A Lonely Goldfields Grave

Death was an ever-present shadow on the early goldfields. It came far more frequently than we can imagine today – and it came in a host of different forms. For 27 year-old miner James Dennis it came through an inadvertent tumble down the Lady Mary South vertical shaft on November 14th, 1895.

Known to suffer from dizzy turns, his mates buried him here with the following epitaph on the original headstone:

Sacred to the memory of
James Dennis
who died through accident
on November 14th, 1895, aged 27 years

Little we thought when we
Bade him goodbye
He had left us for ever
Left us to die

Sad is our lot
That has now befell
For we were not there
For his last farewell

Accidents were one of the more common causes of death, with not only miners but their children too, known to have perished 'down the mine'. Explosives only magnified the danger, while rock-falls and cave-ins occurred with frightening frequency. And if you survived the underground then life in the camps and settlements was none too safe, either...

In 1897 the Norseman hospital was in the front-line of the battle against disease and death on the goldfields.
Courtesy Phototone Colonial Library.

Typhoid was a significant killer right across the goldfields, and a major outbreak occurred in the Dundas fields in 1895. Conditions were said to be 'disgraceful' – the almost complete absence of sanitation and an accompanying shortage of clean water combined to let loose the killer disease. Numerous deaths resulted, despite the best efforts of Dr Elphick, the first resident medical officer in Norseman.

Norseman's first hospital opened early in 1897, with Doctors Harvey, Goode and Jackson joining Dr Elphick in the struggle to turn back the 'grim reaper' who stalked the fields. As if to underline the challenge involved in staying alive Dr Jackson died just three weeks after arriving in town! Death was indeed ever-present, and James Dennis was far from alone in occupying a lonely grave in these dry stony hills.

James Dennis may well have lived in a simple tent such as these, prior to his death.
Courtesy Phototone Colonial Library.

The Lady Mary - From Rough Beginnings

On the 29th of November 1894 a prospector by the name of S.W. Pearce found gold here, at what was to become the Lady Mary mine. Coming just three months after Laurie Sinclair's strike at Norseman and a year after the first find near Dundas this discovery would ultimately prove a major addition to the Dundas goldfields.

Initial development of the mine was somewhat haphazard. An official report for the then Mine's Department noted: *"A lot of time was lost in the early days of the company in opening up, and a description of the workings will show to what extent a good mine can be handicapped by injudicious direction. With one straightforward reef to explore the delay that occurred is the more remarkable."*

Apparently shafts were sunk at various points, to a strict depth of 100 feet. Horizontal drives were then commenced from the foot of each shaft – but because no allowance had been made for the undulating land involved none of these drives connected! Further, a main shaft was then sunk and equipped with a headframe and winding plant – but no-one bothered to ensure this shaft reached the main horizontal drive. Little wonder the company dragged on for years, almost exhausting its capital.

Then a knight-in-shining-armour appeared, in the form of Captain Hosking, an experienced and highly capable mining man. The Mine's Department report is effusive: *"Captain Hosking was then placed in charge, and in an incredibly small space of time the Lady Mary has been made a mine."* In six years from 1898 to 1904 some 19,244 tons of ore were crushed at the on-site battery, producing 21,916 ounces of gold at a solid paying average of 1.14 oz / ton.

The Lady Mary Mine as it looked in April 1896.
Courtesy Shire of Dundas.

Some of the customers outside Hannas Store may well have walked or cycled from the Lady Mary township.
Courtesy Shire of Dundas.

The Lady Mary is one of many local mines that supported its own small 'township', with workers preferring to live on site and travel for supplies, or for social and sporting outings. It is also one of many historic mines that have been reworked on a number of occasions since its first incarnation a hundred years ago. Doubtless, Captain Hosking would be happy that it has continued to give up payable gold over so many years.