

THE DISCOVERY OF THE EAST KIMBERLEY GOLDFIELD 1885

At the Kimberley Society's meeting of 2 March 2005, a large audience heard from Dr Phillip Playford, an experienced geologist and an avid researcher and writer in the field of history. His summary of his beautifully illustrated talk follows.

In the mid 1800s Western Australia was the poor sister of the other Australian colonies. It regarded with envy the wealth generated by the major gold discoveries that had been made in the eastern colonies. As a result, the WA Government decided in 1872 to offer a reward of £5,000 for the discovery of the colony's first payable goldfield.

The Kimberley gold story began with the exploring expedition of Alexander Forrest in 1879. He traversed the district from west to east into the Northern Territory, and on reaching the Pine Creek mining centre he commented to the manager, Adam Johns, on similarities between the rocks at Pine Creek and those seen by his party in the Kimberley. This inspired Johns to mount an expedition to the area, with his mate Phil Saunders as party leader. They sailed from Darwin to Cossack and set out for the Kimberley in April 1882. Saunders found traces of gold in the headwaters of the Ord River, and reported this in a telegram to the W.A. Colonial Secretary, indicating that payable gold could probably be found in the area.

There was debate in the WA Legislative Council as to the best way of following up this report. It was eventually decided to appoint Edward T Hardman, a geologist from the Irish Geological Survey, to join John Forrest's survey expedition to the West Kimberley in 1883. That expedition found no positive signs of gold. However, Hardman accompanied a second expedition, led by H F Johnston, to the East Kimberley in 1884. This time Hardman panned good colours of gold in several watercourses, especially in the headwaters of the Elvire River, where the Halls Creek gold discovery would be made in the following year.

Hardman made many excellent paintings and sketches during the two expeditions. Scanned images of these and others by Arthur Forbes (the police constable, Clerk of Courts, and Mining Registrar at Halls Creek in 1887-1890) were shown during the presentation to the Society.

In early 1885, as soon as Hardman's results were made known, several prospecting parties set off for the East Kimberley. One of these, led by Charles Hall, headed east from Derby to the Elvire River area where Hardman had reported his best gold showings. They soon found payable gold, at what they named 'Halls Creek', on 14 July 1885. As soon as this find became known, the Kimberley gold rush began. Thousands of men made their way to the Kimberley from other parts of WA, the eastern colonies, and New Zealand. Most arrived by ship in Derby or Wyndham, and then walked to Halls Creek. Others came overland from the Northern Territory. Most

had no previous experience in gold prospecting or of life in the bush. Illness and disease were rife, and when the first warden, C D Price, arrived on 3 September 1886, he found that 'great numbers were stricken down, in a dying condition, helpless, destitute of money, food, or covering, and without mates or friends simply lying down to die'.

A few were lucky enough to locate rich alluvial or reef gold, but most had little or no success. Some found enough gold to survive or move elsewhere in the colony. It is estimated that as many as 10,000 men joined the rush, and when Warden Price arrived in September 1886 he reported that about 2,000 remained at the diggings. By the end of 1886 the rush had ceased.

In spite of the early promise of several underground mines, Halls Creek never prospered, as the ore petered out at depth and the alluvial gold was soon exhausted. However, the gold rush drew world attention to the colony and its gold prospects, and some of the experienced prospectors soon moved on to make rich discoveries in the Pilbara and Southern Cross districts (1888), the Murchison (1891), Coolgardie (1892), and Kalgoorlie (1893). Those major discoveries captured the imagination of the world, resulting in a flood of immigrants and investment capital that transformed Western Australia from an impoverished colony in the late 1880s to one of Australia's wealthiest States in 1901.

Hardman left Western Australia for Ireland in 1885, resuming his duties with the Geological Survey of Ireland. He died of typhoid in Dublin on 6 April 1887 at the age of 42 years, leaving a wife and two small children. Prior to his death he was not aware that his ambition to return to Western Australia was about to be realized. An offer of appointment to the permanent position of Government Geologist (and founder of the Geological Survey of Western Australia) had been approved by the Legislative Council on 13 June 1887. Soon afterwards members were saddened to learn of Hardman's premature death.

Applications for the £5,000 reward for the gold discovery were lodged by H F Johnston, E T Hardman, P Saunders, C Hall and party, and several other persons who had found gold in the area. At the time of Hardman's death no decision had been made regarding payment of the reward. The Government eventually decided, on 31 May 1888, that the conditions for payment had not been met and therefore the reward would not be paid. The main reason was that recorded output from the field had been less than the stipulated 10,000 ounces. However, at the same time it was announced that £500 would be given to Hardman's widow and another £500 to Hall and his party.

The other prominent applicant for the reward had been Phil Saunders. By 1907 he was 66 years old and working a small gold show, with minimal returns, near Mt Ida.

The Mt Ida Progress Association wrote to the Minister for Mines asking that Saunders be granted an appropriate annuity by the Government. They said that 'the old gentleman is now rapidly declining and almost blind' and that he would appreciate receiving appropriate relief to assist him when 'his life is apparently very near its close'. This moving appeal had the desired effect, and Saunders was granted a Government pension of £75 per year. If he was indeed close to death in 1907, he recovered well after receiving the annuity. Indeed he lived for another 24 years, dying in 1931 at the age of 90 years.

There can be no doubt that the discovery of the Kimberley Goldfield and the dramatic rush that followed are among the most important events in the history of Western Australia. They marked the true beginning of our mining industry, leading to the major developments that now dominate our economy and have placed Western Australia among the world's foremost mining provinces.

Further reading

Playford, Phillip E. and Ruddock, Ian. 'Discovery of the Kimberley Goldfield', *Early Days, Royal Western Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, vol. 9, part 3, 1985, pp. 76–106.

'The Rush of '86', *Boab Bulletin*, April 1995, pp. 5–6.

'An Early Kimberley Prospector: R.C.S. Macphee', *Boab Bulletin*, August 1997, pp. 5–8.

Burdett, F D, with editing by C R Long. *The Odyssey of a Digger*. First published 1936, facsimile edition, Hesperian Press, Carlisle (WA), 2005. See the book note for it in this newsletter.