

A History of Young

Young (including Murringo, Wombat and Wallendbeen) Interesting goldmining town now the centre of a substantial cherry industry Young is situated on undulating terrain in a valley surrounded by a circle of low hills 376 km west of Sydney via the Hume Freeway and 432 metres above sea-level. It is 71 km south-west of Cowra and 47 km north-east of Cootamundra. Young is the commercial centre of an agriculturally diverse district famous for its cherries, prunes and other stone fruits, although berries, grapes, pigs, sheep, wheat, wool, cattle, oats, barley, eggs, mining, steel fabrication and a pipeline authority are all sources of local employment and income. The population is approximately 11000

Prior to white settlement the area was occupied by the Burrowmunditory tribe. European exploration of the interior occurred along the Lachlan River to the north and the Murrumbidgee to the south but the first European to investigate the site of Young was a pastoralist by the name of James White who, in 1826, was directed, by the local Aborigines, to Burrangong Creek. There he established the Burrangong station at a time when it was beyond the declared limits of settlement and so beyond the realm of government protection.

White soon brought other family members to the property which he stocked with cattle, sheep, pigs and horses. A sheltered flat on the station was used by pregnant ewes and so became known as Lambing Flat. Gold was discovered here in 1860 by White's nephew and 'Alexander the Yankee' at what is now the southern end of Main St. The discovery was published in the Sydney Morning Herald on August 4 causing a major rush to Lambing Flat. Within 12 months, as the diggings spread out, it is estimated that there were 20 000 on the fields, of which 2000 were thought to be Chinese.

Violence, theft, armed robbery and general lawlessness developed as the goldfield was not officially proclaimed until November. This meant no law enforcement infrastructure, no gold escort and no security of possession in a claim. Liquor shanties proliferated, along with the usual array of businesses - butchers, bakers, blacksmiths, storekeepers. Main Street began to emerge at this time, populated first with canvas stores then bark shanties which were gradually succeeded by timber structures.

On November 13, 1860, a group of Europeans banded together, drove off 500 Chinese prospectors and destroyed their tents. Consequently, on November 27, a Gold Commissioner and three mounted troopers were appointed although their lack of numbers and their distance from the field rendered them ineffective.

In December, a vigilante group, to the accompaniment of a musical band, took it upon themselves to burn down some disreputable grog shanties and pour away the liquor which was allegedly drugged. They also drove off some 50 Chinese. Some accounts suggest they scalped two men and cut off the ears of others. Police reinforcements arrived but by that time order again prevailed and no evidence of the assault was found.

However, on January 25, Europeans, fuelled by criticisms about the way the Chinese managed scarce water resources, gathered together, drove off more Chinese and threatened to destroy the police barracks if the troopers interfered. Reinforcements were sent for, bringing the number of law enforcement officers to 30.

Nonetheless, European miners rallied two days later and, ignoring police exhortations, drove off hundreds more Chinese (some accounts claim the number to be several thousand). They stole and destroyed Chinese property, assaulted the miners and cut off their pigtails. When 11 perpetrators were arrested, 4000 miners gathered and demanded their release. Disorder prevailed throughout the night. The men were taken to court the next morning but the evidence of the Chinese was deemed unsatisfactory and the accused men were released with a caution. In the ensuing weeks assaults upon the Chinese and their property continued. All Chinese servants were dismissed, mining ceased and a general state of disorder continued.

Captain Wilkie, the commander of the 12th Regiment, died on February 1 when he fell from his horse during a fit. His funeral procession was deemed spectacular and his widow travelled to England to raise funds for a proper Anglican Church to be erected in his memory (the memorial tablets still decorate the walls of the present Anglican church).

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At this time a Miners' Protective League was formed with the objectives of expelling the Chinese, repealing gold duties, obtaining parliamentary representation and police protection of body and industry, unlocking public lands, and promulgating Christianity throughout the mining districts. The government's concern at these events became apparent when the state premier, Charles Cowper, visited the field to placate the miners. Straddling the fence quite neatly he professed sympathy with their grievances against the Chinese and claimed he was in favour of restriction but asserted that he was powerless to stop them entering the country (due to a British treaty with the Chinese government) and affirmed that the persons and property of the Chinese could not be harmed. At the same time he refused to meet the miners' leaders or hear their address.

Then, on March 11, at least 150 troops with three 12-pounder field guns arrived, setting up fortifications at the corner of Campbell and Berthong Sts. However, they soon became very friendly with the miners and the Chinese were restricted to Blackguard Gully. Meanwhile, a Gold Fields Bill, intended to separate the warring factions, lapsed when Parliament was prorogued.

On May 24, two days after a violent confrontation at Native Dog Creek goldfield, the troops departed, against the advice of the gold commissioner. A rumour soon spread that 1500 Chinese had landed at Sydney, bound for the Lambing Flat area. Consequently another 'roll-up' was called on June 30 which culminated in the greatest riot of all. 3000 Europeans, armed with pick-handles, bludgeons and whips, assembled and, sporting British, Irish and American flags, they marched to the Chinese encampments to the sound of a brass band. Again, pigtailed were cut off, property smashed and huge bonfires consumed Chinese clothing, tents and furniture. At least one European man was killed and others were wounded. It seems unclear how many, if any, Chinese died, though there seem to have been no reported fatalities. Subsequently several men were arrested and on July 14 about 1000 miners laid siege to the gaol in a rescue attempt. The Riot Act was read near what is now Carrington Park and shots were exchanged, in which one miner was killed. That night the police and magistrates released the prisoners, packed up their valuables and left for Yass. The courthouse and police camp were burned down in the evening.

The leaders of the Miners' Protective League went to Sydney to have their grievances heard but one was arrested at Goulburn and the Governor refused to see the others. When a regiment of troops arrived with a howitzer on July 31, another five men were arrested. The miners raised 400 pounds for a defence fund and the trial was held at Goulburn at the end of September. All were acquitted due to a perceived lack of evidence except one man who received two years in prison. The trial judge argued that although the Chinese were 'undesirable' they took the gold, not from British subjects, but from the ground where it would remain but for their exertions.

The miners celebrated and the major upshot of the riots was, ironically, the passage, in November, of the Chinese Immigration Restriction Act - the first legislative salvo of the White Australia Policy.

One of the miners' leaders, William Spicer, an active opponent of violence, was later found at Forbes and sentenced to two years in prison, perhaps for want of a scapegoat from among the mining leadership. He later became a member of parliament.

Back at the fields, the Chinese were restricted to designated fields by government decree. They were consistently fined for working beyond their bounds while further assaults on the Chinese went unpunished as European juries proved unwilling to convict the assailants.

It has been argued that the general tone of lawlessness (produced by an initial absence of authority and then by the government's weak handling of the riots) encouraged the emergence of bushranging in the area after a general absence of such activities in NSW during the 1850s. One notorious figure was Frank Gardiner who set up a butchering business at Lambing Flat in 1860 with a man named Fogg. Gardiner allegedly took to stealing the cattle to supply the business.

After a brawl he was forced to leave town and he subsequently took to bailing up passers-by on the Cowra Road. It is also claimed that, after the first race meeting at Lambing Flat in 1861, he stole the winning horse.

Two other men with connections to Lambing Flat were the now infamous bushrangers Ben Hall and Johnny Gilbert who became Gardiner's closest associates. Working a large area, which

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included the Lambing Flat diggings, the 'gang' (which included John Vane, Michael Burke and John O'Meally) committed a profusion of robberies.

In 1863 O'Meally and Burke were shot dead, Vane surrendered and was imprisoned and Gardiner fled the state with Ben Hall's sister-in-law, Kitty Brown. Hall then became the de facto leader of the 'gang' which now consisted essentially of Hall, Gilbert and John Vane. Both of the former were killed in 1865. Dunn fled but was caught and hanged in 1866. Another noted bushranger, Frank Cotterell (alias Blue Cap), was captured by the Young police and appeared at Young police court in 1867 where he was committed to stand trial.

The annual gold supply carried out by escort from Young peaked in 1862 at nearly 3500 kg but it declined rapidly thereafter - to 235 kg in 1868 and 29 kg in 1876. By that time the number of miners was down to 400. In fact, they began to drift away as early as 1862 in search of better pickings at Forbes. The soldiers left in July of that year and Lambing Flat itself was worked out by 1864.

The Chinese were forced out to Wombat, 20 km south, where a ploughed line separated them from the Europeans. Local businessmen were feeling the effect of a declining population and wanted the Chinese readmitted to the business district but the European miners resisted.

As alluvial gold declined, attempts were made to establish quartz reef mining but returns were discouraging. Sluicing was carried out in the 1880s and 1890s and dredging from 1900 to 1903.

The Chinese had disappeared by the turn of the century and only about 20 miners remained by 1910 producing less than 3 kg of gold annually. In all 11 280 kg were shipped out by escort between 1861 and 1876. From 1876 and 1910 the area yielded only another 1400 kg.

Amidst all of this the emerging township was surveyed in March 1861. The first allotments went on sale in May and officials named the settlement 'Young' after the governor of NSW, although many continued to call it 'Lambing Flat' and 'Burrangong' until the end of the century. Young was not officially gazetted until 1869.

The first hotel proper opened in December 1860 and a post office, school, bank, newspaper, Anglican Church and Catholic Church were established the following year. In 1862, the first hospital was built and a new courthouse replaced the one burned down in the riots. Shop building shifted to Boorowa St in 1862 - the year the telegraph line arrived. A Wesleyan Church was completed in 1866, followed by buildings for the Presbyterians and Primitive Methodists. In most cases there was a steady upgrade from makeshift premises to timber to brick.

The Robertson Land Act of 1861 opened the countryside up to small landowners and, as mining declined in the area, farming began to emerge. Wheat, maize, barley and oats were cultivated from the 1860s and fruit-growing began to emerge as a major industry in the 1890s, although the cherries, for which the town is now famed, were first cultivated in 1878.

Local industries emerged such as a sawmill in 1865, a large flour mill in 1866, a brewery in 1877, a tannery and boot factory in the 1880s and a soap factory and brickworks. A meat chilling works opened in 1893 and a butter factory in 1894.

Local government was established in 1883 and in 1889 Young became the first town outside the capital cities to install electricity for the supply of streets and homes. When the railway line arrived in 1885, it greatly enhanced local agriculture by facilitating market access. Cherries in particular took off, capturing the Sydney market and fruit cultivation in general boomed. By 1923 Young reputedly had the world's two largest cherry orchards.

Tourist Information

Young Tourist Office Tourist

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