A glimpse of life on the 19th Century goldfields

Some idea of life on the 19th Century goldfields of New South Wales is given in a Department of Primary Industry publication - FEBRUARY 2007 PRIMEFACT 575. www.dpi.nsw.gov.au

Some extracts are given below.

“Early in the gold rush days the gold diggings at first resembled tent camps. Even the Gold Commissioner began his career at Ophir in a large tent, as did his small police force. Commissioner Hardy measured out small claim areas for the diggers, issued licences at 30 shillings per month, arbitrated disputes and in general kept very good order.

The dwellings, whether tents or bark humpies had to be set up far enough above the banks of the creek or river to avoid being flooded when it rained heavily and the water rushed down the gullies. At first, it was not unusual to see tents and tarpaulin structures with additions of bark, galvanised iron, hessian bags and calico.

Later, when the diggings became established and miners brought their families with them with the intention of staying for some time, slab huts were erected with either bark or galvanised iron roofs. “
Thanks to the efforts of the photographer Beaufoy Merlin and his assistant Charles Bayliss, many photographs were taken on the diggings during the early 1870s. These photographs are now known as the Holtermann Collection, as Bernard Holtermann, a very successful miner, provided the finance for this work. Many of these photographs are now accessible through the State Library of NSW web site.


Most of the photographs were taken in the 1870’s around Mudgee, Hill End and Gulgong in central New South Wales. However, the living and working conditions in and around Batemans Bay were probable similar to those in other parts of the colony.

A selection of photographs from the Holtermann Collection are reproduced here.
Photographs from the Holtermann Collection.

Life on the goldfields

Geology of the Batemans Bay region
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Life on the goldfields

Photographs from the Holtermann Collection.

Bernard Otto Holtermann.

The Old Courthouse Museum
Batemans Bay NSW

Doug Finlayson
Canberra, 2016
The Holtermann Collection of 3500 glass plate negatives is now being digitised. Thanks to many generous benefactors, and the latest technology, we will soon be able to share this magnificent collection online.

How was this collection created?
When Bernard Otto Holtermann struck the largest-ever nugget of reef gold in 1872 he sent photographers Charles Bayliss and Beaufoy Merlin (with a horse-drawn darkroom) to record every detail of a new way of life: sunburnt prospectors and their vast makeshift towns.
Geology of the Batemans Bay region

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Photographs from the Holtermann Collection.
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The Chinese camps were usually set apart from the other ‘new chums’ on the goldfields, a fact which contributed to the resentment the European, American and ‘native Australian’ diggers built up against the Chinese. The Chinese also continued to wear their own traditional clothing, with loose blue shirts and trousers, and the distinctive cone-shaped straw hats.

The Chinese workers did not bring women with them from China. Most of them intended to collect whatever gold they could and then return home, often not just to provide for their families, but also for ‘masters’ to whom they were contracted one way or another. Nevertheless, there was enough interaction among the diverse ethnic groups for some of the Chinese to find wives and settle in Australia for good.

During the Mogo gold rush days on the NSW South Coast, many Chinese lived at Chinaman's Point on the Clyde River (Batemans Bay) for mutual protection, and travelled by boat across the Clyde River to "Latta's Point" and the Mogo Goldfields.

The Chinese were sometimes the target of prejudiced and racist attitudes and outright persecution by both European gold miners and the Australian Government of the time. However, around Batemans Bay there was little conflict with Europeans and Government officials.

It is believed there were about 7,000 Chinese people living and working on the NSW Araluen goldfields in the 1800’s Australian gold rush days.

Traditional Chinese religion, especially ancestor worship, was important in the lives of Chinese immigrants. Chinese temples or joss-houses were established in many goldfield towns and in cities. These joss-houses were dedicated to, and contained, the effigies of various Chinese gods and goddesses, including: Cai Shen (the God of Wealth), Guan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy), Guan Di (the God of Loyalty and protection from injustice) and Tian Hou (Goddess of the Sea). Worshippers prayed and made sacrifices to their ancestors and these gods for health, prosperity, safety and good fortune.

(Information and paintings – National Museum of Australia)
When gold was discovered in Australia, the volume of Chinese immigration significantly increased. The highest number of arrivals in any one year was 12,396 in 1856. In 1861, 38,258 people, or 3.3 per cent of the Australian population, had been born in China. This number was not to be equalled until the late 1980s. The majority of Chinese immigrants to Australia during the gold rush were indentured or contract labourers. However, many made the voyage under the credit-ticket system managed by brokers and emigration agents. Only a small minority of Chinese people were able to pay for their own voyage and migrate to Australia free of debt.

(Information and painting – National Museum of Australia)
Geology of the Batemans Bay region

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Strip mining at Araluen.

Chinese waterwheel at Araluen, 1868.
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Traction engine carting firewood for Araluen dredge, about 1900.


Family working on the goldfields, 1850’s. Engraving - Samuel T. Gill.
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Issuing mining licences, 1850’s.

Mining family at home, 1870’s.
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Hill End, central NSW, 1872

Photographs from the Holtermann Collection.

Bernard Holtermann (2nd from left) and partners with 114 kg of gold nuggets.
Geology of the Batemans Bay region

Life on the goldfields

There’s much more information on web sites. Some of these are listed below.

Web sites

• The Forgotten Gold Mines of Nelligen

• The Original Gold Rush, Mogo

• Argyle County, Southern Tablelands of NSW

• Majors Creek history
  http://www.majorscreek.org.au/content/history

• Majors Creek mining history, Dept. of Primary Industries, NSW

• Nerriga Gold Deposits, Dept. of Primary Industry, NSW

• Life on the Goldfields, Dept. Primary Industries, NSW

• Children on the Goldfields, Dept. Primary Industries, NSW