

## Letter from the Diggings

No doubt the men who came to Victoria in the eighteen fifties to find gold wrote thousands of letters home to their loved ones, but few seem to have survived. To the historian such letters provide a wealth of information about goldfield life with the intimate glimpses they provide of existing conditions.

The letter below is a rare survivor, and provides some interesting details of just how successful some diggers were.

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JOSEPH DARWENT, from Thornhill Moor Hope valley, Derbyshire, England to HIS BROTHER

per steamer "Sarah Sands"

Adelaide, South Australia.

11 June, 1853.

My dear Brother,

On my return a few weeks ago from the Diggings where I have been so-joining and Digging for the auriferous since May last I found your most welcome and kind communications (both enclosed and in the same Envelope) of the 27th Feb and 25th March 1852 & I need not tell you how thankful I was to hear that my dear father, Mother and all other members of our numerous family were well and may God grant that they may continue so till it pleases Him to bring my wanderings on this side the Hemisphere to a successful close and spare then our happy Meeting to which I look forward with so much anxiety and hope

I fear my letters and newspapers to you & my dear parents have not reached their destination so regularly as they ought – I am obliged for the copy of the illustrated London which you sent me - observe from the letters from you which I do receive that you mention other letters which you have written to me that have never come to hand – really the post office arrangements must be very defective – You will have learnt from the letters I transmitted to my parents from Melbourne and the Diggings of the circumstances which induced the Railway board to discontinue the works of that unfortunate undertaking the Adelaide city and Port railway which was the cause of my proceeding to the diggings, a step which I have no reason to regret as you will presently see.

You'll be pleased to learn that before I concluded my engagement with the railway board I received a very complimentary and flattering letter from the Chairman enclosing a

resolution of the Board expressive of the satisfaction I had given them in my capacity as Secretary & at the same time offering me a situation in his office ( which is the first mercantile house in Adelaide) as corresponding Clerk at a Salary of 250 pounds per annum which I have declined having determined to try my luck at the diggings which in the sequel proved that I acted for the best and as some account of my digging adventures may be interesting to you I will endeavour to detail some of them as succinctly as possible & as well as my memory will serve me

The first visit I paid to Melbourne was in March last on a trading expedition which proved tolerably successful. I was only absent from Adelaide for a month, came back and completed my engagement with the railway Undertakers & started hence for the now celebrated Diggings of Victoria on the 19th May, I again arrived in Melbourne in due course & on the 5th June having fully equipped myself as a Gold digger & joined a party of three besides myself ( which I subsequently left) quitted that city for the Bendigo Creek about 100 miles in company with the drays which took up our Stores & tools, from the Carriage for which we had to pay 1/- per lb & arrived there on the 17th of the same Month

The reason we were so long on the road was because the winter had just set in with very heavy rains and the road from Melbourne to the diggings was one prolonged Bog as you will imagine when I tell you that with five horses and two drays we had only 30 cwt of goods including Bedding & every things we had to pitch our tents every night on a fresh piece of Ground which was invariably quite wet, & the journey up was certainly the greatest piece of hardship I endured in my digging career

There is something wild and ..... about travelling in the Bush but the stern reality of its absence from comfort & its near approach to savage life takes away all the Romance at all events in the wet & wintry weather. After our arrival on the diggings we proceed to select a place whereon permanently to pitch our tent (like gypsies) & after a little prospecting about we fixed upon a site near a rich auriferous Ravine delighting in the euphonic name of Growlers Gully

The day after arrival (my birthday) I commenced digging a hole in a place called Yorck Gulley which yielded me in three days 6 ounces of Gold which I considered a very fair beginning.

My Mates (as partners termed on the Diggings) dug elsewhere but their success was not so good as my own. I then commenced a hole in the aforesaid Growlers Gully about 50 yards away from our tent & deprived the youth of thirty ounces of the auriferous in about a fortnight amongst which was the most beautiful Nugget I have ever seen

weighing in 2 oz 16 dwts – It is in the form of an Eagle Hawk and is universally admired not only for its fantastic shape but for its quality & purity.

I then dug a hole in the Gulley that had never been opened & though I only obtained a few ounces therefrom the Gulley turned out exceedingly well to others and from my being the first to commence operations in the Gulley bears the name of Darwent Gulley to this day. When I had wrought out this claim I commenced another in Long Gulley & had to walk upwards of 3 miles to & from my work every morning & evening

The hole I sunk here was 14 feet deep & had 4 drives of level in it two of which were 18 feet long each & the other two 13 & 15 feet respectively. I worked in this claim for nearly six weeks & it yielded me on an average 2 ounces of the precious per diem. All this time my Mates from various causes met with but indifferent success, one was unable to work hard, another was too fat & lazy & the third tho' he was strong as a Lion & worked like a horse had nothing but bad luck & blank holes. I then got tired of finding Gold for the whole party or rather of dividing the Gold which my luck and labour produced into four shares and happened to meet with an old friend and fellow passenger from England, Mr J.H.Parr, a Son of Mr J.H. Parr, Solr Liverpool, I decided to separate from my old mates & Mate with Parr & I have ever since had reason to bless my stars that I did so, for independent of a strong feeling of friendship existing between us both on the passage out & during our residence in Adelaide I found him equal to me in luck & work an agreeable companion & our success was beyond our most sanguine expectation the first hole we dug together was in Golden Gulley, a Golden Gulley indeed it is & it yielded us nearly 200 ounces of Gold before it became entirely exhausted & it did not take us a Month to work it out.

We then worked in several other small Gulleys from which we succeeded in extracting something very handsome for a while but subsequently finding that we sank nothing but blanks & that is it was apparent our luck had left us for a while, added to which the hot weather was coming on & we began to feel a scarcity of that useful element water both for domestic purposes & for washing the auriferous earth with we decided to sell our diggings tools Tent &c. & pack up for Adelaide for a spell or to take advantage of any trading inducement that might offer now we had dug from the Earth sufficient to give us a start in the world.

With this view we joined some acquaintances who were leaving the Diggings also & who were provided with two horse& dray & started on our return to Melbourne via Kilmore on the 3rd October. This time the weather was propitious & the journey to within 30 Miles of Kilmore was all that we could desire - the face of the Country deck'd out in all its

verdure & beauty, the native Shrubs & wild flowers all in full bloom - our party in high spirits

I must confess that never was I more charmed and delighted within the appearance & general character of a Country than I was with this.

The grass was growing in its native luxuriance (the Sun not having yet been sufficiently powerful to wither it) the Country well watered and expansive views in every direction as far as the eye could reach dotted with elegant & Park like timber in full foliage, stretching from the Campaspie River to the Goulbourn.

I was perfectly enraptured with enthusiasm and joy & there let me pause to remark that the Country in the Port Phillip district is as much superior to South Australia as the beautiful & fertile land in the Midland Counties of England is to the black and uncultivated Scotch Moors & I cannot help but lament that so noble a Country should first have been polluted by Convictism & then desecrated to such an extent that it has been by the fierce & vigorous search for gold which is now being prosecuted,

but to resume - When our little party reached within 30 miles of Kilmore the shaft of the dray broke & we had no tools to repair it.

A consultation was held when it was decided that one should mount one of the horses & proceed to the next Station distant 7 miles & borrow tools.

That I should forthwith proceed on foot alone to Melbourne in order to transact some little affairs of my own & the party's, & that the others should remain with the dray pitch the tent for the day and when the tools arrived repaired the broken shaft.

I reached Kilmore that night where I slept & early next morning resumed my journey & when within about 20 miles of Melbourne & 25 from Kilmore I observed a man pass me on horseback & I recognised the horse as belonging to our dray. I knew it was no use my hailing the ..... as if he had stolen the animal he would be sure to ride off & leave me behind so I determined to push on & overtake him if possible at the next Inn & if not get into Melbourne as soon after him as practicable & give information to the police before the rascal had time to dispose of the horse.

I walked on 8 Miles to the next Public house but the fugitive had not made a halt there so I pushed on, alone, in the dark, on a strange and not an over safe road, every step up to the knees in wet & mud for 7 Miles further to the next public house where I overtook the thief & ascertained he had put up the horse for the night, & after privately requesting the Landlord to keep the man secure & not let the horse go out the Stable till I had seen him the next morning (for I was really too tired to undergo the exertion necessary on identifying the animal & securing the thief that night having walked upwards of 40 miles

over a Boggy Country) I got some refreshment & went to bed & was up just in time to find the man with the horse saddled & ready for off but waiting for the Key of the Yard Gate to be let out.

I identified & claimed the horse & the scoundrel attempted to shoot me but I observed what he was about knocked the pistol from his hand then closed with him & first gave him a sound thrashing & then into Custody but the poor animal having been ridden 70 miles without any Padding in the saddle that he died the next morning. The rascal had stolen him from the tether rope while my friends were busily employed repairing.

However there is some satisfaction in the Knowledge that the scoundrel is not only punished for the felony by being convicted to a Chain Gang to work on the roads but that he also had some sore places on this carcass by the drubbing I gave him in exchange for the Cruel manner he had used the noble horse & his cowardly attempt upon myself.

I will not weary you with any further description of my adventures except to say that I duly arrived in Adelaide, after staying in Melbourne for a brief space, & that I found on Making up my accounts & after paying of all expenses to and from the diggings I was 556 Pounds the richer, besides having shared in the romance of the day & gratified my restless desire for travel & adventure.

Previous to leaving Melbourne I bought a piece of land near to what ultimately will become the principal shipping place of the Province & this I expect will turn out a very profitable investment. Since my return I have been trading between Adelaide and Melbourne as a general Merchant dealing in every thing from a Needle to an Anchor & in the short space of 6 weeks have turned over nearly 600 Pound & I feel now that I may indulge the hope of returning to dear old England at some not far distant period with a Competence & may God grant that my dear Parents, my Brothers, sisters and friends may be spared to see the alteration an Australian Climate and the toils & hardships & exposure I have undergone to secure it though as yet if, I were before you, you would, but observe very little difference in my general appearance, as I seem to wear well and my health has always remained good thank God.

The Gold fields do not continue in so productive as they have been tho' the yield is still great & what will be the end of it God only knows.

Do not advise any one you have any regard for to come to this, country, as if they are doing tolerably well at home they will so much better to remain there, contented & happy than to risk the chances & endure the toil they will have to undergo here, with in many cases very slight chances of ever being able to return to their Country family & friends again.

You will of course show this to my Parents & Sisters & brothers & tell them that I am waiting an opportunity to send each & every one a Nugget of my own digging by a friend who I expect is shortly returning to England & with my most affectionate regards to you & yours ( who I hope are well) my dear Parents & Sisters & Brothers & friends, believe me to remain my dear Brother,

Your affectionate ( tho' distant)

& loving Brother

JOS DARWENT.

P.S. – I shall write to my dear father by the next Mail. I was nearly two Months on the Sea last year besides being 4 at the diggings.