Bushranging

**B**ushranging was the practice of hiding out in the bush while leading a criminal life. The gold-rush period in Australia, from 1851 until the early 1900s, was a time of frequent robberies. These robberies were often carried out by bushrangers.

Who were the bushrangers?

Many bushrangers of the gold-rush period were the sons of ex-convict farmers. They were mostly poor, although many had a taste for 'flashy' or showy dressing. Many were against authority, particularly the police and government officials. Some made speeches to their victims, or wrote to the papers, saying that they had been forced into bushranging. They claimed the laws were unfair and that police harassed them.

Bushrangers were often excellent bushmen and riders, and often began their criminal lives by horse stealing. They were usually in their early 20s, but most died within a year or two of taking up bushranging, being either hanged or shot. Very few lived past 30.

Some bushrangers, such as Captain Starlight (centre), dressed in flashy clothing.
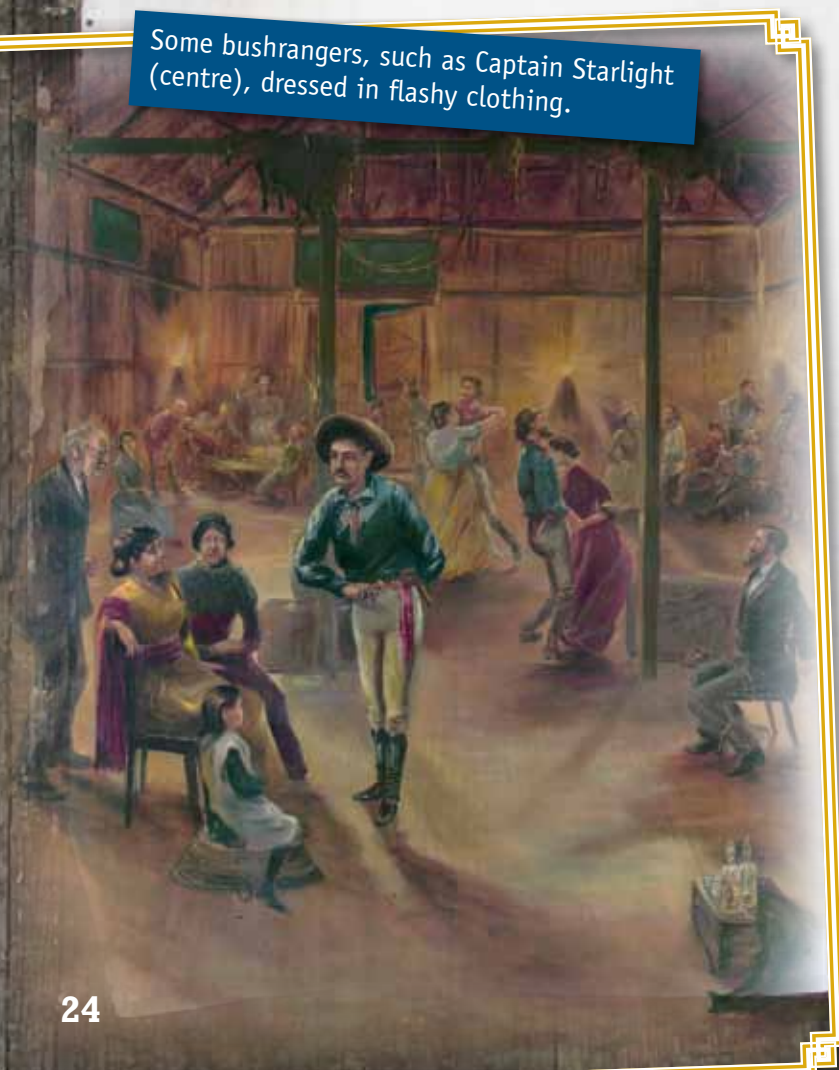
Gold News

Although many bushrangers were young Australian farmers' sons, they came from other countries as well. In 1862, three Frenchmen robbed and killed a mailman near Young, New South Wales. In 1865, a Chinese bushranger shot a trooper near Coonabarabran, New South Wales. There were also several Indigenous Australian bushrangers.

Goldfields police rode poor quality horses, which made it difficult for them to chase bushrangers.

Bushrangers during the gold rushes

Bushrangers became a big problem during the gold rushes. They held up banks and coaches carrying gold, and also stole money and horses from farmers and travellers.

Many police and troopers did not have good bush skills or riding ability. Their horses were not good quality like the stolen ones bushrangers rode. There were not many police and often they were not allowed to chase suspects into other districts. Many poor local residents disliked the authorities and helped bushrangers. They gave them shelter and supplies, sold their stolen goods, and told them about police plans and movements.

Laws against bushranging

In 1865, after several major robberies by bushrangers such as Frank Gardiner and police deaths at the hands of bushrangers, new laws were brought in for one year. Under the laws:

★ any person could capture an **outlaw**, dead or alive, without calling on them to surrender first

★ a citizen who helped an outlaw could be sent to prison for 15 years, and would have to give up their land and goods

★ police could enter any suspect house and arrest everyone there. They could take food, guns or horses from anyone to use for chasing bushrangers.

However, these laws were only temporary, so they did not put an end to bushranging.

Notorious bushrangers

Some of the most notorious bushrangers during the gold rushes were Frank Gardiner, Andrew Scott, Fred Ward, Ben Hall, John Fuller and Ned Kelly. These bushrangers were called notorious because they committed the worst or most daring crimes.

WANTED

Frank Gardiner

Frank Gardiner was born in 1830 in Scotland, and began stealing horses as a teenager. He served jail terms in Pentridge, Melbourne, and Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. Then he set up a butcher's shop and sold alcohol in a 'sly grog' hut at Lambing Flat. Alcohol was banned on the goldfields and Gardiner had to leave to escape arrest. In 1861, he returned to bushranging, robbing many travellers.

The Eugowra Rocks robbery

In June 1862, Gardiner and his gang robbed the gold escort travelling to Sydney at Eugowra Rocks, between Forbes and Orange. They staged a fake accident with bullock carts, and escaped with gold worth 15 000 pounds (about $1.5 million). Half of this gold was never recovered. Gardiner fled to Queensland, but was eventually caught and sentenced to 32 years in prison. After ten years he was released on the condition that he leave Australia. He moved to America and lived there for possibly 30 years. He is one of the few bushrangers who lived to an old age.

Frank Gardiner

The Eugowra Rocks hold-up, carried out by Frank Gardiner and his gang, was one of Australia's biggest robberies.

WANTED

Andrew Scott 'Captain Moonlite'

Andrew Scott, also known as Captain Moonlite, worked as a clergyman for the Church of England in Victoria before robbing a bank in 1869. Although he was identified, no-one believed a minister of religion would rob a bank. In 1870, he used some worthless cheques and was arrested. He was eventually tried for both crimes and sentenced to eleven years in jail. Captain Moonlite was released in 1879 and he and his gang held 30 people prisoner at a farm near Gundagai, New South Wales. A policeman trying to free the prisoners was killed. Scott was tried for murder and hanged in 1880.

'Captain Moonlite' (centre) and his gang

WANTED

Fred Ward 'Captain Thunderbolt'

Fred Ward, also known as Captain Thunderbolt, was jailed on Cockatoo Island in 1856 for horse stealing. Then in 1863, he was serving a second term there when he swam away from the supposedly escape-proof jail. Ward took up bushranging, committing more than 80 robberies. In spite of this, he avoided violence, and was said to be polite and well-mannered. Ward was an excellent horseman, who was apparently liked by local people in both New South Wales and southern Queensland. He had a loyal part-Aboriginal wife and several children. Ward was shot by a policeman in 1870.

'Captain Thunderbolt' (left) was shot by Constable Alexander Walker.

Ben Hall

Ben Hall was the son of former convicts, brought up on a farm. He was an excellent horseman. He married at 18 in 1856, and took up farming near Forbes in New South Wales. In about 1860, his wife left him, taking their son. A few years later he was arrested for armed robbery, possibly because some of his in-laws were bushrangers. Hall was found not guilty and returned home, but found that his home had been burnt down and the farm animals killed. Hall joined Frank Gardiner and later led his own bushranging gang. They committed many robberies, but Hall never killed anyone. In 1865, he was shot by police.
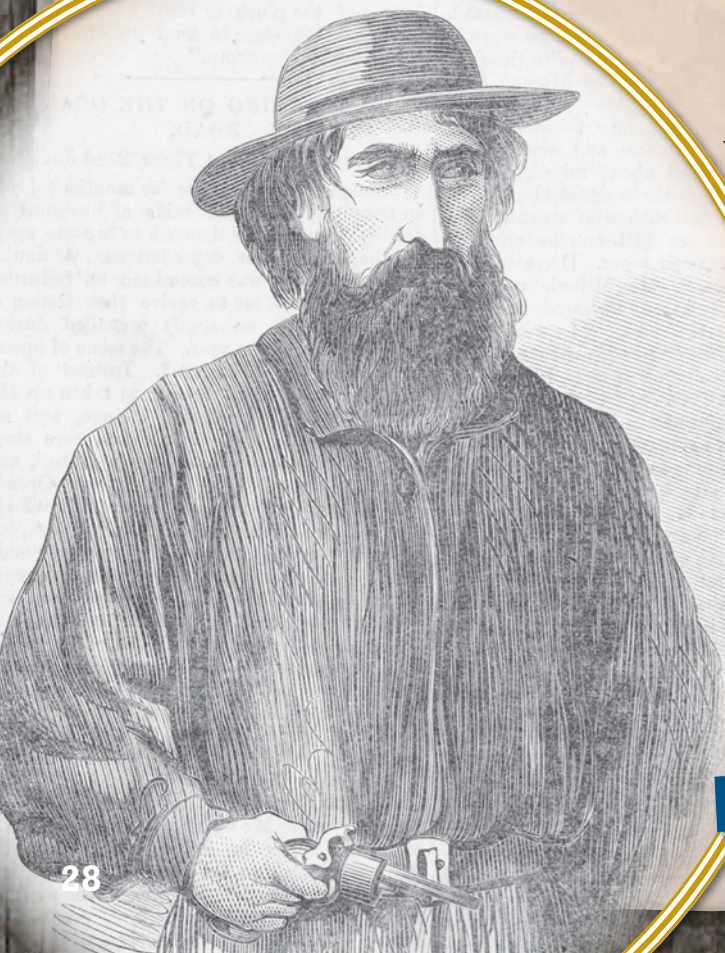
Ben Hall

John Fuller
'Mad Dog Morgan'

John Fuller, also known as Mad Dog Morgan, was a violent, unpredictable man, who began stealing as a teenager in New South Wales in the late 1840s. He may have been mentally ill, but in those days mental illness was not often treated. In 1854, Fuller was jailed in Victoria, but became a bushranger after being released on a ticket-of-leave. He shot several people, including a policeman who passed him on the road. He set fire to huts and storage sheds. Fuller terrified settlers in New South Wales and Victoria for several years. In 1865, police shot him at Wangaratta in Victoria.

John Fuller, also known as Mad Dog Morgan

Ned Kelly

Ned Kelly (centre) and his gang staged robberies and outwitted police. Ned Kelly was one of the last notorious bushrangers.
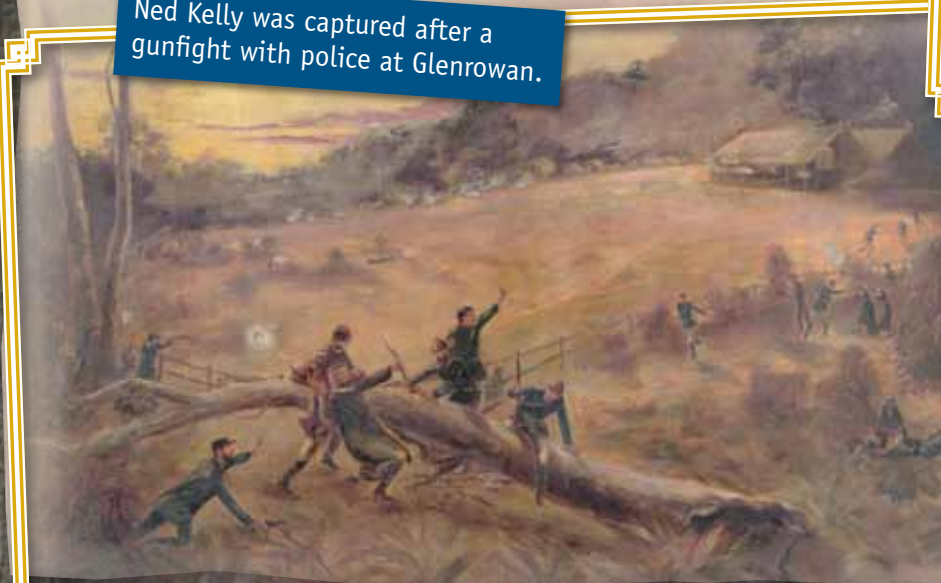
Edward Kelly, known as Ned, was born in 1855 at Beveridge, Victoria. He was the son of poor Irish settlers. The family hated the English-based government and the police. Brothers Ned, James and Dan were arrested and jailed in their teens for horse stealing and assault. In 1878, a policeman was shot at the Kelly farm, and Ned, Dan and their friend Joe Byrne took to the bush.
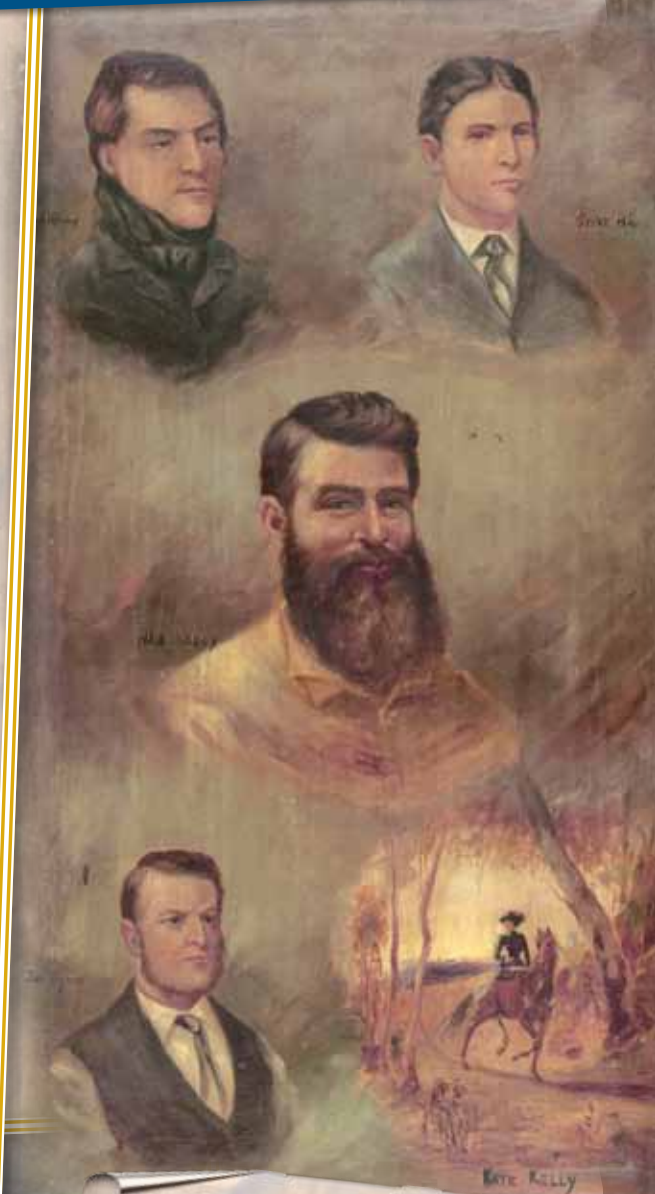
The Kelly gang

Three policemen sent to arrest the Kelly gang were killed at Stringybark Creek. The members of the gang were declared outlaws. For two years, they robbed banks, hotels and rich settlers, with the help of local supporters. They sent letters to the newspapers claiming that they were fighting for the rights of the poor, and against corrupt government officials and police.

In 1880, the gang planned a stand-off with police at Glenrowan. They tried to derail a train carrying police officers. They made armour to protect themselves in the fight, but three of the gang members were killed. Ned Kelly survived and was tried for the murder of a policeman at Stringybark Creek. He was found guilty and hanged in Melbourne in November 1880.

Ned Kelly was captured after a gunfight with police at Glenrowan.

GOLD NEWS

Railways and the electric telegraph were important factors in the fight against bushrangers. Police were able to receive information and track their activities much more easily.