

A typical digger

A typical digger was a man in his 20s, either unmarried or with a young family. Although doctors and lawyers came to the goldfields, most diggers were tradesmen such as blacksmiths, builders, butchers, carpenters and shoemakers. They were well educated and most could read and write.

Some people came to the diggings from nearby cities and towns by coach or on foot. Others came from all over Australia or from overseas. For those seeking their fortune, no distance was too far and no cost too great.

Most of the diggers who came from overseas were English, but there were also Welsh, Irish and Scottish diggers. **Europeans** were also keen to make their fortune and came from Germany, Italy, Poland, Denmark, France, Spain and Portugal. Californian diggers came from America, and when news of the riches being discovered spread to Asia, Chinese diggers came too.



A portrait to send home

Diggers who had left their families far behind were keen to have photographs like this taken to send home. These men were photographed in a studio in 1864. Their suits do not fit particularly well, and may have been borrowed for the day to help them look more prosperous.



New England digger

This man was photographed on the New England goldfields in New South Wales in the 1890s. Like most miners he was young, fit and keen to make his fortune.

A digger's belongings

Newspapers, magazines and books were full of advice about what diggers should take to the goldfields. Some even provided lists of supplies. Shops in London, Sydney and Melbourne offered special digger's kits.

Recommended supplies

James Bonwick published a guide to the Australian diggings in 1852. He advised diggers not to take too much as transport was very expensive. As most would have to walk to the diggings, they should take only what they could carry. Bonwick recommended:

- hard-wearing clothes
- strong boots
- waterproof coat and trousers of **oilskin**
- a roll of canvas 'for your future home'
- good jacket for Sundays
- pick, shovel and **panning dish**
- a **cradle** 'may be carried in parts without much trouble'.



Celebrating success

Some diggers had jewellery made to celebrate their success. These brooches include many of a diggers' essential belongings: picks and shovels, panning dishes, cradle, bucket, pistol and a pouch in which to put gold. How many items can you find?

Diggers went to shops like this to equip themselves for the diggings

Settlers' and Gold Diggers' General Store, 39, SWANSTON STREET.

N. GERRARD AND CO., (from Hobart Town,) beg to apprise the public generally, that they have opened those commodious Stores, 39, Swanston-street, with a well selected and general assortment of Goods of the best description, and which will be sold at the lowest remunerative rate. Their stock comprises the following:—Flour, fine, in large or small bags; Groceries of every description; Slops and Boots; Oats, Barley, and Bran; Preserved Meats; Tinware; Oppossum Skin Rugs; American Pails; Gold Weights and Scales; Tobacco, Spirits, and Wines.

To wholesale purchasers liberal allowances will be made.

Dressing on the goldfields

A digger's clothes

Clothes had to be tough to cope with the hard work of searching and digging for gold.

The typical digger's outfit was:

- a striped undershirt
- a blue or red flannel striped overshirt
- moleskin (cotton) trousers
- a leather belt
- heavy leather boots
- a cabbage tree hat to keep the sun off.




Cabbage tree hat

Cabbage tree hats

Cabbage tree hats were straw hats made from the leaves of the cabbage tree palm. The leaves were plaited and the plaits stitched together to form a hat. A fine cabbage tree hat was highly valued on the goldfields. It was much more expensive than an ordinary straw hat. Wearing one was a sign of success.

Clothes for the heat

The heat of the Western Australian goldfields meant that diggers working there wore fewer clothes than those on the eastern goldfields. Writing to his fiancée in 1896, Charles Deland described his appearance:

Our costume is not too elegant and fashion troubles us not. During the day I wear boots, socks, trousers, hat and a singlet of fine net ... so that I am not sunburnt all over, shirts being unnecessary. 



Artist and digger, Eugène von Guérard painted I have got it in 1854

This successful digger is dressed in the fashion of the goldfields. He is wearing a striped flannel undershirt, a cotton overshirt, leather boots that come up over the knees and a cabbage tree hat.



This is a page from the sketchbook of the artist and digger Eugène von Guérard

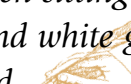
Women's clothes

Women joined their husbands and fathers once goldfields became more established. While men wore a practical style of dress for the rugged life of the goldfields, women and young girls dressed in the same sort of clothes they had always worn.

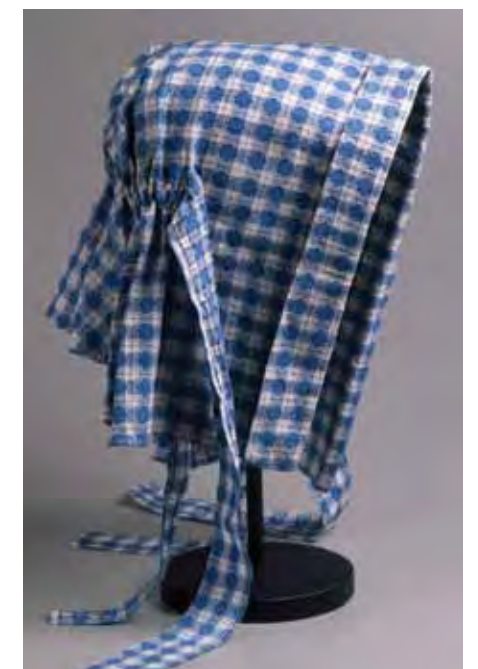
The typical style was:

- a long dress with a high neck, tight waist and full skirt
- a cotton petticoat and **bloomers** underneath
- striped stockings
- hard-wearing boots
- a large bonnet to keep the sun off.

Newcomers were surprised at how well some women dressed in Australia. Writing from Adelaide in 1852, Sophy Cooke remarked that when her husband took her to a concert, she thought her English clothes were not as good as those of local women:

... people dress as genteely and with quite as good taste as those at home ... I can assure you I did not feel dressed enough when sitting by the side of ladies ... with lace sleeves and white gloves; it quite put me in mind of England. 

The two women pictured both have short skirts so they will not drag in the mud. They wear large bonnets to keep the sun off their heads.



This bonnet's large brim around the front and gather at the back helped protect its wearer from the sun

Clothes for Sunday

Sunday was the only day that diggers did not work. Women also did little cooking or housework that day. Everyone put on their best clothes, known as their 'Sunday best'. Some went to church, while others visited friends or went for a walk around the goldfields. There was much to see and do. Brass bands performed popular songs, competing teams played cricket or football and there were horse races, cock fights and boxing.

Sunday shopping

Shops were open with Sunday being the busiest day. Men and women bought food, new clothes and, if they had had any success, a few luxuries such as a proper bed and mattress or a carpet for the floor.

For men, 'Sunday best' was a store-bought suit with matching vest, a white shirt and coloured necktie. These suits were made from linen in summer and from wool in winter.

There was far more choice for women. Some made their own clothes, copying the latest fashions from magazines. Others had them made by the many local dressmakers, or bought them ready-made from the store.



Sewing machine

Sewing machines were invented in the 1840s and available in Australia from 1860.



Sarah's wedding dress

This was Sarah Coyle's 'Sunday best'. It was made for her wedding to Thomas Fitzgerald in 1855.



Leather shoes

These shoes were made in about 1860. With fine leather toes and fabric sides, they were not meant for walking on the muddy streets of the goldfields, but would have been worn inside.

Fashionable dress shops

As goldfields developed into busy townships, all sorts of shops opened to meet the needs of the diggers. Fashionable dress shops were popular. Successful diggers and their families could buy the latest clothes and accessories from Paris and London.

Aladdin's cave

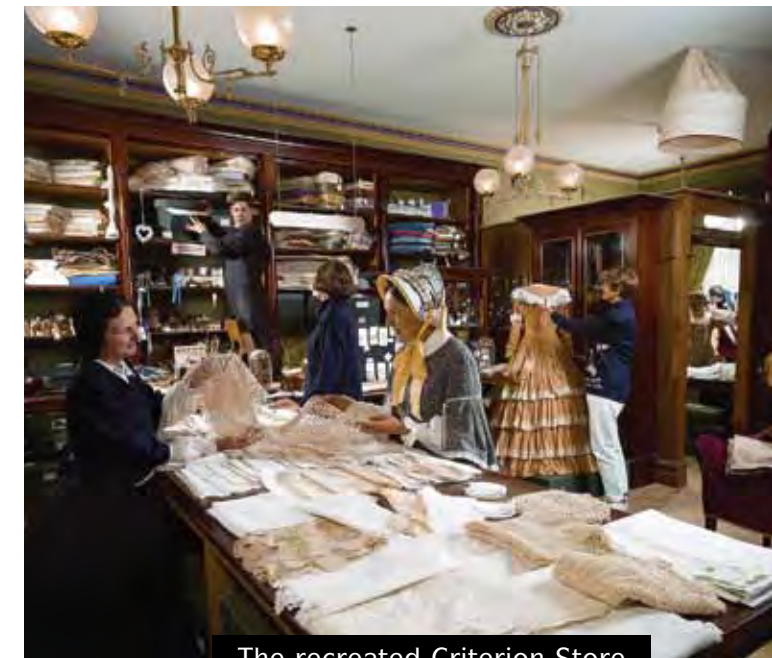
From the outside, even the most fashionable shops did not look very attractive. They were simple tents or roughly made buildings. But stepping inside was like entering Aladdin's cave. Fine fabrics, fashionable hats, shoes, **parasols** and shawls were piled high as the wealth of the diggings attracted goods from all over the world. Mrs Campbell, the wife of a goldfields' magistrate, described successful diggers' wives as dressed 'in fabrics and colours fit for an oriental princess'. In some stores the finest clothes were mixed in with general supplies. Ellen Clacy wrote about stepping into such a store:

Here lies a pair of herrings dripping into a bag of sugar, or a box of raisins; there a gay-looking bundle of ribbons beneath two tumblers, and a half-finished bottle of ale. Cheese and butter, bread and yellow soap, pork and currants, saddles and frocks, wide-awakes and blue serge shirts, green veils and shovels, baby linen and tallow candles, are all heaped indiscriminately together.

(herring – fish)

(wide-awakes – hats)

Stories of diggers' extravagances were common. When some struck it rich they wanted to buy the best of everything. One miner even had slippers made from real gold for his wife!



The recreated Criterion Store at Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Victoria

When the original store operated during the Ballarat gold rush, diggers and their wives could choose from fine laces, beautiful fabrics and fashionable dresses. A **crinoline** is hanging from the ceiling in the top right-hand corner of this photograph.



In 1860, Mrs Urquhart put on her most fashionable dress for the photographer