

Jean Cocteau

Empress Marie Theresa

Duchess of Windsor

Gold

Incan
Bendigo

Pharaohs

Napoleon

Althorp

AND CIVILISATION

Barbara Hutton

Strike it rich! The goldfield
experience and Australian identity

Viking

Ballarat

Student Activities

Egyptian

Fabergé

Cartier

Russian Czars

Sheikh El-Ard Rifaat

The Vatican

Gold

AND CIVILISATION

Strike it rich! The goldfield
experience and Australian identity

Student Activities

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Introduction

To learn about 'history' we need to do more than just read text books, watch videos or listen to our classroom teacher. The stories of our past are hidden in places we might not normally think to look. Paintings, quotations and songs all offer an insight into the stories that make up history.

During your visit to the *Gold and Civilisation* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia you explored a number of paintings and songs by artists who lived and worked on the Australian goldfields. You were encouraged to view these as a historical source, as evidence to help you understand the experiences of different groups of people on the goldfields including diggers, police, the Chinese and women.

In interrogating any piece of evidence, we, as historical detectives, should ask questions of our source, not only to try and decipher the 'story' behind it, but to determine how reliable it is. It may tell a story, but 'whose' story does it tell?

The activity sheets in this pack include a range of paintings and quotations from the *Gold and Civilisation* exhibition. To help you interrogate them, consider the following questions for each painting and quotation.

For paintings:

- Who painted it?
- When did they paint it?
- Why did they paint it?
- What is its message?
- Who was the intended audience?
- Whose 'voice' does it represent?
- Is it reliable?

For the quotes:

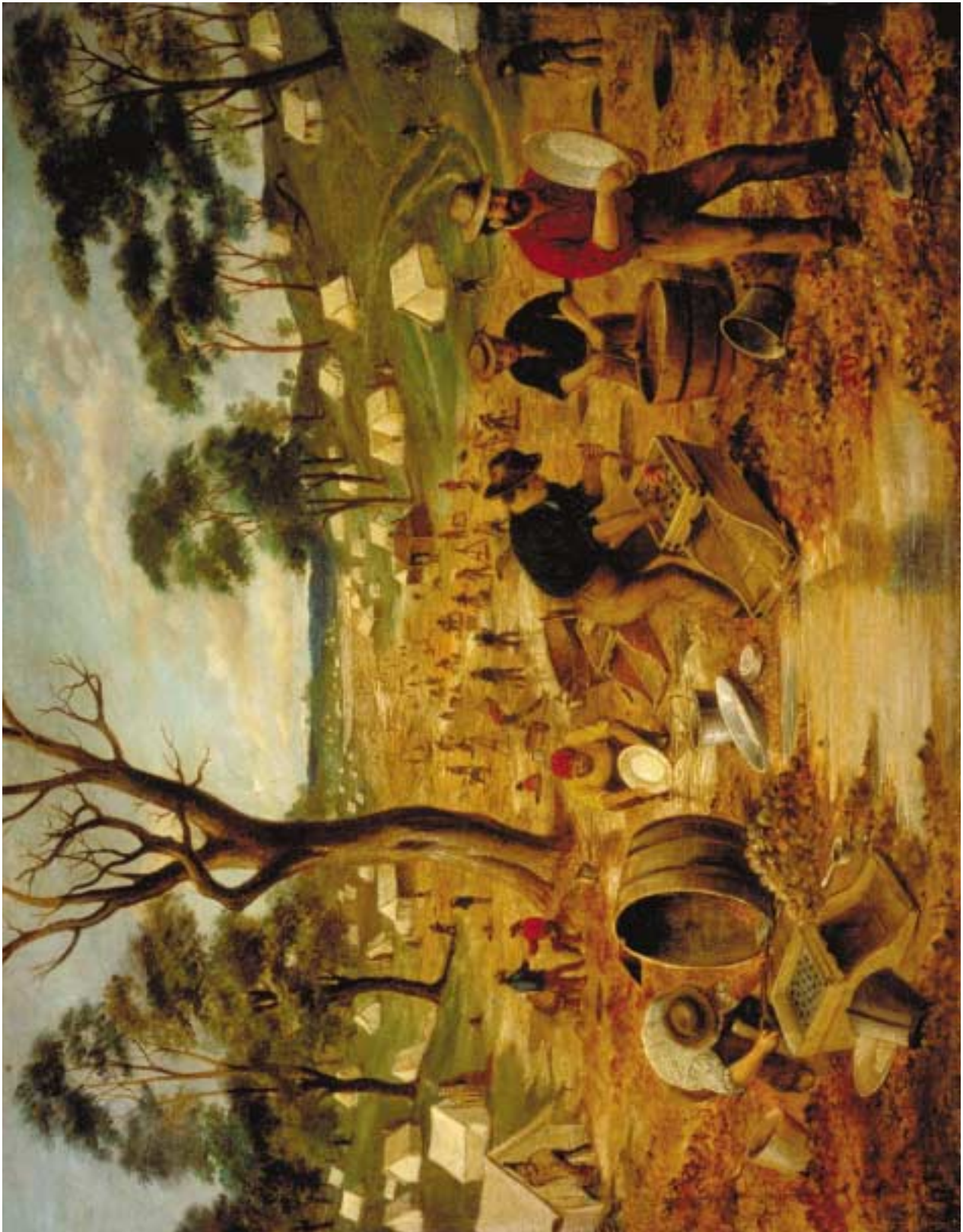
- Who wrote it?
- When did they write it?
- Why did they write it?
- What is its message?
- Who was the intended audience?
- Whose 'voice' does it represent?
- Is it reliable?

This pack also includes two goldfields songs that offer an additional insight into the Australian goldfield experience. Some suggested activities will encourage you to explore these songs as evidence.

These paintings, quotations and songs can all be viewed as 'pieces' of the puzzle that tell the story of life on the goldfields. See if you can put together the pieces from the activities that follow . . .

Introduction





Edwin STOCQUELER

Australian gold diggings, c.1855

oil on canvas

By permission of National Library of Australia

Life on the goldfields

“The trees had been cut down; it looked like a sandy plain, or one vast unbroken succession of countless gravel pits — the earth was everywhere turned up — men’s heads in every direction were popping up and down from their holes, . . . the rattle of the cradle, as it swayed to and fro, the sounds of the pick and shovel, the stores with large flags hoisted above them, flags of every shape, colour, and nation, from the lion and unicorn of England to the Russian eagle, the strange yet picturesque costume of the diggers themselves, all contributes to render the scene novel in the extreme.”

Ellen Clacy, *Eagle Hawk Valley*, 1852.

“As we topped a ridge, the last of a series I thought interminable, my companion suddenly said, ‘Stop and listen’. I pulled up my horse and heard as I imagined the rush of some mighty cataract. ‘It is the cradles’, said he; and so it was — the grating of the gravel or rubble on the metal sifters of five hundred rockers . . . There was no pause nor the slightest variation in the cadence as it floated up to us on the still air . . .”

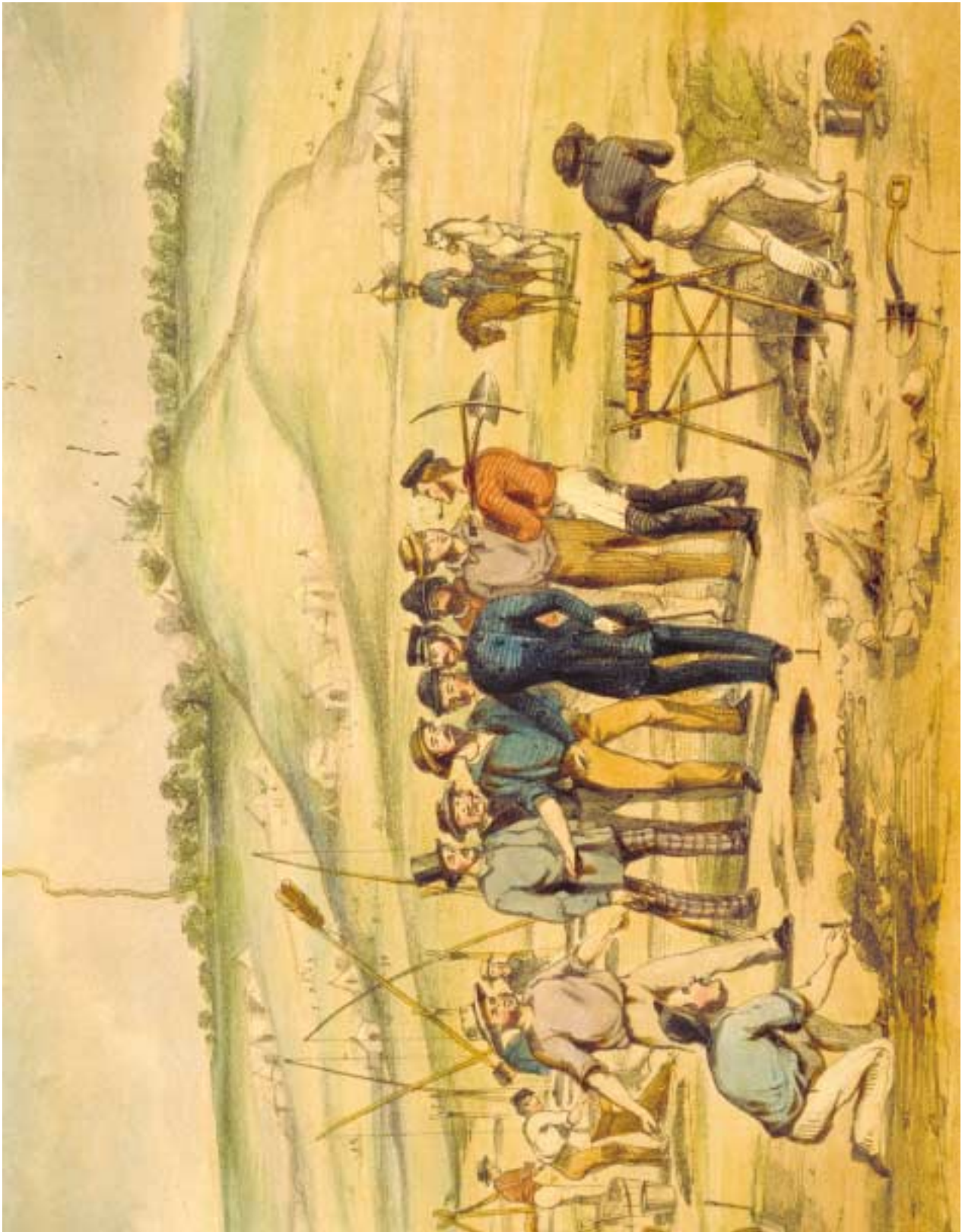
Godfrey Charles Mundy *Our Antipodes or Residence and rambles in the Australian colonies: With a glimpse of the gold fields*, published in London, 1852

Looking at the evidence

- 1 Look closely at the painting *Australian gold diggings*. What does it tell you about how gold was mined on the goldfields? What equipment was used?
- 2 What people are represented in the painting? Do you think this is an accurate reflection of those who worked on the goldfields?
- 3 Compare the painting and the quotations. Do they give the same impression of life on the goldfields? How do they differ?

Activities

- 4 In a group, brainstorm all the activities you can think of that took place on the goldfields.
- 5 Create a goldfields diorama. Try and include all the activities you think might have occurred on the goldfields and all the groups of people you have learnt lived and worked on the goldfields.



Cyrus MASON

The disputed claim, c. 1855

Part of 6 prints: tinted lithograph, hand coloured

By permission of National Library of Australia

Goldfield disputes

“We are subject to periodical unexpected requests to produce our diggers' licences. As in every gully there are a number of men who have evaded taking out a licence, one is quite accustomed on these occasions to hear the signal passed along, giving warning of approaching police. The latter usually arrive to the number of twelve or sixteen men, armed with bayonets, and headed by a mounted officer. They pass from one shaft to another to examine these licences. On hearing of their approach many of the miners disappear rapidly into either mine or into the bush, and so succeed in evading the law. Those who are not so nimble, and are caught, are roped together in pairs, and taken prisoner. I have seen as many as thirty or forty at a time, taken off like this. They are then imprisoned with robbers and other criminals. This method is causing a great bit of bad blood.”

Eugene von Guerard artist. In his *Diary*, 1853.

Looking at the evidence

- 1 Who are the people represented in *'The disputed claim'*? What is the painting attempting to illustrate?
- 2 What does this painting tell you about how gold was mined on the goldfields? How does this differ to how gold mining was illustrated in the painting *Australian gold diggings*? Why might the two paintings differ?
- 3 Read the excerpt by Eugene von Guerard. Does this evidence support the scene painted by Gill? Which source, the painting or the quotation, do you think is likely to be more reliable? Explain your answer.

Activities

- 4 Research the licence system on the Australian goldfields. Why was it introduced?
- 5 Imagine you are a digger or a policeman. Write a letter to a local newspaper detailing your thoughts on the license system.



Mother & children outside their bark cottage, Gulgong area

c. 1875

Image Library, State Library of New South Wales

Women on the goldfields

“Little do women who have come here in later years know of the hardships their predecessors had to encounter. Sometimes in lonely places where no other woman was within reach, perhaps sick and weak, I had to sit down beside the tub to do the necessary washing or attend to the children. At another time, finding myself on the floor with the poor child crying beside me, I was dimly conscious of having fainted away from weakness. How one longed for mothers and sisters at such times, and envied the poorest woman at home who in sickness generally have some relative near.”

Emily Skinner, Beechworth and Buckland River, 1854-78.

Looking at the evidence

- 1 Look closely at the photograph above. What is the cottage made of?
- 2 How many people appear to be living in this cottage? What do you think it would be like for a family to live in a cottage like this?
- 3 Read the quotation by Emily Skinner. What does it tell you about the experiences of women on the goldfields?

Activities

- 4 From your visit to the National Museum and further research in your school library, what roles did women perform on the goldfields?
- 5 In a group, list some of the challenges women living on the goldfields had to face.
- 6 Imagine you are a woman on the goldfields. Write a letter to a loved one back home that tells of your experiences. Tell of the conditions in which you live and how you feel about living and working on the goldfields.



Nicholas CHEVALIER
Miners Prospecting, 1864
Wood engraving
La Trobe Picture Collection
State Library of Victoria

The digger

“A gold digger must be a Jack-of-all trades; he must be able to strip bark, fall a tree, and saw it, dig sods, make embankments, put up a hut, mend your clothes, draw firewood after chopping it, bake, boil, and roast, use a pick and spade, delve, dig and quarry, load and unload, draw a sledge, and drive a barrow, cut paths, make roadways, puddle in mud, and splash ankle deep in water, with occasional slushings from head to foot, bear sleet and rain without flinching during the day, and sleep in damp blankets during the night, thankful that they are not entirely saturated — if ye can do all this, and have spirit enough to attempt it, and endurance enough to carry it on for three months, why there is gold and rheumatism in store for you.”

Alfred Clark, *Geelong Advertiser*, 19 September 1851.

Looking at the evidence

- 1 Read the above excerpt. Why was it necessary for a digger to be a ‘Jack-of-all trades’?
- 2 Do you think Alfred Clark's description of life on the goldfields for diggers is accurate? You may need to conduct some further research before you answer this question fully.
- 3 Look closely at the painting *Miners prospecting*. What picture of life on the goldfields for diggers does it show? Does it support the view of goldfield life described by Clark?

Activities

- 4 In groups, list where diggers on the Australian goldfields might have come from. Think about these men’s experiences, and the skills they may (or may not) have brought with them.
- 5 Develop the character of a fictitious ‘digger’ and prepare a short presentation for your class outlining:
 - Who you are
 - Where you came from
 - Why you came to the goldfields
 - How you travelled to the goldfields
 - What experiences you have had on the goldfields
 - How living and working on the goldfields has made you feel
 - What you hope for the future

You may like to bring in a costume or some objects from home to help you with your presentation.

Charles Thatcher – a brief biography

Charles Thatcher was a 'Colonial Minstrel' on the Victorian goldfields in the gold rush period. Based primarily in Bendigo, his songs brought to life the story of the goldfields. They told of the lure of gold, and recounted the rapid growth of these rural areas, the arrival of new emigrants and the hope and excitement that permeated this whole period in our history. His songs offer a unique window into the social history of this time.

Born in Bristol in 1839, Thatcher, as a youth, had a penchant for the entertainment industry. In his early twenties he left Bristol for London, finding employment playing the flute in a number of theatre orchestras. From here he succumbed to the lure of the goldfields, arriving in Melbourne in 1852. He teamed up with a number of fellow diggers and made his way to Bendigo. Their early attempts at digging were discouraging, but they eventually had some success, with Thatcher's share of the profits amounting to £1000.

After his initial windfall, Thatcher returned to music. He began his career in a tent theatre named Casino, and from here he went on to perform throughout the Victorian goldfields for the next seventeen years. Thatcher was not the best singer, but his perceptive insights into society of the time appealed to the diggers. His witty commentaries on the 'new chum', the Chinese, grog sellers, gold commissioners and the police were met with 'tremendous applause'. On occasion his political parodies cut close to the bone, and he found himself having to evade the wrath of personalities he had ridiculed. Such were the perils of his profession.

Charles Thatcher a brief biography

Commentaries of the time described Thatcher as 'one of the chief attractions of the theatre here' (*Argus*, 7 April 1854). They claimed that his songs were humorous and gave a much better idea of life on the goldfields than many other elaborate works did (*Argus*, 7 April 1854).

In 1861 Thatcher married Annie Vitelli. He travelled to New Zealand writing songs of life on the goldfields there for a period. In 1870 he returned to England, resuming his family's curio business. He died of cholera in Shanghai in 1878.

The following two songs, 'Look Out Below' and 'The Unsuccessful Swell' are songs that Charles Thatcher wrote of his goldfields experience. Some suggested activities will help you explore these songs as 'historical evidence'. What insights can they offer to the goldfields experience?



Look Out Below

A young man left his native shores,
 For trade was bad at home;
 To seek his fortune in this land
 He crossed the briny foam;
 And when he went to Ballarat,
 It put him in a glow,
 To hear the sound of the windlass,
 And the cry "Look out below".

Wherever he turned his wandering eyes,
 Great wealth he did behold –
 And peace and plenty hand in hand,
 By the magic power of gold;
 Quoth he, as I am young and strong,
 To the diggings I will go,
 For I like the sound of the windlass,
 And the cry "Look out below".

Amongst the rest he took his chance,
 And his luck at first was vile;
 But he still resolved to persevere,
 And at length he made his pile.
 So says he, I'll take my passage,
 And home again I'll go,
 And I'll say farewell to the windlass,
 And the cry "Look out below".

Arrived in London once again,
 His gold he freely spent,
 And into every gaiety
 And dissipation went.
 But pleasure, if prolonged too much,
 Oft causes pain, you know,
 And he missed the sound of the windlass,
 And the cry "Look out below".

And thus he reasoned with himself –
 Oh, why did I return,
 For the digger's independent life
 I now begin to yearn.
 Here purse proud lords the poor oppress,
 But there it is not so;
 Give me the sound of the windlass,
 And the cry "Look out below".

So he started for this land again,
 With a charming little wife;
 And he finds there's nothing comes up to
 A jolly diggers life.
 Ask him if he'll go back again,
 He'll quickly answer, no:
 For he loves the sound of the windlass,
 And the cry "Look out below".



The Unsuccessful Swell

I'll sing now of a fine young swell,
 Who in a ship did sail here;
 And came and made his fortune,
 By digging in Australia.
 At least a splendid fortune,
 Of course he came to make, sirs;
 But found out that instead of that,
 He'd made a grand mistake, sirs,
 Oh, dear, oh!

Universal emigration's all the go.

He brought machines for washing gold,
 And tools that looked quite funny,
 Which he disposed of in the town,
 For a good round sum of money.
 At least the cash he got for them,
 Might have been very great, sirs;
 But the fact is they weren't in demand,
 And they didn't pay for freight, sirs.
 Oh, dear, oh, &c.

Like most new chums he soon found out,
 His tin was running short, sirs,
 So he took his boxes to Rag Fair,
 Where things were sold and bought, sirs
 That is, he might have sought that place,
 His clothes for cash to barter at,
 But Rag Fair you know was done away,
 And he didn't come till arter that.
 Oh, dear oh &c.

He went and got a license,
 And most lucky was his fate, sirs,
 For from the first hole that he sunk,
 He took out twelve pounds weight, sirs
 At least, he didn't take it out,
 Although the gold was there, sirs;
 For when he'd sunk about two feet,
 He left it in despair, sirs.
 Oh, dear, oh, &c.

At length he'd but a shilling left,
 And hunger made him plucky,
 So he went and sunk another hole,
 And that, too, turned out lucky ---
 That is, to keep him full six months,
 Of gold there was enough, sirs;
 But like new chums have done before,
 Pitched away his washing-stuff, sirs.
 Oh, dear, oh, &c.

After staying up there just two months,
 And very little making;
 Necessity, which licks us all,
 Made him go and try stone-breaking.
 If through Bacchus Marsh you ever go,
 You'll see him there don't doubt it;
 But if you don't, why then you won't,
 And so that's all about it.
 Oh, dear, oh &c.

Charles Thatcher's songs

Suggested activities for primary students

'Look Out Below' and 'The Unsuccessful Swell' give two different views of life on the diggings.

Read 'Look Out Below'.

- 1 Why do you think this digger was successful?
- 2 Do you think many people who went to the goldfields had a similar story?
- 3 Why do you think he went back to England?
- 4 Why did he decide to return to Australia?

Read 'The Unsuccessful Swell'.

- 1 Why do you think this digger was unsuccessful?
- 2 Do you think his story is a true account of why people were unsuccessful on the goldfields?
- 3 Do you think Charles Thatcher's view of life on the goldfields is accurate? Why?
- 4 Use these two songs to make up a play about two people who come to the goldfields and what experiences they have.
- 5 Pretend you are the main character in one of these songs. Keep a diary of your experiences.



Charles Thatcher's songs

Suggested activities for secondary students

Looking at the evidence

- 1 If these two songs were the only evidence you had, what image or picture of life on the goldfields would you gain?
- 2 According to Thatcher what kind of person tried his luck on the diggings?
- 3 Do you think either song presents an accurate picture of life on the goldfields? Which is likely to be more accurate?
- 4 Do you think the role of a goldfields minstrel was to be historically accurate or entertaining or both. Explain your answer?
- 5 Imagine you are an entertainer who is also a social historian. Write a song about your school (and the people in it) which is accurate and also entertaining.
- 6 From your research about life on the goldfields produce a performance piece. You may choose to do this as a musical, drama, comedy or documentary piece. You should try to keep your content historically accurate.



Extension activity:

Extension activity: 'Harvest of Endurance' scroll

The 'Harvest of Endurance' is a 50 metre long scroll which represents the history of Chinese immigration to Australia. Stories of hardship and survival, resourcefulness and reward are recorded in the traditional gongbi style of painting. The scroll can offer some insight into the experiences of the Chinese on the Australian goldfields.

To view the scroll, visit www.nma.gov.au/harvest

For some activities based on the scroll

www.racismnoway.com.au/classroom/lesson_ideas/20010228_32.htm



Notes:

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