By David Bannear

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There are very few places in Australia where the land itself speaks eloquently of our history since 1788. The central Victorian Goldfields, especially Castlemaine with its largely intact alluvial gold rush landscape, is one of those areas. The significance of the goldfield around Castlemaine has been recognised by the Victorian Government as Australia’s first cultural heritage national park. Part of the recognition process was the importance of Victoria’s gold on a world scale and its ability to promote economic growth and provided tourism and development appeal to a broad area.

Today over 83% of Victoria’s Box-Ironbark Forests have been cleared. What remains mostly covers the goldfields of central and north-east Victoria. The region is densely populated and contains large cities, regional centres and small towns and has very developed public infrastructure. It boasts traditional-type industries (such as engineering and manufacturing) and emerging ones in the shape of grape and olive growing.

In June 2001, the Environment Conservation Council (ECC) provided the Victorian Government with final recommendations on the use and management of its extant Box-Ironbark forests. These forests are on Victoria’s main goldfields and surround gold cities and towns such as St Arnaud, Stawell, Bendigo, Castlemaine, Maldon, Rushworth, Heathcote and Beechworth.

The future use and management of central Victoria’s forests revolved around a community consultative process. Public comments made it clear that the forests had a host of meanings to a large number of people. They were a resource for gold, timber and stone, formed significant historic gold mining landscapes and were a precious environmental remnant with over 350 endangered species.

A landmark recommendation of the ECC was the classification of the Mount Alexander Goldfield as Australia’s first cultural heritage national park. To be called the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park (CDNHP), it is a new public forest land category created principally to recognise and protect an outstanding cultural landscape. This status would see the area set aside primarily to conserve cultural heritage values, and secondarily to conserve natural values. This is a radical departure from the primary purpose of other national parks – to recognise and protect natural values.

The recommendation for the CDNHP was announced in 2001, the year Victorians celebrated 150 years of gold mining. Central to these celebrations was the recognition of the enormous role the gold industry has had in the social and economic development of Victoria and Australia, both from the gold rush and through to the current gold mining industry. These sentiments formed the rationale for the creation of the new type of park.

In its attempt to strike a fair balance in respect to gold mining, the Victorian Government has determined to place 100 metre depth limit for mining under parks, including the CDNHP, which are situated in highly prospective areas. This will enable the parks to be accessed underground, by decline mining without compromising the protection of heritage values on the surface. This decision is recognising an obvious fact, that in central Victoria open pit mining with no commitment to backfilling is increasingly being opposed by sections of the community, irrespective of what the tenure of the land. Decline mining is more acceptable and is emerging as the modern face of continuing large-scale gold mining in central Victoria.

Along with the decision to support decline mining and exploration within the CDNHP, is a commitment made to develop a streamlined approval process for dealing with any infrastructure requirements associated with approved decline mining operations, notably air shafts and vents. Mining and gold exploration will be managed through Schedule 3 of the MRD Act 1975 which means it will require the consent of the Minister of Environment and Conservation. This is a departure from the traditional-type national park where new exploration and mining is not permitted, and existing operations are subject to a process involving tabling in both Houses of Parliament for 14 days.

The groundwork for the creation of the heritage park was completed in the early 1990s. Prior to this time there had seen some bitter conflicts over gold mining and heritage conservation in central Victoria. Decision making was occurring on a localised case-by-case basis, usually in response to a development or mining proposal. Assessments were severely hampered by the absence of comparative data and standard procedures.

To rectify the situation an interdepartmental committee, the Historic Mining Sites Assessment Committee (HMSAC) was formed in July 1989. The committee’s terms of reference required it to work towards the establishment of a State-wide inventory of historic mining sites, set standards for site recording and assessment, recommend appropriate levels of protection for sites and detail management priorities and procedures, and tourism opportunities. Over a five year period, Victoria’s 250 goldfields were surveyed and a database of many thousand sites was established. These sites are now protected through the provisions of the Victorian Heritage Act, 1995.

HMSAC’s overall objective was to conserve significant gold mining sites and relics as an educational resource, while enabling the continuation of mining activity and other developments on historic gold mining fields. The committee sought to preserve every site in the State, or every bit of a site, but only those sites, and certain parts and relics on those sites, assessed as being significant. This approach permitted mining activity within heritage boundaries, including access for gold exploration and such things as tailings and shafts. It advocated good design

continued on page 67

May/June 2002 65
and management for new programs to seek to add new layers of history rather than the wholesale removal of previous layers.

HMSAC’s work commenced in 1989 with an investigation of the Castlemaine Diggings. A major finding was that the historical and archaeological records meshed in that both made clear the continual (and continuing) nature of gold mining. They both showed that superimposed on the early gold-rush landscape produced by intense habitation, mining and movement, is a landscape reflecting the “feast and famine” nature of gold mining in the area from the later 1850s to the present day.

In pursuit of wealth, either for themselves or their employers, miners dug, puddled, sluiced and dredged alluvial gullies and hillsides, dammed creeks and gullies, built roads, constructed water races, and dug intricate networks of shafts, tunnels and open-cuts. They erected machinery of wood, stone and iron, which, depending on the capital involved, was driven by hand, animal, steam or water power. Machinery was added to and replaced as old ground was re-worked, shafts and tunnels extended, and new mines commenced.

Central Victoria’s other great gold rush magnets, Ballarat and Bendigo, are now outstanding examples of 19th century goldrush cities. The Castlemaine Diggings have not been built over by great cities. Instead it remains mostly Crown Land, and has not been fractured by new roads or altered by rural development. Remarkably it has retained its gold rush character. Today, it is an extremely rare landscape relating to the 1850s rush era, as well as rare examples of 1850s and later mining features such as shallow alluvial shafts, quartz roasting pits, early battery sites, Cornish flue systems, puddling sites, water wheel-driven battery sites, and hydraulic sluicing technology. The survival of a range of characteristics of a number of mining technologies and site types make these sites also of great representative value.

The proposed national heritage park takes in all the main gold bearing reefs and gully systems of the Mount Alexander Diggings. Each gold-bearing gully, hill and quartz reef has a history of re-working, stretching back to the early 1850s. Despite the widespread impact of gold mining, the park still contains several significant Aboriginal sites, including drinking wells and scatters of stone tools.

The CDNHP may yet have a higher significance, which will see a change of name, but not management regime. Arguably it is a landscape that has international significance as one of the earliest, richest and greatest gold rush fields and “best of the best” on grounds of extant heritage in the world. The gold production figures from the early years were staggering. The Mining Journal, Railway and Commercial Gazette, London reported that the yield from Mount Alexander in July 1852 was 282,546 ounces of gold and that this yield continued every month, peaking in October of that year, where the yield for the month was estimated 350,000 ounces. It began to decline in 1853, but still was over 150,000 ounces per month. The Castlemaine Diggings is still the 3rd richest goldfield in Victoria, and remarkably the bulk of its gold came from very shallow alluvial deposits, in the first four years of the gold rush.

The world’s two first gold rushes, California and Victoria were pivotal to the increased power of gold during the nineteenth century. Quickly these two goldfields raised the world’s annual gold output by a factor of six or seven. The hoarding of vast quantities of Californian and Victorian gold by the central banks of America, England and France, provided the basis for sound currencies and financial systems around the globe and supported a gigantic credit expansion that bankrolled world trade, shipping and manufacturing. In the 1850s, which was by far the greatest period of gold production the world had ever seen, Victoria alone produced a third of the world’s gold (New South Wales contributed an additional 5 per cent).

Both the Californian and Victorian rushes were roughly of similar size in terms of mining population and gold production. There was, however, a fundamental difference. Only in Victoria, during the frenzy of the Castlemaine Diggings, was there a population predominantly composed of migrants in the usual
sense of the term. In California the gold seekers saw themselves as transient, whereas in Victoria they were more liable to remain, either staying as miners or moving to other Australian fields as fluctuating yields dictated, or settling to non-mining occupations. This fact is no more starkly illustrated by the present-day landscape of the two goldfields - central Victoria with its great gold cities, administrative centres and public and commercial infrastructure and the Californian mountains with a myriad of small towns, some inhabited, many ghost towns.

There is also a fundamental difference in the surviving cultural heritage. There is little archaeological evidence surviving on the original gold rush country in California. American River and its tributaries yielded the rich alluvial gold that sparked the world’s first international gold rush to California. While more gold was taken from this system than all other rivers and streams of California combined, the majority of the gold was not mined from the stream beds but was hydraulically sluiced from the ancient riverbeds which formed the surrounding foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Hydraulic sluicing of these deposits commenced in 1850. Within five years the mining engineers of the Sierra Nevada had constructed five thousand miles of ditches and flumes to supply the water to power the monstrous hydraulic monitors. About 26 million ounces of gold was recovered by the process of hydraulic mining in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, but at the cost of thirteen billion cubic yards of earth being washed away.

The scale of hydraulic sluicing has therefore obliterated or buried the original landscape of the Californian goldrush. To compensate a lack of tangible evidence, California now has a system of over 1000 historical landmarks, many of which commemorate the theme of gold mining.

The surviving heritage of Castlemaine Diggings is in comparison rich in authenticity and intactness. The gullies, hills and flats that once yielded fortunes are still there, bearing the original names and evidence of gold rush and later mining. Also present are many hundreds of ruins, many of them the first homes of the immigrant gold rush miners. The mining relics are both rare relics and touchstones to a wider story of willing immigration, political and economic transformation and the creation of the Australian identity. It is a rare landscape, it is internationally significant and it is fragile. A landscape of ruins and regeneration made more vivid through an amazingly rich and powerful collection of gold rush writings, drawings and artworks.