INTERPRETING THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE GOLD RUSHES AT THE CASTLEMAINE DIGGINGS NATIONAL HERITAGE PARK

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Abstract

The Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park was established in 2002. In a first for Australia, this was a designated National Park with its main emphasis on an historical or cultural landscape. Nonetheless, it was also recognised that its Gold Rush sites and ruins existed within a natural landscape of a Box-Ironbark Eucalypt forest. While this forest appears on the surface to be essentially natural, it is the result of mining processes. Indeed, it is as much an artefact of the Gold Rushes as the buildings and diggings.

As Parks Victoria develops its management plan for this National Park, the opportunity exists to create interpretation which covers both the cultural and natural landscapes and the connections between them. In particular, interpretation in this National Park needs to consider the environmental impacts of the Gold Rushes. This, it is argued, is a difficult task in three ways. First, the ecological and mining processes to be considered are highly complex. Second, historical research into the environmental impacts is still limited, particularly in contrast to the wide variety of material on the social history of the Gold Rushes. Third, there are issues of contested heritage. Even today, there is still much debate over the environmental and economic values of the forests included in the National Park.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2002 the Victorian State Government established the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park, 7,500 hectares (18,000 acres) in size, 120 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. In including the word ‘heritage’, this was the first designation of its type in Australia. Whereas all Australian National Parks up to this time had been declared for their natural values, this National Park was established primarily for its historical or cultural landscape. As promoted in its visitor guide,

The Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park is a rare place where you can still see authentic traces of the great Victorian gold rushes of the 1850s, sites and relics that harbour secrets and tell stories about how life really was on the diggings (Parks Victoria, 2004).

However, while the National Heritage Park contains a large number of historic sites, it is also nearly entirely covered by Box-Ironbark Eucalypt Forest. On the surface, the National Park presents the appearance of a virtually untouched natural landscape, yet the forest is itself an artefact of the Gold Rushes in two ways. First, Box-Ironbark forests grow on auriferous ground. As such, in the nineteenth century the Victorian Government reserved large areas of it from freehold sale. Without the Gold Rushes, it would probably have been sold and cleared for grazing. Second, the structure of the forest has been highly modified by mining. In particular, nearly all the trees have been cut down a number of times and what is visible today is coppice regrowth. It is likely that before the Gold Rushes the forest was more open, with larger trees more widely spaced apart.

For many years, the Box-Ironbark forests were the only major vegetation type not protected in National Parks. However, following a long campaign by the Victorian National Parks Association, the Victorian Government, through its agency Parks Victoria, created a network of six Box-Ironbark National Parks covering 76,500 hectares (180,000 acres). Of the six, only Castlemaine Diggings was established for its historic values, though some of the others contain historic mining sites.

The protection and interpretation of cultural heritage within National Parks has long been the subject of much debate within Australia (Griffiths, 1996: 255-277). In establishing Castlemaine Diggings, Parks Victoria has consciously placed a cultural landscape within a system of National Parks which had evolved primarily with natural landscapes in mind. Whereas previously cultural landscapes might be a minor part of a National Park, at Castlemaine Diggings, they became- for the first time – the central feature.

As Parks Victoria develops its management plan for Castlemaine Diggings, it has the opportunity to develop effective interpretation of the social and environmental history of the Gold Rushes. Most of the research on interpretation of Gold Rush heritage mining sites has focussed on social history, particularly in Australia (Clark and Cahir, 2003; Evans, 1991; Frost, 2003 and 2005; Garton Smith, 1999 and Ham and Weiler, 2004), but also in California (De Lyser, 1999). Indeed, this social focus has also been extended to heritage mining sites in general (see for example Cameron and Gatewood, 2000; Edwards and Llurdes, 1996; Hewison, 1987 and Wanhill, 2000). In contrast, issues relating to the environment were rarely examined, with usually no more than some incidental comments. A good example of this occurred in Edwards and Llurdes (1996). Their

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1 This paper was presented at the Interpretation Australia Association Conference, Strahan, Tasmania, 2005.
2 Australia is unusual in that National Parks are established and operated by the State Governments and not the Federal Government. The reason for this is historical, a number of National Parks were established by individual colonies prior to Federation in 1901.
study commenced with the argument that the environmental scars of coal mining had given Wales a negative destination image, but this was barely discussed again in the article.

This paper aims to examine issues relating to the development of visitor interpretation of the environmental impact of the Gold Rushes at the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park. The unique status of this National Park demands that effective interpretation needs to help visitors understand the inter-relationships between its cultural and natural landscapes. However, this uniqueness causes difficulties, which are particularly magnified by the lack of similar prior developments elsewhere. The National Park managers cannot simply use previously developed interpretation, their challenge is to develop new interpretation for a new type of National Park.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the difficulties of developing interpretation in an area where there has been little historical research. In interpreting the social history of the Gold Rushes, the difficulty would be in choosing between the wide range of historical source material available. In particular, visitor interpreters would likely need to make decisions between often conflicting historical interpretations and approaches. In contrast, for interpreting environmental history the difficulty may be the paucity of historical research. This problem is compounded by the dual nature of the National Park, which has led to differing perspectives on the balance of emphases between the natural and cultural landscapes. Taking these difficulties into account, the second section examines a range of options as to how this interpretation might be structured.

HERITAGE OR HISTORY?

It is curious that Castlemaine Diggings was designated as a Heritage National Park. The alternative could have been to call it an Historic National Park. After all, a key section was previously designated as the Castlemaine Historical Reserve; a number of goldfields in Victoria are still called historic parks (Beechworth) or reserves (El Dorado) and in California a number of goldfields are protected as State Historic Parks (Coloma, Columbia, Malakoff Diggings, Bodie).

What's in a name is more than an idle question. The distinction between history and heritage troubles researchers in tourism and heritage interpretation. Hewison argued bluntly that 'heritage is not history'. Rather, heritage for Hewison was a ‘distortion of the past’ which promoted ‘fantasies of a world that never was’ (1987: 10). Lowenthal noted that history was often seen as factual and ‘real’ and therefore unchanging. In contrast, he characterised heritage as biased and ‘bad history’, at its worst ‘a partisan perversion’ (1998: 102-3). Timothy and Boyd described history as ‘the recording of the past as accurately as possible’, whereas heritage was ‘often the re-creation of the selective past’ (2003: 4 & 237).3

However, historians have a different point of view as to their role. Rather than ‘recording the past as accurately as possible’, their primary interest is in interpreting the past, developing theories to explain and analyse historical processes and causes. As Davison, in rejecting the distinctions made by Hewison and Lowenthal, argued:

Even before the [history] discipline was exposed to the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism, historians had largely abandoned the pretence of objectivity. Any history, they would cheerfully admit, was written from a point of view and, while they might eschew deliberate fabrication and distortion, the past they portrayed reflected as much of themselves as their subjects (2000: 120).

These issues are further complicated by consideration of the visitors. Moscardo (1996) argued that heritage attractions needed to encourage ‘mindfulness’ amongst visitors. Mindful visitors, she

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3 One wonders whether the Victorian Government had such meanings in mind when they chose to use the term heritage.
argued, were ‘active, interested, questioning and capable of reassessing the way they viewed the world’ (Moscardo, 1996: 382). To achieve this effective interpretation needed to be ‘multisensory … personally relevant, vivid or affectively charged … unexpected or surprising; [and] questions are used to create conflict or ambiguity’ (Moscardo, 1996: 384).

Rather than interpretation being constructed or produced for consumption, it is often a ‘co-construction’ between visitors and interpreters:

The resulting narratives are contested by tourists and become subject to negotiation. During the performance of the story, tourists are not passive readers of the text. Rather, they are actively engaged by using their prior background, negotiating, filling gaps, and imagining. Hence, service providers do not simply teach history and tourists do not only learn about the past (Chronis, 2005: 400).

These differing views of heritage and history raise questions for those developing visitor interpretation. Do they limit their interpretation to just objective facts? How they deal with contrasting historians’ interpretation? Should they choose just one, or seek to show multiple perspectives? How do they encourage visitors to be mindful and co-construct the interpretation? The volume and variety of research into the social history of the Gold Rushes greatly complicates visitor interpretation (Frost, 2005). However, for the environmental impact, the paucity of historical research creates a different problem.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE GOLD RUSHES: A HISTORIOGRAPHY

In 1976 J.M. Powell wrote *Environmental management in Australia, 1788-1914*, the first broad-based environmental history of Australia. As a pioneer in the field he took the opportunity to predict future directions for research. In particular he argued:

We urgently require a thorough evaluation of the profits and losses to the Australian environment which were registered in the major years of pastoral expansion [1830s-1840s] and in the succeeding confusion of mining activity during the ‘fifties [1850s] … Hasten the day when biogeographers, geomorphologists and historical geographers combine to interpret and communicate the ecological impact of both the ‘Squatting Age’ and the ‘Golden Age’ (Powell, 1976: 32).

Since he wrote those words, there has been a great deal of research into the environmental changes which resulted from pastoralism (see for example Barr and Cary, 1992). In contrast, there has been far less research into the impact of the Gold Rushes. Powell devoted just four pages to the Gold Rushes (1976: 37-41). Most later general environmental histories of Australia allocated only a similar amount and usually covered similar material (Barr and Cary, 1992: 53-5; Bolton, 1992: 69; Lines, 1991; Pyne, 1991: 195-8). Some otherwise excellent environmental histories even ignored the Gold Rushes; for example, Bonyhady (2000) examined nineteenth century environmental issues through various paintings and artists, but neglected the Gold Rushes despite an extensive range of contemporary paintings of the goldfields. In the quarter of a century after Powell wrote, the most detailed exploration of the environmental impacts of Gold was to be in Weston Bate’s 1978 study of Ballarat. Though particularly valuable for its focus on what the environment was like immediately prior to the discovery of gold, this work was confined to one particular locality.

The celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Victorian Gold Rushes in 2001 finally stimulated greater research. It resulted in specialised articles by the historian Don Garden (2001) and archaeologist Barry McGowan (2001) on the environmental impacts. However, both were limited by trying to cover a large geographical range and timespan within the confines of articles in celebratory volumes. In addition, the more general histories published around the 150th
Anniversary were particularly adept at weaving environmental issues into their narratives (Annear, 1999; Hocking, 2000).

Nonetheless, despite these advances, the literature on the environmental effects of the Gold Rushes remains limited. The recent works are primarily descriptive case studies from which some generalisations are drawn. The problem, in essence, is that the sheer scale of the Gold Rushes works against more comprehensive analysis. The Rushes occurred in all Australian states, in a large number of places and involved hundreds of thousands of people. They spanned over fifty years, during which new Rushes were continually occurring. The environments they affected included mountains and plains, rainforests and eucalypt woodlands, arid grasslands and alpine heath. Gold mining techniques varied and can be divided into a number of types based on where the gold was located and how it was extracted. The main types include fossicking, surface (or shallow) alluvial, deep alluvial, deep reef, sluicing and dredging. Some goldfields were dominated by one type of mining, at others a range could occur in close proximity and at others a number could be tried at the same site over the years. Finally, the evidence of environmental change is enormous, ranging from numerous detailed contemporary books, letters, reminiscences, sketches, paintings and photographs, to still existing landscapes crammed with diggings, ruins, pits, shafts, water channels and mullock heaps.

What is needed is some way to make sense of this overwhelming variety and complexity. Unfortunately, as historians have not yet achieved this, developing visitor interpretation at Castlemaine Diggings is problematic. If the environmental impact is to be featured in this interpretation, then both basic historical research and the development of a more theoretical explanatory framework will have to occur at the same time as the visitor interpretation is created.

VISITOR INTERPRETATION AT CASTLEMAINE DIGGINGS

As its management plan is still under development, little visitor interpretation has been specifically created for Castlemaine Diggings. At this stage this consists of a basic visitor guide comprising two A4 pages of descriptive text and a double page map (Parks Victoria, 2004). However, there is interpretation which dates from before the establishment of the National Park. This includes some interpretive panels, a 95 page guidebook to the goldfields at Castlemaine and nearby Maldon (Mount Alexander Diggings Committee, 1999), brochures for walking trails (for example, Mount Alexander Shire Walks and Trails Advisory Board, 2000) and general guides to the Box-Ironbark forests (for example, Calder and Calder, 2002).

As this interpretation is updated, there is an opportunity to systematically develop interpretation focussing on the environmental impacts of the Gold Rushes. Given the lack of definitive historical research, how might that visitor interpretation be structured? Three possible options are considered below.

OPTION 1: INCIDENTAL INTERPRETATION

The current situation is that references to environmental impacts are scattered throughout the interpretation. Placement is primarily incidental rather than systematic or planned. Interpretation occurs because there is some feature which needs explanation. Often such references are sandwiched between technical or social explanations, with little linkage. For example, the Eureka Reef Walk consists of 20 interpretative stops; one specifically deals with tree cutting and coppicing modifying the forest and a couple mention silt (Mount Alexander Diggings Committee, 1999: 25-36). In contrast, interpretation for the Garfield Wheel and the trail from it to Expedition Pass, does not discuss any environmental impacts, even though there is abundant physical evidence of mines and mullock heaps (Mount Alexander Diggings Committee, 1999: 37-38; Mount Alexander Shire Walks and Trails Advisory Board, 2000). It is possible that future interpretation will duplicate such patterns, relegating environmental impacts to a minor place.
OPTION 2: THEMED BY MINING TYPE OR TIME PERIODS

A conventional approach might be to order interpretation by time periods or mining types (and this could equally apply to social and environmental perspectives). Some sites lend themselves to such an approach. Forest Creek, which currently has no interpretation, could be presented in terms of 1850s alluvial mining, especially as it is the location of a number of famous 1850s photographs (Feuchery and Daintree, 1983; Hocking, 2000: 211). One possibility would be to reproduce these photographs at or near their original locations. Nearby, the Garfield Wheel operated from 1887 to 1914 and so represents a later period of mining.

However, these are exceptions. The majority of sites encompass a number of time periods. At the Forest Creek Gold Mine, the Eureka Reef and the Wattle Gully Mine, mining extended from the 1850s until after World War Two (Mount Alexander Diggings Committee, 1999: 23-36 & 41-2). As these sites, the choice would be between focussing on one time period, or trying to represent environmental impacts from a number of time periods. A similar problem arises in trying to link environmental impacts to types of mining. At some sites, this is possible as they represent one type of mining. However, many of the sites contain multiple types of mining. Common combinations are alluvial surface, underground and sluicing.

Nonetheless, it is recognised that this may be the most likely approach. These are complex sites and existing interpretation focuses on explaining the different types of mining and the time periods in which they operated. This framework could be extended to cover environmental impacts. The main drawback of this could be a tendency to pitch the interpretation at a more technical level. This could lead, for example, to explanations that this type of mining at a certain time led to this type of mullock heap.

OPTION 3: THEMED BY ACTIVITY

Another possibility is to consider a framework of activities, by which the Gold Diggers had an impact on their environment (see figure 1). The activities considered here are listed in the rough order as undertaken by miners. They cover a wider range of effects than just the act of mining for gold and extend over a far wider geographical area than just mine sites.

Figure 1: Miners’ activities and their impacts on the environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Visible evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travelling</td>
<td>Travelling to and from Melbourne, created roads and in the 1860s a railway</td>
<td>Roads and tracks. Towns which were established as stopping places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digging</td>
<td>Extracting ore from ground. Either surface or underground.</td>
<td>Holes, open-cuts, shafts etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timber-cutting</td>
<td>Diggers burnt trees for warmth and cooking. Lit fires to aid prospecting. Later, more industrial mining created enormous demand for firewood.</td>
<td>Extensive vegetation modification. Nearly all trees coppiced. Large tree all gone. Vegetation denser. Conversely, forests protected to provide firewood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste</td>
<td>Human waste, including sewerage and rubbish.</td>
<td>Bottle dumps. Cemeteries (high mortality rate).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Huts, houses, mine buildings towns</td>
<td>Much abandoned and in ruins. Existing towns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplating</td>
<td>Did miners think about their impact?</td>
<td>Archival material: newspapers, paintings, letters, books</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focussing on activities may be a way of encouraging ‘mindfulness’ amongst visitors. A litany of mining techniques and machinery might fascinate a few, but be too technical for most visitors. In shifting the emphasis to the broad range of activities undertaken by miners, there is greater scope for making more personal and relevant connections. Such an approach is already widely utilised in interpreting the social history of the Gold Rushes. Sovereign Hill, for example, works well because it represents an entire town and community, not just the miners.

CONCLUSION

The landscape at Castlemaine Diggings is neither natural nor cultural. Rather, it is a combination of both. It contains many historic buildings, sites and ruins, but they are situated within a natural environment of extensive Box-Ironbark forest. In turn, this forest is also an historic artefact, conserved and highly modified by its gold mining history. This double nature of the landscape is recognised in its designation as Australia’s first National Heritage Park.

This duality creates operational challenges. Whereas other historic attractions, such as Port Arthur and Sovereign Hill, are managed by specialised organisations; Castlemaine Diggings is the responsibility of Parks Victoria. A major land manager in Victoria, Parks Victoria is primarily concerned with natural environments. In does have properties with secondary cultural landscapes, but Castlemaine Diggings is its first National Park with the main emphasis on history.

The complex inter-relationship between environment and history at Castlemaine Diggings require effective interpretation for visitors. However, encouraging an understanding of the environmental impacts of the Gold Rushes should not be just an addition to more conventional approaches emphasising social and technological history. Instead, the link between Gold and the natural environment is central to the National Park and in turn, the visitor experience. To fully understand and appreciate the National Park, visitors need to be told a new story of the environmental impact of the Gold Rushes.
REFERENCES


