

Life on the goldfields: bushrangers – the lure of gold

Mineral Resources

When gold was discovered in the Central Tablelands of New South Wales in 1851, and then throughout the colony, it attracted prospectors from all over the world. But there was one type of gold seeker who was not welcome, and that was the bushranger.

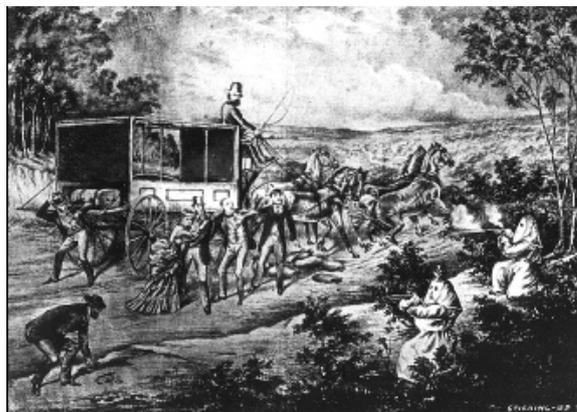
Bushrangers varied in character from the petty thief to the cold-blooded murderer. There were so many of them making such pests of themselves that people referred to them as 'infesting' the bushland. They ranged from the failed digger who found it easier to rob his more successful neighbour, to those who made a 'profession' of robbing the gold buyers at inns and banks, and 'bailing up' the 'gold escort' mail coaches. The years between 1851 and 1880 were bushranging's golden days.

Wild colonial boys

Unlike the convict bolters, the new breed of bushrangers were not desperate men who stole to survive. They were wild young men who stole in order to 'get rich quick', without any pity for their victims who had worked hard at honest work. They also took up bushranging for the adventure, and for the 'glory' of their notoriety. These 'Wild Colonial Boys' were skilled horsemen, keeping for themselves the best of the horses they stole, and because of their thorough knowledge of the bush, they easily outran the city troopers whose horses were of poor quality, as was their supply of firearms.

Where the gold began

The night air in the gold digging camps was filled with the noise of repeated gunshots. In order to discourage thieves, successful diggers would make a show of cleaning and re-loading their weapons, then firing their weapons into the air as a warning to would-be claim-jumpers.



Sticking up the Mudgee Mail, 1874

Few individual gold diggers held on to their gold for long. They quickly exchanged it for provisions and cash. As general storekeepers set up shop, they became the centres for gold buying. There were also some 'professional' gold buyers, whose cheating tricks made them not much better in character than the bushranging thieves. The landowning 'squatters' and settlers also took gold in exchange for meat. Those who wished to send their gold to Sydney's banks for safekeeping, risked being 'bailed up' by bushrangers if they took it themselves, or having it stolen if a mail coach was bailed up. Eventually, the banks set up branches at the gold fields or in nearby towns. But they could only carry so much gold before they had to send it to Sydney.

The obvious risk involved in carrying large quantities of gold as well as registered mail which contained notes, led the Government to provide police troopers as escorts to the mail coaches. Even then, the bushrangers could not resist the lure of so much wealth in one place, travelling through wild bush country. It became common for people to cut bank notes in half, sending one half with one mail coach run, and the other half on another run.



The Forbes to Orange escort robbery at Eugowra

The most famous gold escort robbery was carried out by Frank Gardiner and his gang. The town of Forbes was at the height of its activity as the chief centre of the Lachlan goldfields. Every week, huge amounts were transported in gold, cash and cheques. On 15 June 1862 the gold escort left Forbes for Orange and then on to Sydney. Gardiner and his gang of young bushrangers stuck up the gold escort at Eugowra Rocks and rode off with £14,000 worth of booty in gold and notes. Although this was an enormous amount of money by today's standards, it was not unusual. The gold sent down by the previous week's escort from the same Lachlan goldfields was valued at £34,000. In those days, a working man earned only about £1 per week or less.

Frank Gardiner – The father of bushranging

Born Francis Christie in 1830 of Scottish immigrant parents, Frank Gardiner grew up in the bush at Boro Creek near Goulburn. He had more than one alias, but was best known as Gardiner. He was also known by the nicknames of 'The King Of The Road', and has since been called 'The Father of Bushranging'. He was skilled at riding and shooting. He became involved in crime when he was still a teenager and in 1850 he was arrested for taking part in the stealing of a large mob of horses.

Gardiner was one of few bushrangers who lived to old age. After the Eugowra gold escort robbery he fled to Queensland. He was hunted down and arrested in March 1864. He was convicted at Sydney on 8 July 1864 and released on a pardon on 27 July 1874. On his release he left Australia to live in San Francisco, where it is believed he lived out his life as the proprietor of a saloon.

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