

Life on the goldfields: getting there

Mineral Resources

What did it mean for the colony to be gripped by gold fever?

It was as though Australia was a land rich in gold from one end to another. As word spread around the world, thousands of hopefuls crossed the oceans to try their luck in the 'Lucky Country'.

But getting to Sydney was only the first step. Getting to the gold fields was something else again.

Planning for the long and arduous trip was haphazard, with some doing very little planning at all, either through lack of cash, or lack of foresight. The roads were either very poor or virtually non-existent.

Many did not have any means of transport apart from walking. Some carried their possessions in bags on their backs, others pushed wheelbarrows, while the luckier ones had horses to ride, or to pull a cart loaded with provisions. Heavier loads were carried by bullock teams.

Getting to the diggings – rough roads and interesting characters

Initially mainly single men or married men without their families travelled to Ophir and the other early gold discovery sites. The road across the Blue Mountains had been built in 1813 by convicts, and initially coped with the people and vehicles travelling from Sydney to Bathurst.

However, when the traffic increased dramatically following the gold discoveries, the road conditions became extremely bad, particularly for the carts and wagons. After Bathurst, conditions were even worse.

There were two routes to get to Ophir. One led through Rock Forest, where the home of 'Scotch Harry' Kerr could be found. He would feed the weary travellers with damper and mutton stew for two shillings (20c).

'Scotch Harry' was very knowledgeable about where gold could be found in the area, and would have had some very lively discussions with the travellers. From there, the prospectors could choose a route which led across Lewis Ponds Creek, and then across rough and hilly country until the final steep descent to the valley of the Summer Hill Creek.



'Off to the diggings' – Diggers enroute to the goldfields, c1850s

The alternative route was to travel to Orange via Frederick's Valley, and then head out to Ophir along a bridle track which passed through the land owned by John Templar, who had a large brick steam mill at Narrambla.

The track then led through Joseph Eades' property 'Burnt Down Station' to 'Dosey Bill's' farm which was three miles from the diggings. Here the weary horses could be left for agistment, while their owners continued on down to the creek to look for their fortune.

Either way it was a long and arduous journey, but not without its lighter moments and the opportunity to make new friends.

Mark Hammond, who later became Mayor of Ashfield, spent much of his childhood at the gold fields. He remembered his trip in 1852 when he was eight: "The whole journey, or almost the whole journey was done on foot. It was seldom that anyone rode in the dray, the roads being in a terrible condition and the horses having to do to drag along.



"I remember we camped one night on the banks of a river. We got there late in the evening. A number of teams were in camp there before we arrived. The teamsters had made a big fire and their drays and wagons surrounded it. We drew up and joined in. After we had all had our evening meal, some began telling yarns. Others sang songs as they sat or stood around the fire.

"After a bit there was brought to the camp fire a small wooden bucket full of port wine with a half-pint tin pot as a drinking vessel. Each in turn was handed the pot to help himself, which was done by dipping into the bucket. It is needless to say that wine was obtained by broaching (breaking into) cargo."

Accommodation

Having arrived at their destination, the prospectors then had to find, or more often construct a place to live. The first men to arrive there found that the place was very hilly with only a small area of flat ground beside the creeks.

Care had to be taken to camp high enough above the creek so that they would not be flooded after rain caused the creeks to rise.

If the men had brought tarpaulins with them, ground had to be cleared and small trees cut down and used as posts to make a tent.

For those who had not brought anything, a humpy or 'gunyah' had to be built. This meant digging post holes and making a framework out of small trees.

The walls and roof were then lined with bark cut from larger trees. Aboriginal women would often earn some money cutting the bark for the inexperienced prospectors.

Another material used to line the shelters was hessian bags, where these were available. To make them water proof, the bags were painted with tar on the outside and sometimes white-washed on the inside with sand or clay.

At Lucknow the cyanide sands left over from the gold processing were used for this purpose. Today we know that cyanide is a highly toxic substance which can lead to gangrene and cancer.

Food and provisions

After solving their housing problems the next hurdle facing the early miners was obtaining food. Initially all food had to be either brought with them, or obtained from Orange or Bathurst.

The small village of Orange was 15 km from Ophir, and Bathurst was 50 km away.

The prices of food rose dramatically as storekeepers reaped the benefits of supplying a

product which was in short supply, and which was desperately needed.



The Blue Mountains – road to the diggings



Bullock dray at West Wyalong. The bullock dray was the 'semi-trailer' of the late 19th Century

Many prospectors did not realise that the weather conditions west of the Blue Mountains were so severe.

Orange is on the Central Tablelands of New South Wales, and the weather in winter is cold, with many nights reaching below freezing, with much rain and snow.

Many left their places of employment and headed for their dreams of gold with no suitable provisions; no warm clothes, no tools, and no means of making a home for themselves.

Many quickly became disillusioned and returned home. Eventually, some resorted to stealing from their better prepared and more successful neighbours.

It was not long before several stores opened. Solomon Myer was the first merchant to set up business in Ophir in 1851.

In June 1851 he advertised that he had erected a "commodious store which sold such things as picks, shovels, dishes, spades, mining boots, clothing and bedding, tea, sugar, bacon, flour, tobacco, hams, fresh and salted meat and forage for horses".

Shortly afterwards, others opened stores in what by now had become a 'town', rather than just a mining site. Further development occurred with the arrival of women and children.

As more and more people arrived at the original gold discovery site at Ophir, it became too crowded to accommodate the many prospectors, and they began to look for their fortune further afield.

Gold had been discovered at several other sites along the banks of Summer Hill and Lewis Ponds Creeks, and further discoveries were made on the Turon River field at Sofala and at Hill End. Bathurst quickly became a boom town.

By 1860 gold was discovered at Lambing Flat, now called Young, and one year later, alluvial gold was discovered in the Forbes-Parkes area.

A few years later, the precious metal was found around the Mudgee and Gulgong district, and diamonds and sapphires were found around the same area. By 1881 mining began at the Lucknow gold field.

With the increase in settlements and population there was a need to increase freight capacity to accommodate the many general stores which were setting up business, the added equipment needs of the miners and builders, as well as the housewives' prized furniture.

Transport

The 'semi-trailer' of the late 19th Century was the bullock dray. It was the bullocks which provided Australia with its first means of heavy transport.

The bullock-driver, or 'bullocky' helped open up the continent. The wagon, dray, or jinker, drawn by as many as 16 or 18 bullocks, which were yoked in pairs, was the chief means of carrying supplies to the mining fields, as well as to stock stations and outback towns.

They didn't return empty to the city, but carried timber logs or huge bales of wool stacked several metres high. The bullock driver was a colourful character in his day.

He carried a long whip which he would occasionally use to urge the team to move on. But his chief means of encouraging the bullocks to keep moving was a continual barrage of colourful cursing.

When one sensitive man travelling with a dray congratulated the driver for so much praying, the driver protested "I don't pray!"

At that, the traveller opened his notebook and read out the various expressions the driver had been using. The driver took the hint that he was being gently chastised for his swearing and blaspheming, and made an effort to hold his tongue. The journey continued with the bullocky grumbling under his

breath that the team wouldn't keep moving without the cursing.

Many of today's roads and highways follow the tracks of the original bullock teams. As the roads improved and civilisation spread out to the various mining fields, private carriages and public coaches became a regular sight.

'Royal Mail' coaches were used to carry the mail, and also gold from the diggings. The amount of gold being transported soon became so great that the government arranged for regular gold escort coaches to bring the gold and registered mail from the diggings. The police escorts did not deter bushrangers, and there are many stories of the bushrangers' exploits in 'bailing up' the coaches. But that's another story.

Many newly wealthy diggers rode into town to spend their wealth in the Big City.

When they had exhausted their budgets, they travelled on newly bought fine horses or carriages, taking their families with them back to the diggings to mine for more of the precious gold dust in their own little corner of Australia's El Dorado.



Horse and buggy

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