

## THE NORTH QUEENSLAND GOLDFIELDS

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In Queensland as a whole, goldmining has had far-reaching effects upon population and material growth: in North Queensland especially, gold built up and stabilised the infant community. The gold discoveries of the Sixties and Seventies provided markets which saved the pastoral industries from threatened collapse. With later discoveries and the rise of stable goldmining communities there developed in North Queensland towns, industries, railways, ports and telegraphic networks that were able to meet the needs of newer agricultural industries, particularly sugar, after the era of gold had faded. Goldmining made a major financial contribution to the growth and stability of the Colony of Queensland: perhaps even more important, it virtually created an entire province in nurturing, fostering and underpinning North Queensland.

White settlement of North Queensland developed in a colony-wide period of material growth and development in which North Queensland itself played a significant part and in which gold made a large contribution. Despite several economic setbacks and some political upheavals, Queensland experienced a period of growth within the 40 years between separation from N.S.W. (1859) and Federation (1901). A significant feature of the 40 years was the growth of country towns which came into existence for a wide variety of reasons significant in the history of Queensland as well as in the history of the North: the opening up of the rich inland pastoral areas; the discovery of minerals in outlying districts; the discovery (or revelation) that the whiteman could live and work in the tropics, and the subsequent increase in the sugar industry; the opening up further and further north of the rich coastal strip; and especially the creation, unique in Australia, of a decentralized railway system linking the interior section with the coastal towns. By the end of the century, from Ipswich, 25 miles from Brisbane, to Cairns, 1200 miles to the north; from Warwick with a population of 3,500 to Rockhampton with 1800 and Charters Towers approaching 25,000, the vast colony was scattered with a dozen towns of respectable size and industry.

North Queensland itself became open for white settlement in 1861 with the opening of the Kennedy district, which extended from Cape Palmerston, 40 miles south of Mackay, to Halifax Bay near Ingham, and inland to include the Burdekin Valley. The N.S.W. government had proclaimed the Kennedy District open to settlement some three weeks before Queensland's separation in December, 1859, but in fear of speculative land grabbing, the new colony countermanded the proclamation and waited for the report of Dalrymple's returning expedition. The Kennedy area had already been partly explored, Ludwig Leichardt's expedition from the Darling Downs to Port Essington in 1844-5 had passed through. Then Edmund Kennedy's ill-fated expedition in 1848 to Cape York from Rockingham Bay had passed through giving the area its name. A.C. & F.T. Gregory, two competent and experienced surveyors, followed the Burdekin in the closing stages of a 14 months journey from Victoria River to Brisbane in late 1856, and they spoke highly of the district's potential. George Elphinstone Dalrymple led expeditions to North Queensland in 1859, 1860 and 1864 after each of which he produced glowing reports of fine, large, agricultural and pastoral regions, of which coastal lands suitable for tobacco, cotton and sugar and most optimistically of all, suggestions of gold further inland. "The Land Act of 1860" set in motion a steady trickle of settlers, their families, possessions and stock moving slowly into the north land. Dalrymple himself was appointed Commissioner of Crown Land in the Kennedy district from the 1 January, 1861. His office later became established in the newly founded town of Bowen, named after the governor.

The Burdekin Valley itself saw the first white settlers in the north in 1861 when several men of Dalrymple's earlier party returned to claim areas they had pegged on the Cape and Broughton Rivers. These pioneers moving into the Upper Burdekin were mostly young men seeking prosperity on the new discovered and apparently rich lands. Of these young men, Edward Cunningham, took up "Burdekin Downs" now the oldest property in the area, Michael Miles took up "Fanning Downs" and Christopher Allingham took up "Hillgrove". Originally sheep runs, but soon changed to cattle these early stations brought the first white settlers to the Charters Towers District. The problem of hostile aboriginals, unfamiliar diseases

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and expensive labour were compounded when the colony suffered a serious commercial recession in 1866 precipitated by collapse of the London Money Market. Northern settlers were hard hit. The more fortunate were just able to recoup their outlay, many lost everything. Some had to abandon their properties. A few held on until the discovery of gold produced new markets for station products.

Colonial and local authorities hoped that gold discoveries, optimistically predicted by Dalrymple and others, would enable Queensland to overcome these economic problems and enjoy the benefits which gold had brought to N.S.W. and Victoria in the Fifties. Their expectations rose when Peak Downs three miles inland from Rockhampton was discovered in 1862 and Nash in 1867 discovered gold on the Mary River not far from Maryborough. (This became Gympie). In North Queensland Richard Daintree, a geologist and amateur photographer of skill, endeavoured to systematize the geological survey of the north. Despite an initial lack of success, his advice led to the opening of the Cape River goldfields in July, 1867. The Ravenswood gold strike occurred in 1868/69, the Gilbert River and Woolgar fields were struck in late 1869. Ravenswood, a more successful and lasting field became a centre for further exploration and prospecting which in turn led to the discovery of the Etheridge field in 1871 and also the same year the alluvial field of the Broughton River westward near the future Charters Towers. This was followed in 1873 by the Palmer inland from Cooktown, the Hodgkinson to the south of it in 1875, Mount Morgan in 1882 (not strictly speaking, in North Queensland), and the Croydon in 1886. Then in the peninsula the Hamilton was discovered in 1899 and the Alice River in 1904. In addition to these major goldfields there were many other places scattered over North Queensland where gold was mined but which were never proclaimed as goldfields. They were the site of a few prospectors discovering pay dirt and may have been the site of some kind of minor rush, for the miners were incurably optimistic and prone to leave everything and follow some rumour or tale, but they were likely to last at most a few months. Goldmining late last century quickly came to dominate the life and economy of the north bringing with it a large influx of people to the several goldfields and, however makeshift, a

whole range of shops, services and industries necessary for the population. Gold more than anything else opened up and populated the north.

The North Queensland gold experience was quite different from that of the southern states. In N.S.W. and Victoria gold was discovered in areas already settled: a pastoral frontier had already passed across the territory. In North Queensland, with two exceptions, gold brought the first entry of the white man into rough and difficult terrain: the frontier was a mining frontier. Even in the two exceptions, Charters Towers and Ravenswood, conditions were extremely primitive. Compared with Bathurst and Bendigo, for example, their links with metropolitan centres were extremely tenuous.

The figures for Queensland's population between 1846 and 1902 illustrate dramatically the effects of gold. In 1846 the population was only 2,257. By 1864 it had risen to 61,467, and in 1868 to 99,312. Late in 1868 the first gold was discovered in the Ravenswood district. By 1871 the population had risen to 120,076 and by 1 May 1876 to 173,283. In the five years 1871-1876 three North Queensland goldfields had been proclaimed: Charters Towers, the Palmer and the Hodgkinson: in that period the population had increased by almost 50%.

The census of 3 April 1881 showed a population increase of 40,000, to a total of 213,525, but in the years 1881-1886, which saw the opening of the great Mount Morgan mine and the Croydon goldfield (1886), the increase was 110,000, or fractionally more than 50%. The census of 5 April 1891 showed a further increase of 70,000 to a total of 393,718. By 31 March 1901 Queensland's population had reached 503,266. (Figures from Pughs Almanac for 1902, p.398).

In the years from 1871 to 1891 Ravenswood and Charters Towers were flourishing. Charters Towers, indeed, was rapidly becoming the second largest urban centre in Queensland, a position previously held by Rockhampton.

Turning now to the appearance, life style and attitudes of the North Queensland goldfields it is worth noting that the original strikes were always at least a month in advance of the actual proclamation of a goldfield. One of the best examples of this is Charters Towers where

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gold was found in December, 1871. The claim was registered on 26 January, the following year and within weeks the area had miners fossicking and seeking for alluvial gold, but the goldfield itself was not officially proclaimed until 31 August, 1872. By the end of the first year some 3,000 miners were fossicking in the district scattered over an area "of about three miles square". At Ravenswood gold was discovered in various stages between the end of 1868 and April, 1869, but the actual proclamation of the goldfield took place on 3 November, 1870.

After the discovery of gold, registration of the claim and the setting in of a rush the shape and appearance of the town followed a kind of three phase architectural progression. The first stage would be canvas, then timber and if the diggings continued and were profitable bricks and mortar would follow at least in the centre part of the town. In most of the goldmining centres, outside the main street calico was the common material for housing. Many short-lived strikes never progressed beyond the canvas stage. Hotels seem to have been only grog shops on most goldfields, residential accommodation being provided by the Chinese in canvas shanties and bark boarding houses. Early photographs of any of North Queensland goldfields in the 1870's show a mixture of rude timber buildings. The floors of the early dwellings were usually a clay pug trampled into a suitable hard state, but some simple dwellings contained a rude timber floor constructed from split logs lodged in a rough frame. The roof was constructed from round saplings covered with bark sheets, tied down with bullock hide and further secured by additional poles strapped to both ridge and eavesboard. Later on some buildings had corrugated iron, but for the most part bark slabs dominated the scene.

The digger's residence was commonly a small calico tent, often on the slopes of the gully where the claim was. Its area was roughly 12'x8'. There were many canvas tents and a few log huts, and some had rude chimneys. The furniture consisted of one or two stumps of trees for chairs, anything in the shape of a box or tea chest was a table. The bed consisted of a stretcher or bunk made of forked stakes and saplings covered with a rug or blankets. Cooking utensils were few, and intended to wear well. Two or three tin or pewter plates, spoons, knives and forks,

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two or three saucepans and one or two billies generally completed the list, while a frying pan was regarded as luxury. Once the original camp had stabilised into a town, there would be a main street lined with hotels, boarding houses, stores, banks and butchers shops, usually of wood. In the larger, more permanent centres some would be two storied and even carry some pretentious architectural ornaments. Behind the main street lay the tents in which most diggers lived. Everywhere there were earth mounds. Each reef was surmounted by a windlass with which men hauled up quartz all day. Such was the appearance of almost any goldfield in North Queensland in its early days.

After the initial canvas stage, if gold production continued, the township would begin to expand, graceless, unplanned, devoid of most public utilities. There was no street lighting and no water supply. What water there was would have to come from local creeks and dry seasons frequently brought the onset not only of scarcity of water but of many illnesses affecting miners and their families. Even in the comparatively stable and populous Charters Towers street lighting and running water only arrived in 1890. Spreading suburbs of miner cottages took the place of canvas and slab huts. Usually of four rooms, with a front verandah and a rear lean-to kitchen, they were made inevitably of wood with galvanized iron roofs, so too were shops, offices and other buildings. As the town and the mining industry grew, heavy horse drawn traffic stirred up clouds of dust from the unsealed streets. Around Charters Towers and Ravenswood the countryside had been stripped for miles of its scanty trees for mine props and fuel, while the large numbers of goats ate every piece of greenery.

If the gold did not peter out, and the industry continued to grow, there would be a continuing influx of population. The miners, traders, butchers and grog merchants who constituted the initial rush would be followed by general storekeepers, assayers, and bankers, and almost as rapidly by legal, police and administrative officials, all with their families. If growth continued, streets, houses, shops, schools, newspapers and some public utilities would develop within a few years. Charters Towers was proclaimed a municipality in only its fifth year. Political activity also developed early, centred on the trade unions,

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the municipality and the district as well as on Brisbane. With all the ebullient communal growth there remained constant reminders of rude beginnings, especially in matters of health. In the mines, safety precautions were rudimentary and accidents quite frequent. Public hygiene was casual: garbage was thrown into the streets, refuse and drainage flowed from houses, shops and hotels straight into the gutter. Dead horses and other animals were merely dragged to a vacant allotment, and in the wet season earth closets were a constant health hazard. No wonder Charters Towers paid a bounty on dead rats. Annual epidemics of measles, and of dengue fever and other tropical diseases, were a routine part of life in North Queensland goldfield communities. In an era before modern medicine, transport and communications, personal qualities of good health, physical strength and firm courage were required of those foolhardy or gold hungry enough to venture to the north.

In the nineties a working miner could earn up to £260 a year. Wages ranged from £3 to £5 a week, but averaged about £4-10-0. This was good money, affording the miner's family a diet containing daily fresh meat, vegetables and milk, which were not readily available to labourers in the older communities of Europe from which many miners had come. Good wages and living standards, plenty of work, a sense of independence, the possibility of wealth and the miners' traditional radicalism combined to produce in the north a brash egalitarian and competent community.

One question that naturally arises about North Queensland goldfields is who made money? Usually not the miners themselves, mobile and peripatetic though they were, ready at any rumour to rush off in hopes of a better strike. In the literature of the period it is always hotel-keepers, shopkeepers and above all carriers, all ancillary to mining itself, who grew wealthy. Typical was Corfield, buying goods, equipment and food in Townsville by the wagon load to take over the long and dusty track to the Cape diggings to sell at a profit. Later, as he relates in his book, he raised sheep and cattle on a property near Hughenden to be driven to the diggings and sold at a profit, varying but never less than good. Another good example of the entrepreneur was the German-born Isidore Lissner of Charters Towers, whose careful investments in and around the goldfields

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led him to wealth and a career in public life. Besides mining itself, stamp batteries, pastoral ventures, meatworks, the carrying trade and the stock market provided opportunities for investment to the entrepreneur. Among a tiny group of the very successful are E.H.T. Plant, John Deane and Thomas Buckland all of whom entered municipal and colonial politics. Buckland became a board member of the Bank of N.S.W. and a knight. It must be stressed that such men made up a tiny minority, as did those who, after being spectacularly rich for a time, died penniless like Frank Stabley, famous for St. Patrick's Mine, Charters Towers, who died beside a bush track near Croydon in 1887.

The overwhelming majority of North Queensland mines were alluvial; that is to say the gold was sluiced by the use of water and the old fashioned tin pan. This was the case in the Palmer, Hodgkinson and all the others with the major exceptions of Charters Towers and Ravenswood. These two, after an initial period of alluvial mining became reef mining districts. One man alone can do sluicing, but once you have to dig down you need some kind of group, whether it be 2, 5 or 20. Someone had to dig the hole and work underground, someone else had to work the windlass, possibly a third person had to be in charge of the camp, look after the gold and take turns with the other two. As the greatest gold production came from reef mines, reefing communities had a longer life than the more numerous alluvial fields. The greatest alluvial field, the Palmer, no longer exists; Croydon a town of 7,000 in 1887, is but a village today; all other alluvial fields finished after a short life, whether spectacular or not. The two reef mining towns fell away in the first quarter of this century, Ravenswood to become one of the most romantic of ghost towns, Charters Towers to become, after a period of painful adjustment, a quietly prosperous centre for the pastoral Burdekin valley.

Old goldmining centres are surrounded by mullock heaps from the old mines - vast piles of dirt and stone - remains of derricks, bits of sheds and remnants of cottages. In towns no longer occupied the scene is ghostly, romantic, dreamlike. In the hot sunlight colours have faded, timber has weathered to a silver grey, brickwork has a film of dust remaining from the last storm, the streets are rutted, nothing moves.



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Thus Ravenswood, perhaps the best ghost town of them all. Some others notably Gympie and Charters Towers, which have remained living centres for the local district, retain many remnants of the days of gold. Obviously Charters Towers is the most outstanding example. "The Towers" is a solid comfortable town of slightly over 8,000 people, centre of the Burdekin area's cattle industry. Reminders of the people and events of the past remain in the names of streets, parks, town areas and outlying centres together with the old mullock heaps and in the late Victorian buildings that still dominate the centre. In addition the ports of Normanton, Cooktown, Cairns and Townsville either originated or received their greatest impetus from goldmines in their hinterland. Possibly Ayr, coming into existence to meet Townsville's needs, is also to be reckoned an indirect consequence of goldmining.

As the goldfields of North Queensland went into decline towards the end of the 19th Century and in the first quarter of the 20th, miners and their families together with those who provided services ancilliary to the gold industry, moved to other parts of the North. They found occupation on the Atherton Tablelands, on the cane farms and sugar mills, in fishing, on the wharves, in the railways, in government and municipal employ and the whole range of urban work in North Queensland towns. Throughout the North descendants of the mining communities are interpreting goldfield attitudes and values in present day terms, and contributing to development of the district. The goldfields have made a contribution to the population, material growth and attitudes and values of North Queensland far greater than the visible remnants of goldmining would suggest.

"The gold industries most important contribution to North Queensland was not in dividends but in the miners and their families". (G.C. Bolton, A Thousand Miles Away, Canberra 1970, p.276).

