

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (July 2005)

By Rob Upson

THE NEW ZEALAND GOLD RUSH

The gold rush, across the Tasman, began in 1861 when the precious metal was discovered in the Central Otago region of New Zealand. The province of Otago is located at the southern end of the south island and the central region is rugged and mountainous with many lakes and rivers. The main centres of the region are Dunedin, Queenstown and Oamaru and if you draw lines between these places you will get New Zealand's version of the Golden Triangle, within which, there were over twenty significant mining locations.

By 1867, the Otago goldfields had extracted at least two million ounces of gold. First came alluvial gold, then hard rock or reef mining and then river dredging. The latter was more predominant there than in Victoria because of the numerous rivers which always had an abundant supply of water. The gold rush turned Otago into social turmoil as about 6,000 diggers poured in from all over New Zealand as well as overseas.

Dunedin, (founded by Scottish settlers in the early 1800s), was turned into the commercial and industrial centre of New Zealand at the time. Fine old Victorian and Edwardian buildings are testimony to the city's prosperity. The University of Otago was the first tertiary institution in New Zealand.

Oamaru, further up the coast, also thrived as a result of the gold rush, but primarily, its importance was that of a port servicing the farms and estates of the interior. The first shipment of frozen mutton to the U.K. was sent from here in 18. Oamaru has many historic buildings, in the classical style of architecture, built from the 1860s from local limestone giving it the name of 'The Whitestone City'.

Queenstown, on the shores of Lake Wakatipu, was first settled in 1860 by pioneering sheep drovers and, later in 1862, by gold prospectors. By the 1870s the gold from the region around Queenstown started to decline, as did the population. The district became predominantly a farming area until today, where tourism is now the main industry.

Heading east from Queenstown, along the Kawarau river, the traveller comes to the old mining town of Cromwell at the junction of the Clutha and Kawarau rivers. Now head north along the eastern shore of Lake Dunstan (formed in 1993 by damming the Clutha river at Clyde) for 20 km. and turn east towards the Dunstan Mountains. The road takes you to the Bendigo gold fields, one of the few successful quartz-mining areas in Otago. The name Bendigo was obviously pinched from Victoria. Mining in the early years of Bendigo (N.Z.) from 1862 to 1866 was spent working the creeks for alluvial gold. Later, quartz reefs were discovered in the hills and became the largest of such deposits in New Zealand.

Dozens of crumbling stone cottages, shafts and tunnels can now be found on the Bendigo diggings at places such as Logantown and Welshtown. In New Zealand, today, the name Bendigo is mostly associated with the 30,000-acre high country sheep farm called the 'Bendigo Station', 4000 feet above sea level. Bendigo is also a new viticultural sub-region of Central Otago. The Quartz Reef Bendigo Estate Vineyard recently introduced its first vintage. Bendigo Station Safaris cater for blood sports, with animals such as red stags, fallow deer and the Himalayan tahr (a goat-like mammal) falling victim to the hunting tourist.

To this day, gold mining continues to some degree in the Otago region. As new technologies become available, a few of the old mining sites are being reworked by excavation and dredging. One of the largest scale operations is near Macrae's Flat, (reopened in 1990) about half way between Oamaru and Dunedin. The mine has a throughput of 3 million tonnes of ore producing about 100,000 ounces of gold per annum. The Martha Mine (reopened in 1988) at Waihi in the North Island, on the coast east of Hamilton, is the only other N.Z. mine to experience a rebirth. By the year 2000 the

Macrae and Martha mines had each produced their one-millionth ounce of gold. Rising gold prices had led to a resurgence in gold exploration and production, not only here but also across the Tasman.