

Red Ribbon Movement

The Red Ribbon Movement of 1853 represented a significant series of events in the history of Bendigo. During that year there was much agitation on the Bendigo gold fields, particularly during July and August of 1853, directed against the payment of what the miners called a tax - a licence fee of thirty shillings (\$3) a month for the right to search for gold on what was declared Crown land. They had to pay the licence whether they found gold or not.

The miners, or diggers as they were called, also resented the means used by the authorities at the time to collect the gold licence – through so-called ‘digger hunts’. The miners were expected to carry their licences with them, and the police, who were often untrained, used harsh methods to check these licences.

In Bendigo, the miners took to wearing a red ribbon as a symbol of their protest against the licence. Red was a very common colour in items such as shirts, so was readily available. Shopkeepers too tied red ribbons to their premises as a sign of support for the miners. It should be remembered at that time virtually everyone was a miner. The diggers also had their own banner, designed by William Dexter, a china painter from Devon. This flag showed the pick, shovel and cradle representing labour, the scales representing justice, the Roman bundle of sticks meaning unity and the kangaroo and emu of Australia.

Many thousands of Bendigo miners signed a petition to La Trobe, the Governor of Victoria, protesting against the licence fee. When the Governor rejected the petition, thousands of diggers marched in peaceful protest. Miners from White Hills, Eaglehawk, Golden Square, Kangaroo Flat as well as from Bendigo Flat, converged on what is now Pall Mall and View Point, surrounding the government camp on Camp Hill. The camp had been reinforced with soldiers of the 40th Regiment, as the Government feared bloodshed.

The miners then gathered on the hill behind View Point to hear from their leaders – among them George Thomson, Captain Harrison, Captain Brown and W.D.C. Denovan. They resolved to pay a token fee of ten shillings (\$1) for the September licence, when they met with Commissioners Panton and Wright on Camp Hill. Although Wright and Panton were sympathetic to the miners, the offer was rejected, **but no licence fees were collected for September**. Thus a possible bloody conflict was averted by the common sense shown by the miners’ leaders and the commissioners. It was a truly democratic protest against arbitrary government and preceded the Eureka Stockade Incident by over a year.

Red Rebellion Movement

Bendigo : August 31, 1853

Dear Friends

Having occasion to be in the neighbourhood of the Post Office today, I have scrawled this to inform you of the present state of affairs on the diggings. The corrupt state of the government on the goldfields has long been notorious to all readers of the newspapers and, instead of a mutual confidence existing between the officials and the miners, an antagonistic feeling is the consequence, which is now refined into open defiance of the law.

A meeting took place some time since, when a petition was agreed to, praying that the Governor would reduce the licence fee to ten shillings per month: also that he would allow the diggers to elect representatives to the Legislative Council. Delegates were appointed to convey it to the Governor, it being unanimously agreed. Their reception was anything but satisfactory. Among other things said, he cast a slur in the Garrisons (Germans?) which raised the indignation of all classes.

The result of this was the calling of a public meeting in Melbourne and adopting a petition which was signed by ten thousand persons including nearly all the principal men in the town. The delegates returned and called a public meeting near the camp which I attended last Saturday fortnight.

About ten thousand were present, with flags of many nations flying. It was an animated scene and the result was the adoption of resolutions to the effect that the diggers would pay no more than the ten shillings per month and on that day fortnight would meet again when fifteen of the committee with the like number of volunteers would go to the Commissioners and tender ten shillings each for a month's licence and, in the event of refusal, to give themselves in custody and serve ten days in jail rather than pay the fine (---). The diggers present agreeing to the same in the event of being taken.

The meeting took place as appointed, the resolutions were confirmed. Thirty men went to the Commissioner's who informed them he was not empowered to receive it. To show you the pitch it has come to, although the committee urged the diggers to show no resistance to the authorities, some rash fellows, when in front of the camp in procession, fired some shots in the air, which was the signal for several to follow suit. The consequence was several hundred shots from revolvers. This was condemned by the diggers as a rash act of folly.

The meeting as near as I can guess consisted of from fifteen to twenty thousand.

We are now acting in open defiance of the law which, though to be deplored, is the natural consequence of the vacillating policy of an imbecile government.

On the settlement of the question, much depends in diggers refraining amicably from acts of violence.

We passed over some remarkably level country occasionally varied by gentle rises. From these we could command extensive views of beautiful country. We saw some hundreds on the road all of whom have returned. I think some interested parties have a hand in puffing(?) new places. The sheep farmer is enabled to sell his stock at a high rate. There is a remarkable contrast in the condition and prospects of diggers with last summer. Times are exceedingly dull. An immense population with not sufficient doing in proportion. People reduce their expectations considerably. They no longer talk of ounces a day but are obliged to be satisfied with less in a week. Hitherto, we have done indifferently and have small prospect for the next week. I think it probable that some of my mates will return if they meet with no better success. It will alter my views if I do not succeed in a short time. I must wait a long time as it is not my intention to return until I realize something worth coming for (health permitting), for we have beautiful weather here. Water in some places scarce.

I think Adelaide will not be so desolate this summer as we at first anticipated. Many are leaving the diggings in disgust. Business will take its regular course. People will soon tire if they meet with bad success. I suppose before this reaches you the races(?) will be over. I should like to be there – anything to change the scene. Christmas will soon be here. I wish you as pleasant one as last. For myself, I must be content if my sister has arrived. Be so kind to request her to write to me at the Post Office, Bendigo. I have seen Mr Wear on his road to the Ovens. He had received the letter I brought. From him, I learned that Mrs Venning had returned to Adelaide. Give my best respects to all enquiring friends. To Mary, hoping this may find you in health as it leaves me.

I remain

Your sincere friend

William Sandover

Please favour me with one by return of post letting me know you are all well and all the Adelaide news, not forgetting the diggers. I have not seen an Adelaide paper since I left.

MINERS OF BENDIGO!

**YOUR PRIVILEGES HAVE BEEN
ATTACKED,**

And your Rights Trampled on by the
GOLDFIELDS AUTHORITIES

**IN THE
LOCAL COURT.**

As this is only a forerunner of what you may expect
if the

NEW BILL

For the Management of the Goldfields becomes law,
**THE LOCAL COURT HAS THEREFORE
RESIGNED**

Their Trust, and call upon you to organise a strong
and unflinching Opposition to that Iniquitous Measure.

**THE CRISIS DEMANDS INSTANT
ACTION!!**

Meetings will be held Every Evening during the
week throughout the district

THE MEETING THIS EVENING
Will be held in

GLENNON'S HOTEL, LONG GULLY,
AT HALF-PAST SEVEN O'CLOCK.

If you do not wish to have the old times revived, when
MIGHT' lorded it over RIGHT,

AGITATE! ORGANISE! AND AGITATE!

Remember what you did in the days of the

RED-RIBBON AGITATION,

And show the Government you have not degenerated,
but will present the same bold, unflinching front to

TYRANNY AND OPPRESSION

As you did in those stirring times.

By order,

439,01
J. MINTYRE, Hon. Sec.

NOTICE FOR TRAVELLING SHEEP.

WE Hereby Give Notice, that on the 1st of Decem-
ber next the Scotch Act will be enforced.

J. and G. MOUAT,

CLARK, CAMPBELL, and VOUTER,
Per J. V. FOOTTE.

20th October, 1857.

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Gold.

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