

The District of Bywong Hill

Chapter 7 of the book "Gundaroo".

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After examining the Gundaroo district in the first half of the year 1852 Rev. W.B. Clarke, government geological surveyor, concluded that gold would be found at Bywong, Brooks Creek, Gundaroo Creek and along the Yass River at various points for ten or fourteen miles downstream, summarising his belief by predicting that "gold in profitable quantities will hereafter be found in some part of the district of which Bywong Hill is the centre".¹ Before the end of the year, in fact, gold was discovered on Barnsdale, and within a decade at Fairfield, Bywong and Brooks Creek as well as on both Woodbury and Jerrabiggery where Henry Lintott and Joseph Sutton in turn encouraged prospecting. The discover by the brothers William Jon and Joseph McEnally in mid – 1856 of "a beautiful nuggety gold procured from a dry bank" on Lintott's estate at Woodbury² evoked support from the Queanbeyan storekeeper, Abraham Levy, who rejoiced in the thought of a field developing only fourteen miles from his store, but it was a dry season and a lack of water played a large part in killing enthusiasm. Nevertheless, the first movement resembling a "rush" was sparked off by the Fairfield find of 1861, out of which ten men each reportedly earned \$2 per day for a short period.³ That marked the diminutive scale on which the gold finds were always to be made and worked at Gundaroo, a small and insignificant corner indeed when compared with the tens of thousands kept at work on the fold fields of Bathurst and the Lachlan.

While fitful discoveries were being made on the old estates a far more successful piece of prospecting was undertaken on the farm near Geary's Gap rented from W.J. Packer by Charles Masters. There, on the rich alluvial flats receding from Brooks Creek, Masters found gold in 1860 and continued for many years to obtain it in a quiet way with the aid of his sons.⁴ Although the longest-lived and most successful alluvial workings in the district, Brooks Creel was essentially a family affair in which old Charley Masters shared with his own sons and, later, with his sons-in-law, John Noakes and Donald Dawson, after they married into his family in the late sixties. Otherwise the principal material beneficiary was Alexander Fraser, the nearest storekeeper, who acted as gold receiver and placed the precious packets on the mail coach when it stopped at the *Traveller's Home* en route to Goulburn.

Before Brooks Creek simmered down after news of Masters's find got about there was a small rush to the site in June 1861 and about sixty prospectors hopefully began erecting shanties nearby, encouraged by the interest of Terence Aubrey Murray who brought his family over from Winderradeen to view the wonder. There was comfort for them too in Masters's claim that "anybody by merely taking a tin dish and washing the surfacings could

¹ W.B Clarke, *Researches in the Southern Gold Fields of New South Wales* (Sydney 1860) p. 238

² *Goulburn Herald* 13 September 1856

³ *Ib.*, 26 June 1861

⁴ *Quanbeyan Observer* 25 September 1897

make 10S. daily”⁵, and in the report that between £4 and £7 each per week was being earned by members of the prospecting party formed by Masters and Donald Roderick Macleod. John Nelson Woodman of Queanbeyan began a bi-weekly service from the diggings to Queanbeyan and Goulburn with his line of American coaches, and when John Gale visited the place one Saturday afternoon in July he found a population of between eighty and one hundred busily at work beside the creek where a few slab buildings had been erected, although he noted that most the men were sheltering against the bitter winter in tents.⁶ In spite of the constant rumours of success and the two stores open for business, it was clear that inadequate and inefficient equipment was hampering progress for although one prospector was at work manufacturing cradles, the only part actually using one was that of Macleod and Masters whose men freely admitted that they were still losing valuable particles of gold by hasty and ill-provided procedures.

A week after Gale’s visit Joseph Edgar estimated that 120 men were working on the diggings, but it was the peak of a wave which soon receded, leaving only a few disappointed diggers to envy the success of the Masters family to whom fossicking was no more than a profitable sideline augmenting the proceeds of farming. Then, in 1863, the discovery by a digger named Cameron of a nugget weighing 1 oz.7 ½ dwt. precipitated a rush by more than a hundred diggers to Brooks Creek.⁷ They arrived in comparative droves from Lambing Flat (Young) on the Lachlan where the double sensations of rich discoveries and race riots were cooling, and even thought their stay at Brooks Creek was like the momentary flash of a meteor they left their typical picturesque nomenclature in the trenches which they dug out from the creek banks – Tucker’s Gully, Nuggetty Gully, Blackguard Gully, Married Men’s Gully.

During succeeding years efforts at prospecting were continued by local residents, particularly the brother Donald and Charles Dawson who before coming to the Brooks Creek area had discovered the short-lived goldfield at Warrambucca near Braidwood⁸ and they are remembered still by the pockmarked spot known as “Dawson’s Holes” near where Donnelly’s Creek joins the Yass River at Lumley. After another fifteen years of sleep Brooks Creek again sprang into prominence in 1878 when it was revealed that at nearby Diamond Hill a rich reef, the “Hidden Treasure”, had been struck by the Dawsons working with Masters and Noakes, and that they were producing gold at more than six ounces to the ton from the stone which they were penetrating.⁹ In the following year a large part of the Dawson’s claim was bought out for £1700¹⁰ by Joseph Copeland, a widely-experienced miner who installed expensive machinery with the backing of a Sydney company, the Suburban Gold and Diamond Company. They planned to make the first full-scale exploitation of mineral wealth with

⁵*Golden Age* 20 June 1861

⁶*Ib.*, 11 July 1861

⁷*Goulburn Herald* 20 May 1863

⁸*Queanbeyan Age* 29 June 1865

⁹*Goulburn Herald* 13 November 1878

¹⁰*Ib.*, 12 April 1879, 21 April 1879

Copeland acting a manager, and he and the Dawsons were still there eighteen months later when a visitor reported that the machines were fast nearing completion. In predicting a great future for Brooks Creek, the report sneered at the “sort of blissful lethargy” of the inhabitants of Gundaroo who were about the find “when the merry din of the stampers arouses them from their continuous slumbers that it is a good thing indeed to have in their vicinity a large mining population”.¹¹ But it was not to be. Although the giant crushing machine was ready to start operations on 9 June, the venture enjoyed only a fleeting prosperity before its complete collapse in 1881 after futile attempts to locate gold on the Hidden Treasure as well as at Mac’s Reef and Dairy Creek.¹²

The fossickers resumed, aided now by the impoverished selectors whose reward twenty years after the “advancement of the masses” promised by Robertson’s land reform was to see their wives and children torturing a living from the frugal soil. The menfolk were spending the six months in each year during which they could not find farm work as itinerant shearers, making ends meet to the best of their abilities by travelling in search of work from Dalby to Violet Town. Into the poverty-stricken community of Brooks Creek Miss Lizzie Kellett came in 1890 to discover that of the three farmers right on the creek banks – Peter Millynn, Charles Masters jnr. and John Noakes – only Noakes by that time was still making a business of washing for gold. “The young people of the other families sometimes in their leisure hours collected a little ‘dust’. I even did a little myself and once discovered a nugget worth 4s.6d. How to dispose of the ‘dust’ was a problem, so the teacher, who was expected to be able to manage everything was entrusted to convey the precious grains to the Old Mint. No traveller, however thievishly minded, would suspect a shy plainly-dressed girl of having a packet of one hundred ounces of pure fine gold in the pockets of her frock!!”¹³

Mac’s Reef, to which the Suburban Gold and Diamond Company turned vainly from Brooks Creek in 1880, was already a long-dead letter in the work of gold, lying not many miles south of Masters’s farm, two or three miles south-east of the Woodbury estate, and about fifteen miles from Queanbeyan. There in October 1865, William John McEnally who first discovered gold in the vicinity nine years before, happened once again upon a reef at the summit of a steep hill about half a mile from his selection. Woodbury, since 1862, was in the occupation of John Cartwright, a keen promoter of gold-digging, whose earlier career as a farmer at Upper Gundaroo had brought him into association with Charles Masters at Brooks Creek and McEnally was supplementing the product of his selection by working for Cartwright as a shepherd. While out one day seeking hurdle-wood he picked up a scrap of quartz, broke it with a tomahawk and saw gold glinting from the freshly-cut stone. Cartwright bought in on McEnally’s find (duly names Mac’s Reef after the discoverer) by including him in a partnership which he formed with Tom North, a hardened prospector from Brindabella, J.J. Wright, the Queanbeyan storekeeper, and Dr Andrew Morton, also of Queanbeyan.

Within weeks a town named Newington sprang into existence on the reef, boasting a main thoroughfare (Griffin-street) and another track (Sarah-street) straggling away towards Bungendore, presumably along the line of the “Sarah Reef” discovered by William Bingley. Before the middle of November there were three stores, a butchery, and an hotel licensed as *The Prospectors’* by John Owen Tucker. The population, now congregating, now dispersing, always drifting like patches of oil on an uneasy ocean, included old hands from the Brooks Creek rush, Henry Margules and George Veitch, both of whom started by opening shanty stores; Margules’s shanty quickly grew into a tavern, the *Union*. Abraham Levy, the herald of McEnally’s earlier find, was again active as an agent,

¹¹Ib., 8 May 1880

¹²Edith M. Smith, *Notes on Prospecting in the Australian Capital Territory and Environs* (Dept. of National Development, Canberra, 1963) p. 3

¹³Elizabeth Gunter, ‘A Centenarian’s Recollections’, op.cit.

sending to the Royal Mint in Sydney two small samples of quartz which upon being tested yielded an encouraging 12 oz. 6 dwt. of fine gold to the ton. While not to be compared with the spectacular finds elsewhere in the colony, this was sufficient to justify the installation of a crushing machine with the aid of the Goulburn storekeeper, William Davies, encouraged by John Cartwright and John Menzies. Openings at Newington (which some more optimistically were seeking to name “El Dorado”) immediately attracted the classical opportunists – storekeepers, publicans and coach proprietors. Thomas Moran diverted his mail run via the “township”, while John Allen O’Neill and John Nelson Woodman of Queanbeyan both initiated coach services. Woodman’s building on the reef was used in November for the first Divine Service held there when Rev John Clifton, the Queanbeyan Methodist minister, came on a visit, quickly followed by Father Patrick White whose own adherents, equally numerous on the diggings, set up a school and began collecting for a church. The Roman Catholic church was never built but soon one of the more significant buildings on the reef – and the longest-lived – was a weatherboard Methodist chapel.

Of the many claims taken up, the prospectors’ was certainly the best, closely followed by those of Leahy’s party, Michael Torpy, and groups working at spots known as “Mount Lazarus” and “Napoleon Gully”. Torpy’s claim, part of the “Amalgamated Perseverance” workings, well illustrated the delusions of all those including John Cartwright, who were tempted to gamble more than they could safely lose on Mac’s Reef. Already the forfeitor to John Woodman of one of the best hotels in Queanbeyan because of his stubbornness, Torpy then sold up a second hotel in the town, loudly proclaiming that it was “In consequence of the landlord having determined to VENTURE ALL! on the Golden Prospects of Mac’s Reef.¹⁴ In the bleak outcome of Mac’s Reef he lost all, and had to return to his original calling in the police force.

Despite the continuous presence of at least one ex-policeman at Newington, the law came low on the list of honoured priorities even though one description, no doubt well calculated in its intention, depicted an almost ideal community. “Every evening since Friday last, with the exception of Sunday”, wrote a none-too-casual observer, “Griffin-street, from Flora’s point to the part where Mr O’Neill is building, and especially in front of Mr H. Margules’ Union Hotel, has presented the appearance of a fair – vehicles, horsemen, police, and groups of men every where, the latter engrossed in discussions and arguments which would puzzle the most ingenious lawyer to parry. On Saturday and yesterday evenings Woodman’s corner gave us the outlines of a little fighting; of course this sort of performance is carried on after the Commissioner and police leave.”¹⁵ But the cold hard facts of other reports – especially those of the Queanbeyan Police Court – reveal more than a few friendly scraps as the pastimes of the miners when deprived of the consoling presence of the Goldfields Commissioner and the police. Idlers began nocturnal stone-throwings by way of recreation and after a New Year’s frolic to welcome in the year 1866 five of them, including young Charles masters, committed “a most disgraceful and outrageous assault” on the unpopular Torpy and his stepson, James Breen, by waking them in the small hours of the morning, stoning them as they fled to the protection of another miner’s hut, and then returning to destroy their tent. A worse experience was that of Mrs Ellen Blofield who, as she lay in bed with her husband in their tent at Newington, was molested by a stranger. The

¹⁴*Queanbeyan Age* 26 April 1866

¹⁵*Ib.*, 16 November 1865

culprit was sent to gaol for eighteen months, but George Blofield also received three months hard labour for his savage attack on the intruder.¹⁶

In their traditional roles as money-lenders to the diggers, both resident storekeepers suffered, Veitch by being declared a bankrupt, and Margules by the threats of a digger's wife who vowed to stab him and then poison herself. Previously, at Brooks Creek, Margules had endured a worse crisis immediately before his transference to Mac's Reef by the action of a man who burnt down his store of saplings and calico with the full intention of roasting the proprietor alive inside. The other Mac's Reef storekeeper, Fraser, was canny enough to survive and recoup his losses.

By the time of arrival at Newington in May 1866 of the promised crusher (one which had long been working in the Goulburn district) a second hotel was under construction and a branch "Post Office Store" was being run up by Alexander Fraser of Upper Gundaroo in Dixon-street near the crusher, partly in response to earlier demands that Alexander Dyce or James Breen should be placed in control of much-needed post office. After 22 May when Miss Eirth of Gundaroo named the crusher "Pioneer", Newington throve for two months in a quiet way on the universal expectation of wealth awaiting its residents. A second crusher was installed near McEnally's selection but reports on the reef showed either that gold was not to be had there in payable quantities, or that the worn-out old battery was allowing grains to escape from its plates and blankets. Cartwright's shaft had reached a depth of eighty feet when the gold petered out as it had already done on the other claims, and in the feverish hunt for the lost leads precautions were neglected until the fateful culmination on 17 August 1866. Before the explosion which finalised operations at Mac's Reef late on that Friday afternoon there had already been two warnings, clearly enough indicating a dangerous neglect of safety precautions. In February Alexander Torrie, a Victorian miner, had his eyesight permanently impaired by an explosion of gunpowder and then, on the very morning of the critical day, Dennis Keeffe, a young man intending to leave the mine that night to return to his wife and family on their farm at the Burra, near Queanbeyan, was knocked unconscious by a premature explosion. On recovery he continued to work until about five o'clock that afternoon when a second explosion killed him instantly and mortally injured Charles Foster Loftas. William John McEnally was at the windlass above the shaft and immediately lowered a bucket which on its return had attached to it a slipper full of blood and grit, fastened there by Loftas as mute evidence of what had happened. The injured man was brought up and lingered throughout the night until his terrible injuries resulted in death the next morning.¹⁷

So complete was the failure of Mac's Reef that an old digger wrote that in an experience of fourteen years he had not encountered another instance where early promise gave such unfavorable result, and on his visiting Newington in November 1866 he found "a wholesale demolition of houses and huts, tents and gunyahs, churches and inns, and even not a 'wreck left behind' – nay, not a nestling place for the swallow or a foothold for the gloomy bat".¹⁸ That impression was underwritten by the experience of Bill Tully who just then found

¹⁶Ib., 22 March 1866

¹⁷'Mining in the Queanbeyan District, Past and Present', *Queanbeyan Observer*, 21 September 1897; also *Queanbeyan Age* 23 August 1866

¹⁸ *Queanbeyan Age* 29 November 1866

a man removing gold from his crushing machine at Newington; when he questioned the miscreant he found that he did not even know what the pebbles were and had thrown them away.¹⁹ Cartwright and his partners, already at the time of the double fatality negotiating for the formation of a limited liability company as a means of financing more extensive operations on the field, at once abandoned their workings and although the company was later formed it appears not to have reopened the prospectors' mine. Occasional attempts to revive Mac's Reef were made by syndicates working about Queanbeyan and Canberra, all without encouragement even when large finance was involved, for the "floating" gold in isolated thin veins was in reality a better hope for the fossicker than for the large companies whose machinery and bands of labourers spent more effort on crumbling useless rock than on the actual quartz.

Newington had already failed as a town when its population of diggers melted away to resume the search for gold elsewhere or to return to neglected farms from which they had been all too easily tempted by hopes of sudden prosperity. A few such as Tom Southwell, the teamster, whose normal occupations permitted it, remained in scattered houses on the reef; the Methodist chapel was removed and re-erected at the nearby village of Sutton and other structures made useful materials for additions to residences elsewhere like the slabs taken away by Charles masters for making extensions to his home at Brooks Creek.²⁰ The site of the township was forgotten and the name survived only in the 80- acre "Newington Farm" of William Tully and the general description "Newington" applied to William Marchall's 700 acres and the adjoining farmlets of old Charley Masters and Mrs. Isabella Hines (widow of the wheelwright, Edward Hines, who died in 1877).

The golden hopes of all mines died hard, as after some spasmodic attempts to revive Mac's Reef the formation of a joint-stock company with expected capital of £10,000 was announced in 1872 under the title of the Mac's Reef Gold-Mining Company. The shareholders in the ten-acre lease taken out by the new company were nearly all Sydney men, and they found a willing local director in J.J. Wright who undertook negotiations with George Campbell for the purchase of his engine and crusher lying idle since the collapse of the Duntroon diggings, but the share list could not be filled and the proposal was dropped. The few worthwhile discoveries made at the first opening of the reef, such as Tom North's vein "so resplendent with gold as to represent the brilliant display of a jeweller's shop",²¹ lured solitary diggers to continue their toil in spite of the failure of syndicate after syndicate, and in the year after the collapse of Wright's joint-stock company a ten-acre lease was obtained by William Richardson and Co., still with little profitable result. By 1880, when the Suburban Gold and Diamond Co. tried to cover its failure at Brooks Creek by crushing at Mac's Reef, the whole area was pitted and pocked with proofs of frustrated ambition. During the eighties as the first pinch of approaching drought and depression led farmers once more to dig into the hillside in expectation of finding a stream of gold, the last great stir occurred at the reef.

¹⁹ *Ib.*, 8 November 1866

²⁰ Mr Arthur Masters (PBS)

²¹ *Goulburn Herald* 11 November 1865

When in 1888 rumours spread of a revival at Mac's Reef the names mentioned were not those of the prospectors of twenty-five years earlier. John Cartwright was dead two years; "Mac" and Charley Masters were septuagenarians beyond the stage of practical mining, but Cartwright's sons, Thomas and James, together with Charles Masters jnr., were prominent members of the team rumoured to have hit upon signs of a reef at Dead Man's Creek about a mile from the original working and right beside the route of the later Federal Highway. Rumours ran strongest in Bungendore where, once report claimed, a large company had been formed²² while other stories told of speculators from Captain's Flat, then at its zenith, who had applied for mining leases totaling fifty acres which would effectively prevent any further small-scale prospecting. James and William Nugent, whose father had been the constable at Gundaroo many years before, went out from Queanbeyan in March to take a first-hand look at the prospecting at Dean Man's Creek but found nothing to encourage high hopes. That was a disappointment to James Nugent, a storekeeper always struggling against hard competition, who wryly admitted that there was no-one more in need of trade than himself. A similar predicament had been confessed only six months before by J.J. Wright who attempted to bolster his own failing business empire with a last useless fling at Mac's Reef.²³

William Nugent had prospected the whole district during the mid- sixties with John Cartwright and Francis Dunn, so the brothers' report that there was "nothing in it" was based on sound judgement. They found Thomas Cartwright working with a mate on the creek bank from where signs of a reef were thought to run back into a hill, while three hundred yards behind them James Cartwright and Charles Masters were working in a shallow shaft which yielded nothing beyond a little broken quartz.²⁴ As was to be expected, the hoped-for rush died upon publication of the report but a company was formed to investigate the area quietly. The Nugents were only too correct; an official report by the Mining Warden in 1890 stated that "the Mac's Reef Gold-Mining Company are still tunnelling into the hill, and are now in 490 feet. Four men are employed, and a tramway has been put down. No gold has yet been won."²⁵

Such pessimistic prospects would in normal times have deterred exploration, but the effect of the shearers' strike of 1891 and the economic depression which reached its peak two years later found response in the sensitivity of the unemployed workers to the slightest hope of making even a few pounds out of gold. So the nineties proved to be the second period of gold-rushes, as futile and heart-breaking at Gundaroo as the first. Old Mac died at Bungendore in 1893 and the next year his reef again made news when streams of men armed with picks and shovels began to alight at the Bungendore railway-station to walk out to Brooks Creek and Mac's Reef where dribbles of alluvial gold beckoned them. At One Tree Hill in particular hopes ran high, with eight or ten claims pegged out in August.²⁶ In October

²² *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 8 March 1888

²³ *Queanbeyan Age* 19 April 1887

²⁴ *Ib.*, 10 March 1888

²⁵ Edith M. Smith, *Notes on Prospecting*. P.3

²⁶ *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 16 August 1894

Cartwright's claim at Mac's Reef was reported sold for £250,²⁷ and the establishment of a battery and boarding-house quickly followed. In May 1895 Joseph Copeland's old mine at Diamond Hill was reopened with three shafts operating at depths of between 50 and 115 feet, and in the same year the whole area was included in the Bywong Goldfield during the last great goldrush on Gundaroo.

Official proclamation of the Gundaroo Goldfield, covering the area from Nelanglo to Mac's Reef, was made on 10 January 1873, after the end of the palmy days of Brooks Creek and Mac's Reef, and what was known as the Bywong Goldfield was thus technically only a part of the old Gundaroo field. It was named 'Bywong' because it comprised parts of the parish of Bywong and was, in the narrowest sense, the southern part of Clarke's "district of which Bywong Hill is the centre". North of the field lay the old Bywong sheep-station whose owner, P.J.B. Donnelly, had often helped prospecting parties with food and cash while giving them freedom to work his land if only they refrained from bringing dogs to pester his sheep. Nearby, at Woodbury, following the death of John Cartwright, the sons of the family continued to prospect in the vicinity, and close to Sutton, Alexander Johnston, contractor for building the Queanbeyan railway line, turned his interest to mining after completion of the contract. Johnston had capital to invest and installed a crushing machine under the superintendence of his manager, Joe Bedford, but the real prospectors of the Bywong field were James Cartwright, Joseph Sharp and George Robbing who took up a claim between Johnston's battery and Mac's Reef where Tom Cartwright was already working.²⁸ Reports of the prospectors' success attracted to the area the usual band of unemployed or hard-pressed labourers, one of whom, Thomas Alchin, moved across to Gundaroo from Jerrawa with his wife and children in 1894 after making the discovery that established common belief in the glowing prospects on Bywong.

Tom Alchin quickly fell in with J.F. Lowe, the Gundaroo schoolteacher, forming in July 1894 a syndicate which included Lowe and his brothers, Alan and Charles, and their step-father, Hector Murray Gordon. Two months afterwards Alchin hit upon a reef close to the prospectors' claim, so far richer than the others that from a depth of forty feet it returned more than 51 oz. from four tons sent for assay. News of Lowe and Alchin's success started the "rush" to Bywong – forty men on the field in November 1894, 250 in the following March, a peak of about 300 by mid-1895. The area first worked centred on the free selection of James Henry Millynn who quickly announced plans for subdivision of his land into fifty or sixty-acre allotments which were to be dedicated as a township.²⁹

Officialdom, always slow to act, recognised the crude concentration of huts and tents in December 1895 when Surveyor Goodrich laid out a village of Bywong (commonly called 'Bywong Reefs') with four streets – Burbong, Bungendore, Burra and Gundaroo. It was too late, in reality, to catch the quickly passing wave of population, for Bywong had declined to

²⁷ Ib. 4 October 1894

²⁸ A sketch map by J.E. Carne, showing the positions of the diggings was published in the Annual Report of the Mines Department of N.S.W. for 1895 and reproduced in Roland M. Hill, *Geology of the Geary's Cap-Sutton-Gundaroo Area, New South Wales* (Department of National Development, Canberra, 1969)

²⁹ *Queanbeyan Observer* 5 March 1895

“half a store”,³⁰ having reached its zenith in “two slab buildings bearing the inscription ‘General Store’, a brown-and-white tent with the words ‘Cheap Grocer’ roughly traced across it, half a score of windlasses studding the hilltop and indicating the shafts, one or two slab huts for miners’ dwellings and numerous tents presenting a weatherworn appearance”.³¹ During the uncertain interim two bakers and two butchers actually provided brief presumptive evidence of trade and Bill Sherd planned a public house to be known as the *Bywong Hotel*. It died quickly while still in the planning stage.

The keeper of half-a-store, Henry Hyles (commonly known as ‘Daddy’) stayed on in almost solitary testimony of fond but foolish hopes until his death in 1904, popular most of all for the stocks of lollies which he maintained for the considerable number of children in the locality, as well as for his continuance of the postal service first provided in the establishment of a receiving office under the charge of Thomas Earnshaw in November 1884. The children of Bywong Reefs possessed another amenity in addition to Daddy Hyles’s store after the opening of a public school, with John L. Gunnell as teacher, in October 1895, but education came typically low on the scale of priorities and when after three weeks the average attendance dropped below twenty the teacher would explain it naively only on the grounds that sickness was prevalent and most parents had not known that the school was about to open even though it was the only permanent building in the ‘township’.

One of the first uses approved for the Bywong School was the holding of an entertainment out of which the Progress Committee wished to augment the building fund of an imaginary Bywong School of Arts³² which actually received a small piece of land encroaching on the school ground in June 1896 as the site for a Mechanic’s Institute. By that time, nine months from its foundation, the Progress Committee was close to extinction and its most distinguished member, Dr R.J. Quinn, had resumed his uneasy medical practice in the Bungendore district. The public school continued for a good many years but in 1901 J.W. Vidler who succeeded Gunnell found in the immediate vicinity no signs of the township once envisaged and only three families – Dinters, Earnshaws and Shepherds.³³ The institution survived until 1909 when, on the retirement of the aged, able and erudite Aerthur Frederick Remington, it was closed.³⁴

Many of the mines received fanciful names “Victory”, “The Mystery”, “The New Year’s Gift”, Dinter’s “Coolgardie” - and the best known were “The Little Wonder” and “The Lone Hand”, both at the Mac’s Reef end of the field. The Little Wonder, on the old workings of 1865, after yielding encouraging results to its owners, Henry Pringle and James Ronaldson, petered out in production early in 1896 through lack of water during the drought which stopped so many workings. In due course it was sold to Darmody and Cartwright and not heard of again. The nearby Lone Hand was at least more aptly named, as its prospecting

³⁰ *Ib.*, 31 December 1895

³¹ *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 23 March 1895

³² H. Collier to D.J. Cooper, 2 October 1895 (AONSW P. 1796)

³³ J.W. Vidler, ‘Bywong School 1901-2905’ (MS)

³⁴ *Queanbeyan Age* 10 March 1908

was undertaken in hermit fashion by James R. Whyte before he took as partners Richard Butt and James Tully. Yielding an average of 1 oz. of gold to the ton, the Lone Hand was in 1897 almost the only profitable mine on the field and early in 1898 it was purchased by the brothers Thomas and Samuel Bingley in partnership with Lane and Rowley. The Bingleys' interest in the goldfield (like that of many others) was one of watchful opportunism for it offered to selectors another opening for obtaining an income beyond the diminishing returns from their land and when suspensions of the legal requirements of frequent working of claims could be obtained the gold-seekers would temporarily turn to other occupations. Under the leasing system applied on the field the warden, however, was not well disposed towards part-time miners and in September 1897 he refused suspension to William Dinter and Thomas and Samuel Bingley to allow them to go shearing even though the Bingleys protested that they could not otherwise finance their mine.³⁵ Thomas Bingley owned a threshing-machine which was able to keep him in seasonal work and while the interest in gold ran high his crushing machine, 'The Victoria Crushing Works', on Emu Creek near Creekborough, clattered and pounded by night and day to help him earn a living.

As time passed without any really spectacular discoveries, the depleted group of fossickers attempted to form companies to try the field by the more sophisticated methods made possible with outside capital, for capital was non-existent among those on the spot. The first new company was the Bungendore and Bywong Gold Mining Company, backed largely by Bungendore business men, but including two Bywong residents, Daddy Hyles and Henry Collier. This firm came into being late in 1895 with a resident manager, Edmund E. Hole, working several contiguous claims centred on "The Tunnel" claim at Mac's Reef originally prospected by James McCann Brady. Like so many other hardened fossickers Brady was the victim of heart disease which was exhibiting its terminal stages in dropsy while he worked in The Tunnel and from October 1895, two months before his death, he was obliged to employ William Branagan to keep the claim active. His 'sleeping partner', James McGinley chose that period to transfer his interest in the mine to another absentee, William Brooks, in whose interest Hole resorted to trickery, if Brady's version of an incident in October 1895 is correct. "Mr Hole came here on 18th Inst and asked me to write notice for machine site & took us away from work to try it. When we go to the fence he said I have to get a thing out of the Tunnel. But he wanted to stick a ... *Notice* up by the very essence of *False Pretence* Knowing well It was False".³⁶ The notice which Hole stuck up was Brooks's claim to the abandoned share of McGinley, a document which Brady labelled "Too Pseudo for Anything". Although Brady's death in Queanbeyan Hospital in January 1896 cleared the way for the operations of the company, no fortune was awaiting any shareholder, and after defaults in shares forced the collapse of the company in August 1896 Hole tried to continue operations on the claims with the patronage of the "Bywong Long Tunnel Goldmining Syndicate" without any further success.

The other large company on the field was the "Lowe & Alchin Central Gold Mining & Quartz Milling Co. (No Liability), Bywong", which was floated in July 1896 to provide the means of exploiting the hopeful finds of Tom Alchin. Proposing a capital of £4000 in £2 shares, the company never attained even one thousand shares in spite of a lavish programme

³⁵Bungendore Warden's Court, Complaint No. 8 21 July 1897 (AONSW 3248.3); also Goulburn Evening Penny Post 23 September 1897

³⁶J.M. Brady to Mining Registrar, Bungendore, 29 October 1895 (AONSW 3248.3)

of spending on machinery, buildings and water retention, and its manager, Henry Browne, a mining engineer, found good reason to eat the words of hope which he had spelled out to the original partners in inducing them to help form the company when he examined a load of their stone crushed by Bingley at Emu Creek in March 1896. "No blame can be attributed to the present style of working", he then wrote in the midst of a glowing report, "as at present the claimholders at Bywong are entirely in the hands of the holders of the crushing plants now available".³⁷ Tom Alchin's crusty old father, never noted for open-handedness or parental indulgence, signalled the first disillusionment even before the floating of the company, for after committing himself to the venture he then waited until his son visited him at Jerrawa and coolly informed him that he had no money for shares and the speculators could get along as best they liked without him.³⁸ Five calls on shareholders in seven months of operations reduced confidence in the company to nil; hopes of selling out to some better endowed syndicate failed; the dam burst, and even the manager was disappointed in his hope of escaping disaster by applying for the vacant post of Town Clerk at Yass. In a year the company was dead and the workings reverted to the fossicking of Tom Alchin. Pickings were won from time to time and as late as 1957 a quantity of 42 oz. of gold was obtained from the old mine, but by 1970 its sole memorials were a lantern and some rusty dredge buckets and spikes taken to their final home in the Queanbeyan Historical Museum.

Henry Browne's first report to Lowe and Alchin stressed one of the problems confronting the Bywong miners - the lack of their own crushing plants - and one of his first actions as manager was to build a dam. Lack of water was not so much the cause of the failure of the field as the reason for its inconsequentially long life which dragged on from freshet to freshet, allowing intermittent resummptions of activity. A minor official attempt to cope with lack of water was made in March 1896 with the reservation of three allotments as "Bywong Well" on the village site where from the commencement of the rush a little water had been obtained, but too little to be of real use. "If these were facts instead of fancies", wrote one of the miners at the end of 1895, "there would soon be an oasis round the well, and the children's faces and frocks would be like cherries and snowdrops, and the sound of the washing board would be heard in the land, the gentle shepherds would have clean moles and a bath on New Year's Day; and, above all, the nearest item to godliness might bring with it its neighbour, to the discomfiture of the allotment liar and the specimen fraud who expects you to handle a rock which he has polished with ennicotined saliva".³⁹

The problem of machinery received more effective attention not only in Tom Bingley's crusher, which was active at Emu Creek while water and quartz kept it in business, but also in a number of small batteries confined to particular workings, such as Alexander Johnston's and the Doughboy Hill crusher of James Seymour. One of Seymour's nearer neighbours was Arthur Cronk, proprietor of the "Hit-or-Miss" mine, and his son (who changed his name to Arthur Shepherd)⁴⁰ began to draw good returns from an abandoned

³⁷"H.B.M.E." to Low (sic) & party, 30 March 1896 (AONSW 3241)

³⁸ Thomas Alchin to Henry Browne, 19 June 1896 (AONSW 3241)

³⁹Queanbeyan Observer 31 December 1895

⁴⁰ Mr Patrick Matthews (PBS)

claim in 1902 by “dollying” it in very primitive style.⁴¹ For more than sixty years, until his death in 1964, he continued, the last of the Bywong miners, eking out a living from his mine close to where the Federal Highway began to speed travellers to Canberra across the graveyard of so many golden hopes. The Bywong post office continued to operate under that name but was moved some miles along the Bungendore-road to the Emu Flat residence of John Harriott (who married Mary, daughter of James and Catherine Schofield, pioneers of the area). A public school known as “Bywong” also existed near Emu Flat until about 1940. It was largely a compromise intended to remedy the failure of the Brooks Creek public school and the second Upper Gundaroo school which was opened at a site on the Bungendore road about 2½ miles south of the old school-church in 1893, and it also helped to draw the name Bywong far from the old sheep-station.

Closer to Gundaroo township, on Dairy Creek which feeds Brooks Creek at Esther Mead, an active goldfield was developed at the same time as Bywong, although with less spectacular hopes and correspondingly less doleful failure. There much of the early prospecting was done by Henry Byfield, an old employee of Styles and Massy,⁴² and about 1880 the Suburban Gold and Diamond Company explored and abandoned the area⁴³ In 1895 a “slight rush” produced the only payable effort, the “Who’d-a Thought it” mine of James Kershaw and his partners, one of whom, Thomas Byfield (son of the old prospector) was with him on 18 March 1899 when they struck a patch of gold which returned them almost £100.⁴⁴ Meanwhile other parties, including Hector Murray Gordon and the Lowes, moved onto the creek without success and Coleman gave up the battery which he had established in the first flush of enthusiasm, so that it was ultimately only Kershaw who profited from what was offering there. Tom Alchin was reported to have struck a rich reef at Dairy Creek in 1902⁴⁵ and in the following year there were further optimistic reports, but Kershaw’s battery, until it faltered and finally broke down, was kept operating only by the owner’s finds and the considerable parcels sent down for crushing by James and George Keir from their mine at Diamond Hill during 1903. In the early “rush” at Dairy Creek one of the more hopeful workings was the “Black Maria” reef and in 1906 as prospectors began to work it again rumours of a company being floated to give it exhaustive examination proved partially true when it was reopened as the “Oravida” mine in April, but its new-found life lasted only six months until the promoters decided that its prospects were nil.

The presence of open cuts, shafts and explosives on the goldfield led to the inevitable accidents. J.W. Vidler made the acquaintance at Bywong Reefs of an old Cornish miner, Nicholas Harrison, who had lost one of his hands in a premature explosion at Mac’s Reef⁴⁶ and in 1897 a similar accident with a detonator deprived James Berrigan of two fingers and

⁴¹Goulburn Evening Penny Post 19 June 1902

⁴²Ib., 15 August 1903

⁴³Edith M. Smith, *Notes on Prospecting*, p.4

⁴⁴*Queanbeyan Age*, 22 March 1899

⁴⁵*Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 17 May 1902

⁴⁶J.W. Vidler, op. cit.

the top of his thumb; discharged from Queanbeyan Hospital and recovering, he was then thrown from his horse at Bywong. A Dairy Creek miner, Samuel Goldspink, was injured in 1902 while going home from his work, and even as late as 1909 when most enthusiasm was dead one of the Gallagher boys from Bywong Reefs suffered a back injury by falling twenty feet from a ladder when trying to work an old shaft. At about that time also it was believed that the sudden disappearance of William Branagan was due to foul play but investigations by the police disclosed that in a friendless condition he had simply packed up and moved his residence in the belief that nobody would be interested in his whereabouts.⁴⁷

Apart from the district around Bywong Hill, the only other spot in the Gundaroo region to be worked seriously for gold was Nanima where on 27 August 1872 a field was proclaimed in the rough country north of the sheep station, comprising most of the parish of Toual and reaching its approximate limits at Milford and Elizabeth Fields. Here once again the desperation of the late 1890s led to the discovery of a payable but limited shoot which tapered off to nothing during 1899. The most prominent feature connecting the Nanima workings was Murrumbateman Creek, commonly styled Nanama Creek in that area, and the goldfield thus became known as 'Nanama Creek' in order to differentiate it from the homestead some miles away. At the time of proclamation the field boasted four auriferous reefs, the Cosmopolitan (Greenwood and party), Humbug (Dooley and party), Little Wonder (J. Coils and party) and Enterprise (Johns and party),⁴⁸ but success was elusive. Robert Percy Greenwood, the very first of the gold-getters of 1872, at the outset aglow with hopes of wealth not only from Gundaroo but from other interests at Hill End as well, was in due course reduced to taking unprofitable road contracts while running himself into irretrievable debt to James Ramsay, the Nanima squatter, in efforts to meet the calls on his mining shares.⁴⁹ A similar fate befel Fred Samon, later twice Mayor of Yass, who came to the district as a bullock driver to James Collison. His employer many years later recalled that "He came to me to borrow £12. He had tangled up in Nanima shares and the calls were being made, and he couldn't get out. That was the curse of the leases in a mining area. If they had claims the men could have worked them and paid their way. There is gold at Nanima, alluvial gold, but it can't be worked satisfactorily by the lease system".⁵⁰

At Nanama Creek, as at Brooks Creek, the best long-term results were obtained by a handful of hardworking free-selectors, literally enslaved to the land which they were trying to pay off and panning for gold in the creek in whatever spare moments they had. It was very much a family concern, for nearly all the selector-fossickers were sons or sons-in-law of Richard Butt or of his widow's second husband, England, after whom England's Creek in that vicinity is named. At Kirkdale, about 2½ miles from the Butt family complex, there was a slab store and post office close to a battery removed from Bywong and kept in tenuous business by Robert Young, formerly manager of the Little Wonder mine at Bywong during 1900 and 1901. Ten years later an attempt was made at Kirkdale by D. Roberts to trace a

⁴⁷ Mrs Ada Cooper (PBS)

⁴⁸ *Goulburn Herald* 14 September 1872

⁴⁹ Bankruptcy Administration file, Robert Percy Greenwood, 20 February 1877. No. 13222, Register 9 (AONSW)

⁵⁰ Yass Evening Tribune 27 November 1919

continuation of the rich shoot discovered in August 1897 by the partnership of Butt and Croker, but no trace of gold could be found.⁵¹ One of Richard Butt's daughters, Elizabeth, married John Hall, and their eldest son, William, proved the gold-bearing capacity of the creek banks by washing enough metal for the making of two rings - but only at the expense of so many hours of work as to make it an uneconomic proposition.⁵²

Of the few who made great fortunes in Gundaroo there was none who became wealthy on the strength of its mineral resources, in spite of the predictions of Rev. W.B. Clarke and the optimism of many who tried their luck on the diggings. It is not without its significance that the periods of greatest mining activity in the area - the mid-sixties and mid-nineties - were also periods of droughts and crop failures, for there was no impulse operating more strongly on the farmer than the desire to own and cultivate his own land, and the satisfaction of farming was not worth forsaking while the ground was capable of giving some return in crops. Whatever great wealth may lie hidden beneath the pastures, it has yet to be discovered, and the likelihood of men ignoring the lesson of the past in order to search again for gold in Gundaroo is slight indeed.

⁵¹Edith M. Smith, *Notes on Prospecting*, p.5

⁵²Mrs Elsie Thompson (PBS)