

DOLLY'S CREEK

Payable gold was found at Dolly's Creek in 1859 and a small and brief rush occurred. The settlement lasted for about five years, reaching its peak in 1861 with a population of nearly 600 people. In the late 1860s deep leads and quartz reefs in the area drew most people away from the surface alluvial deposits there to nearby Morrisons, where mining continued through the 1870s and 1880s.

Small and isolated communities like this relied on the existence of towns such as Ballarat to provide them with the goods and services necessary to survive and in turn the bigger towns grew as administrative centres sustaining a greater diversity of services than was required by its own immediate population.

The "migratory" way of life was common to many people during these times - they lived on a succession of different goldfields, including goldfields in other states in Australia and overseas - they moved from one potential bonanza to another. The obvious evidence of their presence are the mines and mullock heaps and to a lesser extent, the tracks and remains of buildings. A survey was done by archaeological students from LaTrobe University in 1990 at Dolly's Creek - covering about a square kilometre. The remains of nearly 60 houses were located and mapped, also identified were the areas that were sluiced for gold and the network of water races that fed the sluices and the locations of more than 600 mine shafts and test pits. The houses were identified by the locating of old fireplaces - fieldstone hearths are the only remains of the small canvas or slab structures that served as homes. Many tent dwellers would not have bothered to construct fireplaces so the 60 houses that were identified would indicate only part of the population. The houses were all on the tops or sides of the hills, none of them were built in the gullies even though some of the gullies have flat and wide bottoms. Visibility was certainly enhanced by building higher up and possibly contributed to the importance of the community feeling. Neighbouring houses were within sight of each other, no one was entirely isolated. There was at least ten metres between houses suggesting that advantage was taken of the available land and a degree of privacy was possible. Living space was small - about 3 x 6 metres inside.

Some artifacts were identified and presumed to have been provided locally. The bricks incorporated into a fieldstone fireplace were assumed to have been manufactured nearby, possibly Lal Lal, Bannockburn or Ballarat. Glass from soft drink bottles was found and while the bottles themselves would not have been made locally the contents almost certainly were. Local manufacture of goods such as bricks and soft drinks made them available to the residents of Dolly's Creek. The price of heavy, bulky items like bricks decreased when local production lowered transportation costs, while perishable goods like soft drinks were only available because they were produced locally. In turn, local industries were able to flourish because of the existence of the markets created by the numerous settlements like Dolly's Creek. The diversity of artefacts recovered by the excavation team show how important access to the railway line at Meredith was to the community. Seventeen different decorative patterns were recorded on ceramics found indicating the range of products available and the number of dishes that were used. More than 41 different vessels were discarded by the people living in one tent, probably only a fraction of the total number of dishes they owned. Given that the people who lived at Dolly's Creek were there for only a relatively short time before moving on, the kind of items they possessed was of particular interest to the researchers. Part of a glass plate for cakes and the remains of an ornate mantel clock were excavated. Although such items were mass produced, cheap and widely available their presence was still unexpected in a simple dwelling. Cake plates and clocks suggested attempts to beautify the surroundings and the way of life, to bring some sense of order to a rough and unruly environment. Such items were attractive and fragile, difficult to transport in repeated moves between goldfields.

The transformation of the natural environment as people altered the existing landforms to suit their own purposes is evident. Hillsides were washed away to recover the gold, and new watercourses were created and old ones deepened. The forest was cut down and used as fuel, construction material and the linings of the shafts. All of these activities have been preserved in the landscape as it is seen now. It is a built environment reflecting the intent of those who created it. The builders desired the recovery of gold and the landscape was built in the fulfilment of that desire.

VD

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