

Problems with bushrangers

Bushranging had been a problem since the early days of European settlement in Australia. The first bushranger, an escaped convict, held up travellers as early as 1790.

With the success of the Victorian and New South Wales' gold rushes, many more men became bushrangers. Thousands of pounds of gold were being transported from towns like Sofala and Ballarat to Sydney and Melbourne every week. Ex-convicts, criminals and those who had failed at the diggings found that holding up these escorts was an easier way to make a fortune than digging for it. In Victoria, the most famous bushranger was Frank Melville who stole gold from travellers between 1851 and 1854.

Ben Hall's gang

The 1860s was the worst period for bushranging. In New South Wales in 1862, a gang including Ben Hall, Frank Gardiner and John Gilbert held up the gold escort at Eugowra, near Forbes, and escaped with £14 000 of gold and banknotes. The following year, the gang, now headed by Hall, took over the town of Canowindra, outside Bathurst. The whole town was rounded up and forced to stay in the hotel. However, as the bushrangers treated their hostages to as much food and drink as they wanted and put on displays of target shooting for entertainment, there were not too many objections!

What is it worth now?

Today
£14 000 would
buy as much as
\$1.75 million.



Ben Hall's gun

Ben Hall put his name on the breech or handle of this gun. Hall was one of the most successful in avoiding capture of all Australian bushrangers. His admirers boasted that he had never killed anyone during his many robberies.



Ben Hall's belt and ammunition pouch

The belt has been cut in half by a bullet fired during his final shoot-out with police.

Arrests, rewards and hangings

In New South Wales and Victoria, officials increased their efforts to stop bushranging. In the 1860s, many bushrangers were killed or arrested. In 1862, Frank Gardiner was arrested and sentenced to 32 years' jail for the Eugowra robbery. In 1865, the government introduced the *Felon's Apprehension Act*, which meant that known bushrangers could be shot on sight. Anyone hiding them could be arrested as well.

Ben Hall shot dead

On 4 May 1865, Aboriginal trackers and Mounted Police found Ben Hall's bush camp, 30 kilometres out of Forbes. After keeping watch overnight, they surrounded the camp and shot Ben Hall dead. Three days later they found his two partners. Gilbert was killed and Dunn escaped, only to be captured a year later. Taken to trial in Sydney, he was sentenced to death and hanged at Darlinghurst Jail in March 1866.

The Clarke brothers arrested

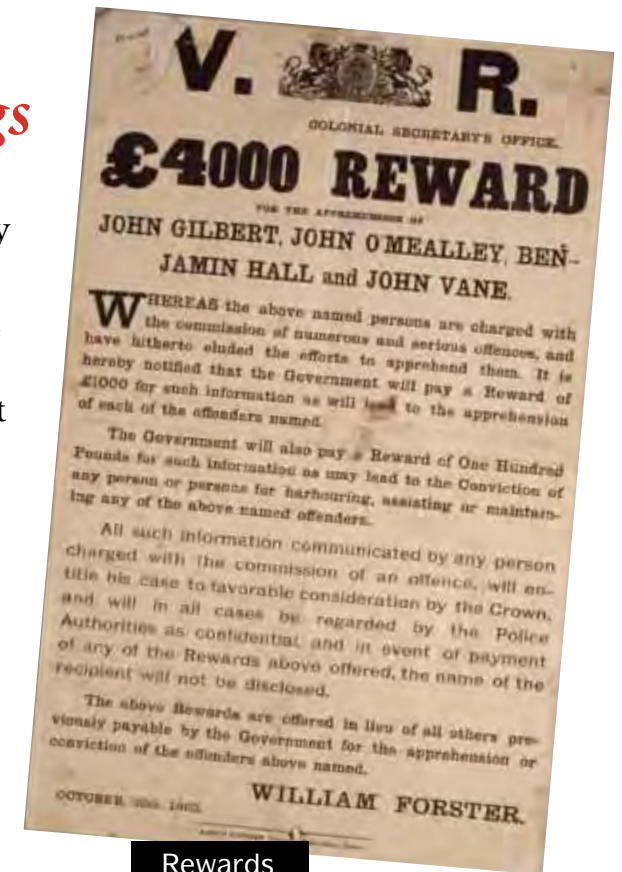
Another notorious goldfields' gang, the Clarke brothers, was captured in 1867. Thomas and John Clarke had been robbing people on the roads around Braidwood, New South Wales for over two years. They were tried, sentenced to death and hanged at Darlinghurst Jail on 27 June 1867. Reporting on the Clarke brothers, a Sydney newspaper described the contrast between the brothers':

Sheepish country-boy looks ... and their life of violence.

(sheepish – shy)

Bushrangers were popular heroes and their activities followed with great interest.

People even bought postcards of bushrangers after they had been killed.



Rewards

Huge rewards were offered for assistance in the capture of bushrangers. A £4000 reward would be equal to about \$500 000 dollars today.



Postcard of Captain Thunderbolt

The licence system

To ensure that diggers, storekeepers, publicans and other goldfields' workers had licences, the Commissioner and his assistants carried out regular checks. These often took on the appearance of a hunt as mounted police and troopers chased diggers who were trying to slip away.

As soon as the police were spotted, people called out 'Joe! Joe!' (the nickname for the police) warning diggers without licences to run away. Diggers disappeared down into mine shafts in the hope of finding an escape tunnel, or ran away into the bush.

When diggers were caught without licences they were often tied to a tree or chained together. Then when the hunt was over they were taken back to the Government Camp. They had to pay a fine of £5, and if they did not have the money, they had to stay in jail.



A portable cell on the Victorian goldfields

There were few jails. Portable cells reinforced with iron rods provided a secure lock-up for prisoners.

Golden stories

Joe and Josephine

Returning to his tent at the end of the day, a digger saw a licence hunt starting. He knew that his mate, Joe did not have a licence, and could not see how he could avoid being caught:

Two of the police were marching straight into the doorway ... when to my surprise [they] were confronted by a smart, genteel looking female. [They] turned on their heels in search of more easy prey, while I proceeded to introduce myself to my new-found sister ... In the course of the evening, Joe intimated that he had resolved never to take out a licence, he should ... continue to wear his new style of attire and that in future his name was to be Josephine.

(attire – clothing)

Diggers refuse to pay for licences

As the gold rushes continued, diggers hated the licence system more and more. It seemed particularly unfair that everyone had to pay this monthly tax whether they were successful or not. Diggers' protests against the system became increasingly violent.

Protests at Sofala and Bendigo

In 1852 at Sofala in New South Wales, over 600 miners refused to pay the gold licence fee. They held meetings, smashed mining cradles and sent a **deputation** to the Gold Commissioner. In 1853, diggers at Bendigo refused to pay and wore red ribbons to show their protest against the system.

Diggers' anger grows at Ballarat

The most famous rebellion was in 1854 at Ballarat in Victoria. A combination of circumstances brought the diggers' frustrations to a point where they felt they had to act. This became known as the Eureka Rebellion.

The winter of 1854 was particularly hard in Victoria. Ballarat was a field where miners had to dig deep shafts before finding any gold. This was slow and expensive, and meant months could go by before they made any money. The Italian miner, Raffaello Carboni, who would later take a leading role in the rebellion, described Ballarat as 'a ruinous field of hard labour'. The Ballarat miners were therefore slow in paying licence fees. Less than half the diggers on the field had them.

The Victorian Government was also short of money at this time. As a result, licence 'hunts' took place as often as twice a week to raise funds. This only made the Ballarat diggers more resentful of the Commissioners and the government.



S.T. Gill's 'Deep sinking' Bakery Hill, Ballarat – 1853

This is the area where the first major protests were held in the lead up to the Eureka Rebellion.

Did you know?

In May 1852, a newly discovered area of the Ballarat diggings was named Eureka. This name is a Greek word meaning 'I have found it'. Many of the diggers who tried their luck there were Irish. Over the next two years, there were some rich finds of gold on this field.



Artist S.T. Gill's sketch 'License inspected, Forrest Creek'

Diggers run for cover, diving down holes or running into the bush as the cry 'Joe! Joe!' rings out.

The Eureka Rebellion

Violence and arrests

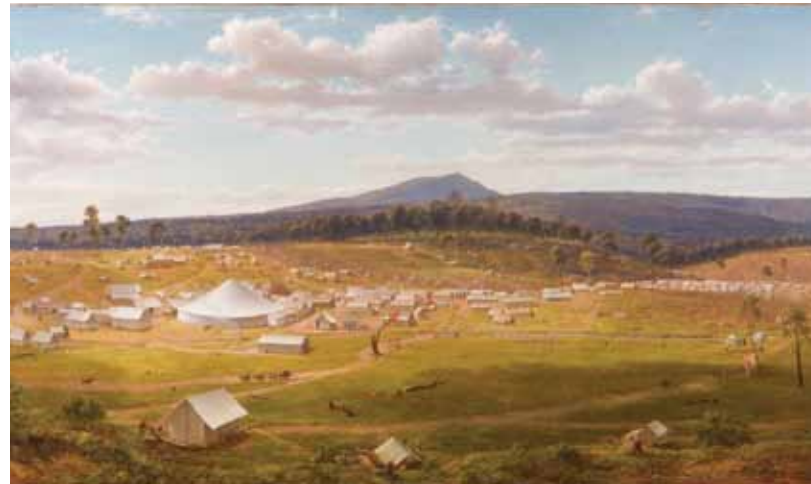
By October 1854, people on the Ballarat diggings were very angry about the licence hunts. They also thought the administration of the goldfields was disorganised and even **corrupt**. The men and women who sold 'sly grog' paid **bribes** to the police so they could continue their illegal businesses. At the same time, diggers were constantly harassed about their licences.

Then two things happened to show the corruption of the goldfields' administration.

On 7 October, a man called James Scobie was walking past the Eureka Hotel in Ballarat when he decided he wanted a drink. Even though it was very late and the hotel was closed, he insisted that he should be served. In a fight with the hotel owner, James Bentley, Scobie was killed. Bentley was arrested but later found not guilty of murder. The diggers were outraged. They claimed the only reason Bentley was not charged with murder was because the police magistrate was his friend.

Diggers decide to take action

A few days later, Irish diggers were further angered when a Catholic priest's servant was beaten up and wrongly arrested. Both incidents indicated to the frustrated diggers that the goldfields' administration and police force were often corrupt and unjust, and they became determined to do something about it.



Artist Eugène von Guérard painted *Old Ballarat as it was in the Summer of 1853–1854*

This painting shows what the diggings looked like immediately before the Eureka uprising. Bakery Hill is on the left. On the right, towards the front of the painting, a group of miners have been rounded up and are being taken to the Government Camp. The large tent belonged to a circus.

Diggers burn down the Eureka Hotel

The event that brought the diggers closer to rebellion was the burning down of Bentley's Eureka Hotel. This happened on 17 October, when diggers organised a meeting to protest against the release of James Bentley. The meeting was well organised and orderly. A committee was appointed to take their complaints to the Governor and money raised to cover expenses. But when it was over, a group of men decided to march to the hotel. Angry and out of control, they smashed windows and furniture, threw curtains and carpets outside and lit fires inside. Soon the hotel, stables, bowling alley and auction rooms were alight.



Eureka riot

Swiss artist and miner, Charles Doudiet was in Ballarat during the rebellion and painted *Eureka riot 17 October 1854*. The Eureka Hotel burns, while angry miners confront police and soldiers.

Diggers are arrested and jailed

The police arrested the men responsible and eventually jailed three: Fletcher, McIntyre and Westerby. Once again, the diggers protested and tried to persuade Governor Sir Charles Hotham to release the men, and again they failed. Over the next few days, the diggers' anger increased until rebellion was inevitable.

1854

7 October
James Scobie is murdered by James Bentley at the Eureka Hotel. Bentley is arrested.

10 October
The Catholic priest's servant is badly beaten and wrongly arrested.

12 October
Bentley is found not guilty.

17 October
Diggers burn down Eureka Hotel. Three men are later arrested.

22 October
Over 10 000 diggers meet on Bakery Hill to protest.

11 November
Ballarat Reform League proposals are adopted.

23 November
The men arrested for burning down the hotel are tried and convicted.

23 November
Members of the Ballarat Reform League demand their release.