All roads lead to Lambing Flat

When gold was found at Lambing Flat in 1860, it wasn't just another goldfield. This was a very rich, vast area that could be worked easily with little capital or equipment. It was the discovery every unlucky miner had been waiting for. Gold was proving hard to find as the fields ran out. Thousands of miners and prospectors rushed to the new field – many bringing with them years of frustrations over hard work for little return on other diggings across NSW, Victoria and beyond.

Among the new arrivals were 1,500 Chinese miners. Ever since 1855 when Victoria imposed an entry tax on the Chinese, these new arrivals had taken to disembarking at Sydney, or Robe in South Australia, and trudging through the bush to the Victorian and NSW diggings.

Many Chinese never made it south of the border, as they often discovered the NSW countryside much to their liking and unearthed new gold rich areas for themselves as they went. Chinese miners staked their claims on the Lambing Flat field from its earliest days.

"Chinese Miners on their way to the Diggings - Charles Lyall, 1854
Reproduced courtesy State Library of Victoria H87.63/2/4

Organised labour

Unlike others, Chinese miners arrived in NSW in organised groups of around 100 complete with a leader. This approach allowed them to undertake mining in a vastly more systematic way than European miners, who worked alone or in small groups.

Chinese teams were prepared to invest time and labour in building infrastructure such as water races and dams to underpin their mining efforts. Water was typically a very scarce resource on the diggings, so the way the Chinese were able to provide for their own needs was a major point of difference.

This led to jealousy at their success in re-working ground that Europeans had abandoned as no longer payable. Europeans accused the Chinese of 'taking their gold', fuelling the resentment.

The coordinated, organised approach of the Chinese miners led to widespread resentment on the diggings at their success in extracting gold from ground others often found unpayable.

Washing tailings.
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A ticking bomb

While anti-Chinese sentiment was widespread, the highly dispersed nature and small number of miners on many of the NSW diggings had usually acted to prevent major confrontation.

Many predicted that it needed only a rush to a goldfield rich enough to attract a large concentration of European and Chinese miners for an explosive situation to develop.

With 9,000 miners on the Burrangong and Lambing Flat goldfields in January 1861, the stage was set for confrontation.

On 27 January, a crowd estimated at 1,500 miners gathered and drove the Chinese off the fields.

The assistant gold commissioner and outnumbered police could do little as the riot ensued. Reinforcements arrived soon after and this allowed the Chinese to return.

Illustration after original "Chinese in Lambing Flat riots, December 1860" courtesy Dept of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs

Deserting the field

To defuse the situation, the police restricted the Chinese to very limited sections of the field. But maintaining a force of 290 police and military on the field was an expensive solution for the government.

When the military were withdrawn in late May, tensions immediately flared, fuelled by news that the Chinese had successfully defended their claim at Native Dog Creek from European miners who tried to drive them off.

The riots came to a head on Sunday 30 June 1861 when 2,000 to 3,000 miners, most armed with pick handles, formed up under flags and banners and resolved to expel the Chinese from the field once and for all.

In a brutal expulsion that included scalping some 'Celestials' as their pigtails were cut off, the Chinese were banished on a cold midwinter night, with no equipment or provisions. As they had back in January, 1,274 Chinese miners took shelter at James Roberts's property '*Currawong*', 20 km away near Murrumburrah. Roberts's family and employees fed and sheltered them for two weeks.

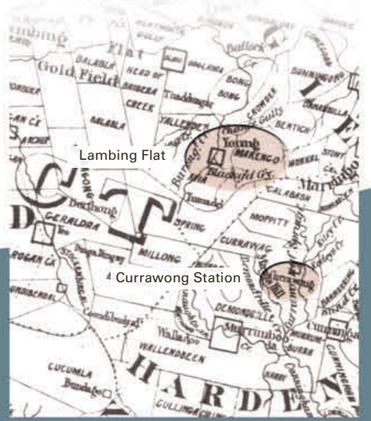
Military response

Police reinforcements arrived on the field a week later. Soon after, three of the ringleaders were arrested on 14 July.

That night 1,000 miners attacked the police lock-up to free the men, resulting in one death when the police fired and charged the crowd. The next day the men were released.

The riot led the assistant gold commissioner to read the British Parliament's *Riot Act* of 1714 that gave local authorities the power to declare a group of twelve or more people to be an unlawful assembly, and order them to disperse or face punishment.

Police reinforcements soon arrived. On 17 July Martial Law was declared and a detachment of troops sent from Sydney to enforce it.



Section from Reuss and Browne's map of NSW 1860-69. Reproduced courtesy National Library of Australia Map NK 5928.

Government reaction

Such a blatant uprising against law and order shocked the colony, with popular opinion blaming it on the presence of the Chinese. Parliament passed an anti-Chinese immigration bill and restricted where the Chinese could mine. This is regarded as the beginning of the 'White Australia Policy', restricting non-European immigration, which ended with the abolition of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1973.

This highly discriminatory legislation did reduce tensions, creating a gradual status quo of resentful co-existence. As the alluvial gold reserves dwindled, most Chinese miners returned home, while those who stayed often drifting into new occupations. To diminish the memory of the riots, the name Lambing Flat was changed to Young, named after the governor Sir John Young.

Chinese market gardener
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