

# BALLARAT TO BALLAARAT

Peter Mansfield



The name **Ballarat** is synonymous with the discovery of gold and the Eureka Rebellion. There is no doubt that these two events were very important in the history and development of both the city and the State of Victoria.

But Ballarat is gold and more.

The district was first settled in 1837 by several parties of squatters - young men brave enough to leave the relative safety of the port townships and push inland with their flocks of sheep. Most squatters came from Geelong but stories of lush grazing land also drew men from New South Wales. They lived a hard and lonely, isolated life which was disrupted in August 1851. Shepherds found a few specks, then nuggets, of gold in the creeks and gullies.

Because of the isolation it took several weeks for the news of the gold discovery to reach Melbourne and a further three months for the news to be relayed to Europe. Today Ballarat historians still debate the actual date of discovery and the name of the man. It is generally accepted that a blacksmith, Thomas Hiscock, found the first gold at nearby Buninyong and that Dunlop and Regan found the "fabulous yellow metal" at Poverty Point, Ballarat.

We do know for certain that news of the gold discovery started a "rush" to Ballarat. A tent city immediately sprang up as the population increased from 70 to 25,000 in two years. A further 50,000 men (and a few women and children) passed through the district on their way to other goldfields. The booming goldfields caused social and commercial chaos; dozens of ships were left idle in Geelong and Melbourne, 40 of Melbourne's policemen quit the Police Force to follow the gold, freight charges between Geelong and Ballarat were as high as the shipping costs between Liverpool and Geelong.

Some men found their fortune in the clay and the gravel. Others, hundreds and more, found virtually nothing. Officially 4.7 million ounces of gold was escorted to Melbourne between 1852-60. This figure doesn't include the gold taken home to England and China by individuals. It was soon realized that real, lasting wealth was made by the butchers, hoteliers and livery stables.

Ballarat quickly became one of the great multicultural cities of the 19th century. Many settlers wanted to find gold and return "home" as soon as possible. Others wanted to stay and were anxious to establish a system of law and order on this new frontier. At the same time these men were keen to do away with many of the trappings of the old world. They were very anxious to avoid the problem of the British class system. It is ironic then that this City which is so English in appearance and manners is also the site of an important armed clash between the diggers and the representatives of British law and order.

The battle at Eureka took place in the early hours of 3 December 1854. It was a short but violent clash between a small section of the local population (less than 200) and the military and police stationed on the goldfield. The diggers were angry about the exorbitant gold licence fees, the cronyism of the goldfields administrators and the lack of a political voice. (Many of the local police were ex-convicts from Tasmania.) The causes and consequences of the battle are still subject to debate today and Eureka has indelibly marked Ballarat's history.

By the 1860's the City began to assume its permanent shape and character. Ballarat East had been the hub of the alluvial gold discoveries and it was here that most people lived. It was also here that the hotels and theatres did the best trade. However the population began to move to the western suburbs. This part of Ballarat offered better building sites and less hazardous living. Ballarat East was notorious for its fires and floods. By now the gold was more likely to be found under the basalt. This meant that the typical miner worked for wages and a share of the profits in the quartz mines. Present-day Ballarat is built on a virtual honeycomb of disused mine shafts, some up to one kilometre deep. It has been estimated that there is more timber in the underground shafts than in the forests around present day Ballarat.

Within a few years schools, churches, hospitals and civic buildings were planned. Ballarat had its own Stock Exchange. The average worker lived in a functional weatherboard house. These homes are modest in design but have proven to be remarkably durable. If you were to look closely you would notice that many of these weatherboard "miners cottages" have wrought-iron lacework and fences. Today you can also see that the City has many architectural styles in its public buildings. Great confidence and a high level of craftsmanship can be seen throughout Ballarat.

Ballaarat (see fn) was formally proclaimed a city on 9 September 1870. The gold continued to attract many people to the district and it is important to note that much of the wealth that was unearthed in the area has been invested in the city. There are numerous surrounding townships which "sat on the gold" but faded away because no infrastructure was established (Talbot, Scarsdale etc). When gold ran out the townfolk moves on to another rumoured El Dorado.

By 1890 Ballarat had matured. Its parks and gardens were the envy of every Australian city. The Library and debating societies flourished. Individuals and community groups worked tirelessly to improve the city. Ballarat made a smooth transition from a mining centre to an engineering city with a sound balance of economic stability and comfortable living conditions. The period of the Great Depression however saw a virtual collapse of the heavy metals industry and the transition to light manufacturing/education/health/retail centre was slow and uncomfortable.

Today Ballarat continues to evolve. Tourism and the hospitality industry are seen as an important growth area. A great deal has been achieved in the last 150 years. Visitors and even local residents agree that there is plenty of scope for the future of Ballarat.

However all visitors are conscious of the "feel" of Ballarat - they can still see that it was a city built on gold.

---

#### FOOTNOTE

**Ballaarat** comes from an aboriginal word meaning **resting place**.

The first settlers occasionally spelled the word with an extra "a". For several years the two words were used, but today **Ballarat** refers to the geographical/political area, whereas **Ballaarat** is only used in the context of the Ballaarat City Council.

Ppeter Mansfield is Ballarat City and Central Highlands Regional Librarian.