 32 km of streets, 65 pubs, 20 eating houses, 32 stores and a flourishing red light district to cater for around 30,000 men — and a handful of daring women — drawn from around the world.

Gold was so plentiful and even the most basic supplies, excluding liquor, so



scarce, that diggers would happily exchange lumps of gold for the same weight in horseshoes!

The discovery of gold on the nearby Hodgkinson River saw many European miners hotfoot it there. When soon after they returned to the richer Palmer River field, they discovered with anger that Chinese had arrived in their thousands to take over the claims abandoned by the Europeans.

As anti-Chinese feeling mounted, with violence erupting from time to time, the Government in Brisbane enacted tough legislation for all goldfields which blatantly discriminated against the 'celestials'.

By the early 1880s the alluvial gold was running out. The Palmer field declined and died as first the Europeans and finally even the Chinese left in search of richer pickings. Today, only a few small townships, like Palmer River, and a multitude of scattered ruins remain of the shanty towns that once promised so much to so many.

Cooktown, too, is but a ghost of its former self, because when the gold ran out, the reason for its existence also disappeared.

Other major north Queensland goldrushes last century took place at Ravenswood and Charters Towers. Between 1872 and 1916 Charters Towers produced ore then worth 25 million pounds — an enormous fortune at the time.

Today, with a population of about 8000, Charters Towers is the commercial centre for a farming and grazing district. But many of the goldrush buildings remain to delight visitors, among them the former School of Mines and the

restored Stock Exchange, where fortunes were made and lost every day as speculators traded in gold shares, some for mines that never existed.

## **Western Australia**

HOUSING probably the richest square mile in the world, the twin gold mining towns of Kalgoorlie and Boulder lie at the heart of Western Australia's fabulous goldfields.

But all around them in the burning outback are a host of former mining towns which, for a few golden months or years last century, were hailed on the stock exchanges of the Empire — only to wither and die when diggers rushed off in search of yet another Eldorado.

West Australian gold was discovered by Arthur Bayley and William Ford when in 1892, beside a rocky pond about 140 kilometres east of Southern Cross where they were camped, Bayley picked up a half-ounce nugget of solid gold. Fired with enthusiasm, the two prospectors rushed about the dry scrub, stooping every few minutes to pick up yet another nugget in the red dust.

Within three hours they had more than 100 ounces of gold. Wild with excitement, they threw their hats into the air, then continued searching bareheaded under the blazing sun.

Soon they reached a rocky outcrop — and undreamed of riches. As Ford said later: 'The first bit of gold we saw on the Reward Reef was a great yellow blotch on the face of stone. It was nice to look at and we did not touch it.'

The 'yellow blotch' was part of one of the largest gold deposits ever found in Australia. Bayley carried almost 600 ounces of gold when he arrived at Southern Cross on September 17, 1892, to claim the reward for discovering a new field, which would become known to history as Bayley's Reward.

Three days later Warden J. Finnerty declared open the gold field, which he named Coolgardie. The rush was on: after a glorious drinking spree involving almost every person in Southern Cross, hundreds set off for Coolgardie, some on horseback, others pushing their meagre belongings on wheelbarrows, even baby prams.

'Everyone who could possibly go had gone to the new rush, including bakers, butchers, the barber and the bootmaker,' lamented one of the few remaining residents.

Soon diggers from all over Australia were making their way to Perth and then tramping to Coolgardie across some 570 kilometres of almost waterless land. Hundreds died on the way.

Within a few months Bayley (who was in poor health) and Ford sold out to a Melbourne syndicate for 60 000 pounds and a one-sixth share in the new company, which mined the reef in earnest. Today, a small plaque marks the spot where they found the reef.

Meanwhile, the claims all round the reef were an ant's nest of activity as miners dry-blown the dust in search of gold.

Coolgardie boomed as many miners made small fortunes, but the cost of living was extremely high because everything from beer to huge 10-tonne

boilers and other mining machinery had to be carted from Southern Cross by horse-drawn waggons or trains of up to 100 camels linked nose to tail. The main street of Calgoorlie was about 70 metres wide, so that camel trains could turn easily.

Dust was everywhere and water was extremely scarce, most of it from salt bores which had been condensed and sold at very high prices. There was no sanitation and flies in thick black clouds buzzed everywhere.

Thousands died from malnutrition and diseases such as typhoid. Yet, undaunted, diggers streamed to the goldfields: by 1897, a year after the railway reached Coolgardie, the town hosted a World Exhibition which was attended by a staggering 61 000 people!

But even then Coolgardie was already being eclipsed by another gold mining town, discovered 60 kilometres to the east in June 1893 by a modest Irishman named Paddy Hannan and two companions, Tom Flanagan and Dan Shea.

‘We soon realised that we were located on a valuable field,’ Hannan said later. ‘It was agreed that I should go to Coolgardie and apply for a reward claim. The news of our find soon got abroad. There was a good deal of excitement. Hundreds of men set out for the scene. The flats and gullies all about our reward claim became alive with diggers dryblowing and finding gold.’

Soon thousands had left Coolgardie for Hannan’s Field, later renamed Kalgoorlie, and adjoining Boulder which contained one of the richest gold

bearing lodes in the world, the legendary Golden Mile. Covering one square mile, the lode is still producing and has to date yielded more than 1200 tonnes of gold, worth more than \$1000 million!

Gold there was in plenty, but not water. During one major drought around the turn of the century, according to one digger, Albert Gaston,

*... men walked around with their lips parched and cracked, too thirsty too speak... The breweries had to close down, and all the aerated water factories went out of action. In the hotels the barmen passed over the whisky bottle, but kept a firm hand on the water jug.*

*Crowds of men could be seen waiting around McDonald's condenser in Hannan Street, and every water stand in the town. The town was covered by a haze of red dust, with the temperature well over the 100 [degrees Fahrenheit] mark, and not a drop of water to be had for love or money. People have asked me why I didn't leave. That was not even thought of. The miner always trusts to luck.*

In the end it was technology, not luck, that saved the day, for in 1903 an amazing engineering project saw the opening of a pipeline to pump water for 600 kilometres from Perth to Kalgoorlie.

Today, in the main street, a statue of Paddy Hannan dispenses life-giving water from his water bag, which is connected to the pipeline that still supplies the goldfields.

But even water could not save Coolgardie: as surface gold started to run out early this century, miners moved away to Kalgoorlie and other gold rushes,

so that by the 1930s it had become virtually a ghost town, which it remains today.

Kalgoorlie boomed as gold fever reached a frenzy. Companies, many of them fraudulent, were formed, only to crash soon after. Of 800 mining companies existing in 1896, only 140 remained five years later. But many genuine ones returned fabulous profits.

Diggers flocked to Kalgoorlie from far away whenever they had a lucky strike or on weekends, packing the many hotels and pubs which sold an amazing — and sometimes lethal — variety of concoctions.

Drunks and other offenders received little mercy, as digger Charles Deland explained in a letter to his family in South Australia in March 1896:

*Though it has been raining all day, there have been hundreds of drunks and fights... Perhaps a man is drunk or aggressive. The police locked or chained up about twenty today... The tree is the largest in the town; attached to it are large iron chains. The man is chained to the tree if he is at all vicious and there he lies, viewed by all who pass. No covering, no shelter from the wind or rain or cold. He is given a few bags to lie on at night if he wishes.*

Today, Kalgoorlie-Boulder is a prosperous gold and nickel mining centre with a population of about 20,000.