

## GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (June 1998)

By Rob Upson

ELLEN CLACY on the GOLDFIELDS

After a four-month sea voyage from England, a young woman named Ellen Clacy disembarked at Port Philip in August 1852. With her brother and several other diggers she set off for the goldfields in the Bendigo region.

Her own account of her travels and experiences are to be found in a book entitled 'A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia in 1852-53'.

It took them about ten days to walk from Melbourne to Bendigo, camping out at night. Their equipment was carried on a horse and dray that they purchased prior to departure. After negotiating the treacherous Black Forest, in those days a haunt for thieves and murderers, and passing through the Mt. Alexander diggings, they arrived at Bendigo.

Here is her description of what they first saw.

*"Saturday 18 - Fine day; we now approached Bendigo. The timber here is very large. Here we first beheld the majestic iron bark.....they are in truth the noblest ornaments of these mighty forests. A few miles further, and the diggings themselves burst upon our view. Never shall I forget that scene.....The trees had all 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 busy hum of so many thousands, the innumerable tents, the stores with large flags hoisted above them, flags of every shape, colour and nation....."*

What marvellous imagery that conjures up. Her writing is also not without some humour as the following colourful description attests.

*"Night at the diggings is the characteristic time: murder here -- murder there -- revolvers cracking -- blunderbusses bombing -- rifles going off -- balls whistling -- one man groaning with a broken leg -- another shouting because he couldn't find the way to his hole, and a third equally vociferous because he has tumbled into one -- this man swearing -- another praying -- a party of bacchanals chanting various ditties to different time and tune, or rather minus both. Here is one man grumbling because he has brought his wife with him, another ditto because he has left his behind, or sold her for an ounce of gold or a bottle of rum. Donny-brook Fair is not to be compared to an evening in Bendigo."*

Apparently it was quite common for the diggers to fire their rifles in the air at night to

warn any would-be thieves that they were armed and ready to defend themselves.

However, in spite of this, the Bendigo diggers were believed to be relatively law abiding, due in some part to the influence of a much-respected Police Magistrate named Lachlan Maclachlan. Maybe we will hear more about him in a future pressing.

Ellen Clacy and her party set up camp at Eagle Hawk Gully and apparently were quite successful in their search for gold. Sunday was strictly observed as a day of rest all over the diggings and deservedly so, when one considers the heavy and constant effort that would have been required to sustain any sort of living.

The cost of living on the goldfields was not cheap even by today's standards. Ellen Clacy quoted flour as being 1/- per lb., sugar 1/6 per lb. and tea 3/6 per lb. Today, one shilling (or 10c) would be worth at least \$5.

After spending only a few weeks on the goldfields she and some of her original party returned to Melbourne, via Forest Creek and Kyneton, arriving back at the end of October 1852. They had a bit of a confrontation with some bushrangers in the Black Forest, being saved by the timely intervention of some other diggers.

She set sail for England in mid November and arrived back in London at the end of February 1853, being away from home a total of 10 months, 7 of which were spent at sea. From her own account she appeared to have adapted very well to the rigours of living on the goldfields.

There are plenty of other personal accounts of life on the goldfields in the 1850's but one given by a woman such as Ellen Clacy appears to be a rarity.