

# Sovereign Hill Education

## The Discovery of Gold in Australia

### Research Notes for Secondary Schools



Early in Australia's history, convicts had told stories of finding gold as they worked. These reports were hushed up by the authorities fearful that convicts, soldiers and public servants would all stop work to look for gold.

Despite this, rumours of gold persisted. A shepherd, named MacGregor, regularly appeared in Sydney with small nuggets. He then mysteriously vanished before anyone could follow him. It was later learnt that his gold was found near the present town of Wellington in NSW.

In 1841 the Rev. W.B. Clarke, an amateur geologist, found gold near Cox's River over the Blue Mountains. When he showed his small nugget to Governor Gipps the Governor exclaimed,

*"Put it away Mr Clarke, or we shall all have our throats cut!"* (Phillips p. 4)

The official attitude towards finding gold changed when thousands of Australians joined the rush to the Californian goldfields in 1848. This sudden departure of so many people depressed the NSW economy and Governor Fitzroy, believing a mineral strike would reverse this trend, persuaded the British government to appoint Samuel Stutchbury as government geologist.

Meanwhile, in January 1851, Edward Hargraves, a tall New South Welshman, had returned home after two years unsuccessfully searching for gold in California. While there he had learnt a lot about prospecting, and the characteristics of gold bearing-country. The area

west of the Blue Mountains impressed him as being the same as the Sierra Nevada. There were the same kind of hills and gullies and rocky outcrops of granite, slate and quartz.

Hargraves soon persuaded the Tom brothers, William, John and Henry, all experienced bushmen, and Tom Lister, a drover, to help him search for gold. Using his Californian experience, he taught these men how to pan and how to build a cradle.

The group found specks of gold near Bathurst which Hargraves reported to the government to claim the reward. Sceptical, the governor sent Samuel Stutchbury to verify the find. In the meantime the Toms and Lister had found more small nuggets and had moved on to Lewis Ponds near Yorky's Corner, finding the site where the shepherd MacGregor had found his gold years earlier. Here, William Tom found a 2oz. nugget and when Stutchbury arrived he pronounced the strike valid.

Within a week, 400 people were panning for gold. Hargraves called the area Ophir after the biblical golden city of King Solomon and the Australian Gold Rush had begun.

By 20 May 1851, Bathurst had come to a standstill. Work ceased for the excited talk of the goldfields. The editor of the "Bathurst Free Press" reported that the town was "utterly paralysed" and "a complete mental madness appears to have seized almost every member of the community." Everybody seemed to have rushed off

to the “diggings” as it was spelt. And many a hand which had been trained to kid gloves, or accustomed to wield nothing heavier than the grey goose-quill ... becomes nervous to clutch the pike and crowbar or “rock the cradle” at our infant mines. (Phillips pp. 7-8)

So much excitement was created by these discoveries that businessmen in Melbourne, alarmed at the exodus of Victorians to NSW, offered a reward of 200 guineas (\$420) for the discovery of a profitable goldfield within 200 miles (320km) of Melbourne.

It is difficult to say with certainty who found the first gold in Victoria. James Esmond, (find drawings and photographs in the *Students* section of the Sovereign Hill Education website) a young Irish prospector, found gold at Clunes in June 1851. At almost the same time, gold was discovered at Andersons Creek, Warrandyte, and shortly after at Buninyong by the local blacksmith, Thomas Hiscock (find drawings and photographs in the *Students* section of the Sovereign Hill Education website). The news of Hiscock’s discovery was reported in “The Geelong Advertiser”, sparking the Victorian Gold Rush and ending the alarming exodus of Victorian men to NSW. Between 21 and 24 August 1851, two men, James Reagan and John Dunlop, camped north of Buninyong on a bend of a creek at a place the Aborigines called “Balla arat”. Here they discovered what was to become the richest alluvial goldfield the world has ever known. Other discoveries followed in quick succession at Mount Alexander (now Castlemaine), Daylesford, Creswick, Maryborough, Sandhurst (now Bendigo) and Mclvor (now Heathcote).

On 21 September 1851 the first gold licences were issued and the “Melbourne Argus” reported,

*The whole town of Geelong is in hysterics, gentlemen foaming at the mouth, ladies fainting, children throwing somersets (somersaults) with excitement. All the ruffians and rogues from Melbourne and the “scum of convicts from Van Dieman’s Land” (Tasmania after 1855) moved in a surge towards Ballarat.* (Phillips p 16)

By the end of September 1851 nearly 10,000 men were digging for gold near Ballarat.

In 1853, the NSW government paid Edward Hammond Hargraves a reward of £10,000 (\$20,000) and officially recognised him as the discoverer of gold, although it is now generally acknowledged that the first discoverers of payable gold were the Tom brothers and John Lister. Hargraves was also given £2,318 (\$4,636) by the Victorian government in recognition of his part in stimulating the Victorian Gold Rush. The reward for the Ballarat discovery was given to Thomas Hiscock.

#### **Bibliography**

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