

The Story according to the Papers

The following item appeared, without fanfare, in the Domestic Intelligence, column of the *Argus* on 8th September 1851:

“NEW GOLD FIELD. - We have received the following letter announcing the discovery of a new gold field at Western Port:

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 ranges, 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 constable 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 Worbey [sic] Mt Alexander Ranges Sept 1st, 1851”

The writer was actually John Worley who, along with Christopher Peters and two others, was credited with the discovery of gold at Mt Alexander, by the Rewards Board in 1864. They had first found gold at Specimen Gully, Barker's Creek, to the north of present-day Castlemaine.

David Bannear, Historic Mining Sites Part 1 (1993)

The Mount Alexander Gold Rush commenced in October 1851 when gold was first discovered at Golden Point near one of Major Mitchell's 1838 exploration camp sites. (“*here from 8 to 12 inches of black soil overlaid deposits of gold, yielding from 12 to 20oz. to the tub of washdirt. As the workings extended southwards down Forest Creek, similar yields were common, and many extraordinary finds were made of 200 to 2,000oz., aggregated in small hollows, or "pockets", in the bed-rock*). The first Gold Commissioners camp (Mr Powlett's) was soon established and by November, the gold diggings had spread some 4 miles downstream, “*tents are being pitched for four miles lower down than the Commissioners*”). Soon the Commissioner shifted and a new camp was set up at Red Hill and in the vicinity of which canvas stores, post office and *Argus* office, and thousands of diggers' tents, swiftly formed the goldfield's first 'village'. Known generally as 'Forest Creek', the settlement was given the name Chewton in 1856.

The Melbourne Morning Herald reported:

“MOUNT ALEXANDER: His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor returned from these diggings yesterday morning. The reports from the mines are very favourable, several large yields rewarding the miners for their toil. One man obtained eleven pounds-weight of gold in forty-eight hours. We learn that His Excellency has expressed himself much gratified with his trip and is astounded at the success of many of the miners; it is His Excellency's opinion that the Gold Fields here are much more extensive than at Ballarat.” *Melbourne Morning Herald (20th October 1851) cited in Goldfields Reminiscences, Stan Tingay 1995.*

The *Argus*' correspondent on the spot reported on the changes:

“Though gold is found more or less along the creek the richest deposit appears to be at one point, and at this spot there are 122 tents pitched, containing as near as I could judge, 610 persons, independently of about 400 in the neighbourhood... There have been at least 300 persons arrived here since nine o'clock this morning, and hundreds more are coming across the country from Ballarat.” *The Argus (5th November 1851).*

Three days later, he wrote:

“Since Saturday morning, the scene has greatly changed - then a tent would be seen here and there, but now they are becoming inconveniently crowded... On Saturday, dozens were arriving at a time; on Sunday, hundreds; Monday and Tuesday, one continuous line of new arrivals. Your Melbourne departures are but trifling compared to the arrivals from Ballarat and the surrounding country... Gold continues to be found in abundance -

two, three, and four pounds per day seem common among the luckies; but water is becoming more scarce. *The Argus (8th November 1851).*

He also set the record straight about the actual location of the goldfield:

“The diggings are not on Mount Alexander, as is generally supposed, but in a gully known as Forest Creek, and situated about seven miles from the Mount, and twenty from the Loddon, which receives the waters of this Creek ... the more experienced are quietly retreating to the Loddon, where report states that gold has been found in abundance.”

The Argus (8th November 1851).

The population of the Forest Creek area had reached 15,000 at the end of November 1851, and the *Argus (27th November 1851)* reported:

“The escort brought into Melbourne from Forest Creek on November 26, 1851, 16,226 oz., about 6,000oz. having to be left behind as the conveyances provided for the transport of gold were unsuitable and the roads were in a very bad condition.”

Within months the rush was causing concern:

“MOUNT ALEXANDER: The RUSH to the goldfields is now so great that serious fears begin to be entertained regarding the wheat crops, and it becomes a matter for the prompt attention of the Government as to what is to be done to save the country. *** Whether to raise the the gold licence today to 10 pounds a month for the next three months, or to prohibit digging for that time appears only feasible. The RUSH to these mines is FEARFUL, and no wonder.” *Melbourne Morning Herald (25th November, 1851) cited in Goldfields Reminiscences, Stan Tingay 1995.*

By mid-December the population of the Forest Creek goldfield was approaching 30,000. The cheap labour, on which the squatters and others relied to produce their individual wealth, had suddenly become self-employed persons seeking to strike it rich. The Government in Melbourne was thrown into panic. The Governor and his advisors in the Legislative Council were representatives of the wealthy employing class, and pressure was brought upon them to halt the flow of labour on the gold fields.

Thus it was decided to put the cost of gold-digging out of reach of most working people, by doubling the License Fee to dig - from 30 shillings to 3 pounds per *month* (the equivalent of six spades or five axes). The Government stated that the increase in the License was needed to finance Law and Order on the gold fields. (*Bruce Murray, 1995 Commemoration Booklet*).

Serious trouble was feared, and The Argus reported that a force of 130 soldiers was sent from Melbourne, and encamped at Castlemaine.

On the morning of the 8th of December a notice appeared through the Forest Creek area.

Fellow Diggers!

The intelligence has just arrived of the resolution of the Government to Double the License Fee. Will you tamely submit to the imposition or assert your rights as men?

You are called upon to pay a tax originated and concocted by the most heartless selfishness, a tax imposed by Legislators for the purpose of detaining you in their workshops, in their stable yards, and by their flocks and herds. They have conferred to effect this; They would increase this seven-fold but they are afraid! Fie upon such pusillanimity! And shame upon the men, who, to save a few paltry pounds for their own pockets, would tax the poor man's hands!

It will be in vain for one or two individuals to tell the Commissioner, or his emissaries, that they have been unsuccessful and that they cannot pay the licence fee.

But remember that union is strength, that though a single twig may be bent or broken, a bundle of them tied together neither bends nor breaks.

Ye are Britons! will you submit to oppression or injustice?

Meet - Agitate - Be unanimous - and if there is justice in the land, they will, they must abolish the imposition.

*Yours Faithfully,
A Digger.*

(The Gold Seekers, Norman Bartlett)

After the distribution of that notice, each of the diggings held small local meetings to plan the next step. A delegation of diggers approached Commissioner Powlett, asking him to sponsor a mass meeting so that diggers could express their views directly to him. He refused, saying he had urgent business in Melbourne. The diggers then called their own mass meeting for December 15th.

On the 12th of December the A. Digger notice was published in the Argus, along with a notice.

“NOTICE

TO DIGGERS AT MOUNT ALEXANDER AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

A PUBLIC MEETING will be held on Monday next, the 15th instant, at four o'clock, on the ground near the Commissioner's tent, for the purpose of taking into consideration the Proclamation of His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor of the 1st instant, relative to increasing the License Fee from 30s per month to 3 pounds, and for other purposes connected with the diggings. December 12th.”

A letter in the Argus on the 13th of December from a correspondent “Bendigo” stated: “That we, the gold miners assembled on Bendigo Creek, having learned that the Lieutenant Governor and Executive Council of Victoria, by proclamation, have intimated their intention of doubling our license fee from mid after (sic) the 1st of January next; and considering that it is unjust and extremely oppressive, are, to a man, determined not to submit to the wholesale robbery which is contemplated by such proclamation, and to the uttermost will withstand its imposition. We, therefore, solemnly pledge ourselves to resist it in every shape and form, and will aid by all the means in our power those who will do the same elsewhere. We wish to be understood as not objecting to the present heavy tax of thirty shillings per month, although we consider it too much. As in proof of which, there is a large surplus fund arising therefrom, amount to £3,000.”

On the 15th of December the Argus published a letter:

“Fellow diggers in bush and town! - Remember, 15th of December 1851, to rally round the standard of Australian Reform, and record your opinions against the tyrannical oppressors who wish to levy an enormous Tax upon the bone and sinew of the country - the capital of the poor man!

What has developed the vast, rich resources of this Colony! Labour; which has placed the poor man, who after years of suffering toil to earn a crust for his starving family, is now, in a great measure, to be deprived of the chance of digging for gold (for it is a chance with the many), because the rich man conceives that your energetic spirit to raise yourselves and your families to a position above want, is to be crushed by the intended advance upon the license fee, which has no precedent in the annals of history. Why not tax the amount of gold produced from the soil?

Men, in equity, every man would pay in proportion to what he has received. On the other hand, has thirty shillings per month defrayed the expenses of the Commissioner, escort & company? If it has done so, then the increase of thirty shillings extra, is an imposition in practice, and unjust in principle. Why does not the Government make out a debtor and creditor account, and let the diggers know how the money they have paid has been expended, and where the surplus, which must be a large one, has gone to, or what is intended to be done with it?
I remain, R.B.C”.

and the same edition of the Argus editorialized:

“THE LICENSE FEE:

We believe that we are warranted in stating, that the Government has seen the necessity of deciding that the exaction of the doubled license-fee shall not be enforced. Very ‘firm’ and very ‘judicious’ certainly, the whole proceeding! The adoption of a charge upon the gold, in the shape of a Royalty, is still under consideration; and the License system having proved a complete failure, we think that some better course should be decided upon.”

The scene was thus set for the 15th of December. As researcher Barbara James noted “we are dependent on the two contemporary Melbourne papers (the *Herald* and the *Argus*) for first hand accounts of the meeting.” (*Barbara James Collection held by the Chewton Domain Society*).

On the 17th of December the *Argus* reported:

**“MOUNT ALEXANDER:
MEETING OF DIGGERS.**

Our reporter left the diggings yesterday morning, and arrived with his report too late in the evening for insertion.

From a hurried glance we find that it was attended by about 14,000 men, many of whom had travelled twenty miles to be present. Not a cradle was seen at work after 3 o’clock, until the meeting was over.

J.F. Mann, Esq. in the Chair. Capt. Harrison, Messrs Potts, Lineham, Hudson, Booley and Richmond addressed the crowd, which is reported to be one of the most orderly in the colonies.

Five resolutions were passed, a committee formed - and delegates appointed. We intend giving the report in full tomorrow.”

The *Argus* of the 18th of December and the *Herald* of the the 20th of December both published reports of the meeting, each prepared by their “own Correspondent”. The day was summarized in the 1995 commemoration booklet as:

“The 15th of December was hot and dry, but the chosen meeting place near the Shepherd’s Hut at Chewton, was hung with bright banners and bunting was strung between tall stringy barks. By 3 o’clock, the cradles lay idle, and bands of diggers, many carrying shovels, made their way in from various corners of the diggings. Some were accompanied by musicians, including a brass band, giving the occasion a festive air. Cheers and greetings echoed about to welcome each arriving party. A roaring welcome was given to Captain John Harrison, who led in a delegation from Bendigo.

By 4 o’clock, a cooling breeze gave relief to the crowd. After waiting some time for A. Digger to present himself, at the dray which served as speakers’ platform, J.F. Mann, Esq. was appointed Chairperson. He called upon Mr. Lawrence Potts to speak. (From his turn of phrase, it is clear that the mysterious A. Digger was very well known to “Pottsie”.) Messrs Lineham, Booley, Richmond, Hudson and Capt. Harrison then spoke in turn. Five resolutions declaring opposition to the License Fee and setting out future actions were put and adopted, interspersed with good-natured heckling from the crowd.

1. That this meeting deprecates as unjust, illegal, and impolitic, the attempt to increase the License Fee from 30 Shillings to Three Pounds. Moved Potts. Seconded O’Connor.
2. That this meeting while deprecating the use of physical force, and pledging itself not to resort to it except in case of self-defence; at the same time pledges itself to relieve or release any or all diggers that on account of non-payment of the Three Pound License Fee may be fined or confined by Government orders or Government agents, should Government temerity proceed to such illegal lengths. Moved Lineham. Seconded Doyle.
3. That Delegates be named from this meeting, to confer with the Government, and arrange an equitable system of working the Gold Fields. Moved Dr. Richmond. Seconded Potts.

4. Moved that Captain Harrison, Dr. Richmond and Mr Plaistowe be appointed Delegates from this meeting, to make arrangements with the Government in the spirit of the foregoing resolutions. Carried.

That to meet the expenses of the Delegates and other incidents, a Subscription of 1 shilling per month from each cradle be entered into. Carried.

5. That the miners at each diggings appoint Committees to watch over their interests, and that a Central Committee be formed by a Delegate from the Committee of each Digging, such Delegates to be paid for their services, and report proceedings to a General Meeting of the miners, to be held the first Monday in every month. Carried.

Speakers and hecklers joked about the "Joes and Noonies" (police and troopers), saying that some were so young they had to be dragged from their mother's breast and should be rocked in the (gold) cradles. Special invective was saved for George Cavenagh of the Herald newspaper. The Herald had printed articles describing the diggers in such terms as "vagabonds, cut-throats and scoundrels", but speakers made a point of mentioning how safe and trustworthy was society on the gold fields.

To round off the meeting, the assembly gave three hearty cheers for the Argus newspaper; "who watch over the interests of the working classes", and three groans for the Herald.

After the speeches, the musicians played, and gradually the diggers dispersed to their respective tents.

According to the Argus report: "At 7 o'clock that evening no person could have surmised that anything of importance had taken place that day. During Capt. Harrison's address, there could not have been less than 14,000 persons on the ground, not a cradle was seen to be working. The men appear to have risen en masse, at the sound of the band, and retired in the same order."

The Governor had to back down by rescinding the order to double the License Fee, or risk greater insurrection. This decision was declared in an order dated December 13th 1851; that is, prior to the Monster Meeting. However, it was not reported by the Argus until December 16th and then said to be "under discussion", while the Government Gazette did not confirm the decision until December 24th. Whether the rescission order was deliberately pre-dated, so that the Governor did not appear to buckling under Digger pressure, is open to conjecture. (1995 Commemoration Booklet)

**Rescission Notice,
Colonial Secretary's Office,
Melb. Dec. 13th. 1851**

Measures being now under the consideration of Government, which have for their object the substitution as soon as circumstances permit of other Regulations in lieu of those now in force, based upon the principle of a royalty leviable upon the amount actually raised, under which Gold may be lawfully removed from its natural place of deposit. His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor, with the advice of the Executive Council, hereby causes it to be notified, that no alteration will for the present be made in the amount of the License Fee as levied under the Government Notice of the 18th August 1851; and that the Government Notice of the 1st inst., is hereby rescinded.

By His Excellency's Command, W. Lonsdale.

Writing in the *Argus* on the 5th of July 1924 "G.B." wrote about the aftermath of the 15th of December:

"Though the possibility of a revolt was averted by the abandonment of the proposed increase, the soldiery remained, and for seven years Castlemaine was under semi-military rule. The gold diggers of Castlemaine, like their brethren elsewhere in Australia, do not seem to have been a submissive class, and a small hill in the town became known as Agitation Hill, as here was the local forum where were held from time to time meetings to protest against various wrongs, local and national."