

Cornish Gold Fever 2010

One hundred and fifty-nine years after the first rush, the fever struck again, and on Tuesday 20th April at 10 am we headed north as “diggers” with Robin and Bronwyn Pryor to unearth a little more of our common Cornish heritage. There are thousands of descendants of early diggers all around the world who have a connection with Castlemaine. My enquiry and interest in the Victorian gold towns had arisen out of reasonable speculation, where the Pryor’s had clear evidence of their families’ participation.

Instead of joining the stream of wagons and people pushing wheel barrows with pick and shovel, the Toyota Corolla whisked along the Calder Highway past Woodend and Kyneton to the old town of **Malmsbury** that had been struck with gold fever in 1863. Under the tree canopy of the lake-side park we enjoyed lunch with the ducks. Beryl and myself always recall this spot and our 1991 return to ministry in S.A. With the Hewson’s and their parting gift of a micro-wave oven lashed to our car roof rack, we had enjoyed a parting lunch in the same park. On another occasion we had inspected local relics of the gold era, the rail viaduct and the beautiful heritage home and vineyard linked to Susie McEwen’s family.



Leaving the highway at **Elphinstone** we found ourselves in the heart of the old world village of Chewton. We passed tiny Mt Alexander cottage on the left and the sturdy Primitive Methodist Church on the right with tall poplar trees that looked as if they had been growing for a thousand years.

Our first port of call was **Castlemaine**, inseparable from the region known as the Mt Alexander Goldfields and the Forest Creek diggings. Gold was discovered here at Specimen Gully in late 1851 and it is known as the early site where most South Australians camped. Within six months it is estimated that 40,000 diggers flocked to the Mt Alexander fields. By June 1852 it was reported in S.A. that arrivals back home were already exceeding departures. My **Great Great Grandfather Thomas Curnow** had leased and purchased over 200 acres of land on the Gawler Plains at Peachy Belt in 1852/3 so it left a small window of possibility that along with thousands of others, after an early visit to the gold fields he had returned to S.A. to purchase his land.

I was keen to explore the possibility of unearthing any early records, but like the diggers chance of finding a nugget I had already been told that my chances were slim. We found our way to the Old Court House. An Attendant explained that an unpopular pre-registration of arrivals had started in 1854, (*well after the possible Thomas Curnow window*) and that the first local paper was printed in the same year. They would only have a Government record of Thomas if he had ran foul of the law!! At this point I wasn’t sure that I wanted to dig up any old skeletons but a quick check of names on this and the Gold Escort list was made but with no luck. Thomas’s movements like many others would remain elusive. If he

had been a benefactor of gold fever Thomas would have pitched a tent and then arranged a licence at Golden Point or the Castlemaine Gold Commissioner's Camp. The issuing of a licence began in early 1852 but the Attendant explained that the licence was little more than a flimsy throw away receipt, similar to receipts we receive today.

The well-known gold mining town of **Maldon** is history itself. The fever hit here in 1853, again probably later than any potential visit by Thomas Curnow but the unspoilt look of Maldon's streetscapes, buildings and lovingly restored homes beckoned us on to enjoy it's past life.

It was an ideal time to visit. The hills were heavily treed with gums in blossom and the leaves yielding to the changes of autumn. The rich colours of the Golden and Claret Ash were everywhere and Pepper trees lining the streets added an old world feel.

As we wandered between the veranda posts of the main street we enjoyed a little window shopping giving preference to Opportunity shops, Antique and Book shops. We arranged an alfresco style, modified Devonshire Tea and for a brief moment soaked up the mood of the old shop fronts, rusting galvanized rooves, locals yarning and excited dogs barking in the back of farm utes.



We found the **Uniting Church** in Fountain Street and a local parishioner treated us to a tour. The exciting days of early Methodism touched us as we heard the story that started with a tree stump pulpit, progressed to a tent Chapel then a red brick Chapel and finally to a church that could seat 1000 in 1863. In fact the Maldon Church with it's Wesleyan pioneers had been a hub of spiritual activity for generations.



There was an unforgettable personal connection here also. Earlier generations and Beryl's parents regarded Maldon as a sacred place where the lives of many people had been changed and where District Local Preachers Meetings and large Revival Prayer Meetings had taken place. In an account of the history of the Church I counted seven Ministers whose ministry had been

marked by revival. A Mrs Mitchell wrote, *‘I went to his (Rev Woodall’s) first Class meeting and shall never forget his agonising prayer for the conversion of souls, and in short time some 90 members were added to the church.’* In another statement it said, *“The Maldon Church stands as a monument of untiring energy, zeal, self-denial and Christian worth of it’s early founders. Men who were whole-hearted in the cause, who understood not the meaning of the phrase weak-kneed Christians, but men who were mighty in faith, and who wrestled in prayer to God for the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, and “Blessed be God”, whose prayers were answered.”*

The names of eloquent and fervent local preachers like Jimmie Jeffries and John Boots have been forgotten and where today the church is maintained by a handful people history records that people came, *“ in winter and summer alike”* bringing their lanterns to church with them. Once Chinese’s people were baptised into the faith at Maldon and witnesses of the past stated, *“with fire and zeal so characteristic of the Cornish people and their search for gold they did not overlook the search after true riches, and were not blinded by gold-dust to such an extent that they were blind to the interests of their own and the souls of their fellow-men,”* One report spelt out the significant influence of the place by saying, *“such real live religion has leavened the whole of Victoria.”*

After the initial frenzy of men rushing from one digging to another in a wild scramble to peg a claim at least twelve commercial mining companies ended up operating in the area so without a doubt Maldon became a place of real mining significance. Close to the town the Beehive mine chimney still stands out against the sky-line. We rambled around the chimney site that is not far from the old Welsh Congregational Church and Penny School and we admired the way the town overlooks the rich plains and wine-growing region of Victoria. By this time the shadows were lengthening so we headed for our arranged country cottage where we stayed over two nights. Set by a creek bed well off the main road, the farm cottage was surrounded by large gums and a view of folding green hills. The interior was the loving creation of the owner who had decorated the place with 1940’s furnishings. I even had a chamber pot under my bed-side cupboard and there was a collection of old torches and ladies purses.

Next morning we went fossicking, but not for gold! The Pryor’s had details of early family members and children buried in small gold field cemeteries. We found what had been the **Majorca** diggings off the Pyrenees Highway, south of Carisbrook. It was an open area cleared of trees and marked by mounds of earth that stood out like giant ant hills. A blue stone hall and an 1868 Methodist Church, now a residence, remained where once the Peppercorn Tree General Store and 50 shops serviced the needs of 15,000 miners. Forty year old Angelina Pryor had died here of consumption in 1870 and she was buried in a Dissenters grave. She had married **Thomas Scholar Pryor** in Helston Cornwall in October 1850 and arrived in Melbourne in March 1851.



The historic town of **Newstead**

provided a pasty lunch before Robin and Bronwyn's kept their arranged appointment with local historian Dawn Angliss to check out details. Thomas had remarried a Cornish widow by the name of Jane and between them they had accumulated 15 children. Herbert Pryor, one of Thomas's sons, had been a Blacksmith here in the 1880's and both Thomas and Jane had been buried in the Newstead cemetery.

Another visit to **Maldon** and the Family History Centre unearthed evidence of James Stebbins, Bronwyn Pryor's great grandfather. He had been active in the local Methodist Church and was described as a local preacher of unusual ability. He had lived in a house called Kangaroo Cottage and we eventually found the cute, well maintained place at 11 Ireland Street. It was an exciting discovery because Bronwyn's grandfather Arthur had been born in the cottage in 1872.

The next day leaving wrens, kookaburras and sheep grazing around our overnight cottage behind we made haste to **Daylesford** where, it turned out we would enjoy a picnic lunch by the waterside with a gaggle of geese, but before this came to pass we called at Fryerstown. It was just as well we did because on the way we discovered the **Duke of Cornwall Mine** site, complete with its Engine house, owned by R.L.M. Kitto in 1888. Robin pointed out that unlike some areas; deep seam mining here required Cornish hard rock experience and expertise.



Fryerstown or Fryers Creek in 1851 was an early site where another 15,000 miners and many Cornish families had camped. Unknown to us at the time this last town would put a human face to what must have been a tough way of life in the harsh Australian bush. Thomas and Angelina Pryor had lived at Fryerstown in 1853 and buried their one year old son here in March of 1857.

Again I couldn't help but wonder if Thomas Curnow had been part of this early community



with its 25 pubs that in real life were probably little more than bush grog shanties. Today one tiny Cornish stone cottage remains on a hillside while few modified places like the Mechanics Institute, a Court house and a Boot maker's shop survive. We parked the car opposite a cluster of small cottages on a well-shaded track to take a few photos. Robin, seeking directions to the cemetery struck up conversation with a

local man who seemed ready to talk about the town's history. After calling at the cemetery and retracing our route we noticed that the helpful gentleman had joined two other people at a roadside table in front of the old Boot-makers shop. With some hesitancy we decided to stop again for a parting word. Their names sounded as Cornish as you could get and they had lived in Fryers town for years. One of them had lived in a house that had been built around an old prefabricated Boot-makers shop. While Robin chatted to the men, Bronwyn was invited to take a few pictures inside the old place with its relics, a shingled ceiling, old boots and boot making tools.

It was a delightful sunny morning with the yellow leaves from the old poplar trees that lined the road falling on us like confetti with every gentle breeze. As the conversation continued a noisy, mud splattered, four wheel-drive vehicle pulled up with a jolt. A scruffy young man and his dog emerged from the unregistered Ute that I noticed also had a cracked windscreen. As we greeted each other the other party paused their conversation to exchange a few heated words about dogs messing up the place. The young man immediately reassured me that his ratty dog "Digger" was O.K; in fact he was an affectionate creature who liked toast even if he did have a jaw strength of 300lbs!! He explained that he had been around for a while and that he lived in a wattle and daub hut out in the bush. I had no trouble at all in believing him at this point. The story that followed had all the makings of a genuine diggers yarn.

When he was a teenager an old lady who operated the General Store told him a story of an elderly gentleman who would run up his debts at the store and every now and then would appear to pay them off with a small bag of gold. Whenever he needed money he would disappear into the bush and next day or so would reappear with his gold. She concluded that the site was near the town somewhere. As a local boy she had gone on to confide in him by sharing a detailed description of the features of the secret site.

My story teller explained that years later he was out in the bush exploring with a boyhood friend when he found what appeared to be a fox hole. After squeezing through the hole he found that it opened up into a larger dugout chamber. It also had a small exit hole but it was only some time later that he realized that the place matched the description that the old lady had given him in earlier years. I gently enquired why he was still living in the bush like a pauper. Oh, he reassured me that the location remained his secret and that one day he would stake his claim.

Our visit to the gold country had finished with a personal touch, a few people who were still **living it**, a good Cornish yarn and a touch of the mystic of gold fever.

Ted (E.A.) Curnow
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