

## Page 3. Otago

### Rivers of gold

Historically in Otago the majority of recovered gold was alluvial – less than 10% came from hard rock. Otago's gold is linked to its schist rocks. Over the past 100,000 years glaciers ground away at the rocks, which were threaded with quartz veins containing gold, and rivers washed and sorted the gravels. These processes concentrated the gold by separating the heavier minerals from the lighter ones. The first miners literally picked up nuggets where they lay.

### Gabriels Gully

On 23 May 1861 Gabriel Read gained esteem and provincial government bonuses when he found gold. He also saw his name given to the locality of the find, Gabriels Gully, near Lawrence. Another character, Edward Peters, had found gold earlier than Read in the same area, but he had not proven that the deposits were extensive enough to be economically worked. Eventually he was awarded a smaller bonus.

Thousands of diggers hastened to the scene of New Zealand's first major rush. The gully became a canvas town overnight as diggers moved in to work the rich blue-spur rock where Read had uncovered gold 'shining like the stars in Orion'.

### Aurum and Ophir

There are many place names in Central Otago that hint at past gold rushes. For example in the upper Shotover River there is Mt Aurum (Latin for gold) – miners in the 1860s believed the mountain was the source of the gold in 'the richest river in the world'. And a site near Alexandra was named Ophir, after the Old Testament place associated with fine gold.

### The Dunstan rush

When American Horatio Hartley and Irishman Christopher Reilly deposited a bag of gold weighing just under 40 kilograms on the Treasury desk in Dunedin in August 1862, the rush to Dunstan (the area around Cromwell) was on. Diggers worked the river beaches of the Clutha, Kawarau and Shotover, and higher up in their tributaries. A lucky few made a packet. Many perished in heavy snowfalls and winter floods. In icy gorges the sun never reached the floor and piles of wash froze cement-hard. A diet of flour and tea meant that many developed scurvy. At the peak of the Otago rush in 1863 the goldfields population was estimated at 24,000. Other discoveries in Otago followed, and men moved from field to field.

### Supplies

Central Otago was isolated and rugged. One miner, after struggling into the area, remarked, 'It is said that Victoria only wants fencing in. This island wants hammering out flat'. <sup>1</sup> Getting supplies to diggers was a major undertaking. Wagons took weeks, and coaches took days to go

from Dunedin to Alexandra over the Pigroot and Dunstan Road. Central Otago as tussock land lacked timber for fuel, so 'buffalo chips' (dried dung) and 'kaladdies' (flax flower heads) were used for boiling travellers' billies. The wagoners were a tough breed, enduring weather cold enough to freeze their beards.

## Companies

Once the easy alluvial gold had been won, mining became mechanised and sluicing claims began. Working deeper alluvial leads required cooperation, the amalgamation of claims, and capital. Companies were formed, and most of the gold won after the 1870s was taken by companies where miners were paid wages, rather than by individual miners.

Hard-rock mines were established. Small towns sprang up in isolated areas, but most reefs were quickly exhausted and today only ghost towns remain. Hidden mine shafts that killed the odd sheep have now mostly been marked or fenced off, although it pays to watch your step among the tussocks and schist tors in gold-mining country.

By 1900 the romantic figure of the digger with his pan and shovel was history – he had been replaced by dredges and underground mines.

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### Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Tom Field and Erik Olssen, *Relics of the goldfields: Central Otago*. Dunedin: J. McIndoe, 1976, p. 20. >

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