Early European Contact and Colonisation
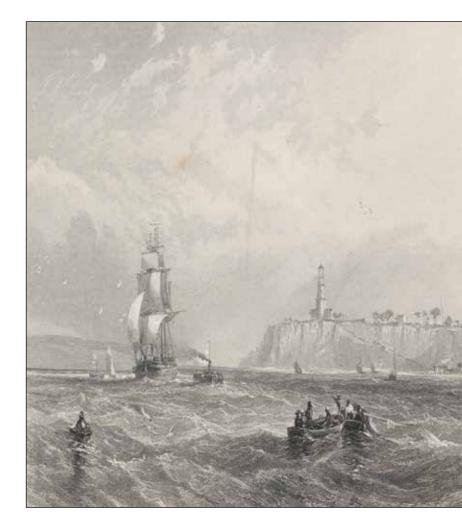
FIRST SETTLEMENT

Convict transportation from Britain to New South Wales began in 1788 and was abolished in 1853. From 1788 to 1823, NSW was primarily a penal colony, comprising mainly convicts and mariners. The first attempt at settlement in Victoria was made at Sorrento in 1803; however, harsh conditions forced the ship on to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).

From 1803 to 1835, the Wathaurong people – the Indigenous inhabitants of the peninsula area – adopted and sheltered William Buckley, an escaped convict from the failed settlement.

Whaling and sealing were important and thriving industries that attracted Europeans to the south and eastern coasts of Australia from the 1820s.

The Henty brothers crossed Bass Strait from Van Diemen's Land in 1834 to create a settlement at Portland. At the same time, John Batman, also from Van Diemen's Land, arrived at Port Phillip, the site of present-day Melbourne, known then as 'The Settlement'.
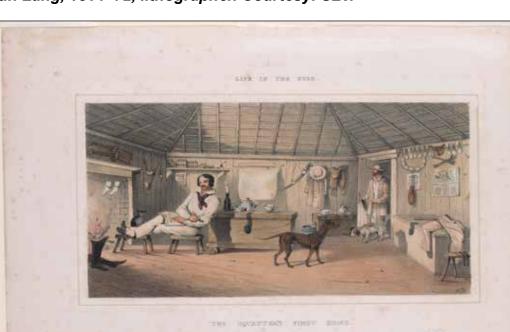

Port Phillip Heads. Edward Paxman Brandard, 1819–98, engraver. Contributor: John Skinner Prout, artist, 1805–76. Published London, Virtue & Co. Courtesy: State Library of Victoria (SLV).

From 1836, 'overlanders' followed Hume and Hovell's route south from Sydney to Melbourne, bringing their herds of cattle. Until then cattle had been non-existent around Port Phillip; it being too difficult to transport from Van Diemen's Land in the small boats used to cross the Straits.

Newcomers squatted on whatever land was available.

ABOVE: 'The Squatter's Home' by Eugene Von Guerard, sketch, circa 1853. Courtesy: SLV. BELOW: 'The Squatter at Home 1839, Bad News from the Outstations', Alexander Denistoun Lang, 1814–72, lithographer. Courtesy: SLV.

By 1837 there was a constant stream of overlanders settling at spots where water and feed appeared suitable for cattle. By 1850 the route from Sydney to Melbourne was well-supplied with establishments offering accommodation, food and liquor, the distance between them dictated by the distance a horse could travel in a day.

In 1839 the first immigrant ships arrived in Port Phillip.

ABOVE: A typical bush hut built with timber slabs and a bark roof. This one set up as a butcher's shop – meat and skins shown hanging in the porch. Circa 1860. Courtesy: Mitchell Library. LEFT: The Melbourne Argus, Sept 1847. Situations vacant and public notices. BELOW: Wattle and daub dwelling typical of later construction, circa 1870.

EARLY BUSHRANGERS

The Plenty bushrangers became active in The Plenty around 1840. They were notorious for their sense of humour and habit of raiding a homestead and taking of a hostage to lead them to the next target. To the population of Melbourne, The Plenty was real frontier land and the exploits of the gang were followed with much excitement, though not much sympathy. In 1842, three of the five-member gang were caught, tried and sentenced. They were transported to their execution by hanging in an open cart sitting on their coffins.

Bushranger Frank Gardiner (1830–1903) is depicted trying to outrun authorities, 1856. Print: Lithograph. Courtesy: National Library of Australia (NLA).

Bushrangers on the St Kilda Road. Painting: William Strutt, 1887, depicts what Strutt described as, "One of the most daring robberies attempted in Victoria" in 1852. The road was the scene of frequent hold-ups during the Victorian Gold Rush by bushrangers, mostly former convicts from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), which collectively became known as the St Kilda Rd robberies. Courtesy: Ian Potter Museum.

FIRST FAMILIES

James Bowie Kirk and John Harlin are known to have commenced occupation of Glenvale Station, known as Harlin's Farm, as early as 1838. The Launceston Examiner reported, on 29 July 1846, that they were known to have been growing wheat on the Glenvale Run in 1836. The station's original area was 6,500 acres, stretching from the hamlet of Glenvale in the south, north to Heathcote Junction/Clonbinane Station, east to Mt Disappointment, the western boundary abutting those of The Dene (Dean) and Big Hill Stations. The area now known as Upper Plenty was located towards the southwestern boundary.
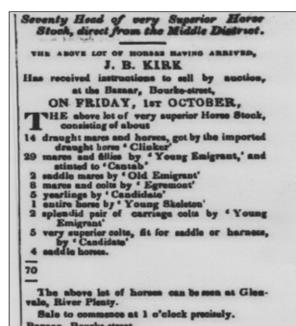

Pastoral holdings of the Port Phillip district, 1835–51, showing John Harlin's pastoral run, Glenvale.

The partnership between Kirk and Harlin was dissolved in 1842. Harlin remained at Glenvale Station until his death in 1853. His widow, Margaret, remained on the property with her second husband, Henry Gibbs, until it was further subdivided and sold in 1887.

The Argus, 12 November 1856.

RIGHT: A snippet from The Argus, September 1847.

Many parts of the Glenvale property were sub-leased for farming activities and there were at least three hotels. Heffernan's Hotel was of brick and noted to have been under construction in 1851. In 1855, The Argus reported the District Licensing Court as granting a liquor licence to William Heffernan, Plenty Inn, Upper Plenty and, in 1856, to Charles McDougall, McDougall Hotel, Upper Plenty (later called The Glenvale Hotel and also referred to as Patton's Hotel). By 1858, James Patton had taken over the licence of McDougall's Hotel. At, "... the junction of a road which leads to Woodstock and the other which leads to The Plenty (Whittlesea), a public house is built which, though small, seems suited for the traffic on the road; it is named the Gap Inn". (The Kilmore Advertiser, 1863.) Very early 'inns' were likely to have existed along stock routes from the mid-1830s. These early buildings were often no more than corrugated-iron structures with dirt floors.

Prior to 1855, all Australian land was deemed to be the property of the British Crown. The Aboriginal inhabitants were ignored. The first licences to allow occupation of land were issued in 1838; John Harlin's being among the first. Crown Commissioners of Land were appointed to oversee land management and, by 1847, all persons in occupation of licensed runs had to lodge applications for lease, stating the name, district, area, carrying capacity, boundaries and the period of occupation. As well as the annual licensing fee, fees were levied per head of stock, which allowed for development of public infrastructure, such as roads and government services.

BLACK THURSDAY

Devastating bushfires, known as Black Thursday, swept through much of Victoria in February 1851. The vivid account below was given in a Weekly Times article in 1880.

Following the fires, John Harlin and other landowners generously rescinded the rents of their tenant farmers. Feed was scarce and all kinds of stock had escaped into the far reaches of the ranges in the search for food. These are thought to have provided the nucleus of herds of wild cattle and horses, known respectively as 'scrubbers' and 'flyers', which infested the ranges and provided exciting and dangerous sport for the stockmen and others who spent much time in running them in and taming them.

Many are the tales told by old residents of the fearful scenes enacted on the never-to-be-forgotten February, 1851. At that period Mr Patton, who had settled on the Upper Plenty some years previously, was residing within a short distance of the foot of the mountains, and, consequently, was one of the first who suffered from the fire.

It had been raging for nearly three weeks when, one scorching hot windy day, the flames, leaping from tree to tree, swept irresistibly down on the flats and spread death and destruction in all directions.

One of the first victims of their relentless power was a carrier, whose camp was surrounded in a moment of time. He rushed into the long reeds near a creek to save himself, but, though fresh and green, the reeds soon got shrivelled, and, catching fire, the unfortunate man became enclosed within a cordon of flames and was so severely burned that he died soon afterwards.

His wife very nearly shared the same fate. In attempting to escape from the camp, she slipped and fell and her clothes took fire, but she managed to extinguish the flames by rolling over and over on the ground and then succeeded in reaching a place of safety.

In the meantime, cattle, horses and other animals were careering madly about in search of shelter from the remorseless fury, which with every gust of wind grew stronger and more terrible in its unbridled wrath.

Cattle sank down exhausted after a hard gallop, and with pitiful lowings were roasted to death; while others, scarcely less fortunate as they still struggled amidst the burning scrub to reach a waterhole or friendly belt of timber, gave vent to their sufferings in roars, which could be heard high above the crackling of the flames in the gum trees, or their rapid hiss through the long summer grass.

Some of them lived to reach water, but only to meet death in another shape, for many got bogged and were unable to extricate themselves. Almost an entire team of bullocks perished in this way in one place, and many more were afterwards discovered which had met a similar fate.

It was about 1 o'clock in the day when the fire reached Mr Patton's farm. Some burning leaves blew across from the treetops and set fire to the stacks of corn, and after that everything went off quickly.

Five hundred bushels of wheat had been threshed in the barn, and a dray was ready loaded to send some to Kilmore, but in a few moments not a vestige remained of the barn, the wheat or the dray.

Just as the dwelling house caught fire, a couple of horses walked through from back to front. They belonged to the carrier before referred to, and were evidently stupefied with the smoke and heat. One went and laid down beside the blazing wheatstack, where his charred remains were afterwards found, and the other was burned to death in the stockyard.

After leaving their homestead Mr Patton's family sought shelter, a couple of miles further down, at an hotel belonging to Mr Heffernan, which was then in the course of erection.

Many other families, also burned out of house and home, betook themselves of this refuge – the strong brick walls, though not much above 4ft high, forming a perfect safeguard against the burning leaves and red-hot cinders which ever and anon fell around them.

About 8 o'clock in the day the heat was something dreadful, and the smoke almost suffocating. Man and beast gave in from sheer exhaustion. Birds dropped down from the trees, or fell while on wing, never to rise again. Wild and tame animals and reptiles emerged from their haunts, only to be driven back and burned, or meet the same fate in attempting to escape. Few, indeed, succeeded in getting away. All nature was convulsed, and for a whole day the demon of the bottomless pit reigned triumphantly.

Some assert that the thermometer went as high as 200 degrees, while others say it was even hotter than that; but, judging from my own experience amongst bushfires, I should imagine it would be fully up to the above figure, if not beyond it.

During the day some patches of country had been burnt before the fire, which, in one or two cases, by these means, [the fire] was partially stopped, and a shower of rain falling at dusk, together with the changing of the wind, effectually prevented it from doing any more damage, though thousands of acres of country had been burnt, many homesteads destroyed and several lives lost.

Night came down and then the scene was one of awful grandeur – burning trees, logs and shrubs glaring in the darkness amongst the blackened surroundings, forming a weird-like picture of misery and desolation.

Even amidst all the horrors of that day and night some ludicrous incidents occurred. Before leaving the burning homestead, one of Mr Patton's men had placed two or three casks of butter in the creek, thinking they would be safe there from the flames. So they were, but not from the attack of some pigs which had taken refuge in the water, and made themselves at home on a meal of butter, while the surplus over and above what they digested comfortably went floating down the stream in a species of thickened oil.

In another instance, a man was galloping away from the fire carrying a baby a few months old before him on the saddle, when he was stopped by an elderly female who implored him to throw the child away and take up a feather bed she was carrying, which he stoutly refused to do; and consigning the old lady and her feather bed to a warmer climate than even Glenvale on Black Thursday, he put spurs to his horse and "cleared off", at least, that is his version of the affair.
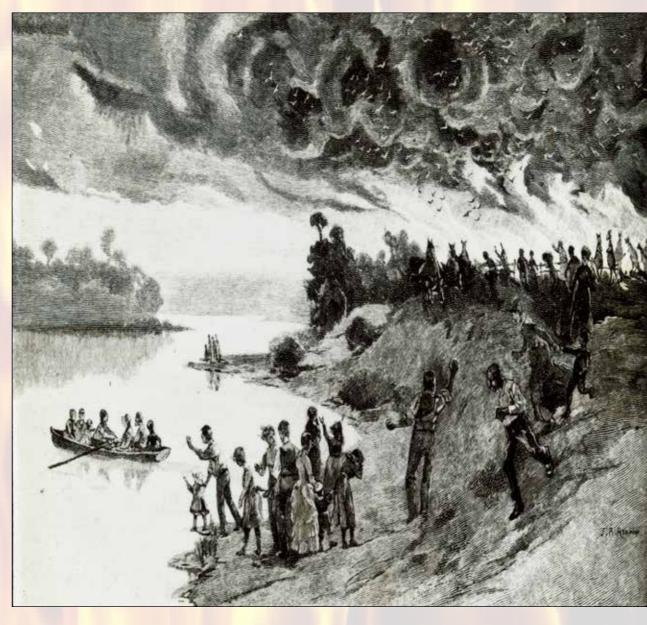
The old lady, however, justifies herself by stating that she only wished the horseman to exchange burdens with her, as the feather bed was proving rather too much of a load to make any speed with in the smoke and heat, and she thought the child could be more easily carried. Which is the more likely story of the two, I leave my readers to judge.

The Upper Plenty District. No. 2. By our Travelling Reporter, Weekly Times, 14 February 1880.

Black Thursday, February 1851. Print, wood engraving by FA Sleap, engraver.

'Black Thursday', February 1851. Wood engraving. Illustrated Australian News, 1 August 1888. Courtesy: La Trobe Picture Collection.
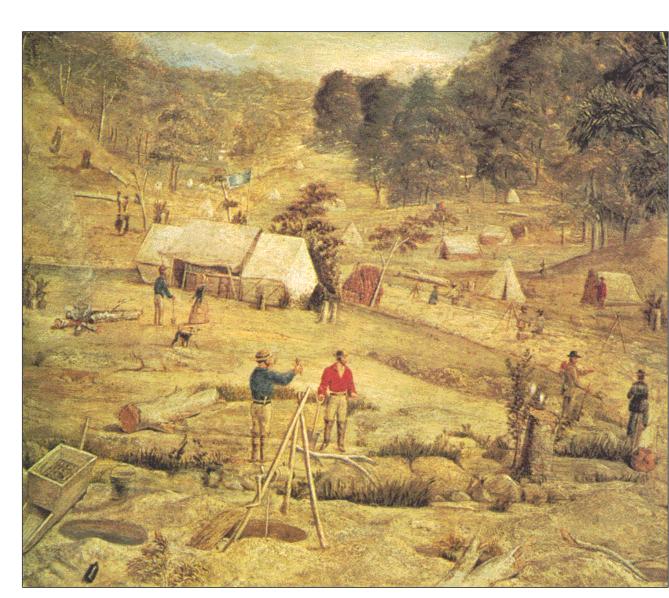
THE VICTORIAN GOLD RUSH

A number of gold finds occurred prior to 1851. However, news of gold discoveries created fears among the governing classes that settlers and convicts would leave the workforce in search of gold, resulting in destabilisation of the economy, thus jeopardising the newly established townships.
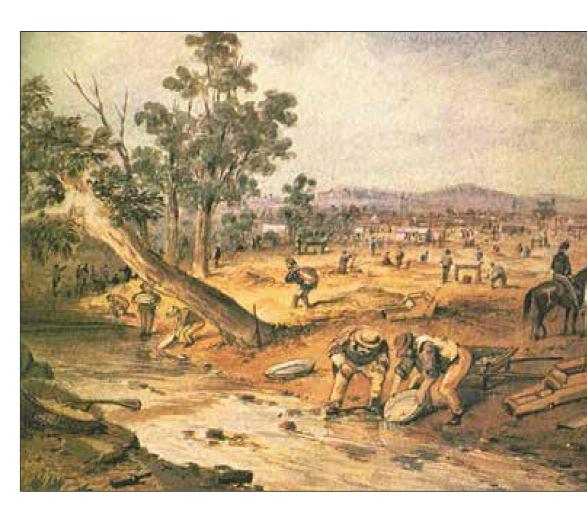
In 1844, Governor George Gipps responded to George Clarke's discovery of gold near Lithgow by saying, "Put it away Mr Clarke, or we shall all have our throats cut". Governor Gipps then moved to suppress all reports of gold discovery in New South Wales.

When the California Gold Rush of 1848 caused many people to leave Australia, the NSW Government re-thought its position and sought approval from the Colonial Office in England to allow the exploitation of mineral resources, offering rewards for payable gold. Victoria separated from NSW in 1851, becoming the colony of Victoria.

The 1850s saw the beginnings of the great Australian 'Gold Rush'. Large deposits were found in central Victoria, starting with Clunes, followed by Ballarat, Castlemaine and Bendigo. Over subsequent decades large deposits were found in most other states. The first Royal Mint outside of England was established in Sydney in 1851.

Digging for gold along an old creek bed. Painting by Edwin Stocqueler, circa 1855.

'GUM THE GOLDFINDER'

There were probably many 'Gums' in early colonial times; men who were adventurers, or who perhaps preferred to be solitary and were content with a simple lifestyle. The following is what can be pieced together about a past local identity.

In the year 1842, about the time the bushrangers made the foray up the River Plenty ... there lived at the head of the Plenty, in the ranges, an old man who was known by the name of 'Gum the Goldfinder'. This man lived in a hollow gum tree, which I have visited. About once a quarter he went down to Melbourne with a small wallet and returned with stores, food, etc., which lasted him until his next visit. It was current through the whole neighbourhood that this man supported himself by washing gold in some of the gullies and that he took it down to some person who was in his secret in Melbourne and sold it.

A letter to The Argus from 'An Old Colonist', 10 June 1882.

ABOVE and BELOW: 'Australian Gold Digging', paintings by Edwin Stocqueler, circa 1855.

About the year 1838, Glenvale Station was then my property, and the man 'Gum' was there digging for gold, though he led the public to believe he was hunting for lyrebirds, which in those days were abundant on Mt Disappointment. 'Gum' was in the habit of coming to my station for rations. On one occasion I asked him whereabouts his camp was; he directed me to have to find it. I took an early opportunity to go and search for the place, and from his previous directions I had no trouble finding it. It was only a mile from the station, and I was much pleased with the situation. He had a nice garden, which was well-stocked with a variety of vegetables, and a beautiful stream of water running through the centre of it. His habitation was an old fallen gum tree, which in its fallen state was fully 70ft in circumference. A shell of the stump stood forming the back of 'Gum's' fireplace; the short space between the fallen trunk and the remains standing upright had been covered in with bark, the burnt portion of the tree cleared out with his adze [hand tool]; and he had in the tree a kitchen, a storeroom where he manipulated his gold, and a bedroom. He handed me a small nugget of gold, which I took, beat very thin, and sent to an elder brother in Sydney, who, when acknowledging his receipt, replied telling me, "to mind my cattle and not think of gold-gathering". 'Gum' was a quiet, inoffensive man. He told me he came from Van Diemen's Land, and appeared very thankful that I allowed my manager to supply him with rations.

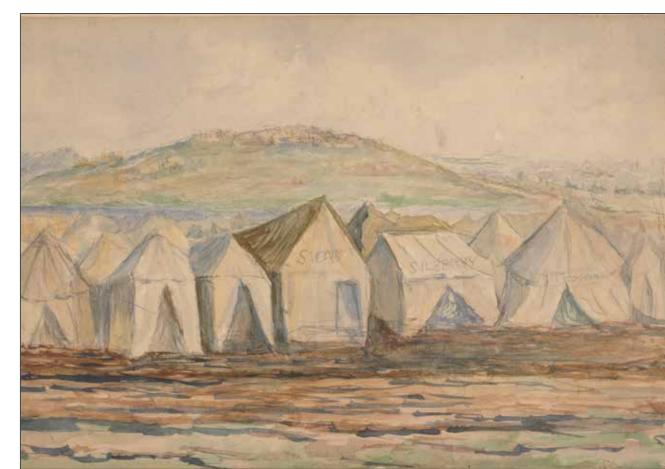*Letter from George Urquhart to The Brisbane Courier, 7 July 1882.*

Between 1851 and 1861, Australia produced one third of the world's gold. Australia's population more than tripled, from 430,000 to 1.7 million, between 1851 and 1871.

The initial stages of the gold rush were responsible for bringing an influx of immigration, which brought many social changes, including an increase in racial tensions and the persecution of some groups, in particular the Chinese.
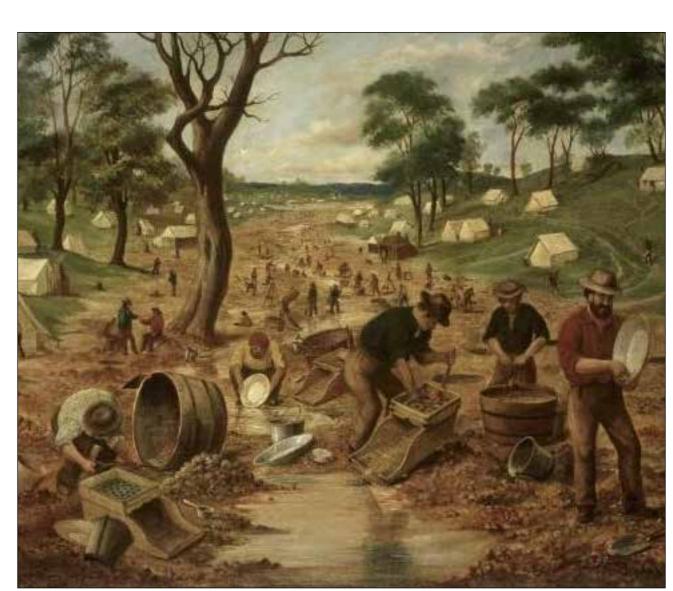
During the 1850s, the largest numbers of immigrants came from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, America, China and Germany. Most arrivals were unassisted immigrants from Britain, selected and dispatched by the colonial land and emigration commissioners. A ten-pound poll tax on Chinese immigrants was introduced in 1855 – the first anti-Chinese legislation.

Accommodation shortages forced people to live in tents at 'Canvas Town' on the banks of the Yarra.

Canvas Town, South Melbourne, 1852. Watercolour on paper, mounted on board by AH Kenyon. Courtesy: SLV.

Numerous but insignificant gold finds were reported in Kilmore in 1851, Reedy Creek in 1856, as well as numerous other areas. In June 1866, the Mining Surveyors Report (Kilmore Division) reported, "... 200 European and 300 Chinese on Reedy Creek. Some are surfacing and ground sluicing, others puddling ... Earnings estimated at 25s to 30s per man/week".
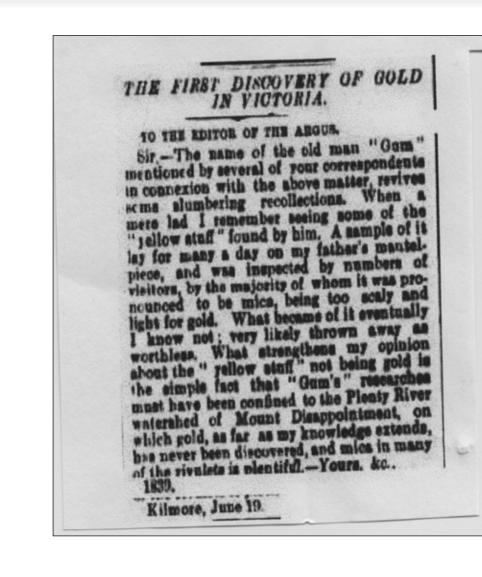
THE END OF AN ERA

Gold mining started in Clonbinane about 1870 and lasted until around 1880. In the 1890s a rich reef (the Golden Dyke) was discovered at Clonbinane, which was worked until the beginning of World War I. A 1930s revival produced little.

In 1925 a Department of Mines report declared, 'Mining practically dead'. After early optimistic reports, quartz mining at Glenvale was disappointing and little further mention can be found.

History shows that boom times have always created opportunities for scammers and swindlers. Below is an example of one which occurred just down the road.

Mining Company Swindle
[A LETTER] TO THE EDITOR OF THE ARGUS

Sir, Having read with great interest your articles on the present 'scrip mania', I have thought it necessary to address you upon the subject ... I allude to another mining company swindle which is about to appear before the public on Monday, 1st of August, under the title, I believe, of 'Mt Disappointment Gold Quartz-mining Company' ...

The Argus, Monday 1 August 1859.