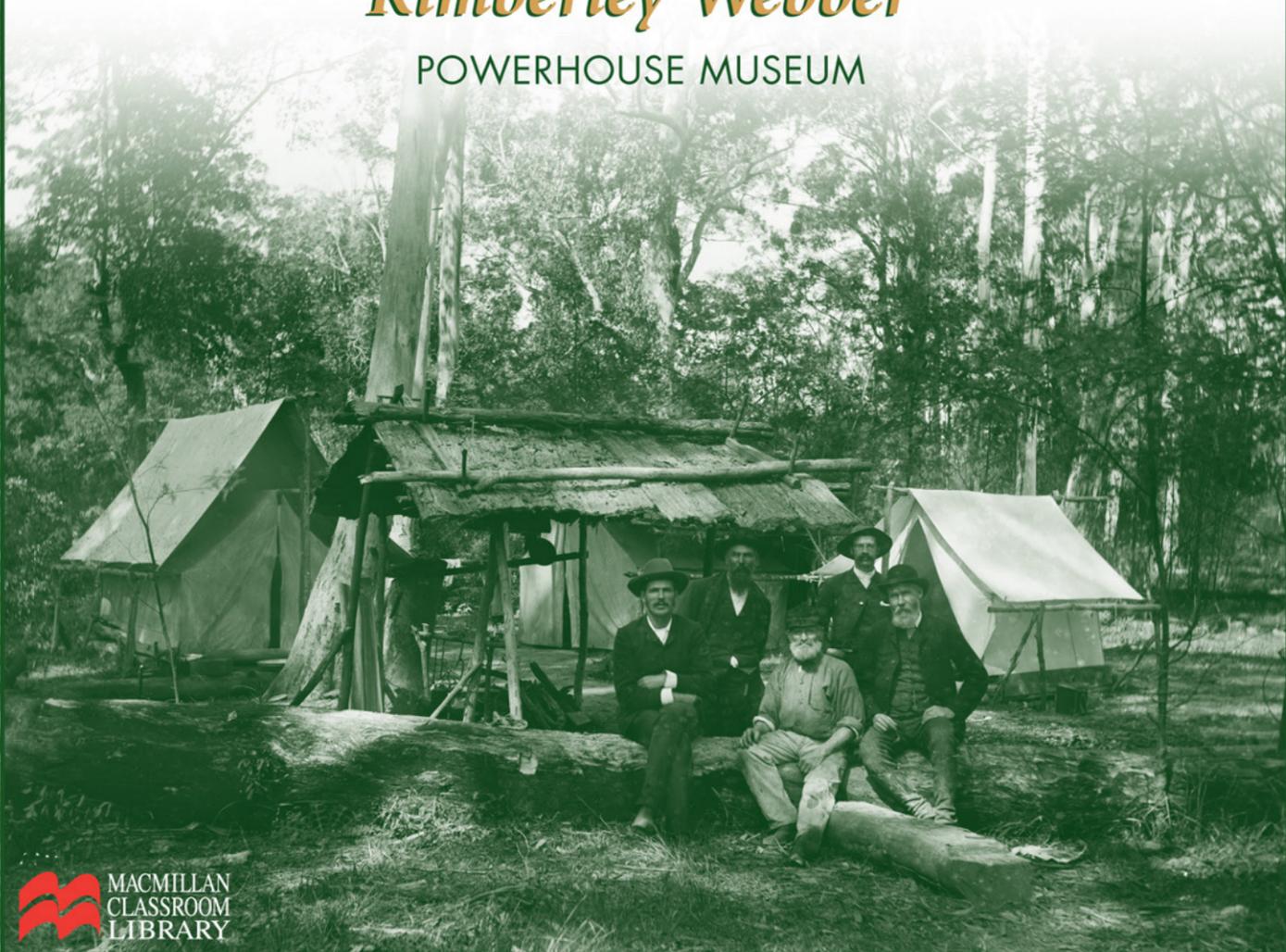


THE AUSTRALIAN GOLD RUSHES

# Daily Life on the Goldfields

*Kimberley Webber*

POWERHOUSE MUSEUM



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### **Glossary words**

When a word is printed in **bold**, click on it to find its meaning.

# The Australian gold rushes

**I**n 2001, Australia celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the official discovery of gold near Bathurst in New South Wales. On 12 February 1851, Edward Hargraves found five grains of gold in mud washed from Lewis Ponds Creek.

Gold was such a valuable and desired material that for a while, the whole country was caught up in 'gold fever'. Men left their jobs, homes and families to rush to the goldfields in New South Wales and Victoria. The fever spread to Queensland, and then finally to all the colonies of Australia. Within 10 years, the population had more than doubled, as eager gold diggers from Europe, America and Asia sailed to Australia in the hope of making their fortune. Australia was never the same again.

New towns and cities grew quickly with the increase in population. More farming land was taken up to feed the diggers and their families. New industries developed to provide them with building materials, furniture, clothes and food, and equipment for the mines. But gold did not bring prosperity for all. As settlement spread, more and more Aboriginal people were forced off their traditional lands.

*Daily Life on the Goldfields* is one in a series of six books that celebrates 150 years of gold in Australia, from the excitement of its official discovery in 1851, to the large scale mines of today. Each book looks at how the discovery of those tiny grains of gold changed Australia forever.

## Daily life on the goldfields

Daily life on the goldfields was quite different from the life most diggers knew. In the rush to the diggings, families were usually left behind. Home was often a simple, canvas tent with the most basic furnishings.

Everything about the goldfields was new. Diggers wore different clothes and used new tools. They worked long hours in all sorts of weather. Where they may have always slept in a house on a proper bed, they now had to get used to a tent with a mattress of gum leaves. Simple meals were cooked over an open fire.

Everyone was carried away by gold fever and dreams of great riches. Few were successful. Most had to make do with small finds of gold rather than the huge nuggets they had hoped to find.

### In this book you can:

- **READ** about what sort of people were attracted to the goldfields
- **SEE** the everyday clothes of diggers and their families
- **LOOK** at their homes and what was in them
- **FIND OUT** about their food and where it came from
- **SEE** how they managed their daily household chores
- **LEARN** about sickness and death on the goldfields.



Photographed in 1872, these diggers stand proudly by their mine

# A typical digger

A typical digger was a man in his 20s, either unmarried or with a young family. Although doctors and lawyers came to the goldfields, most diggers were tradesmen such as blacksmiths, builders, butchers, carpenters and shoemakers. They were well educated and most could read and write.

Some people came to the diggings from nearby cities and towns by coach or on foot. Others came from all over Australia or from overseas. For those seeking their fortune, no distance was too far and no cost too great.

Most of the diggers who came from overseas were English, but there were also Welsh, Irish and Scottish diggers. **Europeans** were also keen to make their fortune and came from Germany, Italy, Poland, Denmark, France, Spain and Portugal. Californian diggers came from America, and when news of the riches being discovered spread to Asia, Chinese diggers came too.



New England digger

This man was photographed on the New England goldfields in New South Wales in the 1890s. Like most miners he was young, fit and keen to make his fortune.



A portrait to send home

Diggers who had left their families far behind were keen to have photographs like this taken to send home. These men were photographed in a studio in 1864. Their suits do not fit particularly well, and may have been borrowed for the day to help them look more prosperous.

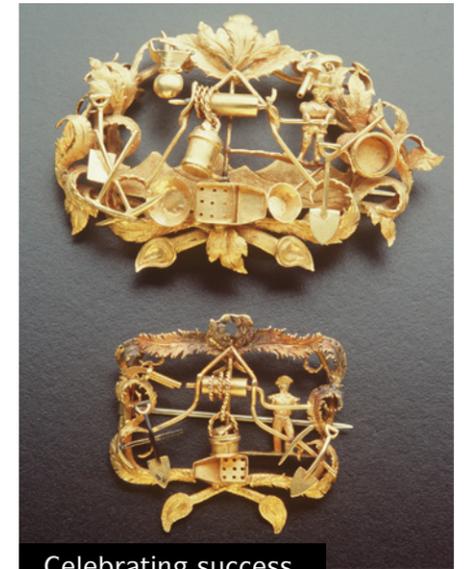
## A digger's belongings

Newspapers, magazines and books were full of advice about what diggers should take to the goldfields. Some even provided lists of supplies. Shops in London, Sydney and Melbourne offered special digger's kits.

### Recommended supplies

James Bonwick published a guide to the Australian diggings in 1852. He advised diggers not to take too much as transport was very expensive. As most would have to walk to the diggings, they should take only what they could carry. Bonwick recommended:

- hard-wearing clothes
- strong boots
- waterproof coat and trousers of **oilskin**
- a roll of canvas 'for your future home'
- good jacket for Sundays
- pick, shovel and **panning dish**
- a **cradle** 'may be carried in parts without much trouble'.



Celebrating success

Some diggers had jewellery made to celebrate their success. These brooches include many of a diggers' essential belongings: picks and shovels, panning dishes, cradle, bucket, pistol and a pouch in which to put gold. How many items can you find?

### Settlers' and Gold Diggers' General Store, 39, SWANSTON STREET.

Diggers went to shops like this to equip themselves for the diggings

**N.** GERRARD AND CO., (from Hobart Town,) beg to apprise the public generally, that they have opened those commodious Stores, 39, Swanston-street, with a well selected and general assortment of Goods of the best description, and which will be sold at the lowest remunerative rate. Their stock comprises the following:— Flour, fine, in large or small bags; Groceries of every description; Slops and Boots; Oats, Barley, and Bran; Preserved Meats; Tinware; Oppossum Skin Rugs; American Pails; Gold Weights and Scales; Tobacco, Spirits, and Wines.

*To wholesale purchasers liberal allowances will be made.*

# Dressing on the goldfields

## A digger's clothes

Clothes had to be tough to cope with the hard work of searching and digging for gold.

The typical digger's outfit was:

- a striped undershirt
- a blue or red flannel striped overshirt
- moleskin (cotton) trousers
- a leather belt
- heavy leather boots
- a cabbage tree hat to keep the sun off.



Cabbage tree hat

## Cabbage tree hats

Cabbage tree hats were straw hats made from the leaves of the cabbage tree palm. The leaves were plaited and the plaits stitched together to form a hat. A fine cabbage tree hat was highly valued on the goldfields. It was much more expensive than an ordinary straw hat. Wearing one was a sign of success.

## Clothes for the heat

The heat of the Western Australian goldfields meant that diggers working there wore fewer clothes than those on the eastern goldfields. Writing to his fiancée in 1896, Charles Deland described his appearance:

**O**ur costume is not too elegant and fashion troubles us not. During the day I wear boots, socks, trousers, hat and a singlet of fine net ... so that I am not sunburnt all over, shirts being unnecessary.



Artist and digger, Eugène von Guérard painted *I have got it* in 1854

This successful digger is dressed in the fashion of the goldfields. He is wearing a striped flannel undershirt, a cotton overshirt, leather boots that come up over the knees and a cabbage tree hat.



This is a page from the sketchbook of the artist and digger Eugène von Guérard

The two women pictured both have short skirts so they will not drag in the mud. They wear large bonnets to keep the sun off their heads.

## Women's clothes

Women joined their husbands and fathers once goldfields became more established. While men wore a practical style of dress for the rugged life of the goldfields, women and young girls dressed in the same sort of clothes they had always worn.

The typical style was:

- a long dress with a high neck, tight waist and full skirt
- a cotton petticoat and bloomers underneath
- striped stockings
- hard-wearing boots
- a large bonnet to keep the sun off.

Newcomers were surprised at how well some women dressed in Australia. Writing from Adelaide in 1852, Sophy Cooke remarked that when her husband took her to a concert, she thought her English clothes were not as good as those of local women:

... people dress as genteely and with quite as good taste as those at home ... I can assure you I did not feel dressed enough when sitting by the side of ladies ... with lace sleeves and white gloves; it quite put me in mind of England.



This bonnet's large brim around the front and gather at the back helped protect its wearer from the sun

## Clothes for Sunday

Sunday was the only day that diggers did not work. Women also did little cooking or housework that day. Everyone put on their best clothes, known as their 'Sunday best'. Some went to church, while others visited friends or went for a walk around the goldfields. There was much to see and do. Brass bands performed popular songs, competing teams played cricket or football and there were horse races, cock fights and boxing.

### Sunday shopping

Shops were open with Sunday being the busiest day. Men and women bought food, new clothes and, if they had had any success, a few luxuries such as a proper bed and mattress or a carpet for the floor.

For men, 'Sunday best' was a store-bought suit with matching vest, a white shirt and coloured necktie. These suits were made from linen in summer and from wool in winter.

There was far more choice for women. Some made their own clothes, copying the latest fashions from magazines. Others had them made by the many local dressmakers, or bought them ready-made from the store.



Sewing machine

Sewing machines were invented in the 1840s and available in Australia from 1860.



Sarah's wedding dress

This was Sarah Coyle's 'Sunday best'. It was made for her wedding to Thomas Fitzgerald in 1855.



Leather shoes

These shoes were made in about 1860. With fine leather toes and fabric sides, they were not meant for walking on the muddy streets of the goldfields, but would have been worn inside.

## Fashionable dress shops

As goldfields developed into busy townships, all sorts of shops opened to meet the needs of the diggers. Fashionable dress shops were popular. Successful diggers and their families could buy the latest clothes and accessories from Paris and London.

### Aladdin's cave

From the outside, even the most fashionable shops did not look very attractive. They were simple tents or roughly made buildings. But stepping inside was like entering Aladdin's cave. Fine fabrics, fashionable hats, shoes, parasols and shawls were piled high as the wealth of the diggings attracted goods from all over the world. Mrs Campbell, the wife of a goldfields' magistrate, described successful diggers' wives as dressed 'in fabrics and colours fit for an oriental princess'. In some stores the finest clothes were mixed in with general supplies. Ellen Clacy wrote about stepping into such a store:

*Here lies a pair of herrings dripping into a bag of sugar, or a box of raisins; there a gay-looking bundle of ribbons beneath two tumblers, and a half-finished bottle of ale. Cheese and butter, bread and yellow soap, pork and currants, saddles and frocks, wide-awakes and blue serge shirts, green veils and shovels, baby linen and tallow candles, are all heaped indiscriminately together.*

(herring – fish)

(wide-awakes – hats)

Stories of diggers' extravagances were common. When some struck it rich they wanted to buy the best of everything. One miner even had slippers made from real gold for his wife!



The recreated Criterion Store at Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Victoria

When the original store operated during the Ballarat gold rush, diggers and their wives could choose from fine laces, beautiful fabrics and fashionable dresses. A crinoline is hanging from the ceiling in the top right-hand corner of this photograph.



In 1860, Mrs Urquhart put on her most fashionable dress for the photographer

# Homes on the goldfields

When diggers arrived at a new goldfield they usually needed to find somewhere to live. Most diggers bought a roll of canvas and looked for an open piece of ground. Chopping down any trees in the way, they would build their first home, a tent. This provided enough room for one or two beds, a place to eat, and storage for their tools and personal belongings.

## Adding some luxuries

Diggers added a few luxuries if they decided to stay for a while. A stone fireplace at one end of the tent meant they no longer had to cook in the open. The fire also provided warmth in winter. A wooden floor kept their belongings out of the mud.

Despite these improvements, tent life was not comfortable. Canvas walls and roofs did not keep out the heat of the Australian summer or provide protection from the biting winter cold. Although tents gave shelter from the rain, they did not keep out insects, snakes or other wildlife.

## Golden stories

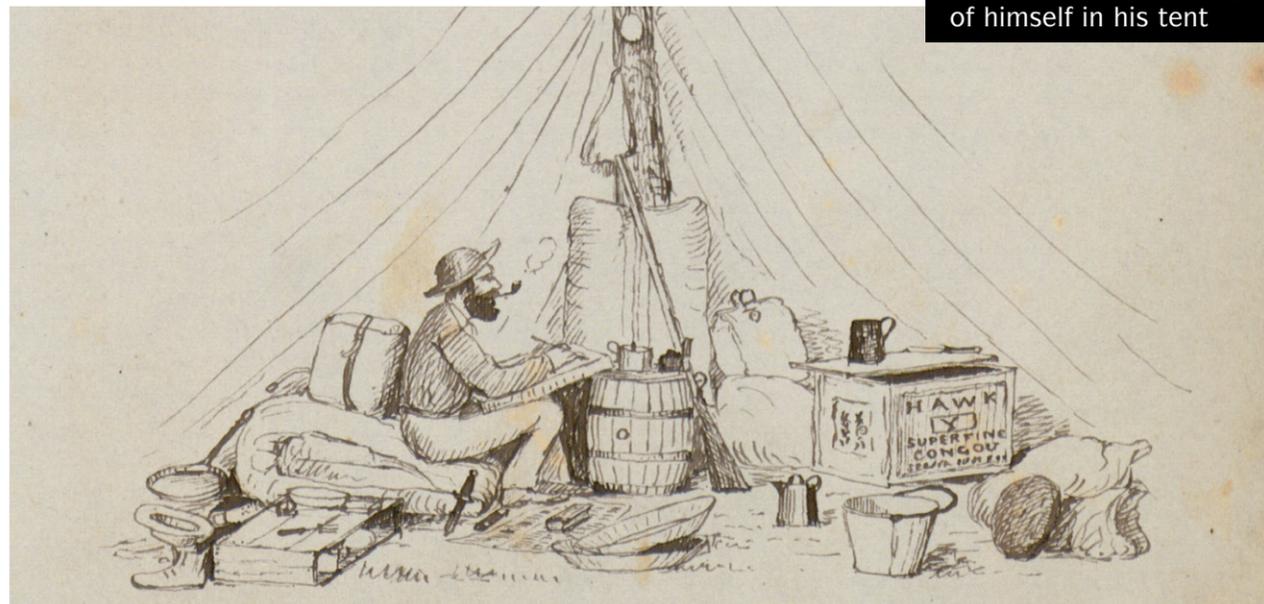
### Edward Snell

Edward Snell was an English engineer who arrived in Australia in 1859 and went to the Victorian diggings. Each day he wrote in his diary, describing his life on the goldfields. One Sunday he wrote:

*Made a damper to take to the diggings tomorrow and wrote up this log — read an old newspaper from England dated last October. Our tent is in a precious litter and here's a sketch of the interior of it and by jove while I've been sketching I've forgotten the damper and it's burnt black as coal, there it is on the right.*

(litter – a mess)

Edward Snell's drawing of himself in his tent



## Bark huts

Some diggers became tired of tent life and built themselves more substantial bark huts.

The result was a simple but sturdy home. Some diggers made them even more comfortable by constructing wooden shutters for the windows, putting down a wooden floor and lining the bark walls with canvas. The lining kept out the wind, insects and snakes.

In some areas, Aboriginal men made money building bark huts for the diggers. In Gympie, Queensland, they were paid about three shillings for this work.

## How to make a bark hut

- 1 Peel large sheets of bark off ironbark or other suitable trees.
- 2 Press the bark flat and leave it to dry.
- 3 Build a simple framework out of timber.
- 4 Nail the bark to the timber frame.

## Golden stories

### Mrs Campbell's bark hut

When Mrs Campbell, the wife of a police magistrate, joined her husband on the Ovens goldfields in Victoria, she was pleased to discover a neat bark hut ready for her:

*I was surprised to find the table well supplied with cups, saucers, plates, silver forks and spoons ... some of the officers hearing that the missus was arriving had sent them for her use till her own were unpacked, as well as a nice hair mattress to sleep upon.*

(missus – married woman, wife)



Diggers stand outside their bark huts

## More comfortable homes

When diggers or families decided to stay in a particular area, they wanted a home that was more comfortable. Many built these homes using all sorts of different materials. A variety of materials were suitable for the walls:

- Wattle and daub walls were made of pieces of timber (from the wattle tree) held together by mud or clay.
- Slab huts were made from thick pieces of timber joined together.
- Weatherboards were specially cut timber pieces that were nailed onto a wooden frame.
- Mud bricks were made in areas with good clay soil. Diggers mixed clay with water to make bricks. These were dried in the sun and used for the walls of the house.
- Ready-made bricks were supplied by commercial brickworks on more established goldfields.
- Stone was the most expensive material used for house building because it was the most difficult to cut and shape.

Simple wooden shutters served as windows and doors. Only successful diggers could afford glass. Roofs were made from bark sheets, wooden shingles or **corrugated** iron. In wooden houses, the walls were lined with canvas.

### Two rooms

At first, these houses only had one or two rooms. If it was a family home, everyone slept in one room with children in one bed and parents in another. The second room would be where they ate, played, washed, cooked and worked. If the family was successful, they might also have a parlour, or best room, for when visitors called. This would have a carpet on the floor, curtains at the window and even a piano. Children were never allowed to play in this room.



Slab hut

A slab hut with a bark roof. The slabs on the front wall have been whitewashed. Illustrations of fashionable dresses in the window suggest that the owner is a dressmaker.



Wattle and daub hut

This family stands in front of their wattle and daub home at Hill End, New South Wales. The man has probably built this house. On the chimney you can see how he has built a frame of sticks and rammed mud in between them.

## Furniture and furnishings

Early homes on the diggings usually had simple homemade furniture. Most diggers had brought everything they needed on their backs, so furniture was made from whatever they could find.



The interior of a digger's hut by artist Henry Winkles. All the furniture has been made from local materials

### Making furniture

Diggers made stools from logs of wood and tables from wooden planks stretched between upturned buckets. They converted discarded boxes into cupboards and made beds by stretching canvas across a timber frame.

With limited space, diggers hung food, tools and clothes from the tent's timber frame. Light came from candles stuck in old bottles or from **kerosene** lamps.

When townships began to develop around a goldfield, shops soon followed, selling furniture and luxuries like carpets and proper mattresses.

## Golden stories

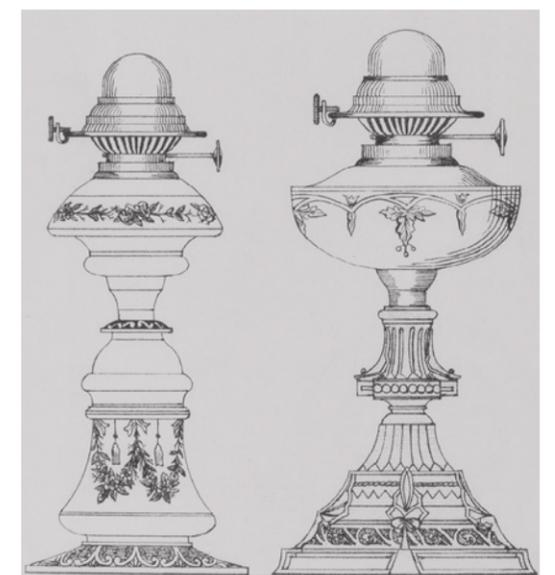
### Emily Skinner's tent home

Emily Skinner shared a tent on the Victorian diggings with her husband, their baby and her husband's mining partners.

Although it was only two rooms, she found it snug and cosy and wrote:

*Our men were first rate bush carpenters, and had made several articles of furniture: cupboard, safe, tables, and some really comfortable chairs. They looked quite nice when cushioned and covered with neat chintz and we spread bags and matting over the earthen floor.*

(chintz – cotton fabric printed with floral pattern)



Kerosene lamps

# Eating and drinking

In the early years of the gold rushes, diggers ate very simple meals. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were much the same – meat, bread and tea.

## Fresh meat

Meat was either fresh or **salted**. Fresh meat was available when a herd of cows, sheep or pigs arrived at the diggings. These were butchered straight away. Sides of lamb, beef or pork, chops and steaks were grilled over a fire or fried in a pan. If diggers had vegetables, such as potatoes and onions, they could make stews.

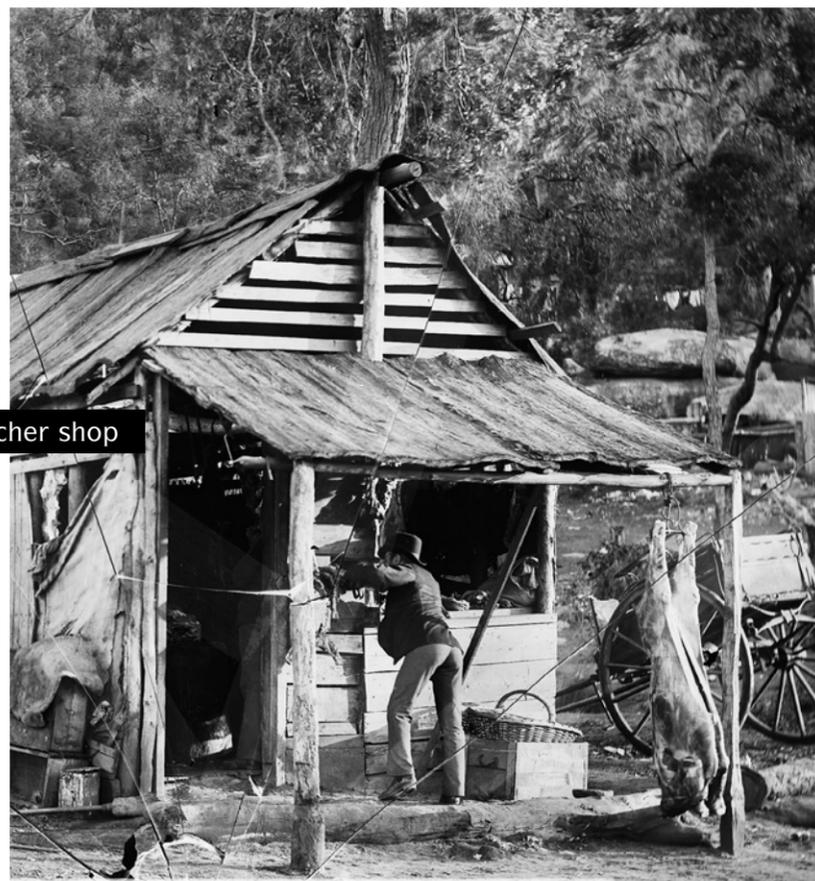
## Salted meat

There was always salted meat when fresh meat was in short supply. This was meat that had been rubbed with salt so it would keep for much longer. When both fresh and salted meat ran out, diggers went out hunting whatever animals they could find. Kangaroo and rabbit were both popular foods.

By the time of the Western Australian gold rushes in the 1880s, tinned meat was available. As it was usually described as 'tinned dog', it cannot have been very tasty.

In Australia's hot climate, meat did not stay fresh for long. Butchers killed animals out the back of their shops and hung the meat out the front. Buyers could not be too fussy. When they got the meat home, they washed it in vinegar and water to get rid of the smell.

Butcher shop



Meat grinders made it easy to chop meat up finely for pies and other dishes

## Damper

Damper is a type of bread made with baking powder instead of yeast. It was a popular choice because it was so easy to make. Diggers mixed flour, baking powder and water in their tin gold-panning dishes, shaped it into a round loaf and baked it in the coals of the fire. Some people found it delicious, especially with golden syrup on top. Others found it tasted dreadful, and thought anyone who ate damper had the 'digestion of an ostrich'.

Like it or not, damper was a major part of the digger's diet. As one digger wrote:

**W**e had to content ourselves with mutton and damper three days a week and damper and mutton on the other four days.

## How to make damper

(recipe makes one large damper)

### STEP 1

Mix nine cups of plain flour with two tablespoons of cream of tartar and one tablespoon of bicarbonate of soda (baking powder).

### STEP 2

Add enough water to mix to a soft dough.

### STEP 3

Shape into a round loaf.

### STEP 4

Leave to rise in a warm place for 15 minutes.

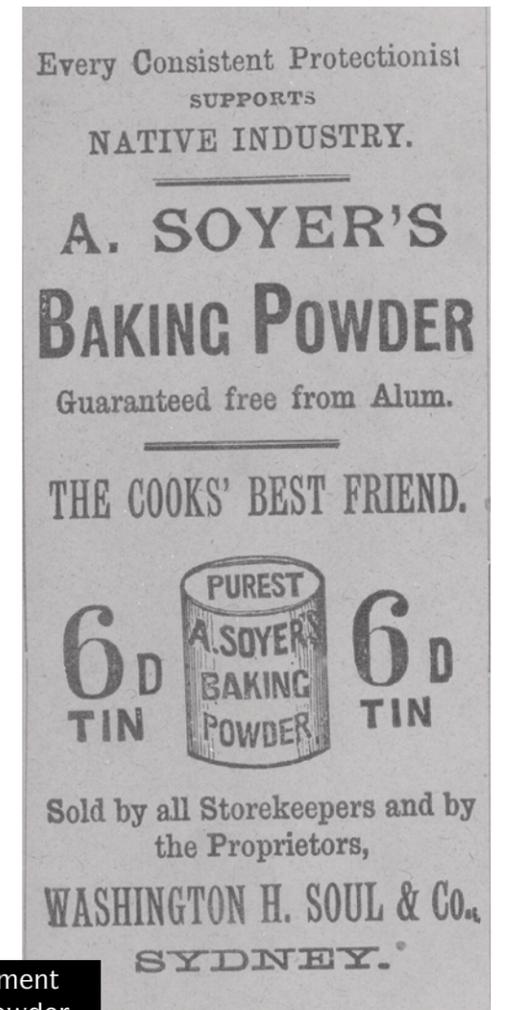
### STEP 5

Bake in a hot oven for 30 minutes or wrap in aluminium foil and bury in the hot coals of a barbecue.

### STEP 6

The damper is cooked if it sounds hollow when you knock on it.

An advertisement for baking powder



Damper can be baked in a camp oven like this one



## Billy tea

Diggers drank **pannikins** or mugs of tea at every meal. Tea was important because it was dangerous to drink the local water. With no proper toilets, water in the creeks, rivers and dams became badly polluted. Water had to be boiled before it was safe to drink.

## Swinging the billy

The tea came from China and was light in colour and mild in flavour. Teaspoons of loose tea leaves were tossed into a **billy** of boiling water. Some liked to stir the tea with eucalypt twigs, which gave the tea a distinctive taste. With the lid firmly on, the billy was swung around to make the leaves flavour the boiled water. If the leaves did not sink to the bottom, the diggers had to suck the tea through their teeth.

Fresh milk was scarce on the diggings. Few people could afford to keep and feed a cow. The only thing added to tea was sugar, although some liked a swig of brandy as well.



A pannikin



A billy

## Eating out

For diggers living by themselves or too tired to cook, there were plenty of cheap places to get a meal. In 1857 in Ballarat's Main Street, one in 10 buildings was a restaurant.

There were few government rules about setting up a restaurant. Anyone could find a large tent or slab hut, paint a sign and open up for business.

## Chinese restaurants

The tradition of Chinese restaurants began on the goldfields. Some Chinese set up cheap cafes or restaurants, seeing this as an easier way to make money than digging for gold. The difference was they did not sell Chinese food, but European dishes such as soup, stews and pies.

## Hawkers

Hungry diggers could also buy pies and sausages from one of the many **hawkers** who walked around selling their goods. However, many thought that cheap cuts of meat such as horse, dog or cat were used in pies and sausages, which meant they were not too popular.

The interior of John Alloo's Chinese restaurant in Ballarat in 1855, drawn by goldfields artist, S.T.Gill

## Packets of Chinese tea

The writing down the sides of the packets includes messages from customers about the excellence of the tea.



## Alcohol

At first, the sale of alcohol was banned on the goldfields. Officials thought it would only increase the diggers' unruly behaviour. Diggers were used to drinking alcohol and when they could not buy it legally, they found **illegal** supplies instead.

### Sly grog shops

Disguised as cafes and stores, **sly grog** shops could be found all over the goldfields. The owners added all sorts of things to the alcohol including water, wine, tobacco and even hot, spicy cayenne pepper. This was to make it go further and make more money. Drunken customers gambling, arguing and fighting were common problems.

In April 1853, the painter and gold digger Eugène von Guérard wrote in his diary:

*Some days ago a large tent was put up close to mine by some very undesirable-looking people. A man with a wife and daughter, and several young men, seem to be carrying on an illicit sale of spirits. The gambling at night invariably ends in loud quarrelling and fighting. Very unpleasant neighbours.*

Two weeks later he reported that the police raided his neighbours' tent and closed down the sly grog shop.

In 1854 the ban on alcohol sales was lifted. Hotels sprang up all over the goldfields.

The brewing of beer was one of the earliest manufacturing industries to set up business on the goldfields. Buninyong was among the first places where gold was found in Victoria.

## Golden stories

### Sly grog hawkers

Sly grog was also available from hawkers who walked around selling it on the goldfields. At Bendigo, Victoria, some women had a clever disguise for their illegal activity. Looking 'hugely fat', they walked around the goldfields selling a shilling's worth of brandy poured from a tube that ran under their skirts to a large tin container.

## Hard-working Chinese

In the 1850s and 1860s, thousands of Chinese came to New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland to dig for gold. In the 1870s, Chinese were in the majority on the Pine Creek diggings in the Northern Territory. With care and patience, they worked over old diggings abandoned by Europeans, and often had great success.



This Chinese man was sketched selling his vegetables in the street



The brewery at Buninyong, near Ballarat in Victoria

### Chinese knowledge of farming

Most Chinese came from Canton in southern China where they had been farm labourers. They soon put their knowledge of farming to work. They were particularly skilled at managing water and making sure the soil was as healthy as possible. Their results were more successful than those of European farmers, particularly with growing vegetables. In many areas, it was only because of their skills that vegetables such as potatoes, onions, carrots, beans and cabbages were available at all.

The Victorian journalist, E.M. Clowes reported that Australian farmers should learn from the methods used by the successful Chinese farmer:

*... [he] never looks up, never stops from dawn to dark. He divides his ground into little oblong patches, with channels between to conserve every drop of moisture; he pampers the young weak plants, shading them from wind and sun with bits of sacking, boards or slates; he loosens the ground unceasingly round them and waters untiringly.*

# Shopping and housework

Most diggers brought some supplies of food with them to the diggings. They bought what they could from local stores when these ran out. If supplies were not available, they sent away to the nearest town for them.

## General stores

Some people quickly realised they could make more money by setting up shop than from digging for gold. They opened general stores that sold everything. Huge sacks of flour and sugar were stacked on the floor, shelves were filled with packets of tea, sacks of coffee beans, tins of sardines, jars of pickles and a variety of other food items. Panning dishes, cradles, picks and shovels hung from the rafters.

## Canned food

At the time of the Western Australian gold rushes, there were improvements in canning technology. This meant a wider range of tinned foods was available and diggers had far more choice.

Writing to his parents in 1896, Campbell Deland described the 'enormous variety' sold in local stores:

**P**lum puddings, custards, roly-poly, cauliflower, cabbage, turnips, celery, beans, asparagus, boiled mutton, beef, pork ... ox-head, ox-cheek ... in fact any dish you can imagine is done up in tins & only needs warming.

(roly-poly – a steamed pudding made with jam)

This store, which is recreated at Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Victoria, stood on Main Road, Ballarat.

One of the largest stores at the Ballarat diggings



## Golden stories

### The Clendinning's general store

Martha Clendinning and her sister went with their husbands to the Ballarat diggings. In 1854 they opened a store selling tea, coffee, sugar, candles, matches, tobacco, jams and bottled fruits. Among their most successful items were baby clothes.

As Martha Clendinning later wrote:

... these had never appeared on any goldfield before ... Those [women] who possessed babies managed by hook or by crook, in many cases, to obtain a share of their husband's gold, and visited our store for some of the precious articles. Our investment proved a paying one, we soon had to send to Melbourne for a further supply.

## Buying and selling

In the early years of the gold rushes, most diggers bought and sold things using gold rather than coins and notes. On the Victorian diggings in 1852, the digger Edward Snell wrote in his diary that he had:

**S**old the cart for 10 ozs of gold and Charley the horse for 10½ ozs.

(ozs – ounces is a unit of mass. 10 ounces equals 283 grams)

## 'Ready Reckoners'

Most diggers carried around little books called 'Ready Reckoners' that showed the value of specific amounts of gold. Every shop had gold scales and there were lots of stories about the tricks used by shopkeepers to cheat diggers.

Ellen Clacy accompanied her brother to the Victorian diggings in 1852 and described some of these tricks:

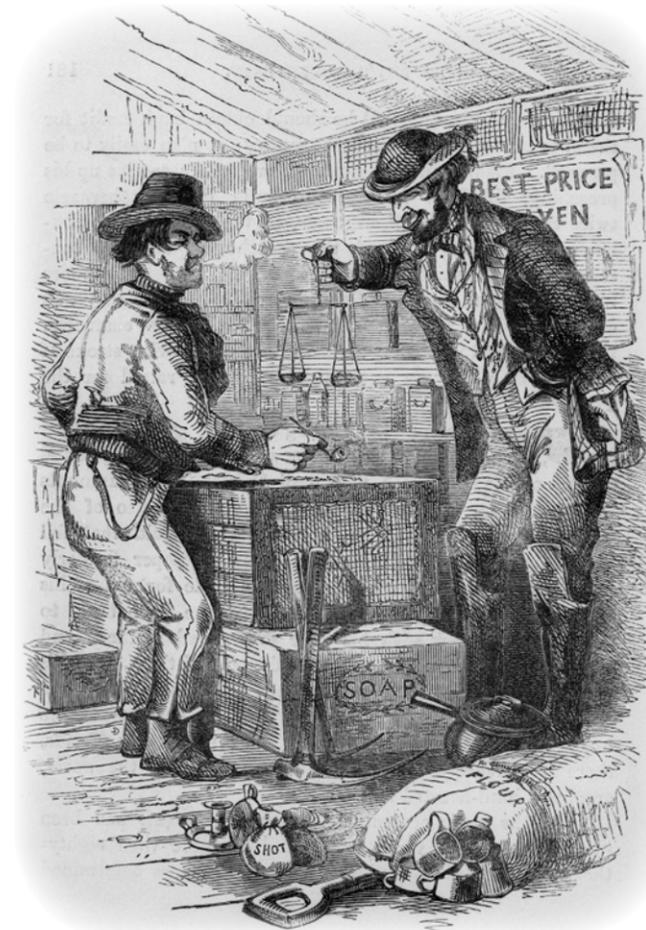
[One] mode of cheating is to have glass pans resting on a piece of green baize; under this baize, and beneath the pan which holds the weights, is a wetted sponge, which causes that pan to adhere to the baize and consequently it requires more gold to make it level ... A common practice still is for examiners of gold dust to cultivate long finger-nails, and, in drawing the fingers about it, gather some up.

(baize – a soft wool fabric like felt)

Diggers could convert their gold dust into currency at local banks or gold traders, but the price offered was usually less than in cities such as Sydney and Melbourne. Most preferred to send their gold by the government escort to the nearest major town.



Chinese diggers carried scales like these to weigh their gold



This digger (pictured on the left) keeps a wary eye on the gold buyer as he weighs up his gold to pay for the goods the digger has just bought

## Household chores

When men lived by themselves on the diggings they did only the most basic housework. Once a week they had a bath in a tin tub and washed their clothes in what clean water they could find. Some would regularly sweep the floor of their tent and tidy up, but others would not bother.

If their families joined them or they married, there was more work to be done and women did most of it. Some things, such as cooking meals and washing up, were done every day, but other chores were done on certain days of the week as this poem describes:

*Monday was always wash day*

*Tuesday was for ironing*

*Wednesday was the day for sewing and mending*

*Thursday the bedrooms had to be cleaned*

*Friday the rest of the house had to be cleaned and tidied*

*Saturday was the day for cooking and baking ...*

There might have been a garden to look after and children to mind. If diggers' wives grew their own vegetables they had to preserve what they did not eat. They chopped up beans, tomatoes, onions, cabbage and carrots and cooked them over the fire to make pickles and chutneys. Fruit was made into jam. If they had a cow they had to milk it, and make butter too.



Working in the kitchen

This woman had a well-equipped kitchen, including a cast-iron range or stove. The range burnt wood and included an oven as well as hot-plates on top for saucepans.



A shop-bought butter churn

## Golden stories

### Mrs Campbell makes butter

Mrs Campbell went to the Ovens diggings in Victoria with her husband. They bought a cow to give them milk and butter. To make butter, she put the cow's milk in a large stone jar and churned it around and around for two-and-a-half hours with a wooden paddle called a dash. Mrs Campbell wrote that although this was very hard work, it made her appreciate the butter more.

## Wash day

Washing was the worst domestic chore and it was particularly hard work on the diggings. Diggers worked in clay and mud all day, making their clothes filthy.

### Washing by hand

All clothes, sheets and towels had to be washed by hand. To do this, the women of the house:

- soaked the washing in soapy water
- scrubbed each piece against a **washboard** to get the dirt out
- rinsed everything in clean water
- put the washing through a **wringer** to squeeze out the water
- hung the washing out to dry.

On the Western Australian diggings, Charles Deland was rather proud of his washing routine:

*I have also made a rule of a weekly washing day in place of the old tri-weekly one. I find by so doing that I can keep the mending of my things up to date and also do not find the washing a bother but rather a pleasure for it means that my hands are clean at least once a week. I do not iron or starch my shirts for it is unnecessary up here ...*

### Dry washing

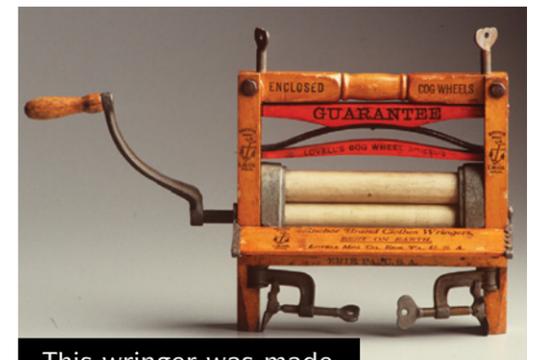
In Western Australia, some goldfields were in the desert and water could be in short supply. There was only enough for diggers to wash themselves with none left over for their clothes. Diggers developed a technique of 'dry washing' instead. They would hang their clothes on bushes for two weeks and beat them occasionally with a stick to get the dirt out.

The irons on the left and right could be heated over the fire while one was in use. The handle could be removed to keep it cool.

Mrs Potts' irons



A washtub and a collection of washboards



This wringer was made for a child to wash a doll's clothes



# Sickness, accidents and death

## Polluted water

Sickness was greatly feared on the goldfields. It was very difficult to stay healthy.

Some of the worst problems came from drinking bad water. The only supply of water was from rivers, creeks and dams, and diggers used this for washing themselves, their clothes and their cooking pots, plates and mugs. There were also no proper toilets. As a result, people became ill from diseases such as **dysentery** and **cholera**.

## Insect bites

Living in tents and huts, it was difficult to keep insects away. Mrs Campbell wrote about her constant battles with insects on the Ovens goldfields in Victoria:

**O**f the flies, I hardly know how to speak. It would fill a whole chapter to tell you what torments they were ... [when food came to the table] a battle had to be waged to eat it ... yourselves versus the flies ... for swarms of them were circling over you all the time, ready for the spoils.

Mosquito and flea bites became infected and sores would not heal. Painful knee and hip joints from working in damp conditions were also common.

A poor diet with a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables caused people to suffer from **scurvy**. In summer, they had heat stroke and sunburn, and in winter, they suffered from chills and rheumatism. Being a digger was certainly not a healthy way of life!



The invalid digger, by artist S.T.Gill

This sketch has captured the misery of being sick on the diggings. A digger sits dejectedly outside his tent. An injured foot means he cannot work. Only his faithful dog keeps him company as, in the background, other diggers continue their search for gold.

## Medical help

Medical help was expensive and often hard to find at the diggings. Only successful diggers could afford a doctor's high fees.

## Doctors

Doctors also joined the rush to the goldfields. Some worked as diggers and practised medicine in their spare time. Others gave up digging and returned to medicine. In 1854 there were 16 doctors at the Ballarat goldfields. The standard charge for a doctor to visit a digger's home was £2 and to deliver a baby, it was £5. If people could not afford to pay, doctors could refuse to help.

## Hospitals

Hospitals were important on the diggings because many diggers had no one to look after them. Hospitals were partly funded by the government. The rest of the money had to be raised by the community.

## The apothecary

An alternative to the doctor was the **apothecary** who was trained to make up doctors' prescriptions. He also made his own special medicines and tonics. When diggers or their families were sick, they went to the apothecary's shop, described what was wrong and bought what the apothecary recommended.

Apothecaries also sold **patent medicines**. These were cures for all sorts of illnesses. One of the most advertised patent medicines was Holloway's Pills. These were called the 'Wonder of Wonders' and promised to cure 50 different illnesses including asthma, worms, rheumatism and fits.



The well-organised digger carried his own medical supplies. This is a kit of medicines to cure cholera



Leech jars

These jars were designed to hold leeches. Leeches were used to cure a range of illnesses. They were put on the skin of the sick person to suck out some of the patient's blood.



An advertisement for a syrup for coughs and colds

## Accidents

A digger's life was dangerous and many died trying to make their fortune. Accidents were common. Mine shafts collapsed, killing diggers trapped under rock and timber. Mines filled with poisonous, deadly fumes and there were accidents with machinery. In Ballarat in 1859, one person was killed in a mine accident every week.

The Melbourne newspaper, the *Argus*, reported one such accident in December 1851:

**A** poor fellow has just been carried past on a sheet of bark. I fear there is but little hope for him. While under-mining, the earth fell in and he was dug out a short time after, but apparently in a dying state, bleeding profusely at the nose, eyes and ears.

Another digger wrote in his diary the same year:

**T**he diggers worked their claims very carelessly and accidents resulted by the caving in of the sides; a few deaths also resulted. One party took up a claim at the foot of a large tree, and found a considerable quantity of gold amongst its roots; the tree was under-mined and fell, killing one of the party and injuring another.

Some people died just trying to get to the diggings. In Western Australia, men set off on the long walk through desert to the mines of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie and were never heard from again. They lost their way and died from lack of water and food.



Chinese cemetery

Diggers killed on the goldfields were quickly buried. Beechworth in Victoria had the largest Chinese population of any field, and the local cemetery has a special Chinese burial ground where about 2000 Chinese diggers are buried.

## Death and funerals

When someone died, the funeral was organised as quickly as possible. In the early 1850s, there were no churches and few priests or ministers of religion. Someone would read from the Bible, perhaps a hymn would be sung and then the body would be buried. If a wife and family were widowed and left without help, diggers would pass around a hat to collect money for their care.



A funeral

### Mourning

When family members died, close relatives went into mourning, which meant they did not go out, except to church, and did not entertain. This lasted for two to three years, and during that time everyone, even little children, would be dressed in black. Well-off families would have all new clothes made for this mourning period. Others would dye their existing clothes black.

### Professional mourners

Undertakers or funeral directors did good business on the goldfields. If families had the money, they hired a fine hearse pulled by black horses with ostrich plumes on their heads and even a group of professional mourners to walk behind the coffin.



This mourning dress dates from the 1850s

At Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Victoria, they have restored a funeral hearse and occasionally recreate a funeral scene for tourists visiting the township.



Even women's jewellery was supposed to be black during periods of mourning. Can you see what the hand is holding on this bracelet?

# Once the rush was over

Although people found gold for many years to come, the 'rush' to different fields and the sense of excitement and urgency ended fairly quickly. By 1861, most of the people who had come from Europe and America had left again. Most of those who stayed moved away from the goldfields to find work in other towns and cities, or on the land. Many diggers tried to become farmers, and some succeeded.

## Two more 'rushes'

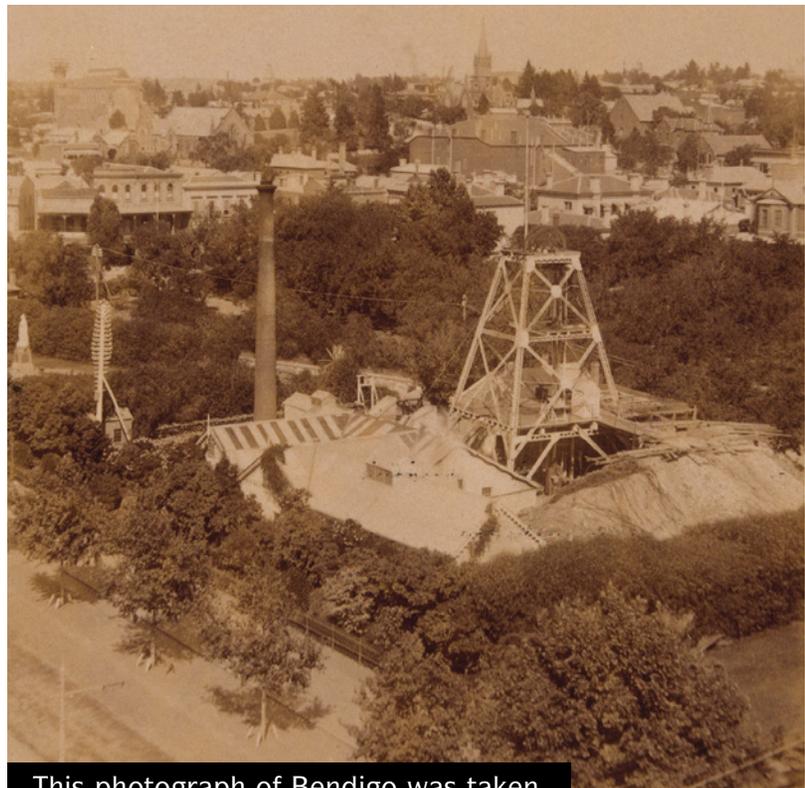
Two gold rushes came later in the 1880s and 1890s when gold was discovered in Western Australia and Queensland. In the 1970s, there were new finds in Western Australia. Once again, gold fever turned ordinary people into diggers frantically seeking their fortunes.

## Spread of settlement

The gold rushes opened up new areas of Australia to European settlement. Northern Queensland, the Northern Territory and areas around the Western Australian goldfields were only sparsely settled by Europeans before gold was discovered. Towns like Ballarat and Bendigo in Victoria, Gympie and Charters Towers in Queensland, and Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie in Western Australia were all created from the business and money brought about by the gold rushes.



In this once bustling street in Hill End, New South Wales, shops, homes and hotels have almost disappeared



This photograph of Bendigo was taken about 1908. Goldmining continues, almost in the centre of the city

# Glossary

<i>apothecary</i>	a person who makes drugs, a chemist
<i>billy</i>	a container for boiling water over a fire, usually with a tight-fitting lid
<i>bloomers</i>	white cotton underpants with legs that came down to the ankles
<i>cholera</i>	a disease affecting the digestive system that can be fatal
<i>colonies</i>	the six British settlements of New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia (including the Northern Territory) and Western Australia
<i>corrugated</i>	sheets of iron bent into folds
<i>cradle</i>	a wooden box with sieves inside that was used to separate gold from mud and gravel
<i>crinoline</i>	a petticoat with wire hoops sewn into it. When worn under a long dress, it made the skirt stand out
<i>dysentery</i>	an infectious disease that affects the lower bowel and causes severe diarrhoea
<i>Europeans</i>	settlers from Europe. This term is often used to distinguish between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal (or European) Australians
<i>hawker</i>	someone who travels from place to place selling goods
<i>hymn</i>	a song praising God
<i>illegal</i>	against the law
<i>kerosene</i>	a liquid that creates a steady flame when used in lamps or heaters
<i>oilskin</i>	cotton that has been coated with oil to make it waterproof
<i>pannikin</i>	a tin mug
<i>panning dish</i>	usually round, made of tin and with a shallow lip. Diggers swirled the mud and water around in the dish, poured it away and hoped that gold remained in the bottom of the pan
<i>parasol</i>	an umbrella used to keep off the sun
<i>patent medicine</i>	a commercially manufactured cure for all sorts of illnesses
<i>salted</i>	a method of preserving food using salt
<i>scurvy</i>	a disease caused by lack of vitamin C. It is prevented by eating fruit such as oranges and lemons
<i>sly grog</i>	refers to alcohol sold illegally on the diggings
<i>washboard</i>	a corrugated board made from wood, iron or glass. Clothes and linen were rubbed up and down on the board to make them clean
<i>wringer</i>	a machine to squeeze the water out of clothes and linen. Two wooden rollers are turned by a handle, forcing the clothes through and squeezing out the water

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The calculation used in this book to convert 1850s pounds to today's dollars is only approximate as prices fluctuated wildly during the gold rushes.

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