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### Colonial words

When a word is printed in **bold**, look for its meaning in the 'Colonial words' box.



## Colonial people: Gold diggers

Would you like to travel back to colonial times and experience what life was like then? In this book, you will meet Henry. He lives on the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s. Come along and see through his eyes what the life of a gold digger was like.

### What is a gold digger?

Gold diggers were people who travelled to the Australian goldfields during the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s. Gold was found all around Victoria after 1851, with the largest deposits near Ballarat and Bendigo. People came from all around the world to seek their fortune. Most were men, but there were also a number of women.

#### Colonial words

**COLONY** a settlement in Australia that was controlled by the British government  
**DIGGINGS** another word for goldfields  
**GOLDFIELDS** areas of land where gold is found  
**NATION** a country with its own government

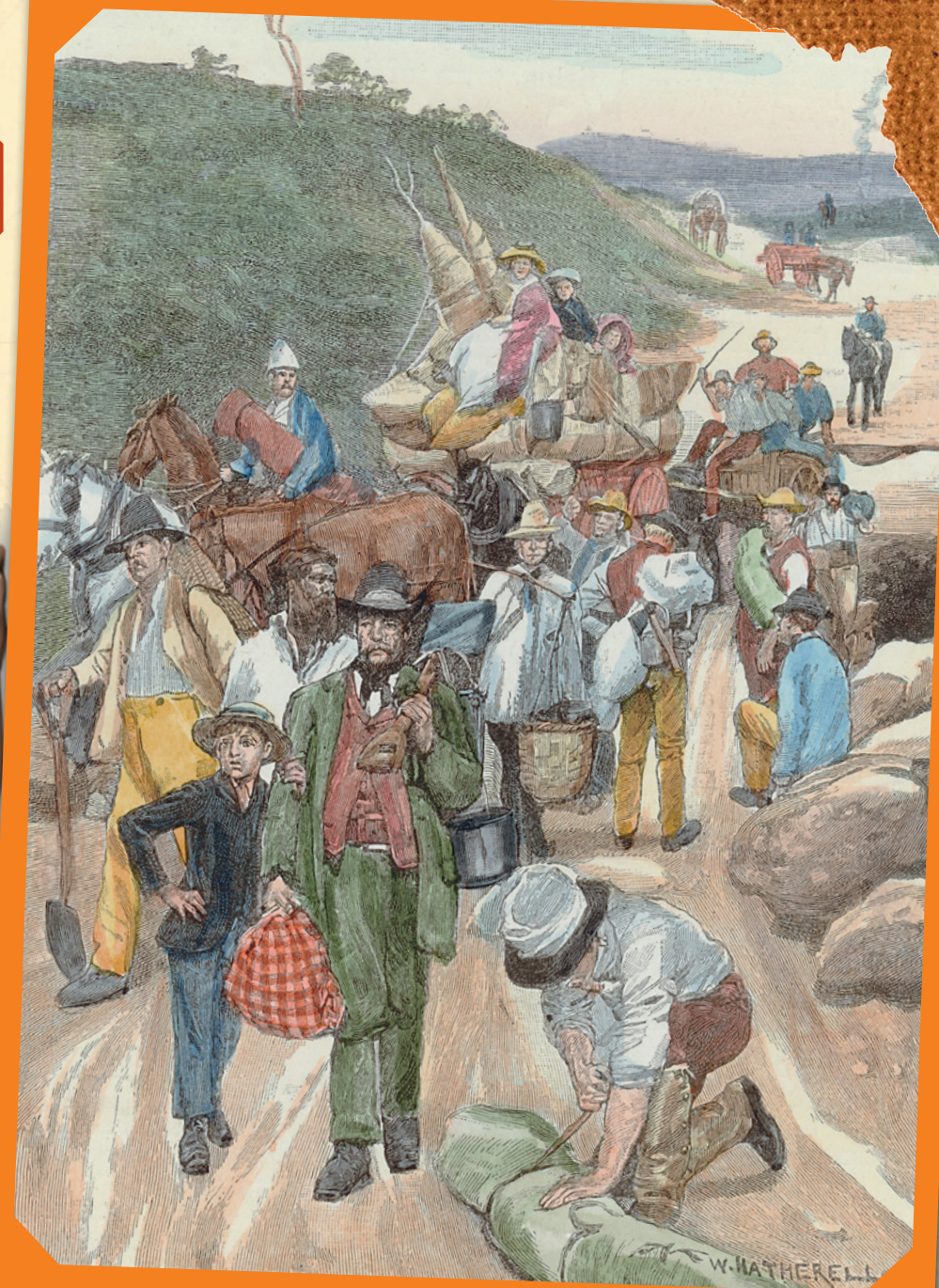
### AUSTRALIA'S COLONIAL PERIOD

The colonial period began in 1788, when British settlers established a **colony** in New South Wales. It ended when Australia became a **nation** in 1901.

Hello, my name is Henry. I am 13 years old. My family came from Wales to Melbourne, Victoria, in 1853. It took two months by ship. Papa used to be a farm worker, but now he hopes to strike it rich on the goldfields. Mama and my sisters stayed in Melbourne while Papa and I travelled to the *diggings*.

We share our tent, food and tools with some men we met on the ship. They are from a village not far from ours, back in Wales. We also share the gold, so whoever finds some splits whatever money they get for it with the rest of us.

It was a long journey to the goldfields.



Many large gold deposits have been found in central Victoria.

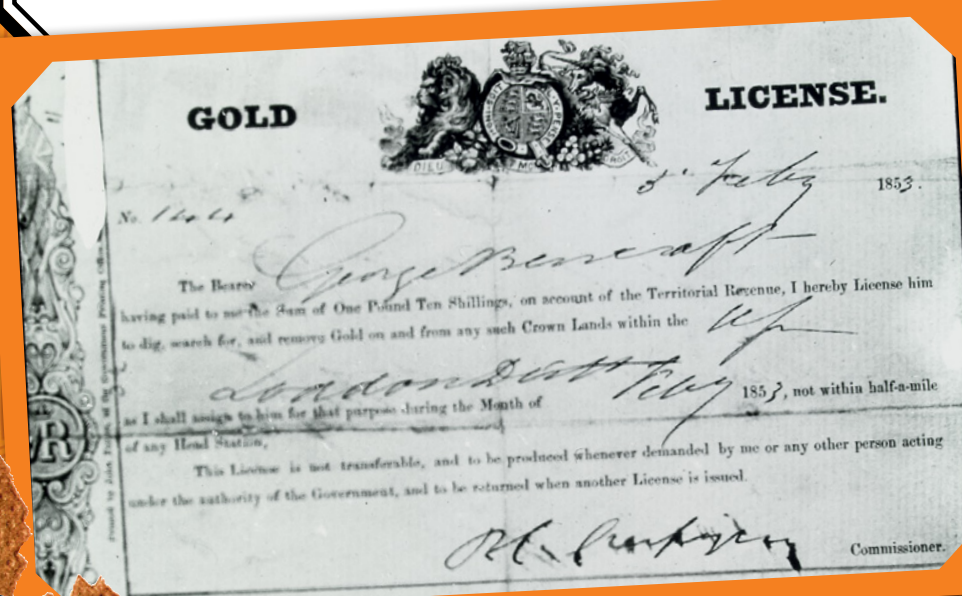


## Welcome to the goldfields

People say there is gold to be found all over central Victoria. Looking across the valley here, all that can be seen are tents, wooden platforms, and piles of soil and sand. Thousands of people are hard at work, digging for their fortune, as far as the eye can see.

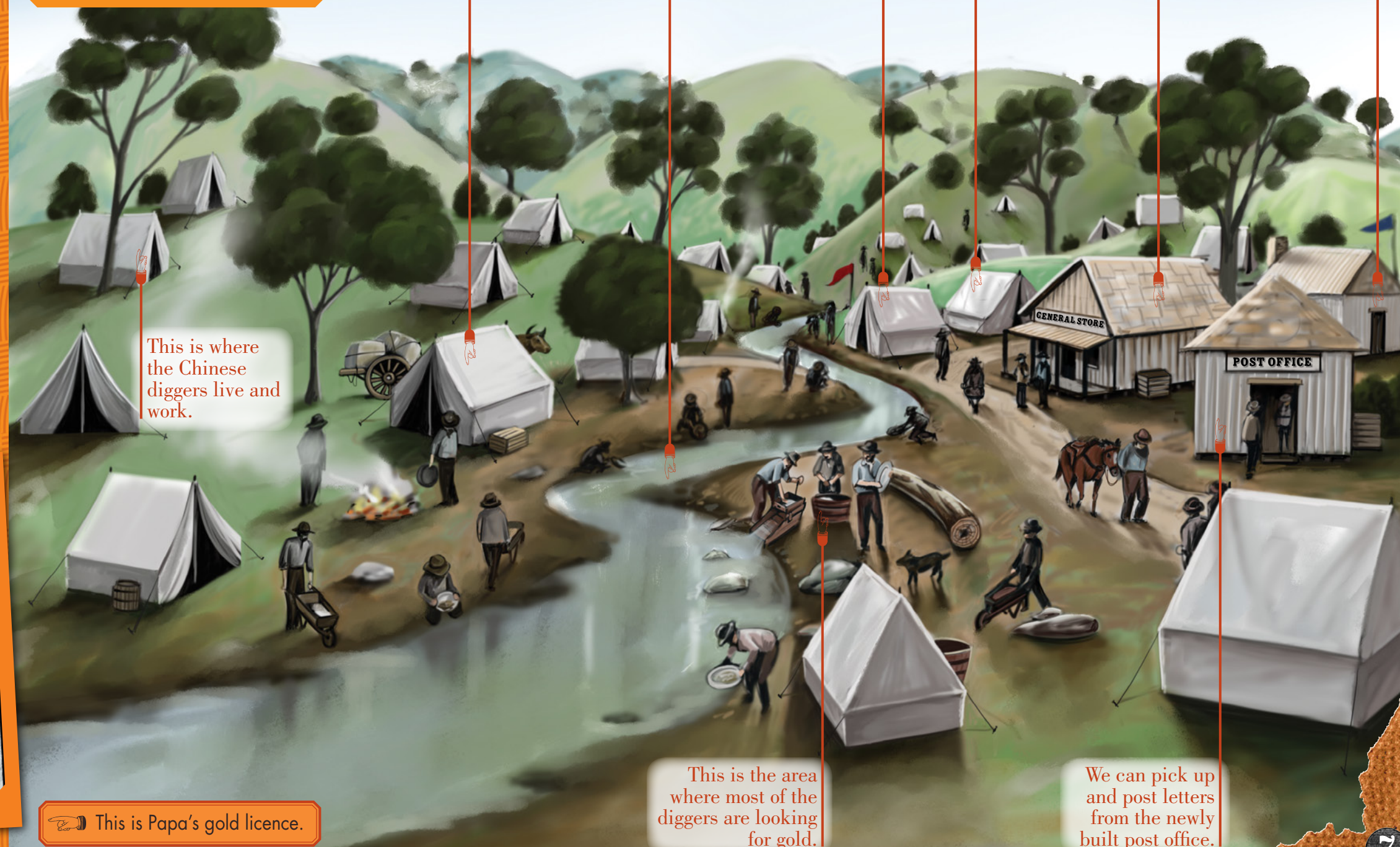
## Life on the diggings

The goldfields are home to many people like us. When gold was discovered, they flocked here. They chopped down trees, made roads, and built a city of tents and small huts. Others came to set up businesses selling food, equipment and clothes to the diggers. The police soon arrived too, to try and keep law and order.



## GOLD MINING LICENCES

Gold diggers were not allowed to dig for gold unless they held a licence, which cost £10. Some of the diggers could not afford to pay, so they took their chances without a licence and hoped they would not be caught.



The tents are where the diggers store their belongings and sleep at night.

We use water from the creek to drink, cook and wash, and for our mining work.

There is a butcher's tent where meat is sold.

There is a doctor here but he is very expensive and not very good.

We get our food supplies from the general store.

The police check that all the diggers have gold mining licences.

This is where the Chinese diggers live and work.

This is Papa's gold licence.

This is the area where most of the diggers are looking for gold.

We can pick up and post letters from the newly built post office.



## Where we live and work

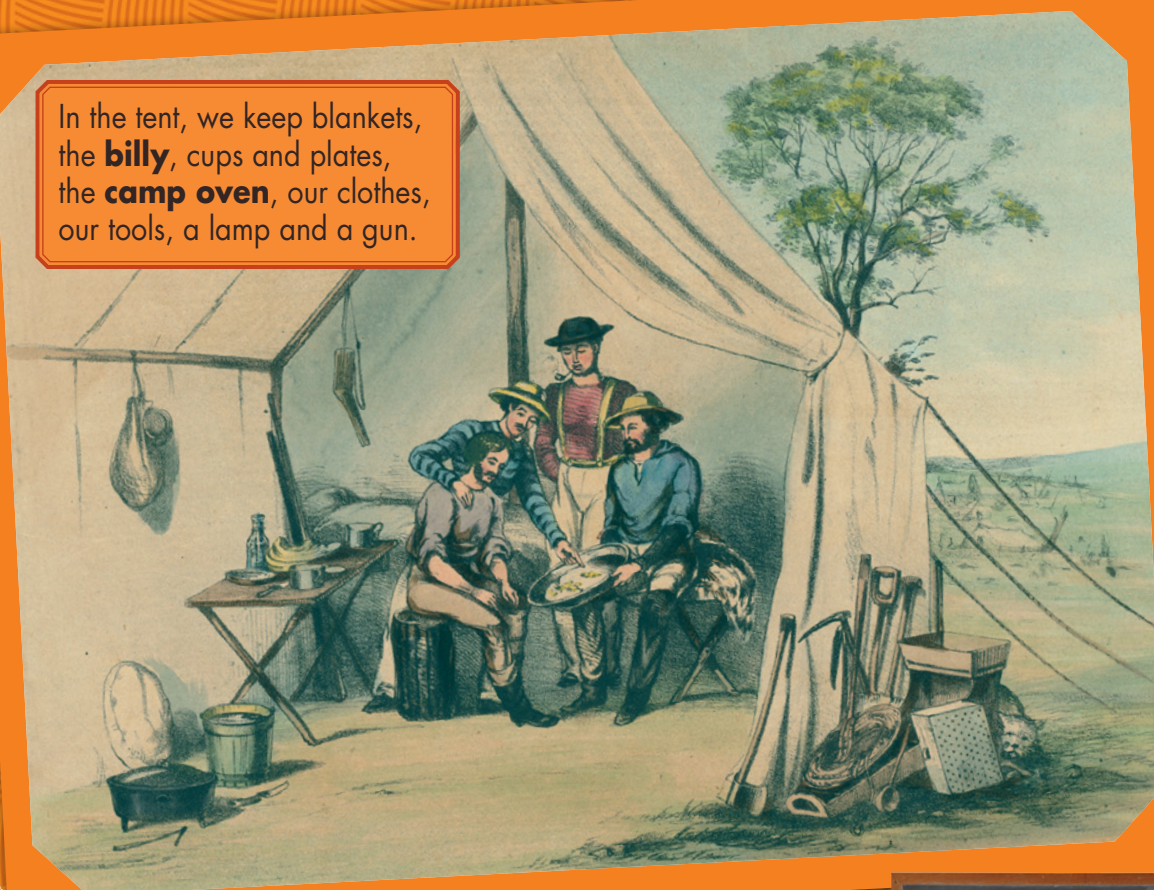
We sleep, eat and store our belongings in our tent on the goldfields. Our diggings and the creek are a short distance away, and that is where we spend our days searching for gold.

## Our tent home

Inside our tent, we make beds from gum leaves, with sacks on the top of them. One day soon, Papa is going to make a proper table and benches from logs dragged in from the bush. Our tent keeps us dry when it's raining, but it doesn't protect us from heat, cold and wind – or snakes and insects! We have a

fireplace outside for cooking. Papa says if we are still here in winter, we might build a chimney inside the tent as some of the other diggers have done.

In the tent, we keep blankets, the **billy**, cups and plates, the **camp oven**, our clothes, our tools, a lamp and a gun.



### Colonial words

**BILLY** a tin for boiling water  
**CAMP OVEN** a large cast iron pot with a lid

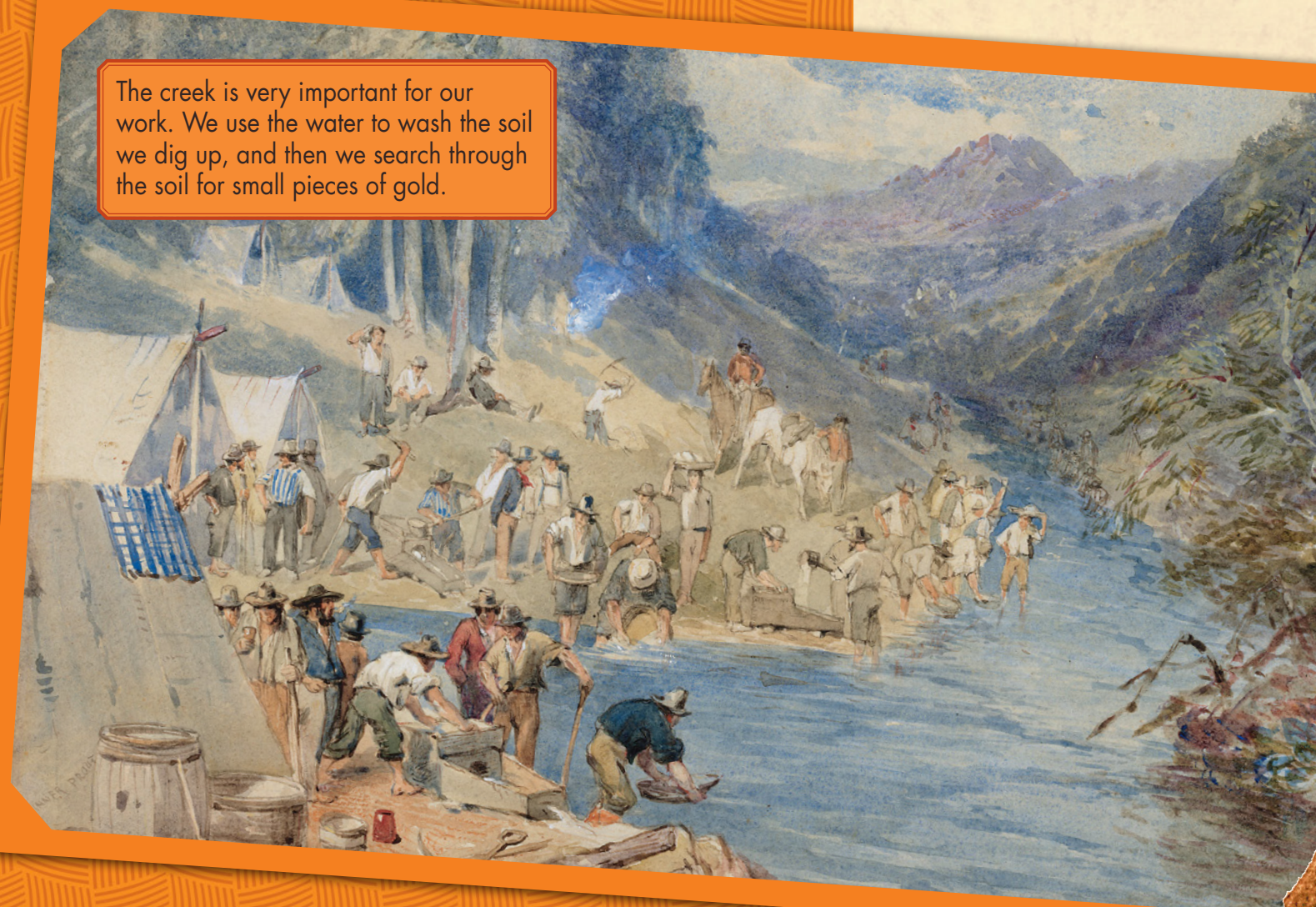
## On the diggings

We work on the diggings from dawn to dusk every day except Sunday, no matter what the weather is like. Our patch of ground is near the creek. We dig and sift through the soil, looking for the gold that will make us rich.

## WATER ON THE GOLDFIELDS

Water from rivers and creeks was vital for the gold diggers' work. Although the water quality was poor, they used it for washing, cooking and drinking too. This was probably the cause of many illnesses among the diggers on the goldfields.

The creek is very important for our work. We use the water to wash the soil we dig up, and then we search through the soil for small pieces of gold.





## What we eat

The kind of food that Papa buys for us to eat depends on how much gold we find – and how much money we are paid for it. We can't grow our own food here, but there are all kinds of foods for sale at the general store. Also, some of the Chinese diggers run 'tent restaurants' in their section of the diggings.

The general store sells cheese, butter, pickles, jam, tea and coffee as well as basic supplies, but fresh fruit and vegetables are rarely seen.

## Our supplies

We brought flour, sugar, salt and tea with us from Melbourne, and bought some **mutton** from the butcher when we arrived. For the first few weeks, we made billy tea, **damper** and stew. When our supplies ran out, we went to the general store and paid six times more for basic items than what we spent in Melbourne!

## MAKE THIS COLONIAL FOOD!

Damper was a popular food on the goldfields. It was easy and cheap to make, and very filling. Ask an adult to help you with the cooking.

### INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups self-raising flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup water
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons butter in small pieces
- extra flour

### EQUIPMENT

- a mixing bowl
- a board
- a cup
- a sieve
- a tablespoon
- a teaspoon
- a baking tray

### METHOD



1

Sift the flour into a bowl and add salt. Rub the butter into the flour until the mix looks like breadcrumbs.



2

Add the water and mix it into a dough using your hands.



3

Knead the dough on a floured board until it is smooth, then press it into a round shape.



4

Place the dough on a lightly floured baking tray. Bake it in the oven for 30 minutes at 200°C. Leave it to cool before serving.

### Colonial words

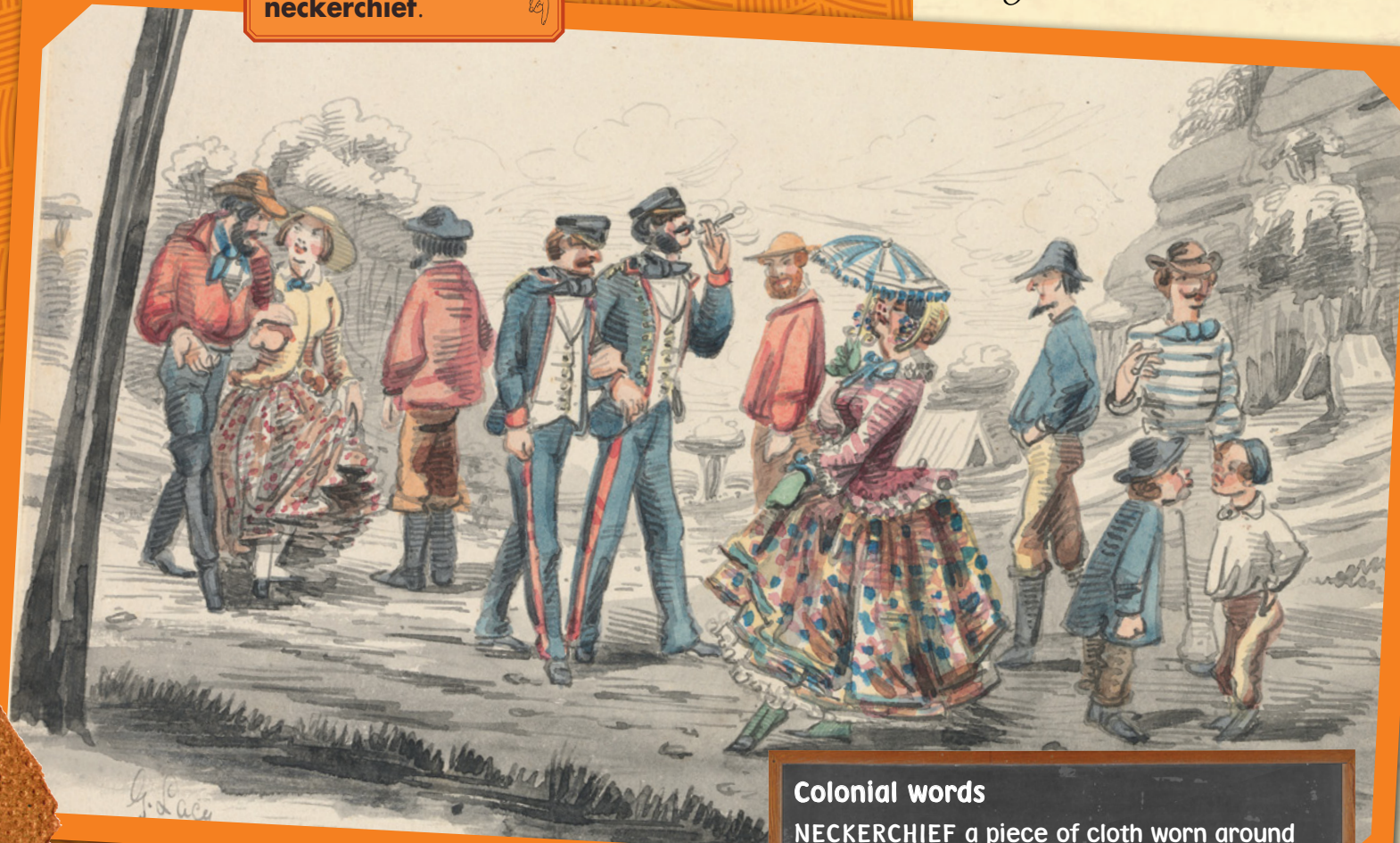
**DAMPER** a kind of bread made without yeast  
**MUTTON** meat from sheep



## What we wear

*Gold diggers work hard, digging in the dirt and mud for days on end. Our clothes have to be hard-wearing and practical – we need them to last.*

Nearly all the men on the goldfields, including the policemen, wear a **neckerchief**.



### Colonial words

**NECKERCHIEF** a piece of cloth worn around the neck to protect it from the sun and absorb sweat (it was also just a fashion of the time)

## The diggers' outfit

Almost all the men on the goldfields wear cream or brown cotton pants, a red or blue work shirt, sturdy boots and a hat. Some diggers have a jacket for evenings and cooler weather, or for Sunday best. Most of the men grow beards, so when the weather is wet and the diggers are covered in mud, it is difficult to tell one man from another!

## Women's clothes

Most of the women on the goldfields wear long skirts and petticoats, but these garments are made shorter than usual so they don't drag in the dirt and mud. Some women work alongside their husbands, sifting soil and searching for gold. They usually wear bonnets in the summer to protect their faces from the sun.

Some women worked with their husbands on the diggings, and even their children helped out.



## WOMEN ON THE GOLDFIELDS

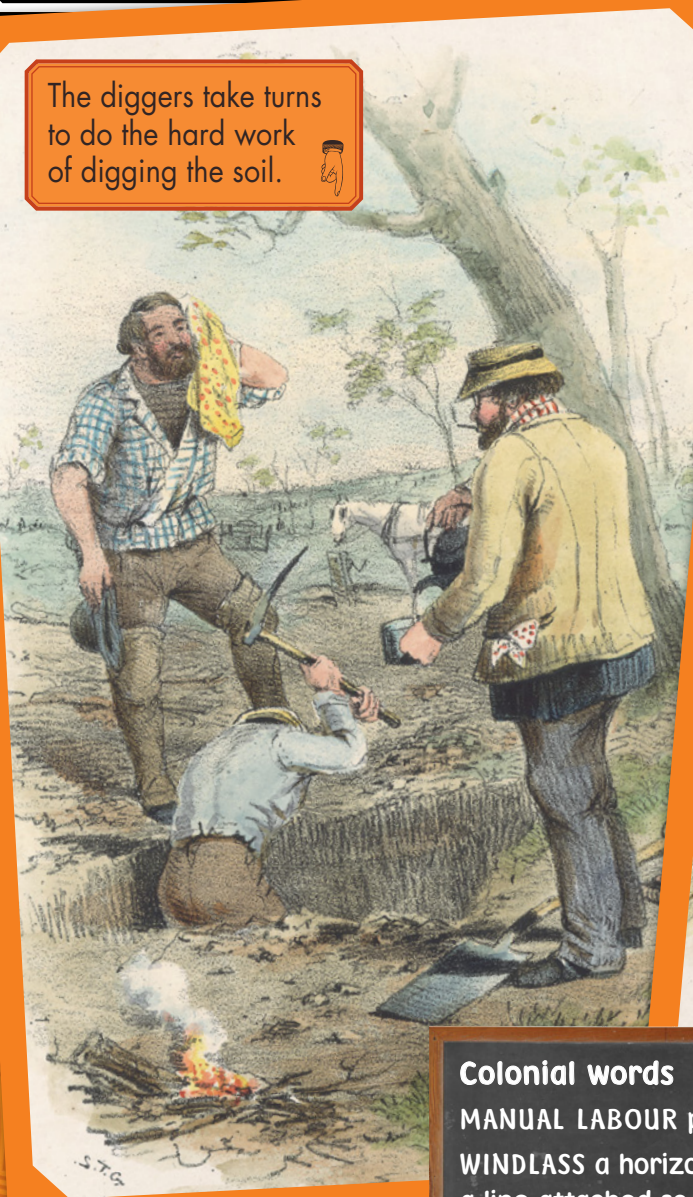
On the Ballarat goldfields in Victoria in 1854, there were about 4000 women compared to 12,600 men. Most women looked after their families. However, about 200 of them had their own businesses, such as running grocery stores, or in areas such as domestic service and dressmaking.



## How we get the work done

Digging for gold is hard **manual labour**, but we have a range of tools and equipment that help us get the job done.

The diggers take turns to do the hard work of digging the soil.



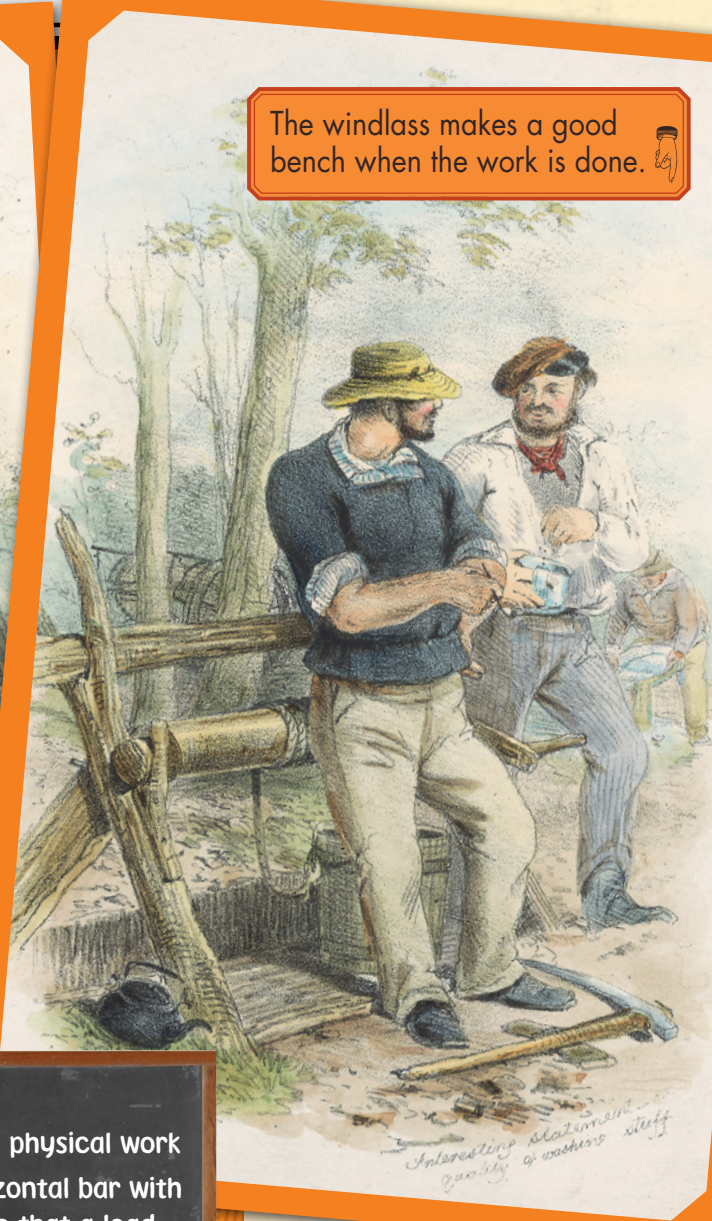
### Colonial words

**MANUAL LABOUR** physical work  
**WINDLASS** a horizontal bar with a line attached so that a load can be wound up or down

## Digging the soil

The men use picks to break up the soil. They dig holes with spades and load the soil into buckets. When the holes become very deep, the men use a **windlass** to bring the buckets of soil to the surface.

The windlass makes a good bench when the work is done.



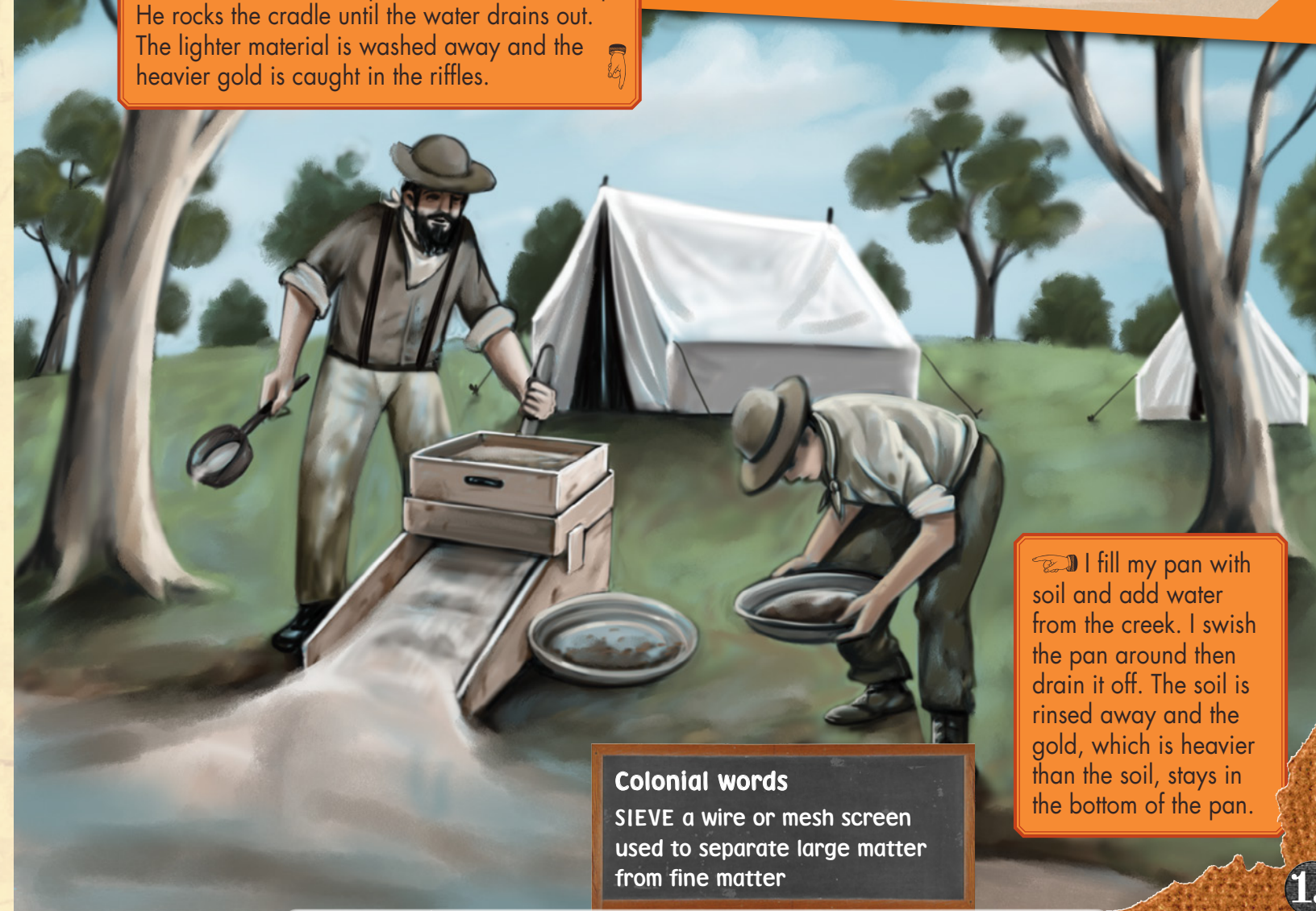
## Finding the gold

We use wheelbarrows to move the soil down to the creek. Then we wash and sift the soil in the water to find and remove the gold.

Papa works the cradle. This is a wooden box with ridges, called riffles, at the bottom and a metal sieve on top. Papa puts soil, gravel and rocks on the sieve and pours water over the top. He rocks the cradle until the water drains out. The lighter material is washed away and the heavier gold is caught in the riffles.



We all work together to get the job done.



### Colonial words

**SIEVE** a wire or mesh screen used to separate large matter from fine matter

I fill my pan with soil and add water from the creek. I swish the pan around then drain it off. The soil is rinsed away and the gold, which is heavier than the soil, stays in the bottom of the pan.



# A working day

Every day is a working day here on the goldfields, although some of us rest on Sundays. As I am 13 years old, I am considered old enough to work too.

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

The first man to wake up in our camp crows like a rooster! The next man up does the same, until everyone is up and starting their day.

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

After I have put away our bedding, I join the others on the diggings.

Right then, show your gold licence, please.

Here it is.

And mine too.

Soon, two policemen arrive.

The men at the next site aren't so lucky.

It looks like he didn't have a licence. He'll pay a high price now.

I'll clean up the camp before I start work.

Good boy, Henry.

I go outside and light the fire. We have tea and some of the damper and mutton from last night's dinner.

That's because there are so many people on the goldfields now.

The water looks dirty today.

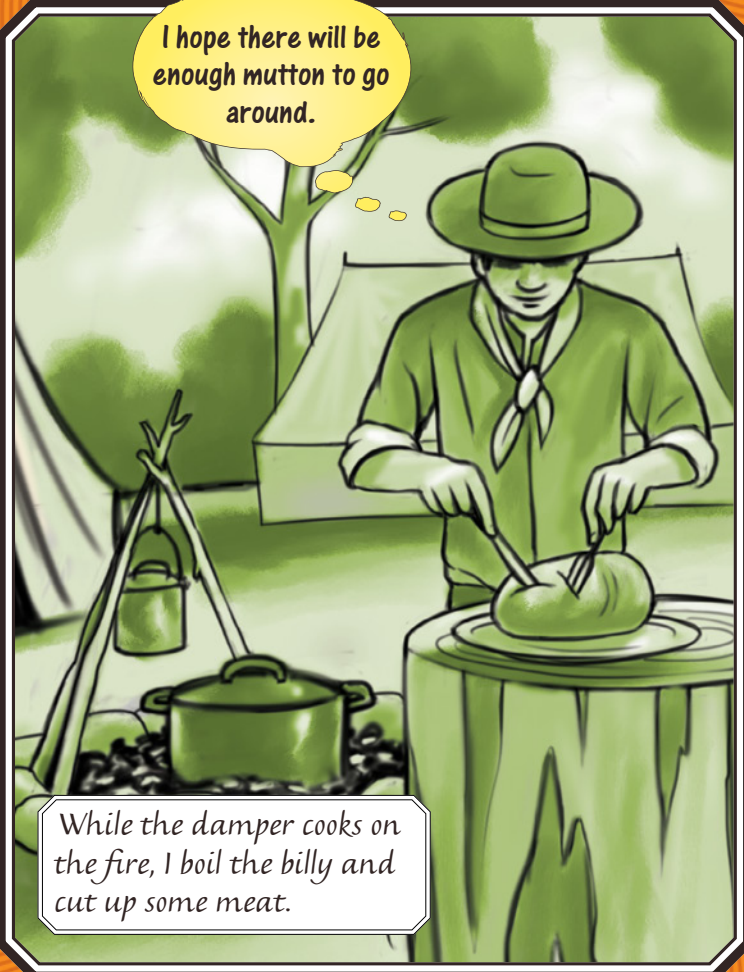
I rinse the billy and dishes in the creek.





Damper... again.

The hard work makes us hungry. I head back to the tent to prepare lunch.



I hope there will be enough mutton to go around.

While the damper cooks on the fire, I boil the billy and cut up some meat.



Your father slipped and hurt his ankle.

I'll be fine.

When the other men arrive, Papa does not look happy.



Everyone is worried that Papa has broken a bone.

We need to go to the doctor's tent.

The only doctor here is a quack - and an expensive one at that!



Papa stays in the tent to rest. I work on the diggings with the other men.

It's a hard life on the diggings. I hope we strike it rich soon.



It's only sprained, but you'll have to rest for a day or so.

Henry, do you think you can take my place on the diggings?

I take Papa to the doctor's tent.



## Leisure and entertainment

*Life on the goldfields is hard work, but when work is over for the day, life at the camp can be fun, exciting and sometimes even a little scary.*

### *In the evening*

After dinner, Papa and I read newspapers and books we've swapped with other diggers, or write letters to Mama. Occasionally we have a meal at one of the Chinese restaurant tents in the Chinese diggers' camp. There are always people playing music and we enjoy listening and singing along. The other men go to cafés and play cards. Some even go to the **sly grog shop** to drink alcohol. It's not unusual to hear fighting – or even gunshots!

### *A day of rest*

On Sundays, ministers preach in different parts of the goldfields, but not many diggers go along to listen. Most prefer to have a quiet day socialising, exploring the bush or doing chores, such as washing, mending and repairing tools. The Chinese diggers, however, work seven days a week.

The evening is my favourite time on the goldfields.

#### Colonial words

**SLY GROG SHOP** a shop where alcohol (grog) was sold illegally (alcohol was illegal on the goldfields)

## PLAY THIS COLONIAL GAME!

## PIG

This card game was popular in the colonial period. It is played by four to seven players. The aim is to collect seven cards of the same suit.

### EQUIPMENT

- a set of playing cards

### METHOD



1

The players sit in a circle. Each player has seven cards. Put the rest of the cards aside.



2

The players sort their cards by suit and decide which suit to collect – the one they have the most of.



3

Each player chooses a card they don't want and slides it face down to the player on their right. Make sure all players are passing and picking up the cards at about the same time.



4

Players can choose to keep the card they receive or pass it on. The winner is the first person to get seven cards of the same suit and shout 'pig'!



## A shopping trip

As Mama and the girls are still back in Melbourne, I try and write to them every few weeks. There is so much to tell them about our life here on the diggings.

November 1853

Dear Mama,

Papa and I have settled into life and work here on the goldfields. Yesterday we went to buy supplies. It was strange to find that some of the shops here are in tents, although huts have been built for others.

Our first stop was the butcher's tent. The smell of the place is just terrible and you always have to wait for ages. They never have time to clean up the mess of bones and scraps, so they leave them out the back for the flies. Disgusting!

I am glad I do not work as a butcher!



Next we went to the general store. It sells everything from food and clothes to tools for digging. It is always busy as there is only one general store on the goldfields and so many diggers to supply. We bought flour for making damper and sugar for our tea. Papa needed a new shovel handle too, as his broke in half yesterday.

We went to the post office, but there was no mail for us. We even stopped at a café. We had a cup of coffee and a biscuit before heading back to our tent, where I put the meat on to cook. I am doing all right with the food, but I really wish you were here as I miss you and your cooking so much.

Your loving son,

Henry

Papa says the owner of this café also sells sly grog.



Coffee Tent 5 m from Bush Inn Diggers Breakfast



## A big event: Striking gold

Tiny amounts of gold are found almost every day on the diggings. But every now and then, someone strikes it lucky with a bigger find. This makes all the hard work worthwhile and gives them the opportunity to start a new life.

Well done, Henry. We can eat for another week.

We often find small specks of gold. This makes us enough money to buy food, tools and pay for our mining licences.



I have a feeling there's more to be found here.

We are all excited but try not to show it. If people hear of our good fortune, we might be robbed or others might try to dig on our claim.

### Colonial words

**EUREKA** an expression of Greek origin, meaning 'I found it', commonly used when diggers found gold

Keep quiet, we don't want to let the whole camp know!

Eureka!

Later that day, one of the men lets out a yell. He has found a small nugget of gold.



Take these, Henry, and put them in our safe place.

Sure enough, Papa soon finds some more small nuggets.

I put the gold in a wooden box that I've buried in the dirt under our tent.

I wonder if this will make us rich.

By the end of the day, we have found even more gold!

We should take the nuggets down to Melbourne and sell them.

But Papa, we might be robbed by bushrangers!

We'll send it down with the gold escort, they'll make sure it's safe.

### Colonial words

**BUSHRANGERS** robbers who lived in the bush during the colonial period

**GOLD ESCORT** armed guards who travelled with diggers between Melbourne and the goldfields





A few days later, Papa packs up our gold and we travel down to Melbourne with the escort.

These guards make me feel safer.



The trip takes three days, but there's not a bushranger in sight.

Not far to go now.

I can't wait to see Mama and the girls.



We make sure our gold is stored safely then go to see the family.

It's so good to see you.

This tent city is just like the diggings!

Now we can buy a small farm and start a new life in Australia.

The next day, Papa sells the gold to a dealer.

I won't be too sorry to leave this place.

We're sad to see you go, but we'll be staying on for a while. There's more gold to be found.

We return to the goldfields to pack up our belongings and give the other men their share of the money.

Good luck to you!

Thanks!

Papa and I sell our gold licences to some men who have just arrived. Then we set off back to Melbourne, grateful for the new start that the gold has given us.



## Meet the real gold diggers

The story you have just read about Henry and his father paints a picture of what life would have been like as a gold digger during Australia's colonial period. It was created from historical information found in libraries, museums and on the internet about real diggers who lived during the 1850s.

## A visit to the diggings

In the early 1850s, Ellen Clacy travelled from England to the goldfields of Victoria. She wrote a book about her experiences giving information about the gold diggers. She described the diggers, a typical tent and a shopping trip.

A wealthy lady rides out to the goldfields.



'... thousands of human beings engaged in digging, wheeling, carrying, and washing, [mixed] with no little grumbling, scolding and swearing.'

'A box on a block of wood forms a table, and this is the only furniture ... [They eat from] tin plates and **pannikins** [and] breakfast, dinner, and tea ... usually consist of the same dishes – mutton, damper, and tea.'

'The stores at the diggings are large tents ... and everything required by a digger can be obtained for money, from sugar-candy to **potted anchovies**; ... from ankle boots to a pair of [**corsets**] ... and every [tool] for mining, from a pick to a needle. But the confusion—the [noise] ... what a scene ...'

A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia in 1852-53, by Ellen Clacy

### Colonial words

**CORSETS** women's underwear  
**PANNIKINS** small metal drinking cups  
**POTTED ANCHOVIES** a kind of tinned or bottled fish



## Exploring the gold digger experience

We can learn a lot about gold diggers and their lives from paintings, photographs, newspaper articles and advertisements that date from around the 1850s.

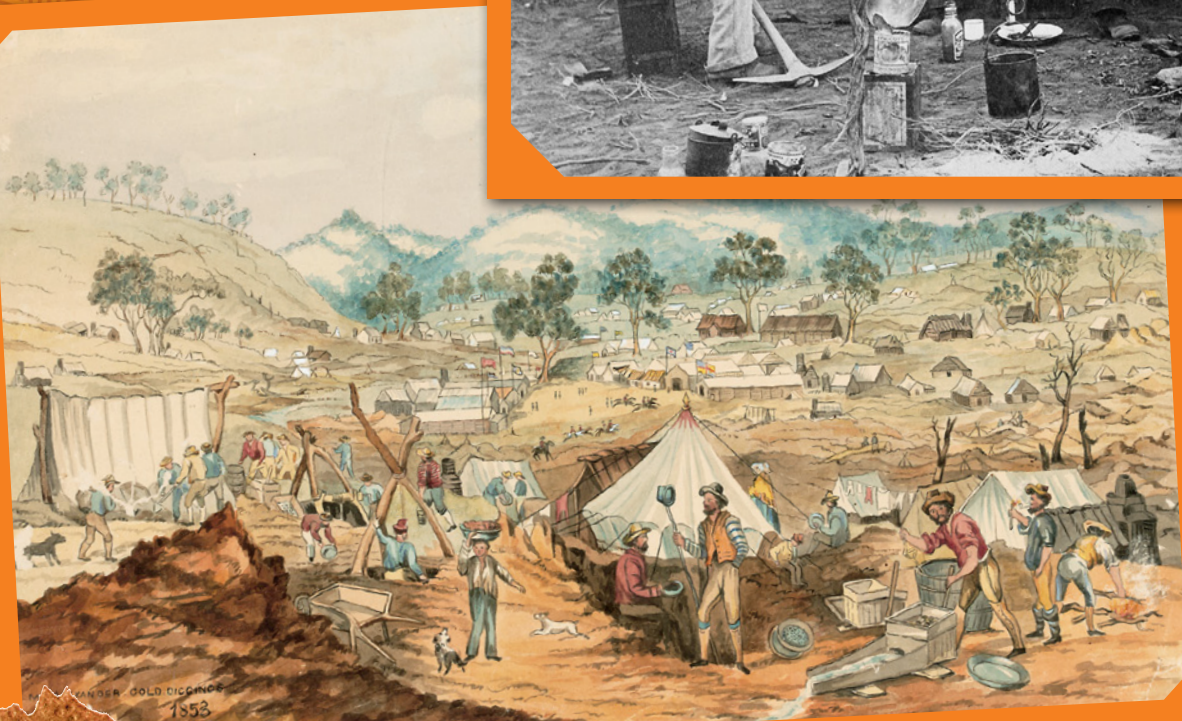
## Paintings, drawings and photographs

Paintings, drawings and photographs can show us what gold diggers wore, what their living and working conditions were like, and what they did in their leisure time.



Miners take a break at their tent.

Life on the goldfields is crowded and busy.



## Newspaper articles and advertisements

Newspaper articles and advertisements from the 1850s provide us with information about daily life on the goldfields during the colonial period.

The best Shop for an Outfit for the "Diggins" is George Johnson's "Smock Frock House," where intending Diggers can procure blankets, rugs, blue and scarlet serge shirts, blue and stripe Guernsey shirts, pilot cloth coats, trousers of all kinds, serge drawers, knitted stockings, leggings, &c., &c., together with warm clothing of every known material, and at OLD PRICES.

Hobart Colonial Times, 4 July 1851

A gold-digger must be a **Jack-of-all-trades**: He must be able to ... fall a tree and saw it ... put up a hut, mend clothes, [chop] firewood ... boil and roast, use a pick and spade, ... dig and quarry, load and unload, draw (pull) a sledge and drive a barrow, cut paths, make roadways, puddle in mud and splash ankle deep in water ... bear sleet and rain ... during the day and sleep in damp blankets during the night ... if you can do all this, and have spirit ... and endurance enough to carry it on for three months, then there is gold and **rheumatism** in store for you.

*The Argus*, 1 May 1852

### Colonial words

**JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES** someone who can do all kinds of jobs  
**RHEUMATISM** a disease that causes swelling and pain in the joints and muscles



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