

CHIMNEYS PROTRUDING FROM THE HILLSIDES SHOW THAT THE MINERS OF WHITE CLIFFS DUG OUT THEIR HOMES BESIDES GOUGING FOR OPALS.

WHITE CLIFFS—a place of dreams

OLD-TIMERS AND GHOSTS HAUNT A DYING OPAL TOWN

By PETER H. N. D'ABBS



In the boom years at the turn of the century when this picture was taken the diggers of White Cliffs toiled under terrible conditions of heat and discomfort, producing opals worth millions.

LATE in 1889 four kangaroo hunters found some beautiful fragments of stone about 65 miles from Wilcannia in Western New South Wales, but they had no idea of their value.

Yet their find was to lead to the founding of a town which became world-famous, which glittered with wealth and throbbed with excitement for a quarter of a century, then sank into near-oblivion. Its name is White Cliffs.

ALL Australians have heard of White Cliffs and all know that a fortune in opals was won there. Yet probably not one person in a thousand knows the origin of its curious name—for it is a long way from what most people would call a cliff. It takes its name from three outcrops of white stone near the town.

It was in December, 1889,

that the four kangaroo shooters—Alf Richardson, Will Clouston, Charlie Turner and George Hooley—found the stones which aroused enough interest for them to take samples to show to the mining registrar at Wilcannia.

By a strange chance, another Charlie Turner (not the roo shooter) had also sent a sample of the same lovely stone to a South Australian called Tully Wollaston, who fathered the opal industry in Australia.

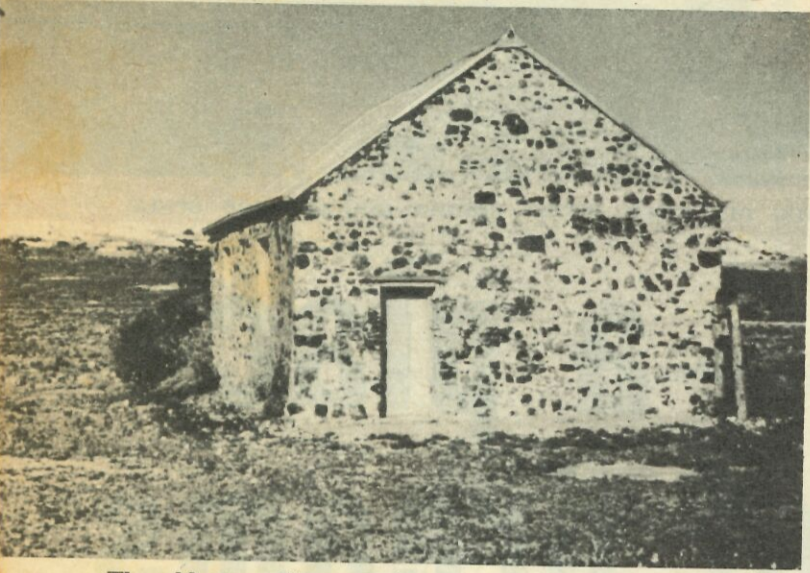
Wollaston knew exactly what it was that had been sent to him. He hastened by coach and buckboard to the lonely camp of the kangaroo shooters and there they showed him some stones they had found in a shallow seam. They knew nothing about their value and could not put a price on them.

Wollaston decided to offer the men £150 for their stones, but he had only £140 with him. He intended to make up the



Even visitors to the opal diggings often came back with specimens such as those displayed at left and experienced gougers unearthed glittering prizes like the massive example seen above.

White Cliffs began to die when the Germans became enemies overnight



The old stone Freemason's hall, now the parish church, was one of the few buildings erected with an eye to permanence.



White Cliffs' sole link with the outside world was the Cobb's coach (often drawn by camels) running from Wilcannia.

other £10 later. But by the time he had offered the £140 in cash, the men practically grabbed it from him and called it a deal. They then told him he could have had the whole lot for £10 as far as they were concerned.

Wollaston went to London and virtually created there the market for Australian opals (the Hungarian mines having closed 30 years earlier). So here was already demand for the White Cliffs output when the big boom came. Germany later became the biggest buying country.

Of the four kangaroo shooters who sold Wollaston the opals, at least one, Alf Richardson, helped to pioneer White Cliffs. His grave is in the neglected cemetery of the near-ghost town, and his name is still legible on the headstone.

DIGGERS and buyers swarmed to White Cliffs in the 1890s and in the early days some of the buyers were intent on fleecing the diggers. One buyer even conceived of (to him) highly profitable idea of getting the diggers to sell him all the stones they found for a flat return of £300 a month.

Wollaston, who arrived on the field at that moment, paid £3,000 for the stones then offering, including £150 for one stone. So the snide idea of getting the entire output for £300 a month failed.

In the 10 years from 1891

to 1901, White Cliffs produced enormous wealth, in terms of today's money.

On June 4, 1894, it was officially proclaimed a village. At that time, 700 miners were toiling on the field, under terrible conditions of heat and discomfort. Also in the village were the miners' families, buyers, tradesmen and the usual hangers-on. The total population of "the Cliffs" as the town was called, was more than 5,000.

As the field itself covered little more than a square mile the town was convenient as mining towns go. Contact with the outside world was solely by coach running from Wilcannia, and all water, except the few showers of rain, had to be brought from the Dar-

ling River. On the outskirts of the town of tents, bark huts and temporary habitations covered two square miles.

In 1902—the peak year of production—White Cliffs opals sold for £140,000 and the total value of the disclosed output would be around £2 million.

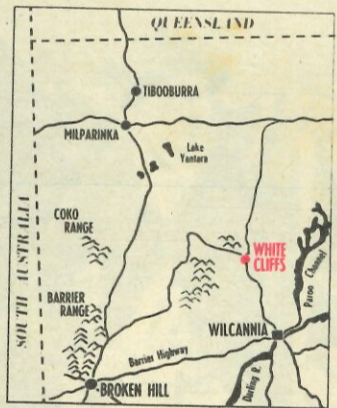
The dusty streets were blazing hot by day and lit by acetylene gas at night. The place was thronged with men of many races—Chinese, Assyrians, Hindus, Germans, Afghans, English and others.

It had a prison, post-office, six hotels, two clubs, innumerable eating houses and 12 stores. A Salvation Army band received excellent support from cashed-up diggers, who liked the tunes. But already the zenith had passed.

About 100 miles to the north the black opal had been unearthed for the first time—a thing of wondrous beauty and high price. The exodus began.

Then, with the coming of World War I in 1914, White Cliffs received what was almost its death blow, for the Germans had become by far the biggest buyers. They had become enemies overnight and the market had vanished.

Today, where once 5,000 swaggered and laughed and fought and made money, 35 people doze. All that remains is a collection of buildings, mostly dilapidated.



White Cliffs is a sleepy semi-ghost town in western N.S.W. (see map above). Most of its mines (below) are abandoned.



Hectic Days At White Cliffs

Riots And Robbery In Opal Field Boom

In this Real Life Story, "Wanderer" tells of his hectic experiences at White Cliffs, when opal was first discovered there. Combats between the "Spiders" and residents took place, and there was a remarkable opal theft as well.

I was overseer on Tarella station, situated 12 miles from White Cliffs, long before opal was discovered there by Hooley, Turner, and two brothers named Richardson. These men were kangarooing, and by mere chance pitched their camp close to the site of the first rich discovery, which they kept secret for many months. Race-horses were trained at the camp, four-horse teams driven to Wilcannia, a distance of 50 miles, and periodical trips were made to Melbourne before the discovery was known to the public. My first trip to the field was on New Year's Day, 1892, when about 20 people were there. They were reticent regarding the news of the discovery. From that time the population increased by leaps and bounds. Hotels, stores, and private residences were erected, and the town, like all mining towns, grew with mushroom rapidity.

Leaseholders of mining areas, having to comply with labor conditions, employed tributors at 75 per cent. of the value of the opal won by them. The opal was sealed in packets and deposited daily in the leaseholder's safe until the arrival of a buyer. At times it meant months of waiting for cash to liquidate their liability to storekeepers. The value of opal fluctuated. At times it was practically valueless, but at others the price would soar to £40 an ounce. Johnston's, the first hotel, did a roaring trade. A jockey, having swallowed 12 pints of beer without leaving the bar, raised himself on tiptoe to look over the counter and indignantly demanded the proprietor, whose back was turned, for a moment to serve him at once, declaring he was too dry to spit.

The second hotel was The Royal, owned and run by Jack Burgess.

Shortly after the opening a riot occurred between "Spiders," who had congregated for an approaching race meeting, and residents of the town. The leader of the "Spiders," "Stumpy," had arranged with his confederates to paint the town red on the following Sunday morning.

Stumpy opened the battle by seizing a chair in the bar of the Royal Hotel, breaking off a leg with which he swept the bottles and glassware off the shelves and counters.

News of the proposed attack having leaked out, the residents, laying in wait, joined in a fierce battle in the bar. Not finding sufficient scope for their energy the combatants adjourned to the street.

The Spiders, finding themselves outnumbered, and getting the worst of it, ran in all directions. "Stumpy" was chased by Jack Burgess, and was tripped and fell flat on the road. He finally hid under the billiard room of Johnston's Hotel, which was raised on blacks some 18 inches above the surrounding level.

Here he defended himself with gibbers until the arrival of the police, who had been on duty at the Kandy race meeting. He and his mates were hunted out of town. The town was indeed painted red, but only with the gore of the attacking party.

Soon after the riot there was an opal robbery from the claims of the discoverers. One of the tributors, disregarding the rule of meum et teum appropriated the best of the opal won by him, instead of handing it to the leaseholder, as customary.

This tributor decided to take a holiday, boarded the coach bound for

Real Life Stories

Wilcannia bent on having a good time. Meanwhile the leaseholders not having received the quantity of opal expected from him, informed the police and he was searched at a wayside inn and a valuable parcel of opal, of which he could not give a satisfactory account, was found on him.

He was arrested and locked up in Wilcannia gaol, committed for trial, and allowed out on bail. Walking along the street he espied a peculiar piece of opal exhibited in a jeweller's shop window which he recognised as being a portion of the contents of the stolen parcel. He informed the police, who examined the parcel and found one piece which exactly dovetailed into the piece exhibited in the jeweller's window. This was conclusive evidence, and the arresting constable was charged with robbery.

After arresting the tributor and getting the parcel, he helped himself to the contents and handed the balance to the inspector of police. The piece stolen by the constable with given to a friend who arranged with the jeweller to exhibit it in his window. Both the tributor and constable got heavy sentences.

It was rumored that the parcel was again stolen from the courthouse safe, but this I cannot vouch for. Anyway there were characters

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A Bushman Writes Of "Mirage" Land

By ARTHUR J. REES

LONDON, February 5.

THE house of Harrap will publish this month a valuable contribution upon the inexhaustible theme of Central Australia. This is "Hard Liberty: A Record of Experience," written by Fred Blakeley and prepared for publication by Muriel V. Morley.

The work differs from recent publications of the kind by not coming from the pen of a globe-trotter, distinguished or otherwise, or a practised journalist or writer. It is the work of a bushman, of Australian birth, who has had a lifelong acquaintance with the country he writes about, who has concentrated upon his environment, rather than literary style, and has made an excellent book.

The value of most books about Australia is a thing easy to assess, but an estimate of the permanent worth of this writer's contribution to the literature of his native land is harder to come by. It is the effort of a man apparently unaccustomed to the use of the pen, but who, in spite of that — or perhaps because of it — has created a picture of the Australian Interior which stands out as an epic of it for English and Australian readers.

Mr Blakeley hungers and thirsts for the bush, for its beauty and spiritual freedom, and has set it in his book in a frame of golden Australian sunshine, with a touch of mysticism. He calls it Mirage Land.

"HARD LIBERTY" tells the story of a push-bicycle trek made by the author and two companions from White Cliffs to Port Darwin through Central Australia and the Northern Territory in 1908, accompanied by an animal called Jethro, more dingo than dog, a killer, of which many strange tales are told.

The three young men had been mining at a new opal-field, "the Bunker," ten miles from White Cliffs, and the author gives an account of opal-mining in those days, describing it as a risky game. "Half the men who went to make their fortune did not earn their tucker, and were obliged to go upon the track carrying their swag."

The Northern Territory was much discussed on the fields, for, as the writer says, that big open space was a magnet to these wanderers, and, in his own case, Darwin attracted him particularly. Then he and two brothers, Jim and Dick O'Neill, began to consider how to get there, and, after discussing various possibilities, decided to make the journey of 2200 miles on their bicycles.

The majority of the miners thought them mad to tackle such a trip in this fashion, and warned them that they hadn't got a chance. But they were not to be deterred, and left the Bunker for White Cliffs on June 5, 1908.

White Cliffs gave them a great send off, and next morning, at daybreak, their Odyssey began.

Adventure and color came to them almost at the outset. They made Yancannia Station, forty-five miles to the north, on the first day, and found along the road what the author describes as something "unique in my experience of roadside pubs." It was the Yancannia Hotel, surrounded by its own cemetery! "If there is such another I should like to hear about it," the writer comments. The hotel was subsequently pulled down.

The book is not only a testament to a most wonderful journey, beset by accidents and occasional mishaps met with true Australian cheerfulness and fatalism, but throws new light upon life and conditions of the interior, which apparently have not changed appreciably since the journey was undertaken. To fight droughts in Australia, more must be learnt about the conditions governing them, the writer says, and it is his belief that Central Australia is the place to learn. It is here, he adds, that drought and erosion problems take their origin, and it is here they should be studied.

THERE is much of interest and value about camels, the development of Australia's Interior, and other matters. At a moment when the concern of the Australian people for the vanishing aborigines is reflected in the leading newspapers of this country, Mr Blakeley's views on the problem of the native race are worth giving.

"Something can still be done. After a life spent mostly outback, and having travelled nearly all over Australia, I have concluded that it is too late for a general scheme to protect and preserve all our natives, but I think that at least one portion of Australia is specially adapted to preserve the finest type of aboriginal I have encountered, and one whose tribal life is unimpaired. The tract of country I have in mind is known as Central Australia West. It comprises about three hundred miles square, and covers portions of West and South Australia. As practically the whole of this area is sandhill country, and never likely to be of use to the white man, it could be made a reserve, administered by the Federal Government."

Mr Blakeley, from his intimate lore of native ways and customs, gives a complete picture of their manner of life, and his description of their various methods of smoke-signalling, rock-tapping and sending rapid information through the bush from tribe to tribe, by other methods, makes absorbing reading.

There is enough adventure and romance in "Hard Liberty" to supply the plot and material of half-a-dozen thrilling stories of adventure. It is capably illustrated with photographs, and there is a front map showing in detail the whole course of the strange and remarkable journey.



Hitch in gift



Noted bushman-pro prospector Fred Blakeley (pictured) —the man who took Lassetter on his supposed "last ride" — wants to give his body to medical science.

He wants it to be dissected by University medical students when he dies.

Man's wish

And he wants the corneas of his eyes to be taken by a hospital eye-bank to help someone see again.

But the veteran, who has tackled desert and jungle in his time, found that doing a good turn for posterity wasn't so easy as he thought.

Mr Blakeley, of Stanley Street, Concord, talked with friends about his intentions and found others who also thought they would like to leave their bodies to science.

"The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was the only thing to do," said Mr Blakeley.

But no one seemed to know how to go about it.

First, he went to the Public Trustee and put his wishes in writing — in a will.

A SPOT OF BOTHER

What next? Mr Blakeley had trouble finding out, so he came to "The Sun" Office.

A check showed that a number of Sydney hospitals maintain eye banks and mobile equipment by which corneal grafts can be taken from dead people on the spot and returned to hospital for storage.

A person wishing to allow corneal tissue to be taken from his eyes should let others know his wishes and also let the hospital of his choice know about it.

If he wants to leave his body to the University Medical School, he should write to the Professor of Anatomy, who will write back to him in acknowledgment.

He should also let his next-of-kin know his wishes.

None of which completely satisfied Mr Blakeley.

He said he thought it should be sufficient to notify some central agency — perhaps a Government section — and that it would make good sense if the intending donor were given some form of identification, perhaps a disc to be worn.