

## Eureka: The Birthplace of the Australian Spirit.

A glossy brochure with the gold stars of the Southern Cross, proclaims Ballarat ' Birthplace of the Australian Spirit", a mighty big claim!

Ballarat is 110 kilometres N NW of Melbourne and in 1854, on the fledgling goldfields, it became the site of the famous Eureka Uprising.

To set the scene; Ballarat, aboriginal for 'pleasant resting place' and originally home to the Watharong people. When you drive in from the west, just over Clarke's hill, two Mountains loom on the horizon; like warriors guarding the town. Mt Warrenheip and Mt Buninyong. Warrenheip , meaning covered like emu feathers, very aptly named for its skirt of gum trees and Buninyong from a phrase Bowang Yowang meaning man with bended knee. When you drive in from the south you can understand why the roaming nation labeled the scrunched up leg mountains, Buninyong.

A sense of irony comes through in the naming of Ballarat's jewel lake and surrounding suburbs, Wendouree . According to Legend when -----Yuille arrived in the district in 1837 he claimed the area as his own. Pre-lake it was known as Yuille's swamp. One day he met with Watharong people travelling through their lands. 'And what do you call this place' he enquired. The 'elder' woman of the tribe stood forward and indicated "go away, go away 'with her hands ,saying 'Wendouree, wendouree'. 'Go away' is putting it very politely.

When the cry of gold rang out in August 1851 people flocked to the district. Why in only a few weeks over two thousand people had arrived on the diggings and a tent city sprang up overnight, like mushrooms after a heavy rain. There were Germans, Americans, Chinese and strong contingent of Irish. By 1854 'conditions on the goldfields were crowded and the miners led a hard life. Firewood and drinking water were in short supply, disease was commonplace and the miners paid a high price for food, clothing and mining equipment.'

The pastoral landscape of the early diggings changed dramatically noted historian W.B. Withers 'the green banks of the Yarrowee were lined with tubs and cradles, its clear waters were changed to liquid yellow... and its banks grew to be long shoals of tailings...in a few weeks the green slopes where the prospectors found the gold... changed...to the appearance of a fresh and rudely made burial ground'

Throw into this harsh melting pot, crippling mining taxes on the government's 'crown land' and sparks started to fly.

On the 17th October 1854 ... an angry mob rioted and set fire to James Bentley's Hotel as a sign of outrage at the corrupt government. The arrival on the goldfields of more Government troops and further provocative licence hunts incensed the miners.

'On the 29th November 1854 a 'monster meeting' of some 12 000 Ballarat residents took place at Bakery Hill. Hastily devised as a symbol of resistance, the Eureka flag was flown for the first time at the meeting.'

The colourful Raffello Carboni in his published account of the Eureka uprising (R.Carboni, The Eureka Stockade, Melbourne , 1855) wrote of the flag; 'There is no flag in Europe or in

the civilised world half so beautiful... the flag is silk, blue ground, with a large silver cross; no device or arms, but all exceedingly chaste and natural.'

The next day legendary Irishman Peter Lalor emerged as a natural leader and beneath the flag he rallied the crowd to swear allegiance. 'We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties'

On the 1st of December the miner's started to erect the stockade on the Eureka lead up on the Melbourne road. The miners said, '...they enclosed a flat bit of ground for drilling.'

The government said: '...they built a defensive camp.'

Either way in the wee hours of the 3rd December 1854 a reinforcement of red coats descended on 150 tired and weary miners. They were under the misapprehension that no one would attack on the Lord's day. Shots rang out over the unsuspecting miners and in the ensuing battle over thirty were to die. Martial Law was imposed immediately and the riotous nature of the crowd was subdued.

In it's aftermath a 'shocked silence settled over Ballarat as bodies were identified and buried and reward notices were posted for familiar rebel leader's names'. British historian Paul Johnson referred to it as a picturesque but trivial episode, however Australian historian Weston Bate sees it differently. 'Eureka ...a small rebellion about a large principle; the right of people to protest against Government action that infringes basic rights and liberties' 'A number of important social changes and political improvements arose out of the events at Eureka. The abolition of the oppressive licence fee resulted in greater freedom and democracy for the diggers. The right to vote for political representatives was introduced and Australia's political system was strongly influenced by the demands of the Ballarat Reform League.'

But more than that Eureka became a symbol that represents man's fight for freedom, it has been likened to England and her Magna Carter and America and her Declaration of Independence. Eureka and her flag continue to be commemorated in books, songs, films, theatre poetry and art.

Ballarat is proud of it's history and many links to this period surround you as you wander the streets of Ballarat. You can walk the Eureka Trail starting at the Post office, former site of the Government Camp, past Bakery Hill where that first meeting took place and where the flag still flies proudly (but also boasts one of the largest McDonalds you've ever seen). Towards the gully formed by the Yarrowee Creek and onto to the contentious sites of the Eureka Stockade, actually the two choices are only a long stone's throw apart. One site boasts 'The Eureka Soldiers' Memorial' erected in March 1856.

The other the Eureka Stockade Centre opened in 1998, the 'realisation of Ballarat's long held dream of a Eureka Monument of national significance that will suitably enshrine Eureka as part of the national heritage.' And it is fantastic. Its modern design embodies many aspects of the famous rebellion. It is built into the ground, then allows 'the visitor to travel up towards the light of the commemorative lawn.' like so many miners would have emerged from the dark. The buildings 'crowning glory' a mast with sails the size of two tennis courts. These sails are a replica of the Eureka Flag and symbolise the arrival of many migrants by ship to

Port Phillip during the goldrush era of the 1850's. 'Deeply symbolic on a 'sacred' site it is a moving monument to a defining moment in Australian history.

Inside the magic continues, in the interpretative centre, 'which evokes the action that occurred on the site,....not a historic reconstruction.' A creek like channel with river stones runs through the entrance, you cross it to enter the Exhibition where state of the-art multi-media technology tell the story leading up to and the events of December 1854 and huge characters of Lawlor and others in another room loom larger than life The contemplation space is almost Buddhist with its minimalist approach, running water and artistic interpretive flag and many a lively debate has been re-created in the Debating Hall .

Onto another important Eureka Site, the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery where the remains of the original flag are carefully and proudly housed along with many other paintings and artwork. Our ex-Premier Jeff Kennett wondered out loud about moving the flag to the new centre but he was howled down. 'The Ballarat Fine Art Gallery has housed the Eureka Flag since November 1895, when the Gallery's Founder and President, James Oddie, received it from the widow of John King, a trooper who took part in the attack on the Eureka Stockade'.

When they restored the flag in 1973 they found it to be made of fine woolen mohair fabric, the 'silky' sheen commented on by Carboni. The stars were constructed of a transparent 'white petticoat' lawn but little is known of the makers of the flag.

'Today the flag is viewed by many as a national icon' and it is often taken up as a symbol of rebellion.'

'With its combination of courage, determination and mateship, the Eureka story is a short but unforgettable chapter in the nation's history.'

The birthplace of the Australian Spirit?

There is no doubt that Ballarat and the Eureka uprising were the birthplace of the Australian Democratic spirit ,our civilian forebears raged against Government corruptness and inequality, a small battle but a big principle But as the old legend states;

"When the white-fella arrived in the district and started tearing down the trees for the mines and ripping out the gold they must have disturbed the resting dreamtime spirits. For all its tales of wealth and beauty there is still many a sad tale to tell about Ballarat.