

The discovery of the Mt Bischoff Mineral Resources Tasmania

Compiled by R.E. Smith from notes left by the late James Smith

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Mr. James Smith, the discoverer of the Mount Bischoff tin mine, was born at George Town in Tasmania in 1827, at an early age he was left an orphan, and was taken under the guardianship of Mr. John Guillan, a merchant and mill owner of Launceston. At the age of nine he commenced work in one of his guardian's flour mills, and while there he commenced a course of self instruction in which he long persevered.

After his arrival at manhood he made occasional expeditions in search of minerals in the wild country to the east and west of the River Tamar.

In 1851 he went to the gold fields of Victoria, and two years afterwards, in 1853, he settled as a pioneer farmer at the River Forth on the N.W. coast of Tasmania, on 640 acres he selected from the Crown.

For six years he was a struggling farmer and orchardist, having planted one of the first orchards in the district, which is still, in 1922, bearing fruit.

But farming was not to his liking and on the 11th April 1859 with two companions he started on the first expedition, quickly followed by another, which resulted in the discovery of gold in the Wilmot and Forth Rivers.

From the Forth as headquarters he continued exploring, without companions, the little known interior.

Early in the 60's he cut pine along the branches of the Dove River, where the logs floated down to the Forth or by that river to Leith at its mouth, where they were sawn into timber by hand on the point on the west side of the river where the railway bridge now crosses.

During these expeditions he explored the highlands drained by the Forth, Leven, Pieman and Arthur Rivers; and the courses of the streams flowing into Bass Strait to the westward of the Forth. He also discovered silver ore on Mt. Claude near Sheffield, but did not trace it to its source.

In October 1871 Mr. Smith started on the expedition during which he discovered the tin at Mt Bischoff. In a former expedition he had had a quantity of provisions conveyed to a convenient depot by way of the then newly opened track through Smith's Plain which gave access to the foot of the Black Bluff, which is there the commencement of the open country.

After several weeks spent in examining the country in different directions he reached Knole Plain late in November, where he was detained for a time by wet weather.

From one part of that plain he could see Mt. Bischoff; but he did not, as in former years, have much desire to visit the mountain, as he thought that an experienced prospector had already been there, and that it was not likely that he would have overlooked the existence of gold or tin in payable quantities at the mountain.

His principal desire was to reach the head waters of the Arthur River and examine its bed and banks from near its source downwards, till failure of provisions, now very much diminished, should render it necessary to seek a fresh supply either at Table Cape or Circular Head, with the country between which and the Arthur River he was comparatively familiar.

He reached that river by a track from Knole Plain which Mr. Gordon Burgess with Mr. Heazlewood and Mr. Savage as his assistants had cut under directions from the Government a few years previously, and which was still traceable.

Having reached the Arthur he made an examination of some of the country to the westward to near Mt Cleveland in order to decide whether it would be well to go on a prospecting tour in that direction on some future occasion.

On the 1st December he decided to return to the Arthur, and on the afternoon of the same day he commenced the descent of that river. For a considerable distance he found the banks comparative by level. Not having a shovel with him he could do but little except look for lode outcrops and search from time to time in the beds of streams and he noted some places to which he intended to return with a prospecting outfit should he meet with nothing elsewhere more promising.

After descending the river for a few hours he discovered on it one of the highest falls he had up to that time seen. At the fall the river descended from the comparatively level table land into a steep valley.

A short distance below the fall he discovered traces of gold. Continuing down the river he discovered more gold, but the bed of the river in that part was too much encumbered with debris for him to examine the rocks and their crevices for gold or tin to any extent. The second discovery of gold was at a spot which he afterwards found was about a mile from Mt. Bischoff ; though, from the impossibility of obtaining a view of the surrounding country owing to the depth of the valley and the denseness of the scrub he was at that time unable to determine its exact position.

At length, on the afternoon of Saturday, the 2nd Dec., he arrived at what he believed, owing to an old inaccurate map he had, to be the junction of the Waratah with the Arthur. He prepared a camp on the west side of the river opposite the branch stream, and rested there till Monday. On the morning of that day, the 4th Dec. 1871, he proceeded a short distance

up the branch stream and selecting a spot where he thought it likely that he would find a trace of gold or tin if either existed even in small quantities, he washed a little of the detritus of the stream and obtained about half a teaspoon full of what he thought in the gloom of the forest looked like oxide of tin, but he thought it might possibly be some new mineral. So small a quantity of tin would hardly have been noticed on the goldfields of Victoria when he was there. He therefore decided to return to the last place where he had found gold. Taking his little pick and dish, his only prospecting implements, he soon satisfied himself that the gold was not in quantity that he could then follow up.

Returning to his camp he decided to continue the search down the river.

He descended the stream for some distance on Tuesday, and on the following Wednesday he reached a spot where the sun shone through a natural gap in the trees and he now took time to examine in the clear daylight the sample of mineral, and on noticing that some of it was very little waterworn he concluded that its matrix was not far from where he had obtained the sample.

He now decided to return and follow up the discovery to some extent at least.

In the bed of the creek where he had washed the tin there was slate and schist in situ, and porphyry boulders; and it was easy to decide that where the slate and porphyry joined was the most promising place to find the mineral in quantity.

He started early in the morning to trace the porphyry boulders to their source, and late in the afternoon he camped in the valley of the creek he was ascending. On searching in and near the bed of the creek by his camp he could not find a trace of tin. He, however, discovered traces of lead. He had been nine hours ascending the creek encumbered with his knapsack. On the following day he descended for about two hours, without his knapsack, to where he had seen the confluence of a branch coming from the north-eastward. A short search in this branch resulted in a very encouraging prospect, about half a pound of tin being obtained in one spot in a few minutes.

It was now easy to trace the tin along the creek to its source on what is now the Mount Bischoff Tin Mining Co's south section. In doing so he discovered a lode of antimonial lead and another containing zinc blende and galena.

Having verified the position of the tin and being short of provisions, he determined to return to Knole Plain in as direct a line as possible. He therefore started in a south-easterly direction, but the denseness of the forest caused him to keep to the northward, and after a time he heard a sound resembling that of a waterfall, and turning in the direction whence the sound came, he emerged from the gloom of the forest, and stepping onto a basalt precipice over which a large stream was falling he saw before him to the north and north-westward a broad expanse of wooded valley bathe in unobscured sunshine, and he knew that this must be the Waratah, and that the fall was a new discovery.

He now understood that the stream in which he had found the first trace of tin was not the Waratah as he had thought, but one which up to that time had not been marked on the maps he had seen, and he decided to call it "Tinstone Creek," which name it has continued to bear.

Having reached Knole Plain he remained there from Saturday evening the 9th December to Monday morning. All the food he then had remaining was about four ounces of bread and enough tea and sugar to make about a pint of tea. His intention had been to start early on Monday morning for a cattle station which was about ten mile distant. But on reflection he thought that he might by very strenuous exertion and unencumbered with anything to carry but his small pick and dish make a hurried visit to the mount to further examine the tin ground and return to the plain in time to reach the station.

Starting early he heard the sound of the Waratah Fall at about seven o'clock. It then began to rain and in the course of half an hour he was drenched. That day he discovered antimonial lead and got a better idea as to how to apply for the mineral sections.

He then set out for the cattle station and arrived there apparently that evening, but this is not clear from the records. The stockman provided a meal of fried lean kangaroo and damper and tea. He was very much exhausted on reaching the cattle station, but the time of his arrival there and the length of this stay the records do not show.

He then returned to where he had some provisions stored, and commenced to re-examine much of the ground he had traversed in former years, thinking that he might have overlooked tin ore in some of the black sand he had seen in previous expeditions.

As the weather had set in dry and the waters of the rivers became lower than they had been for many years he continued the search in these beds for several weeks, hoping to find gold in quantity where he knew it existed in traces, or that he might find tin in a place more accessible to a sea port.

At length, having searched the river beds, that of the Inglis in particular, as far as he thought expedient under the circumstances, he applied in March 1872 for mineral sections on the site of the discovery at Mt. Bischoff. He described the position of the ground with, he thought, sufficient accuracy, and was not a little surprised on being informed that a more accurate description of the position of the proposed sections was required.

Owing to this he arranged with Mr. E.B.E. Walker and Mr. Maurice Duncan of the Leven to accompany him to Mt. Bischoff in the month of May. The two latter travelled by the old track to Hampshire Hills, while Mr Smith travelled through the bush to do some more prospecting on the way. On meeting at Hampshire Hills they proceeded to Knole Plain, and from there they cut a foot track to Tinstone Creek.

Mr. Walker, who in former years had been on the gold fields of Victoria, had made a small cradle of a kind used by the gold diggers. This was carried in pieces ready for putting together. Mr. Smith wished to ascertain whether there was a rich deposit of tin at the creek in order to determine whether to commence mining operations there first, where, besides being sheltered from the cold winds of the place, there would be plenty of water available.

The inclemency of the weather however interfered too much with their intentions, and after Mr. Smith had seen his friends safely to Surrey Hills, he did some more prospecting before returning to the coast. Meantime he had prepared a plan which he felt sure would satisfy the minister as to the discovery being on Crown Land, as he supposed there was some doubt as to whether it was on the V.D.L. Co's Surrey Hills Block.

The applications to lease the proposed sections having been approved of it was necessary to find the money for paying the first years rent and for preliminary mining operations. This he did by disposing of 160 acres of land at the River Gawler which he had selected from the Crown some years before.

On the 11th August 1872 Mr. Smith; and the survey party, consisting of Mr. E.P. Sprent and his assistant Mr. David Jones; and two workmen engaged by Mr. Smith to work at the mine, named George Yatlow and John Pow; and Mr. Woodward's bullock team with a light dray load of provisions, lent tools etc, started from Emu Bay. Keeping ahead of the team they cleared the old track of logs sufficiently to allow the dray to pass, and in three days they reached the Hampshire (Surrey? Hills). There they were joined by Mr. Henry Shaw, who assisted in looking out a way through the open country; and in another day they reached Knole Plain. From Knole Plain to the mountain they widened and improved the foot track previously cut, but it still led over innumerable slippery logs. What provisions were not required for immediate use were stored in a hollow tree and the rest were carried along the track to the mountain, where a camp was soon formed in a sheltered place in the myrtle forest. And having made themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted they commenced the work of surveying the first mineral section at Mt Bischoff.

This was a tedious task owing to the rain and snow that generally prevailed. Whenever there seemed a promise of fine weather they hurried to work and took every advantage of the short respites from wet weather, though the scrub was almost constantly dripping. It was only on such occasions that Mr. Sprent could use his theodolite owing to the gloom of the forest through which the survey lines had to be opened.

However, after three weeks, during which they lost no chance of hurrying on the work as much as possible the survey of the first 80 acre block now known as the Mount Bischoff Tin Mining Co's south section, was completed. Emu Bay was reached on the return journey on the 10th September, after an absence of thirty days.

The next work was to open a dray track from Knole Plain, the nearest open country. Having marked the track, Mr. Smith left Yatlow and Pow to commence clearing it. They worked well, at first by themselves, and then under the supervision of MR. W.M. Crosby. But snow and rain so retarded the work that it was not made passable for drays to what is now the west side of Waratah till the 13th December, this work being carried out entirely at Mr. Smith's expense, the Government having declined to assist in any way.

On the 14th of that month in the year 1872 preliminary mining operations were commenced under the management of Mr. W.M. Crosby. Ore dressing, prospecting the ground in different directions and other work were carried on simultaneously.

At length, the north section having also been surveyed and prospected and the existence of tin in great quantities demonstrated, the Mount Bischoff Tin Mining Co. was formed, and took possession of the two sections on the 1st August 1873.

Up to this time the whole responsibility and expense of developing and working the mine had been born by Mr. Smith. From the formation of the Co. the history of the mine can be easily traced by referring to the periodical reports.

Mr. Smith's health had suffered as the result of the hardships he had encountered during the years he spent in exploring and prospecting, and after the Co. was formed he took up farming again where he had relinquished it fourteen years before.

He was elected to the Legislative Council in 1886, but resigned before his term was completed.

He died in 1897 at the age of 69, and was buried in the Congregational Cemetery at Forth.

In 1874 he married the eldest daughter of Mr. John Pleas. His widow and their six sons and daughters are still living, the widow still residing at the Forth.