

Heritage Notes for the Specimen Gully Hut and Gold Memorial

Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park

Visit the place where the Mount Alexander goldrush of the 1850s began. Explore the evocative ruins of the home of Bridget Worley, one of the first women on the goldfield, and the memorial to her husband and his colleagues who were the first Europeans to discover gold in the area. Learn about how Dja Dja Wurrung People constructed shelters and the importance of the nearby slate quarry.



Womin-dji-ka (Welcome)

Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park is part of the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung People *Djaara* whose rights were recognised through a Recognition and Settlement Agreement with the State of Victoria in March 2013. The Dja Dja Wurrung People maintain a close and continuing connection to *Djandak*, their traditional Country.

Djandak is a cultural landscape that includes both tangible objects such as scarred trees, mounds, wells and stone artefact scatters; and intangible stories. *Djandak* is a living entity, which holds stories of creation and histories that cannot be erased.

Dja Dja Wurrung share stories of shelter construction and the importance of the nearby slate quarry via a sign at the Specimen Gully Hut.

Parks Victoria pays our respects to Dja Dja Wurrung Elders, past, present and emerging, and asks that visitors do the same. Aboriginal artefacts are protected by law, and it is prohibited to disturb them in any way.

Getting there

The Specimen Gully Hut and Gold Memorial is located on Specimen Gully Road, Barker's Creek, 8km from Castlemaine via the Midland Highway, 120km from Melbourne via the Calder Freeway. Take the Elphinstone or Pollards Rd exit onto Harmony Way. Specimen Gully Rd is an unsealed gravel road but accessible to most 2WD vehicles in dry conditions. Park with care on the gravel area to the side of the road opposite the hut.

The hut can be visited by hikers and bikers on the Goldfields Track (Leanganook section). It is located 180m west of stop LT6 where the walking and cycling routes diverge, 12.8km from Castlemaine. For more information visit goldfieldstrack.com.au.

Before you set out



Download the free geo-referenced Castlemaine Diggings Northern Walks map from the Parks Victoria store on Avenza Maps and use your phone's GPS to help you find where you are in relation to the places and stories in these notes.

If you don't have the Avenza Maps app on your phone, you will be prompted to download it – access to WiFi is recommended.



There are no toilets at Specimen Gully. Public toilets are located in the Castlemaine Botanic Gardens on Downes Rd, and beside the Visitor Information Centre at 44 Mostyn St, Castlemaine.



Dogs are permitted provided that they are kept on a lead and under control at all times. Please collect and remove your dog's droppings for the sake of other visitors and to avoid stress to native animals.

The Specimen Gully Hut and Gold Memorial

Where the Mount Alexander goldrush began

The first gold discovered by Europeans in the Castlemaine area was found at Specimen Gully in July 1851. Although gold had already been found near Clunes and Warrandyte, it proved hard to extract and did not lead to a huge rush of hopeful prospectors.

However, when news spread of what claimed to be the "richest shallow alluvial goldfield in the world" in September 1851, it triggered the Mount Alexander gold rush, bringing flocks of migrants from around the world, one of the largest mass immigration movements of the nineteenth century.

The gold rush, and the social and political changes it triggered, helped to shape the Australia we know today. This remarkable story is etched into the landscape of the Castlemaine Diggings, one of the best preserved mid-nineteenth century goldfields in the world, and Australia's first National Heritage Park.

The Specimen Gully Hut and Gold Memorial is the perfect place to begin exploring the Castlemaine Diggings.

Remembering the past

When you visit Specimen Gully – be it on a spring afternoon, with rays of sunshine streaming through the trees and the ruins, the gentle sounds of birds and insects, and a breeze rustling the leaves, or on a cold winter's morning shrouded in mist with frost underfoot, there is a quiet magic to this spot that pulls you back in time.

Imagine what it might have been like during the height of the gold rush, with men shouting over the sounds of picks and hammers, eventually replaced by the deafening roar of the crushing battery.

The large European trees around you had not yet been planted, and most of the Box-Ironbark forest that has since regrown, would have been felled for mining and firewood by the 1860s. Where the hut stands now, would have been the Specimen Gully Chapel. On Sundays, when work ceased and the battery fell silent, miners and their families would have gathered here to pray and sing.

Cast your mind back further and imagine what the gully was like before Europeans arrived. You can learn more about the Dja Dja Wurrung People and how they constructed shelters and used the nearby slate quarry from the interpretive sign on the fence.

The price of luck

On 20 July 1851, Christopher Peters, a hut keeper on Dr William Barker's sheep run, discovered specks of gold while secretly panning in Specimen Gully – the first gold to be found in the Mount Alexander area. Peters panned the black soil using a small soup tin, revealing half-a-dozen pieces of gold about the size of grains of wheat.

The discovery was initially ridiculed as being fool's gold (pyrite), possibly because the Mount Alexander station did not want to lose its staff. Mr Pearce, the station manager, suggested that Worley and his companions send the gold to an auctioneer in Melbourne for valuation.

Peters and three colleagues, George Robinson, Robert Keen (both shepherds), and John Worley (a bullock driver), were determined to continue prospecting, so they resigned and told their former employer they were off to the goldfield at Clunes. Having laid a false trail, they remained at Specimen Gully and began mining the rich vein of quartz located just to the east of the house ruins.

When a furious Dr Barker found out, he threatened to have them charged with trespass, so John Worley decided to take pre-emptive action and come clean about their discovery, writing a letter to the editor of *The Argus* newspaper:

“Dear Sir,— I wish you to publish these few lines in your valuable paper, that the public may know that there is gold found in these regions, about four miles from Doctor Barker's home station, and about a mile from the Melbourne road; at the southernmost point of Mount Alexander, where three men and myself are working. I do this to prevent parties from getting us into trouble, as we have been threatened to have the Constables fetched for being on the ground. If you will have the kindness to insert this in your paper, that we are prepared to pay anything that is just when the Commissioner in the name of the party comes.

JOHN WORLEY,
Mount Alexander Ranges, Sept. 1st, 1851.”

Letter printed on page 2 of *The Argus*, Monday 8 September 1851. Source: TROVE, Newspapers and Gazettes, National Library of Australia.

This proved to be both lucky and unlucky for Worley and his friends. Unfortunately, on the very day he wrote his letter, new regulations came into effect in Victoria, prohibiting anyone from digging without a monthly mining licence, which cost thirty shillings (£1 10s) to be paid in advance.

In the 1850s, the average Australian labourer earned less than nine British Pounds (£9) a year, and a domestic servant around £7, so £18 a year for mining licences was viewed as completely unreasonable and triggered widespread protests.

Upon reading Worley's notice, Captain Wright, the Chief Goldfields Commissioner, immediately instructed Commissioner Powlett to ride over from Ballarat to fine the men £20 for digging without a licence and demand a 10% royalty on the gold they had obtained. However, Worley's gamble worked, and the four men continued to mine in Specimen Gully – and were soon joined by many more.



This engraving of "Whirley's Gully" by G.F. Sargent appeared in *The Illustrated Magazine of Art*. The presence of large trees suggests the artist visited early in the goldrush, because a few years later, few such trees would have remained. Source: Archivist / Alamy Stock Images.

Want to learn more about the mining licence and protests against it? Download the heritage notes and visit the site of the first mass protest in 1851 on the [📍 Monster Meeting Walk](#) or [🚶 Forest Creek Trail](#).

A flood of collective free will

Nobody organised the Mount Alexander gold rush. It happened because tens of thousands of people around the world saw an opportunity to improve their fortunes and pursued it.

By the end of November 1851, the rush to Mount Alexander was unlike any seen before in Australia. At first, there was just a trickle of people arriving, but before long there was a continuous stream of new arrivals. Ballarat, Victoria's first major goldfield, was largely depopulated, and gold seekers flooded into central Victoria from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), New South Wales, South Australia, and New Zealand. The governor of Victoria, Charles La Trobe referred to these arrivals as 'adventurers'.

By 1852, Victorian gold fever had become an international contagion. More ships sailed into Melbourne that year than any other port in the world. A record 88,000 paying passengers left the British Isles for Australia, and nine out of ten came straight to Victoria.

Another 61,000 prospectors arrived in 1853, and 83,000 in 1854. By the 1860s, these gold seekers had trebled the nation's population, and Victoria was producing 33% of the world's gold, much of it coming from the Mount Alexander Diggings.



Adventurers travelling to the diggings through the Keilor Plains in 1853. Engraving with watercolour by J.A. Gilfillan. Source: State Library of Victoria

The goldfields made such an extraordinary contribution to the state's success, that the Victorian Government set up a Board to decide who should be rewarded for discovering them.

In 1864, Peters, Worley, Robinson and Keen were awarded £250 each by the Victorian Government for discovering the Mount Alexander Goldfield. In 2022, this sum would be worth the equivalent of around \$60,000 – slightly below Australia's average annual income.



Want to learn more about the goldrush and immigration?

Download the heritage notes and follow the trails of the ⑤ Monster Meeting Walk, ④ Pennyweight Flat Walk, ⑦ Forest Creek Trail, and Eureka Reef Heritage Walk (in the Central Diggings), which offer more insights into what life was like for the gold seekers.

Success that came in waves

By mid-1855, there were nearly a thousand diggers at Barker's Creek, with more people arriving every day from around the world, including several thousand from China, and spreading out into the surrounding area. The growing town included several butchers, blacksmiths, general stores, a hospital and a chapel.

However, by the end of the year many of the diggers working the surface had begun to leave. As the surface gold became scarce, shafts had to be dug to access the reef below, and steam-driven quartz-crushing machines used to break up the quartz and extract the gold. Quartz reef mining required significant investment.

As the first public quartz mining company in the district, the Specimen Gully Quartz Mining Association had to forge their own path. Completed in 1859, their crushing battery was the largest and most powerful in the district, with thirty-two stampers (large iron hammers), and associated boiler, winding and pumping machinery.

The main tunnel into the reef was over 122m long and connected many existing shafts, with further shafts and adits (tunnels) added. While these efforts extracted a decent amount of gold, the expenses incurred were higher than the rewards. By February 1861, the company suspended operations, and the plant and machinery sold the following year. The stone ruins of the plant remain in the gully to the east of the hut and memorial.

If you want to explore Specimen Gully beyond the fenced area, we recommend hiring an experienced local guide. It is very rugged with many hazards including overgrown shafts and unstable slopes. Enquire at the Castlemaine or Maldon Visitor Information Centre.

By 1864, Specimen Gully was almost entirely deserted. Even Dr Barker, the first European settler in the area, left the district in 1863. Gold mining had been encroaching on his sheep run for many years, and he returned to medical practice.

In 1870s, miners began reworking the Specimen Gully reef, cleaning out the old tunnels, digging new ones, and finding enough gold to make a profit for several companies over the following years, despite the hard rock and challenge of continually having to drain water from the shafts and tunnels.

The construction of the Coliban water race ensured a reliable supply of water, which enabled miners to start sluicing. Mining continued right through to the early 1930s, with quartz reef mining, sluicing and dredging operations with varying degrees of success.



Want to learn more about different gold mining techniques?

Download and follow the ⑤ Quartz Hill Walk and ⑥ Welsh Village Walk heritage notes.

The changing fortunes of the Worley family

John Worley remained in Specimen Gully for some years, unlike his fellow prospectors who moved away. In 1854, he and his wife, Bridget, were living in a shepherd's hut only a few metres from the discovery site – an upgrade from the tent they had been living in when they first found gold.

Initially, John extracted gold by chipping quartz off an outcrop of the Specimen Gully Reef by hand and pounding it with hammers.

The Argus reported that this yielded enormous returns, but it must have been back-breaking work. In 1858, presumably having exhausted the gold at the surface, Worley dug a shaft down to the reef. His luck must have run out eventually, because in 1866, he was living in Lancefield, working for the owner of a threshing machine.

What happened to John Worley after that is a mystery, until his death in Melbourne in 1889. However, at some point, he and Bridget separated. Bridget remained in Specimen Gully with her children, where she lived until around 1895.



John and Bridget Worley photographed outside Oyster Shell Cottage, a suburban home, possibly in Lancefield in the 1870s. Source: McLean family album, donated to Harcourt Valley Heritage and Tourist Centre Inc.

A home for a beloved mother

The ruins you can see today are Bridget's house. The room with the large fireplace, furthest from the road and partially roofed, is the original home built by her son, Daniel Rielley, sometime after 1870, on the site of what had been the Specimen Gully Chapel. Slate from the local quarry was carefully squared and laid flat to produce a straight edge for the walls and has survived remarkably well.

Bridget lived in the home until around 1895. She spent her final three years at the Castlemaine Benevolent Asylum, dying in 1898 at the age of 78.

The new owners, Mr. and Mrs. William Smith enlarged the house, as did the next owner, Mr. John Smith, possibly their son. Today, you can identify the different phases of the house and outbuildings by the different style of construction. In 1931 John sold the house, and half acre of land around it to Mr. R. Owen Owens for a gold memorial.



Left: Bridget Worley with her pet spaniel in the 1870s. Source: McLean family album, donated to Harcourt Valley Heritage and Tourist Centre Inc. The McLeans were friendly with Mrs Worley and lived just over the hill from her home in Specimen Gully.
Right: Bridget and John's youngest daughter, Ellen, after she married. Source: Harcourt Valley Heritage and Tourist Centre Inc.

One of the first women on the goldfield

Bridget Mulvaine was born in County Antrim, Ireland in 1820, to parents Pat and Rose. When she moved to Australia is unknown, but she was living in Melbourne with her first husband, George Rielley when their son, Daniel, was born in 1846.

When George died, Bridget married John Worley, a bullock driver in 1848, when they were both 28 years old.

Not long after, John found work on Dr Barker's sheep run, and Bridget became one of only three European women reported to be living on the Mount Alexander goldfield at the start of the rush.

Shortly after her husband and colleagues first discovered the gold, not yet knowing if it was real, Bridget showed a small bottle of gold pieces to Mr Pearce, the station manager, while paying for a couple of sheep the family had taken (a common arrangement for workers on remote outstations). Thinking nothing of it, she gave him a piece.

Bridget and John had six children together between 1849 and 1863: Sarah, Mary, Ellen, James, Mark William, and John. However, life was challenging on the goldfields and many children died young, including James (aged 3) and John (only 2 months old).

Bridget's eldest and youngest sons remained in the area. Daniel Rielley married Susan Portwine in 1874, and built a home in Mosquito Gully, where they raised a family of ten children. Mark William married Sara Harris in 1892 and had two sons, one of whom was sadly killed in action during World War I.

Ellen Worley followed in her mother's footsteps by moving to another country. In 1869, she gained passage on the Alhambra to New Zealand, claiming to be 21 so that she could travel unaccompanied, even though she was only 16 or 17 at the time.

In 1874, she married William Wells. The couple lived in the goldmining town of Blue Spur Tuapeka, Otago, and had a son and a daughter.



Want to learn more about what life was like for miners during the goldrush? Download the heritage notes and following the trails of the [3](#) Monster Meeting Walk, [4](#) Pennyweight Flat Walk, [7](#) Forest Creek Trail and [6](#) Welsh Village Walk.

A memorial dedicated to the discoverers

The idea for the gold memorial came from the Castlemaine Old School Boys' Association, and was financed by one of their members, Mr. R. Owen Owens, a Barker's Creek resident and Castlemaine businessman, who purchased the property and financed the project.

On Saturday 10 October 1931, he unveiled the 9ft (3m) high cairn, constructed by another local resident, Mr D Reilly. Made from local slate with a granite plaque embedded in it, it is a lasting dedication to the four men who discovered the goldfield.

The Castlemaine Association of Pioneers and Old Residents, who preserved accounts and documents collected from gold rush pioneers, took care of the site and monument until they became part of Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park in 2002.



The unveiling of the Gold Memorial by Mr Owens in 1931. Note how few trees there are in this photo and how much has re-grown around the site since then. Source: Harcourt Valley Heritage and Tourist Centre Inc.

Where did the slate come from?

The slate used to construct the house and gold memorial comes from a quarry 350m west along Specimen Gully Road.

Being easy to split, slate was highly sought after by European migrants for building and paving (flagstones). This quarry probably started operating in the 1820s, and had a steam engine, planing and sawing machines on site. By the 1860s, when it was temporarily abandoned, the quarry was around 67m deep.

Quarrying recommenced in the 1880s, with several leases, including the Castlemaine Flagging Company, and Castlemaine Slate Paving Company. A railway line used to pass nearby, which was likely used

for transporting the heavy blocks of slate. This quarry is no longer in use, but Castlemaine slate is still highly valued, and quarried nearby. You can learn about the importance of the slate quarry to the Dja Dja Wurrung People from the interpretive sign on the fence.



Want to learn more? Download the heritage notes for the 6 Welsh Village Walk and visit the impressive cliffs of the former slate quarry on that walk.

Acknowledgements

The information in this factsheet was drawn from various sources, including: David Bannear, heritage reports, mining surveys, accounts in the *Mount Alexander Mail*, and:

- Keith Macrae Bowden, 1974, *Doctors and Diggers on the Mount Alexander Goldfields*
- Harcourt Heritage Centre, 2020, Bridget Worley, article in The Core, Harcourt News, Edition 69

Other sites to visit in the park



There are many fascinating sites to visit in the Northern Diggings, including the Garfield Water Wheel (walks 1 and 2), the Monster Meeting Site (walk 3), Pennyweight Flat Cemetery (walk 4), Nimrod Reef Mine and Welsh Village (walk 5), Forest Creek Gold Diggings (walk 6) and Expedition Pass Reservoir (walk 7), a great spot for swimming, canoeing or fishing.

Camping is available at Vaughan Springs, Warburton Bridge and Chokem Flat campgrounds (no bookings or fees, limited facilities) in the Southern and Central Diggings. Situated on the banks of the Loddon River, Vaughan Springs is a popular location for families, with large grassy areas, BBQs and picnic tables, and shady trees that put on a beautiful display of autumn colour.

Visit parks.vic.gov.au for further information.

Taking care of the park



The Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park has been included on the National Heritage List as Australia's outstanding gold rush landscape. The Park's goldrush features are of great national cultural and historic significance. Left undisturbed, they will remain for many future generations to rediscover.

You can help protect the heritage values of the Specimen Gully Hut and Gold Memorial by following these simple guidelines:

- No bins are provided. Please take all rubbish away with you for recycling or disposal.
- Fires are prohibited in this area. Firewood collection is prohibited throughout the Park.
- Firearms are prohibited.
- Culturally important Aboriginal sites are found throughout this landscape. Please tread lightly and be mindful of conserving both physical and intangible heritage. All artefacts are of cultural significance and are protected by cultural heritage laws.

- Please do not touch the ruins or disturb the ground. All plants, animals, historical artefacts, archaeological sites and geographic features are protected by law.
- Fossicking, prospecting and digging for gold are strictly prohibited within the Special Protection Area around Specimen Gully. Penalties apply. Prospectors can access a prospecting map of the Castlemaine area showing where prospecting is allowed from local visitor information centres or parks.vic.gov.au
- Vehicles, including motor bikes, may only be used on formed open roads, not on walking tracks. Drivers must be licensed and vehicles registered and roadworthy.

Be prepared, stay safe



The Castlemaine Diggings are a heavily mined landscape and contain a variety of ongoing hazards, including uneven and unstable ground, mineshafts, open cuts, quarries, and mine tailings. For your own safety, please stay on mapped tracks and supervise children.

- Comply with local signs and do not climb over or around barriers, fences or on the ruins.
- We recommend hiring an experienced guide to safely explore mining relics located off the mapped tracks. Enquire at the Castlemaine or Maldon Visitor Information Centres.
- Do not park or rest under trees. Tree and branches may fall at any time and swing away from the tree.
- It can be cold and wet in winter and very hot and dry in summer so be prepared for adverse weather conditions.
- Mobile phone reception is unreliable in the Park, particularly in the gullies. You may get a signal by moving to higher ground.

Emergencies

For emergency assistance call Triple Zero (000).

The Northern Diggings are in the North Central Total Fire Ban District. Bushfire safety is a personal responsibility. Anyone entering parks and forests during the bushfire season needs to stay aware of forecast weather conditions. Check the forecast before leaving home. The Specimen Gully Hut and Gold Memorial is in an isolated, heavily forested location. We do not recommend visiting this site on hot, dry, windy days or when storms are forecast.

Check the Fire Danger Rating and for days of Total Fire Ban at emergency.vic.gov.au, on the VicEmergency smartphone app or call the VicEmergency Hotline on 1800 226 226.

On days of Catastrophic Fire Danger Rating this Park will be closed for public safety. Do not enter the Park. If you are already in the Park you should leave the night before or early in the morning. Closure signs may be erected but do not expect an official warning. Check the latest conditions at parks.vic.gov.au or by calling 13 1963.