

1851 MONSTER MEETING OF DIGGERS

Was there one true Diggers' flag?

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There is no suggestion of an iconic diggers' flag in either of the newspaper reports of the 1851 Forest Creek meeting in the Argus or the Melbourne Morning Herald. The famous Argus account states that: 'Early on Monday, preparations were made, flags collected, and a temporary platform brought to the spot in the shape of a dray'. The only possible evidence for a dedicated diggers' flag is in David Tulloch's sketch of the meeting, drawn on the spot and reproduced as a lithograph in 1852 in Thomas Ham's Five Views of the Gold Fields of Mount Alexander and Ballarat.

This flag in the sketch is in four quadrants, the top left depicting a crossed shovel and pick. The other three quadrants cannot be distinguished. There are two other flags in the sketch, a diagonal red cross on a yellow background and the Argus banner which customarily flew over its office in Forest Creek. Tulloch's accompanying text describing the meeting, a eulogy to the diggers which deserves to be better known makes no mention of a flag except in Tulloch's words accompanying his lithographs which can be read in the **Story** section of this website.

The first mention of a 'diggers' banner' appeared in connexion with the Red Ribbon movement in Bendigo in August 1853. The Argus of 19 August covered the huge anti-licence protest meeting held a few days before and its reporter stressed the importance of flags and banners in the protest movement:

Gully after gully hoisted its own flag, around which the various sections rallied, and as they proceeded towards the starting-points, formed quite an animated spectacle. The various nationalities were well represented by the different flags: the Germans in particular seemed determined to come out strong on the occasion, having ordered some splendid new banners for the purpose. The English nation was well supported by royal standards and union jacks, and the Irish seemed determined not to be behindhand, and had provided themselves with a very beautiful green flag, with the harp in the centre, supported by the pick and shovel. But the flag which attracted the greatest attention was the Diggers' Banner, the work of one of the Committee, Mr Dexter, an artist of considerable talent, and certainly no company ever possessed a more appropriate coat of arms, or a motto more in character with themselves.

No further details were given. However, a description of Dexter's flag appears in William Howitt's 1855 book, Land, Labour and Gold:

The pick, the shovel and the cradle, – that represented labour. There were the scales, – that meant justice. There was the Roman bundle of sticks, – that meant union: 'altogether, – all up at once.' There were the kangaroo and the emu, – that meant Australia, (p.224)

It is this description which has come down to the present as an iconic diggers' flag. Howitt, who was present at the meeting, was scathing in his disapproval of the radical William Dexter (and his feminist wife Caroline), declaring the flag to be an insult to their shared British heritage.

The possibility that Dexter copied the design from a flag flown at the 1851 Forest Creek meeting is remote as he did not arrive in Australia until October 1852. Geoff Hocking also casts doubt on the connection and helpfully brings to bear on the subject his expertise on nineteenth-century workers' iconography. There was mention of a 'diggers' arms' depicting a pick and shovel at the testimonial dinner for Gold Commissioner Captain Bull in September 1854. However, at two guineas a ticket and limited space at the Victoria Hotel most of the diggers would have had to read about the dinner in the pages of the Mount Alexander Mail (22 September 1854).

The only flag which can be positively identified as associated with the Forest Creek Monster Meeting of December 1851 was the red flag with the white star flown by Captain John Harrison outside his tent in Bendigo. The Argus of 13 December 1851 gave a report of the meeting held by Harrison in support of the Forest Creek men which mentions the flag: 'The appointed place of meeting was in front of Captain Harrison's tent, over which floated a red flag with a white star'. A few days later Harrison, a squatter and a well-known activist in several causes, spoke to great acclaim at the Monster Meeting at Forest Creek, though no mention is made of his flag.

However, the most persuasive argument against the existence of an iconic diggers' flag on the Victorian goldfields was the design of the flag which was raised at the Eureka Stockade in December 1854 – the white stars of the Southern Cross on a blue background. If Dexter's quadrant design was generally accepted as the diggers' flag, why was it not raised over the ill-fated Eureka Stockade? The Eureka flag has survived in our collective memory because it was torn down and souvenired by the victors, because it was tendered as evidence at the treason trials, because it was sewn not painted and because men lost their lives in its defence. Those interested in the (contested) provenance of the Eureka flag can read Len Fox's *Eureka and Its Flag*.

So it is doubtful that there was ever a generally accepted diggers' flag on the Victorian goldfields. Flags and banners were indeed important to the diggers in support of their many causes. For the most part the flags were ephemeral and painted spontaneously on canvas or sheeting to serve in the moment. At the huge Red Ribbon meeting on the Ovens diggings (a centre of digger activism neglected by historians) several flags flew over the platform: a crimson flag on which was inscribed 'Taxation without representation is robbery'; another waving from a gum tree demanded 'Representation for the miners'; and a third, depicting the familiar crossed pick and shovel, called on the authorities to 'Unlock the lands' (*Empire*, 31 August 1853).

Perhaps the last word should go to the despised Chinese, who joined the Bendigo Red Ribbon procession in August 1853 bearing a handsome Chinese banner depicting their distinctive iconography. Unfortunately there is no existing record of the design of their banner.