

BLACKWOOD-BLAKEVILLE GOLDFIELD

DATE

HISTORY:

1851-59

Early alluvial working

Gold was unearthed as early as 1851 at Blackwood. It was not, however, until June 1855 that news of discoveries by Edward Hill as a spot called Red Hill saw a large gold rush set in along the course of the Lerderderg River and its tributaries.. When the **Blackwood Rush** peaked in September 1855 ¹there were some 13,000 diggers on the field. By this time, most of the locations which were to become famous for their alluvial gold had been opened: such as Golden Point, Nuggetty Gully, Long Gully, Yankee Gully, Frenchman's Gully and Dead Horse Gully. The last named gully was noted for the recovery of the district's largest nugget, 29lbs in weight. During the Blackwood Rush, two main mining villages were established: at Red Hill and Golden Point, the latter was surveyed and laid out as Blackwood. By the end of 1856 the bulk of the mining population that had gathered on the Blackwood field had left for the Fiery Creek Diggings. For those that stayed on, less than one tenth of the original population, things were never to be easy. Little new alluvial ground, except got Blue Mountain Diggings in 1862, was to be discovered. Alluvial mining was almost exclusively focussed on the bed of the **Lerderderg River, which was sluiced time and time again using sluice boxes, pumps and water wheels.** At first the sluicing was carried out by a mixture of Chinese and European miners: eg. in February 1860 there were 460 Europeans and 230 Chinese.² By the 1870s, alluvial mining was increasingly monopolised by the Chinese. European miners appeared unable, or unwilling, to compete against the organisation and perseverance of the Chinese, and thus were few in numbers in comparison, and were usually referred to as lonely fossickers or hatters. Puddling, common on some Victorian goldfields, was a rare practice in the Blackwood district: in October 1859 there were only two- horse-driven puddlers in operation ³, and their numbers never exceeded five.

Reef discoveries

At the end of the Blackwood Rush, miners also began to tackle two lines of reefs: **Trehella or Barrys and Yankee or Union.** The working of the former reef led to the survey of the township of Bayup, later named Barrys Reef. Although proving to be rich, on and near the surface, these and two other lines of reefs discovered in 1858, **Simmons and Johnstons**, proved to be very unpredictable and difficult to work: often narrowing or terminating suddenly at depth and trending east-west rather than the conventional north-south direction. A few quartz reefs were also successfully prospected away from Blackwood during the late 1850s: **Snake Gully line of reefs, Hit and Miss Reef**, and the **Garibaldi line of reefs.** The first period of Blackwood's quartz mining was mainly funded and undertaken by small parties of working miners, called co-operative companies. These small companies mainly tunnelled in to the hills from the creek bed and dropped shafts from their adits. Some of the tunnels were driven for great distances, eg. a tunnel commenced by the **Egerton Company** to intersect Annie Laurie Reef (Barrys Reef) ended up being some 2,300 feet long.⁴ The **Clyde Banks Company's** tunnel went in over 1,300 feet.⁵ Most of the shafts dropped by the companies never went far below the water level, though one sunk by the Sultan Company reached 900 feet. During the pioneering years of quartz mining, companies erected small crushing mills which were either powered by steam or water power: in July 1859 there were 17 companies operating crushing mills, 13 were powered by water and 4 by steam.⁶ The water to drive the wheels being delivered by races from the nearest, most reliable water course.

1860's:

Water - an annual obstruction to gold production

By the 1860s, gold production in the Blackwood district was heavily linked to the water supply. From this time, drought-induced obstructions to sluicing and quartz crushing became an annual event. Some years proved to be particularly bad, eg. a very dry period from 1865 to 1867 forced many to leave the district.

1870's:

1870s - Districts first and only investment spree

Blackwood's first, and only mining investment spree commenced around 1868. It appears to have been spawned by two main factors. During the preceding drought the small companies, unable to crush, had stock-piled large reserves of ore. Once the drought broke and the water-wheels had their 'fuel' there was a massive jump in gold production. There was also an influx of outside capital, mainly from Clunes and Ballarat which saw a hundred mining leases taken up in a twelve month period.⁷ The flagships of the investment spree were four public companies: the **Clunes and Blackwood, Trojan and Union** companies on Yankee line of reefs, and the **Sultan Company** on Barrys Reef. These companies experienced mixed fortunes and had diverse influences on the district's mining industry. The Clunes and Blackwood and Union companies became famous for their extravagance, expenditure on large steam-powered machinery, and dismal failure. For years after, the fate of these two companies was cited as one of the major constraints to the district attracting worthwhile outside capital.⁸ The Sultan Company, on the other hand was successful. It mined for some ten years, was the district's largest employer of mining labour, and became the only public company to mine profitably: 82,000 tons/66,000 ounces of gold for 60,000 in dividends.⁹ Whilst the public companies briefly basked in the glory of highly capitalised mining, and then failed miserably, the small co-operative companies maintained the industry. There perseverance through the 1870s is no better illustrated by the efforts of the **Victoria Company**. This company, which rose among the wreckage of the ill-fated public companies on Yankee Reef in 1876, worked for ten years before mining on a profitable basis.¹⁰ Most crushing plants of the small co-operative companies were upgraded during the investment spree. Like the pioneering period of quartz mining, the machinery being used was powered by both steam and water. Whereas most of the Yankee Reef companies preferred steam power, those on Simmons Reef were exclusively water-powered. Along this latter line of reef, most of the companies, including the **Simmons Reef, Koh-i-Noor, Imperial and Lerderberg** upgraded their plant in the early 1870s: eg. the Simmons Reef Company installed a 36ft diameter wheel, cited as the then largest in the district.¹¹ The water for all the Simmons Reef mills came from the Lerderberg River: to drive their mill, the Imperial Company constructed a race which was 6-3/4 miles long, 670 feet of which was through tunnels.¹² The Koh-i-Noor Company received its water from a government reservoir. The re-equipping of co-operative companies also took place way from Blackwood: eg. the **Garibaldi Company** constructed a 8 mile race from Korgamunnip Creek to its new mill.¹³

New reef discoveries and technology

During the early 1870s, two new auriferous reefs were successfully opened in the district: **Wrights Reef** (five miles south of Blackwood)¹⁴ and **Browns Reef** (about 8 miles south-west of Blackwood, and six miles north of Ballan).¹⁵ The small mining boom resulting from the discovery of the latter reef, in 1871, caused the abandonment of tunnelling claims along the Upper Werribee and led to the establishment of the township of Blakeville. Unfortunately the rush saw only a handful of minor reefs discovered, the most significant being Ashton's Freehold in 1872.¹⁶ Companies were formed to work both reefs - Wrights (**Red White and Blue** and **North Britain**) and Browns (**Undaunted**) - and all erected substantial machinery. One of these new companies, the North Britain Company, was to become the district's most prominent mine in the 1880s. Two companies - the **Great Tunnel Quartz Mining** and **All Nations - crushed cement** during the 1870s. The cement (hard conglomerate) was obtained from the old alluvial workings at Golden Point. Both companies also did their own quartz mining and erected substantial plant. Some of the mines also began to treat highly mineralised ore: the **North Star Company on Union Reef roasted quartz** in kilns¹⁷ and the **New North Britain Company erected a pyrites works**.¹⁸

1880's:

Minor mining revival

Blackwood's investment spree had run out of steam by the mid 1870s. In a time of very depressed mining, Barrys Reef was the only bright spark for the district. By 1874 a sizeable village had formed around the mines on Barrys Reef and the Sultan Company was employing a large number of men. When this company's production declined during the late 1870s, matters were particularly bleak for the miners. In June 1878, the local mining registrar reported a drop in the district's mining population. A year later, he was reporting on a mass removal of machinery from the field, as companies such as the North Cornish, Star of the West, British Lion and Albion, auctioned their plants.¹⁹ The next year brought further calamities: the Sultan Company suddenly closed down throwing out of work a large number of men; and a violent flood down the Lerderderg River swamped all the creek claims, sweeping away fluming, water-wheels, sluice-boxes and other mining materials, and destroying or damaging most of the bridges.²⁰ Although mining did bounce back in the 1880s, it never really recovered the disasters of the 1870s. The first hints of a revival in quartz mining came in September 1881 when the registrar reported that the steam engines and plant that had been removed (valued at about 18,000) was now being replaced or again brought into the district. One of the newly equipped mines was the **Simmons Reef Amalgamated Company**: it planned to invest £2,329 in the construction of a large reservoir of 25 acres (approximately 109,000,000 gallons).²¹ The company intended to use the water to crush all year round, and also supply other mill owners. Unfortunately, the company could not fund the work, and was continually affected by the lack of water. To add to its woes, its fancy new crushing plant (a turbine-powered battery from America) proved to be very uneconomical. Other companies to erect new plant during the 1880s revival included the **New Sultan**, **New North Britain**, **Countess**, and **New Cosmos** (Snake Gully). Unfortunately none of the mines that worked during the 1880s were to match the results of the old Sultan Company. Only the New North Britain Company was to have any significant influence on the district, but by 1886, even this company's success was beginning to wane. With the decline of the New North Britain, the mining registrar reported a gradual decline in the mining population as miners gained permanent employment on other fields and removed their families. The New North Britain's collapse in 1889 sounded the death-knell for large-scale quartz mining in the Blackwood district. From the 1890s onwards, the district rarely featured in mining reports, except for the odd mention on the activities of a few small co-operative prospecting parties. The government, in attempt to help local prospectors, installed a small crushing battery at Blakeville in 1907.

Animosity to Chinese

The reports issued by the mining registrar in the 1880s are often quite testy, as he continually addressed the matter of lack of mining investment in the field. The poor record of the large public companies had stymied any chance of outside help, it was now up to the locals to revive the industry. By the end of the decade the registrar was blaming the Chinese for lack of local capital. For some thirty years, he wrote, the Chinese had enjoyed the same rights and privileges as Europeans. During this time they had confined their attention almost exclusively to mining Blackwood's main lead (the bed of the Lerderderg River) where their primitive peg and brush dams had proved excellent foils to ordinary floods, and many had returned to China with large quantities of gold. Their constant re-working of the Lerderderg had left nothing for the local quartz miners to fall back on in difficult times, and the thousands of ounces of gold that the Chinese had taken home, if it had been left for the Europeans, he argued, would have mainly been used for developing the district's quartz reefs.²²

Deep lead mining

Apart from witnessing the last hurrah for quartz mining, the 1880s also saw a significant attempt at deep lead mining. By 1884, several companies were prospecting for deep alluviums at **Green Hill**. A discovery of auriferous drift in the following year by the **North Benedetti Company** sparked a small boom. The North Benedetti Company went as far as constructing a dam across Green Hill Creek, a tramway from its tunnel and a puddler.²³ It appears to have not mined profitably and mentions of the company, and its neighbours, such as the Benedetti Amalgamated and Benedetti, do not feature in mining reports after 1887.

Twentieth century quartz mining

By the turn of the century there was little happening on the Blackwood reefs, except for the work of a few individual prospectors. These miners were often assisted by government prospecting grants. This prospecting period appears to have had only one notable success in 1918, with some large bodies of payable ore being worked at the Yankee mine by a co-operative party. On the same line, the Countess Company sunk a main shaft 108 feet and opened up on a lode 2 to 5 feet in width.²⁴ These mining operations were both short-lived.

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