

THE CORNISH AT HILL END, NSW

*An Abridged Talk
Given by local historian Brian Hodge at Hill End
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THE ARRIVAL OF THE CORNISH

When discussing the Cornish community at Hill End, the two goldfields very close to this village are also included:

- The Tambaroora Goldfield, 5 kms to our north
- The Dirt Hole diggings, a further 4 km north.

What happened at Hargraves, 25 km to the north, is also a part of the story. These goldfields were all opened up within months of each other:

- Hill End, July 1851
- The Dirt Hole October 1851 and
- Tambaroora a few weeks later.

The Australian gold rush commenced at Ophir in May 1851- quite close to the Cornish Settlement, whose official name was Byng. In these early days, the miners at very little expense were digging for the loose gold found in the rivers, creeks and gullies, different to the traditional hard rock mining in Cornwall.

Even in these infant years of gold mining, there is evidence of a Cornish presence. In August 1852, a hundred miners from Tambaroora and beyond packed into Burton's Circus tent and formed "The Tambaroora Association of Alluvial Miners", probably the first trade union among gold miners in Australia. The miners felt very much threatened by two very powerful groups:

- First, the merchants of Sydney who wanted the goldfields divided into leases controlled by them, with the miners no longer independent, but working in a master-servant relationship.
- Second, the wool lobby who dominated the government and saw the gold rush draining away their labour force.

So the Union was formed. Its first President was John Tom, the robust, eldest son of Parson Tom, the founder of the Cornish Settlement. It is also worth noting that younger brother William, together with John Lister, found Australia's first payable gold, exploited by Hargraves to start the rush. Also, it was brother James Tom, whose discovery of gold in the Turon River at its junction with Hill End's Oaky Creek that influenced the timing of Hill End's first settlement. When the Ophir diggings were flooding in June, the Government geologist posted on a tree James Tom's discovery for all the diggers to see.

It is clear that, even before the migration of Cornish tin miners to our goldfields, the Australian descendants of one Cornish family - the Tom family - had an important influence.

In 1852, there was evidence of a growing Cornish presence - the Wesleyan Church, set up by preacher John Davis, was the first church on the Tambaroora Goldfield, a very simple slab structure - 18 ft by 12 ft. In October 1852, John Davis, unlucky in his minings, returned to Sydney to proselytise among the poor. Before leaving he was given a magnificent testimonial of gold by the miners and their Union.

The first publicised presence of Cornish miners, using the skills they had learnt in Cornwall, was in 1855 at the Dirt Hole diggings, next to Tambaroora.

There were three factors involved:

- Reef mines - supposedly rich - had been found at the Dirt Hole.
- In 1854, close by at Hill End, the first promising discovery of reef gold was made - on the hill west of the Royal Hotel. Joseph Wythes, who held the lease, had no crushing machinery (too expensive) and his men had to break down the ore by 'dollying'. At the beginning of 1855. Wythes sold his lease to a Bathurst solicitor S.B. Sergeant from Cornwall who, at the christening ceremony, spoke to his miners of his experiences in Cornwall and named the reef the Cornish Quartz Vein.
- At Hargraves, 25 km north of the Dirt Hole, the presence of the heavily capitalised British Colonial Company pursuing underground operations on the site of the Kerr Hundredweight.

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In the light of the Dirt Hole reefs which were receiving good press (written by S. Cole - one of the owners), Alfred Spence, Manager of the British Colonial Company, made two decisions:

- To purchase the Dirt Hole leases.
- To purchase the latest crushing machinery; install it at the Dirt Hole; use it for operations there - and gain crushing contracts from Hill End, where no machinery existed.

As his labour force, Spence brought from Cornwall, 30 skilled miners who erected a stamper battery for crushing ('like the ones used in Cornwall' wrote Gold Commissioner Johnson), built huts for themselves and formed a village. Cole owned the Dirt Hole tavern and had sold his Coronation Vein lease to the British Colonial Company. Cole admired the Cornish miners and wrote in the Bathurst Free Press that they were 'of a superior class - masters of their trade'.

In February 1858, the stamper battery was christened. In the next few weeks the miners built the roasting pits where the quartz was fed in to soften it prior to crushing.

SUMMARY

At the very beginning of the goldfield history of this district, Cornish people with their skills and Cornish technology, were very important. The roasting pits remain as wonderful evidence of their skills. In 1963, they were in excellent condition and were easy to restore completely by National Parks & Wild Life as part of its historic site. The remains of a stone hut can still be seen.

The plans, however, did not work out as Alfred Spence had hoped. The Dirt Hole veins did not fulfil its expectations. From Hill End, Sergeant's Cornish Quartz Vein sent only one crushing of 80

tons. Royalties paid reveal that only around 11 ounces of gold resulted, representing a huge loss for the former Bathurst solicitor. Early in 1856, the British shareholders of Spence's company (meeting chaired by Lord Alfred Churchill) decided enough was enough, as for every dollar earned in NSW, two dollars were being spent. Therefore, the Company closed down its operations and abandoned its lease.

A NEW PHASE

The fortunes of the Cornish miners had taken a new turn. Off contract from the British company, they could now make independent decisions; they could take out leases at the Dirt Hole, Tambaroora or Hill End. These were the most promising options for there was still loose riverbed gold being discovered. They would help pay for the underground mining which was a slow and costly process.

A new class of miner emerged - a hard rock miner who was also the investor. Friends usually formed partnerships to lessen expenses.

For the next few years there was little joy and much hard work. Newly discovered reefs at Hill End in 1857 attracted brief attention. Then in March 1858, there was a dramatic discovery along the Hawkins Hill ridge at Hill End, where for a short time 300 claims were at work. At about 105 feet, however, the reefs proved uneconomical.

A major problem during this period was the absence of crushing machinery. The British Colonial Company's stamper battery at the Dirt Hole had been sold to an enterprise at Summer Hill Creek near Orange. The mines were really doing it tough, crushing by hand in a contraption with a spring and a lever, a slight advance on the 'dolly pot'.

In 1861, Hill End's first census revealed a settled village of 36 dwellings (with a total of 106 rooms), described as weather board, slab and inferior. If the village was to have a future, it would be as a reef mining community. The population was 122 - 76 males (24 married) and 48 females. Of the males, 10 were over 50 and 39 under 15. Apart from the usual commerce involved, the sole activity stated was quartz mining, 47 males gave that as their occupation. The foreign born population comprised 4 'miscellaneous' (which would have included Louis Beyers from Poland), 1 American Indian, 1 American, 2 Chinese, 6 Germans (which would have included Bernard Holtermann), 1 Welshman, 5 Irish, 7 Scottish and 5 English. (Strong family oral history maintains that most of this English contingent came from Cornwall).

My great grandfather, John Hodge lived on the goldfields from 1852 to 1908, and also my grandfather, Walter Frederick Hodge all his life (1863-1943). Obviously, at this very early stage of growth, the Cornish group was very strong. It is also reasonable to assume that many of these 47 quartz miners would also be investors with partners.

This powerful Cornish presence is shown by the fact that the Wesleyan church was the first to be constructed in the village. No doubt Wesleyan archives can pinpoint the year it was built; oral history suggests it was there at the time of the 1861 Census.

TOWARDS THE BOOM

By the time of the Census, the problem of crushing the ore had been solved. In 1859 an American, D.B. Johnson, had discovered the first reef at Tambaroora and more discoveries followed. Then a very clear-sighted Gold Commissioner, Joseph Cox, called a public meeting and addressed it. His theme: the great need of the goldfield was crushing machinery. As large-scale capital had no

interest in the field, the miners themselves could solve the problem by forming their own co-operative. 'Vociferous cheering' of the Commissioner followed. The co-operative was a great success and in October 1860 the first stamper battery for the Tambaroora Goldfield was christened The Victoria, in honour of the Queen.

Then in 1861, publican Harriet Beard, universally admired as the miners' friend, herself bought a far larger stamper battery. By 1865, the miners' first stamper had been bought by the Tambaroora Inn publican Jean Reneteau who located it half way towards Hill End, to catch the crushing trade from that village.

By 1861, the three close mining communities - the Dirt Hole, Tambaroora, and Hill End - had the necessary machinery to prove their claims.

The first spectacular crushing came from two Cornish partners, Phillip Jeffree and James Letcher at the Dirt Hole, 10 tons of ore returning 61 oz of gold in August 1863.

Returns at Tambaroora were steady, but to the south 1865 was the turning point in the reef-mining history of Hill End. In that year the miner, Adams, looking for his horse half-way down Hawkins Hill, chanced on surface ore with gold in it. There was a rush from the locals, leases were pegged and very successful mining followed - 'a good many made a lot of money'.

A year later, 1866 - Louis Beyer found surface gold still further down the hill. Immediately a series of claims were pegged out, either side of this find in a north-south direction. Between 1869 and 1873, these remarkably rich claims formed the basis of Hill End's boom, an estimated 11 tons of gold being taken from them.

Although 1866 was a significant one for Hill End's future, it was also a tragic one for many families. Successful Cornish man, James Letcher, was in partnership with the Jeffree brothers at the Valentine Mine. He had moved to Hill End and lived in a very comfortable dwelling at the junction of the Bathurst Road and Beyers Avenue. This was an indication that he had continued to prosper, but tragedy was soon to darken this village. The year 1866 developed into a very cold winter and convulsions, diphtheria and scarlet fever carried off 33 of Hill End's children, all under 10 years of age - one child of every two born failed to reach their first birthday. James Letcher and his wife lost their complete family: Ann 6½, Caroline 3½, Jane 17 months, Mary 12 and William 14. However, new family emerged - in 1867 Ann Rose, 1870 John Joseph, and 1871 Jane.

THE BOOM PERIOD

Hill End's peak year was 1872, when an estimated 7,000 people lived in and around the town and included about 1200 underground miners. Harry Hodge in his Hill End story suggests one-third were Cornish; T.A. Browne, Gold Commissioner at the close of Gulgong Goldfield, said 'most'.

Strong evidence of a sharply rising Cornish population is the building of churches. In December 1870, the new Wesleyan church was opened. Built from rubble and stone, it could accommodate 150 worshippers. It was opened with 3 Sunday services attended by 250 people. In 1872, there were complaints that the Church was not large enough. (The Wesleyan Chapel still remains in Hill End. In the 1930's, it was sold to the Church of England. In 1969, some repairs were made at a cost of \$880.00).

In March 1873, the foundation stone of the Primitive Methodist Church was laid and completed by July. During Hill End's sharp decline, it was sold to the Roman Catholic Church. It still stands and is owned by the National Park and Wildlife Service.

It is impossible to detail the fortunes of every Cornish miner-investor in Hill End. At the height of the boom most of the mines, worked for some years by the locals, were floated into public companies at great profit to the original owners. The following are a few Cornish claim-holders who did well from this procedure.

1. The Jeffree brothers and family.

Phillip arrived in Australia in September 1854. Four years later he was followed by his wife Caroline and their 5 children: Joseph 13, Phillip 11, Jane 9, Ann 7 and George 5. He was also joined by his brothers Henry, Samuel and Josiah who all worked in mining at the Dirt Hole in the 1860's.

The family was on the spot to invest early in good ground on Hawkins Hill, in partnership with others. In one venture, Ross and Jeffree sold a claim for 60,000 pounds, while Jeffree and Gillard's claim in May 1872 was sold for 65,000 pounds. A year later this mine was sold for 110 pounds!

In the decline, most of the Jeffree families left Hill End though Phillip and Phillip Junior remained, the latter playing the piano at public functions. Phillip Senior died in 1898 and his son in 1918.

At 'Rose Cottage' in Hill End, there lives (as at 2005) Betty Jeffree, wife of the late Russell Jeffree, a direct descendant of the Jeffrees.

2. A second success story was that of Cock, Attwood and Dwyer.

William Cock, born at Redruth, Cornwall in 1835, had been a tin miner at Carharrack. He married Ann Northey whose father owned a business in Hill End during and after the boom years. John Attwood in the 1850's had been a blacksmith at Sofala, but was attracted to the Hill End goldfield. (I have no personal information concerning Henry Dwyer).

Being at Hill End in 1866, the three friends were in the right spot at the right time and pegged their claim in ground that proved fabulously rich. The claim up to July 1871 had returned gold to the value of 30,000 pounds. It was then floated as a public company for 80,000 pounds, but closed down in 1876 - the gold running out.

3. On Hawkins Hill, the 'Cornish Mine', first called the 'All Nations', was bought at the fire sale price of 334 pounds in 1874 by 10 Hill End miner-investors, and more than paid its way before closing in 1876.

The Cornish influence was also present in commerce. Hill End's first and only brewery, owned by the Inch family, flourished for several years during the 1870's. There had been intermarriage with the well-established Jeffrees of Hill End, Albert Jeffree becoming the head brewer for Edward, Richard and Charles Inch. In the Tambaroora Times, August 1875, there was the advertisement: 'Try Inch's celebrated XXX ale, which for quality and flavour cannot be excelled. R. Inch, Proprietor'.

Of course there were other Cornish men in commerce, including Robert Northey, whose name is perpetuated on the shop he once owned.

In the boom period 1871-1874, between 40 and 50 miners were killed in underground operations. Only one of them was specifically named as Cornish - a miner-investor by the surname of Oliver. He had set his explosives and thought that he had heard them explode. Tragically, the sound he had

heard was from the next mine and he walked back into his own explosion. Oliver had saved 985 pounds in order to visit relatives and friends in Cornwall.

THE CORNISH MINING SKILLS

The Cornish miners were known as 'Cousin Jacks' - a description which suggests that they were a closely-knit community. The three generalisations directed to them were:

1. In 1855 at the Dirt Hole, investor and publican S.A Cole wrote in the Bathurst Free Press that they were 'superior' and as mechanics, masters of their trade.
2. In April 1868, a young Australian-born miner, Mark Hammond, rode into Hill End and was to make discoveries which precipitated the boom. In his memoir 'Remembered with Pride', he wrote:

I was satisfied there was no opening for a stranger. Another thing I noticed was that there were two leading parties in the community - one German and the other Cornish men. Those outside these brotherhoods were in the minority and not likely to receive much help from either of them. Nevertheless, it was amongst the minority that I had to direct my attention and seek my friends.

3. The third and more detailed description of the Cornish was made by Thomas Alexander Browne, Gold Commissioner (1871-81) at Gulgong, a thriving goldfield not far from Hill End. However, he was heartily disliked by Gulgong's miners who regarded him as quite incompetent. Also, he had ties to the squattocracy of Victoria and had membership of The Melbourne Club since 1854.

Browne was also a writer who wrote adventure romances under the pen name of Rolf Boldrewood. His most popular novel was 'Robbery under Arms'. In 1880, he published 'The Miners' Right'. Chapter 14 is set in Hill End, which he calls "Warraluen", apparently its aboriginal name. However, its miners refer to it as "the Hill". This is part of what Browne wrote:

As I rode up the narrow street, serpentine in construction, as in all gold-founded townships, I looked carefully for the hotel which I had been informed that Edward Morsley kept. The settlement differed in some respects from the one I had quitted. Its prosperity depended almost wholly upon quartz reefs. In their nature, the reeds or ledges of quartz rock are more permanent as to the gold crop than the alluvial deposits which can be rifled in a comparatively short time. Whereas the great depth of the matrix, as a rule, and consequently slow, steady extraction of the golden stone necessitates a more protracted service, a more settled population. Hence the populations of 'reefing districts' are for the most part famed for comfortable cottages, well-grown orchards and a general air of well-paid contented labouring life.

The miners in this particular locality were chiefly Cornish men, hereditarily accustomed to subterranean labour in their own land. Laborious, enduring, and efficient in their own occupation, to which many of them had served a life-long apprenticeship thousands of feet below old 'ocean's swells and fall.' In Wheal Maria or The Great Dungavel, they were said to be by no means so suave of manner or agreeable in association as their cosmopolitan brethren of the alluvial goldfields. The aggressive, sullen nature of the untravelled Briton was still uncorrected by association with the outer world. They formed a community within themselves, and, as such, shut up to the development of their own peculiar tendencies, some of which were less pleasing than remarkable.

At this particular time the reefs at one end of the line of shafts, upon a mountain crest far above the town, had been lately yielding enormously, and were renowned throughout Australia. The 'Cousin Jacks' were, therefore, in great force. Much given to brawling amongst themselves, they were more than likely to be uncivil to strangers. The small force of police, hitherto though sufficient for their subjugation, was all inadequate when a dozen reefs in line were sending up ten ounce stone - even better than that, it was whispered, and hundred of wages men, employed by the great absentee companies, received their three pounds each as regularly as Saturday came.

In some respects, therefore, I had arrived at an inopportune season. Saturday night was pay night, and the vinous aspect of the groups I encountered - so different from the men at Yatala, except perhaps upon a high festival - convinced me that I had chosen a bad day for my entrance into Warraluen. However, I bestowed myself at the first available inn, and after needful refreshments and a couple of hours' rest, strolled out into the well-lighted streets.

'Well, lad', said a short man, whose blue-black curly hair and deep-set eyes betrayed the 'Cousin Jack' while his enormous spread of chest redeemed him from any imputation of insignificance, "hou farest all as one as a stranger, loike? Where be'st bound?"
'To Morsley's Inn, if I can find it among these crooked streets of yours" I said, slightly irritated at my want of success and inauspicious surrounds.

'Black Ned?' said the pocket Hercules, rolling himself around, and not resenting the imputation on his town, but steadying himself for a comprehensive look at me. 'Be'st a friend o' thatn? Not by the looks o' thee - danged sight more loike to be friends with yon pratty mawther as he's gotten boxed-up there wi' him - more's the pity.'

Yet at the end of this chapter, Browne writes of leaving 'the Hill' and 'parting cordially with his kind-hearted Cousin Jacks'.

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These strong underground miners certainly did not take a backward step when confronting their sectarian rivals, the Irish. The Hill End correspondent to the Sydney Morning Herald 26 Sept. 1872 wrote:

Saturday last was enlivened by an outbreak between the Irishmen and the Cornish men
...many were the black eyes and broken noses.

Usually these fights took place at the back of Patrick Coyle's Clubhouse Hotel.

DECLINE AND EXODUS

Hill End's boom year was 1872 with a population of around 7,000. However, by the 1901 Census there was only a population of 643. Investment capital had shied away and the shutes of the gold-bearing ore were being exhausted.

If the Cornish miners continued to work as miners, the nearest underground gold mines were at Lucknow and Wattle Flat, while in the 1880's there were the silver mines at Sunny Corner and farther afield, the silver, lead and zinc mines of Broken Hill.

Some Cornish families did remain. In 1898, there was only one partnership working underground at Hawkins Hill - the Cornish Clymo brothers.

In 1896 a Cornish engineer at Sunny Corner, Alfred Guninan, was brought to Hill End to organise salvage operations on Hawkins Hill, involving heavy machinery destined for the Red Hill mine at Tambaroora. As it was quite a challenge, he rented a house in Hill End. Guninan wrote:

At Hill End many old Cornish miners now fossicking for a pittance came introducing themselves. Some of the younger descendants were looking for work, others glad to hear any news about home and to get a Cornish newspaper. Many had lost all contact with their homeland.

My uncle, Harry Hodge, born in Hill End 1902 remembered some of the Cornish men:

John Carmichael, 'a dour Cornish man' who married my great aunt Alice, ran the bakery and general store across the road from the Royal Hotel. They left for Wattle Flat around 1916.

Phillip Jeffree Junior lived in the Clarke Street cottage, once the Bank of NSW. He died in 1918. His father Phillip, one of the Cornish pioneers on the goldfield, had died in 1898.

CONCLUSION

Hill End was brought to its boom period by the perseverance of its local miner-investors who had formed partnerships. Many of these were Cornish.

The tangible legacies left by the skilled miners are the roasting pits, the Valentine Mine, the shafts and drives under Hawkins Hill and elsewhere - and two churches.

In the wider sphere, Cornish immigration of free people gave momentum to our transition from a merciless dictatorial convict society to a society of economic hope and developing democracy.

Now the last Cornish man living in Hill End is Nick Harvey and his wife, Nancy.