

Striking It Rich

"The mouths of mining men must water when they read of the richness of some discoveries on these goldfields in the very early days."

Norseman Today, Centennial Edition, 1992

One such 'mouth watering' mine was the Cumberland, located just west of here. Opened up by Captain Carne in early 1897, the Cumberland caused a sensation when a horizontal drive at 80 feet (25 m) depth intersected an extraordinarily rich band of ore just 20 inches (500 mm) wide. The stone was reported to be a 'mass of gold', with three and a half tons of ore yielding a mind-bending 1,054 ounces!

To put this yield of 300 oz / ton in context many modern mines make a profit on not much more than 1 oz / ton! Little wonder the owners of the Cumberland installed security doors either side of this band of ore, a step rarely – if ever – seen elsewhere on the goldfields.

This was no isolated case either – other samples from the Cumberland produced spectacular yields of 495 oz / ton, 280 oz / ton and 341 oz / ton. One small shipment sent to Adelaide, where the mine was floated on the stock-exchange, produced 26 oz of gold from just 23 lb of stone. Talk about striking it rich...



The Kirkpatrick 'crew' and their 'happy home'.
Courtesy Phototone Colonial Library.

Right alongside the Cumberland was the Kirkpatrick, established during 1895/6 in 'very hilly country, midway between the Lady Mary and Norseman'. While yields from this 30 acre (13.5 ha) lease were not as remarkable as those emanating from its neighbour, it still gave up large quantities of valuable ore. As with many local mines, those who worked the Kirkpatrick lived on the lease, building rudimentary but happy 'homes'. Life in the Dundas fields was tough, but it had its rewards.

The Kirkpatrick Mine was one of a number located immediately west of here in the late 1890s.
Courtesy Shire of Dundas.



The Cobb & Co Coaches That Weren't

Cobb & Co coaches were a ubiquitous site in most goldfields in Western Australia in the late 1890s, and worked the route between Coolgardie and Norseman from 1896 onward. When Messrs Cohn, Kidman and Nicholson established a 'Royal Mail' coach route from Esperance to the Dundas fields it is not surprising that this service was also known as the 'Cobb & Co' – though in fact this was not the case.

The coaches, teams and associated equipment were bought from the original firm in the eastern states when routes there were shut down. Many of the drivers came 'out west' too, not wanting to be separated from their teams. So, despite local newspaper advertising at the time referring to the 'Cobb & Co line of Royal Mail Coaches' the service that plied this road was not in fact true to its name.

This does not in any way detract from either the value of the operation to the local community or the spectacular sight of the coaches and their teams. Highly polished vehicles sporting ornate timber and metal work were tastefully painted in the company's colours. These were then hitched to a team of four, five or six horses selected because of their matching colour and size.



Many early coaches were 'double-deckers'.
Courtesy Photofone Colonial Library



All manner of goods were transported via the Coach Road in the early years. Courtesy Shire of Dundas

Chosen for their 'heavy bodied, light legged, proud of carriage' attributes, these animals were much loved by their drivers – men such as Billy Wary, Jack Catterini and Cabbage Tree Ned Divine. The run from Esperance was scheduled to take a day and a half, though it often extended well beyond this – especially if rain had turned normally dry tracks muddy and slippery.



A typical goldfields Cobb & Co coach.
Courtesy Battye Library

The first coach arrived a day late on May 23rd 1896. Perhaps this delay could be explained by the fact that it was carrying 12 large bags of mail, weighing over one and a half tons! Indeed, so heavy was the load that some of the mail had to be left at Dundas to enable the coach to continue over the final hilly leg to Norseman. Little wonder the local postman was reported to have been 'rather busy' sorting and delivering letters in the days there-after!



