

About 320 kilometres north-west of Sydney, in a gentle hollow in the hills, lies Stuart Town, formerly known as Ironbarks, and home of many legends from the goldrush days.

Today, there is a population of about 300, two general stores, a Post Office, and a hotel.

It seems hard to believe that little more than a hundred years ago, the town was riddled with people from all over the world, eager to make their fortune by finding that elusive yellow mineral, GOLD.

A shepherd named Wallace often picked up small yellow stones during his travels around Ironbarks several years before the 1851 rush, but, because he had never seen native gold before, was not aware of the wealth he possessed.

Edward Hargreaves then discovered gold near Orange in 1851 and the news of this extraordinary find spread like wildfire throughout the country.

Hordes of would-be miners invaded the region which they named Ironbarks, after the trees in the area.

Thousands of Chinese and Europeans scrambled over the goldfields of Ironbarks and nearby Mookerawa, the creeks were lined with men laden with gold pans and the hills were dotted with shafts and tunnels built by the more serious miner using a hammer and tap.

It was not unusual for miners to build deep shafts, hear of record finds elsewhere, and pack up and leave without ever reaching gold.

Gold-digging was a real cut-throat business, the Europeans would literally guard their claims with their life, allowing no-one to come near their precious plots and the Chinese worked together in large family groups.

They often worked in shifts moving large rocks and rubble from their plots of land and constructed trenches to bring fresh water each day to the camps of those in search of ~~xxx~~ alluvial gold.

The more conscientious miner concentrated on reef gold and spent long hours ³⁰⁰ boring hundreds of feet of tunnels using the most primitive of methods.

One of the biggest problems facing the miners was water-logging. There were no pumps and bailing water from the ground was both time consuming and back-breaking, so, as a result, many of these mines were abandoned.

The ore raised from the mine was taken to a battery stamper which crushed it and left the gold gleaming on mercury-coated copper plates. The batteries usually consisted of about five steel stampers which weighed up to three quarters of a tonne each.

Massive steam engines which operated twenty-four hours a day, worked the crushing

plants which were so noisy they could be heard for miles. The work involved in mining was extremely hazardous, but apparently, the miners considered it well worth the effort.

Gold was fetching anything up to three pounds an ounce which, in most cases, was three times the average weekly wage.

There were many mines in the area...all with a tale to tell. Some of the better known camps were Specimen Hill, Madman's Mine, Golden Gully, Princess Alexandra and Billy Mine at Farnham. The town was not without its many colourful characters who brightened up the otherwise dull existence.

Gold fever had certainly struck - it seemed everyone was "seeing gold," but there were those who felt there was an easier way to obtain riches than work for it. Men like Ben Hall with his companions Johnny Gilbert, Dunn and O'Meally, robbed a mine shanty near Mookerawa then rode through Ironbarks on their getaway. Some other bushrangers operating in and around Ironbarks were less famous but equally notorious.

Bell and Harvey, two local troublemakers, robbed a battery - an unforgivable crime in those days. Unfortunately for them, they didn't get a chance to spend their loot, Harvey was shot²⁵⁰ during his escape and his partner in crime, ^{Bell}Harvey, took his own life through poisoning, rather than be taken alive.

An unknown bushranger tried unsuccessfully to hold up the local postmaster, Poyle, who was confronted by the man brandishing a gun and demanding money. Poyle's horse was apparently a frisky creature and shyed during the hold-up.

The more the ignorant ~~the~~ bushranger fired his gun, the faster the horse ran, until he reached town. A rock was laid in honour of Poyle, the pay master, but is now well and truly covered by the waters of the Burrendong Dam.

Another well-known spot is Orangey's Corner, named after a Chinaman who sold oranges at Ironbarks when the rush was at its peak. He became popular with the locals because of his easy-going nature and spontaneous wit. He was discovered dead one day on his corner - he had been shot to death and robbed of his ¹poultry savings. To this day his assailant is a mystery.

The old miners of the day were also a colourful bunch. In the early days, John Haynes, the owner of a mine near Ironbarks, is reputed to have worn^a Ned Kelly type plough share armour and brandished a gun which shot out nails... he swore to nail all trespassers to the nearest tree.

The story behind Madman's Mine originated with an old miner who apparently dragged a string of nuggets behind him in the dust. He often dressed in women's clothing and also clothed a tree stump which stood on his claim in the same attire.

