

WILLIAM SLATER'S LOST GOLD MINE.

By Rob Parsons

In late December 2024 I set out on my first attempt to rediscover William Slater's long lost gold mine. This mine is of great importance to Tasmania's heritage and mining history, as it is the first ever example of hard-rock mining on the West Coast of Tasmania.

It is a deep tunnel, perfectly arched, cut by hand tools for a total length of 120ft, through the cap of a hill.¹ Until recently its whereabouts or existence had been unknown, ever since the property and all tools were advertised for sale in 1882.²

When writing of the history of the west coast of Tasmania, every historian recalls the 'first' prospecting parties to arrive. The Meredith brothers, Charles Donnelly and T.B Moores parties - all arrived to the Pieman river in the summer of 1876-77. The first two mentioned established base camps and huts, as far upstream as navigable by ship. But overlooked is the fact that the Slater brothers were in the very same area, finding good coarse gold seven years before any of these men had ever set foot in the area.

By reading the (almost) fortnightly reports of 'The West Coast Goldfields' (1880's - The Mercury Newspapers) I have not only been able to follow in good detail the story of William Slaters gold mine, but locate it on ground and document it. This information brings to the surface many historic and lost placenames of the surrounding area. Several main features in the area are named by pioneers of the past, ie. Owen Meredith River, Donnelly's Crossing. But to date, not one thing exists to commemorate William Slaters story. (Not even a marker / headstone where his final resting place is, in the Cornelian Bay Cemetery, North Hobart!)

The following report gives some insight into what I have researched about Slater's mine, the company formed as a result of it, and the shortcomings and demise of the company. With this, I'll give a brief report on the two separate expeditions in which I undertook to relocate the mine. It is my hope in doing so, that the mines official location can be filed with Mineral Resources Tasmania, and the placename "Slaters Range" can be considered for official use.

Rob Parsons

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William Slater was born on 17th June 1851, in Manchester, England. He arrived in Tasmania in 1870 with his family, and settled in Deloraine where his father John was engaged in agricultural pursuits.³

In mid January 1873, alongside his younger brother Alfred, William departed on 6 month excursion to see the western coast of Tasmania. The vessel used was a 5 ton cutter named Alma, which had been fitted out at the cost of Mr C.L Weber, he being interested in the more remote and unexplored parts of the island. The trio spent the first two months exploring the watersheds of Macquarie Harbour, where many prospects of gold were obtained, but only of a fine nature. On the 15th of March they left the harbour and made it up the coast northwards to the mouth of the Pieman river. It was here that upon investigating the dangerous bar they were compelled to run though, the surf at the time running 10ft high, threatening every moment to engulf the frail and tiny craft.⁴ Having successfully entered the river, the party then began prospecting their way upstream. 20 miles in total, finding gold occasionally, but the best prospects were to be obtained high upstream, as far as the boat could be navigated.⁵ This point, was just above the shortly afterwards well known 'Donnelly's Crossing', and they moored in a cove which would be known by future parties and subsequent government surveys as 'Alma Cove'. This name is one of many that no longer exists on maps.

It was in the vicinity of Alma Cove that good reef gold was obtained, but after some time prospecting, a want of provisions and worsening weather caused the men to make preparations for the homeward trip.

The region would remain once again isolated, until 1876 when Charles Percy Sprent was commissioned to cut in a track from the newly formed tin mining town of Waratah. After months, Sprent and his party had reached Parsons Hood, where they were split in two groups. Messrs. Jones and Lempriere ordered to head directly west and strike the Pieman river, whilst Sprent, Long and Bourke would continue south west to reach Mt Heemskirk.⁶

Following the glowing reports of tin discoveries published by Sprent on his return to civilisation, immediate action was taken up by several new companies to set up prospecting parties for the upcoming season.⁷ This would of course include the well documented Meredith Brothers, Charles Donnelly's Party, T.B Moore etc who would go on to make history as the first mining claims on the West Coast of Tasmania. These were all alluvial tin mining claims, based around Mt Heemskirk.

The Mt Heemskirk tin mining field did not eventuate to much more than a few seasons work, by which time payable gold was discovered in a tributary of the Savage river, by Harry Middleton.⁸ This led to a rush of the north Pieman area and more payable gold discoveries were made.

Upon hearing of the new gold discoveries Slater though it wise to follow up his previous find of coarse gold, and with that in mind he arrived at the Alma Cove, Upper Pieman River in August 1879.⁹

Beginning work at the mouth of the Owen Meredith river, Slater tested his way upstream for a distance of 5 miles. He sampled every creek on both sides of the river, and found the best prospects to be coming from every one of the creeks found on the south side of the river.¹⁰

The most coarse gold though, and that of a honeycomb nature was concentrated in a creek he named 'Specimen Creek'. It was here Slater began his long and painful search to locate the reef in which this gold was being shed. Following the lead of gold first upstream, then into the hill, where here he found several specimens of rough quartz with gold running through them. A 50 Acre lease was then taken out on the property with the direct intention of striking the main reef.¹¹

Slater began his work first by dropping a 30ft shaft on the spur in which he obtained his specimens, but this was met without luck. Following advice given, a small company of six shares was formed, The Lefroy Gold Mining Co. Funding and supplies secured, several crosscuts were then made along the creek leading up to the spur, some of which were around 100ft long, ranging in depth 4 to 7 ft.¹²

Dynamite was frequently packed in from the Henty River, owing to the fact the ground was so hard to work, having been made of slate. Although several quartz leaders were met throughout, none of them contained any gold. Mr Slater then proposed a tunnel to be driven through the cap of the hill, high above the creek. This was guessed to be a distance of 120ft. The work was outsourced and by April 1881 reported to be completed according to contract. Once again, without striking any gold bearing material.¹³

Having read all of this information, it was my desire to explore the area and see if I could locate the 120ft tunnel, this would then line up the location of Specimen Creek, Mt. William and Slaters Range.

The clues given by the newspaper articles indicate that Specimen Creek was on the south side of the Owen Meredith River, it also had a spur 40ft above the creek, where the first shaft was sunk. This was all at the foot of Mt. William, the highest point of Slaters Range. In reviewing the topography for the area I found that two separate ranges were potential candidates. These both having northern high points and both having multiple creeks feeding from these points.

After multiple visits to the location, exploring both the right and the left range, I finally located the 120ft tunnel featured in the articles. It was of course as described, a credible piece of work, being perfectly arched and straight as an arrow for its length.

Knowing now the exact location of the tunnel, I made another visit to the area to find the other mentioned features down closer to the creek. These ranged from several deep shafts, some with drives extending north and south, but also another tunnel of 300ft, which upon further investigation was written about on 9th, Sept 1881.¹⁴



Portal to Slaters Tunnel (120ft)



Slaters Tunnel (120ft) midway, looking outside



Entrance to 300ft Tunnel



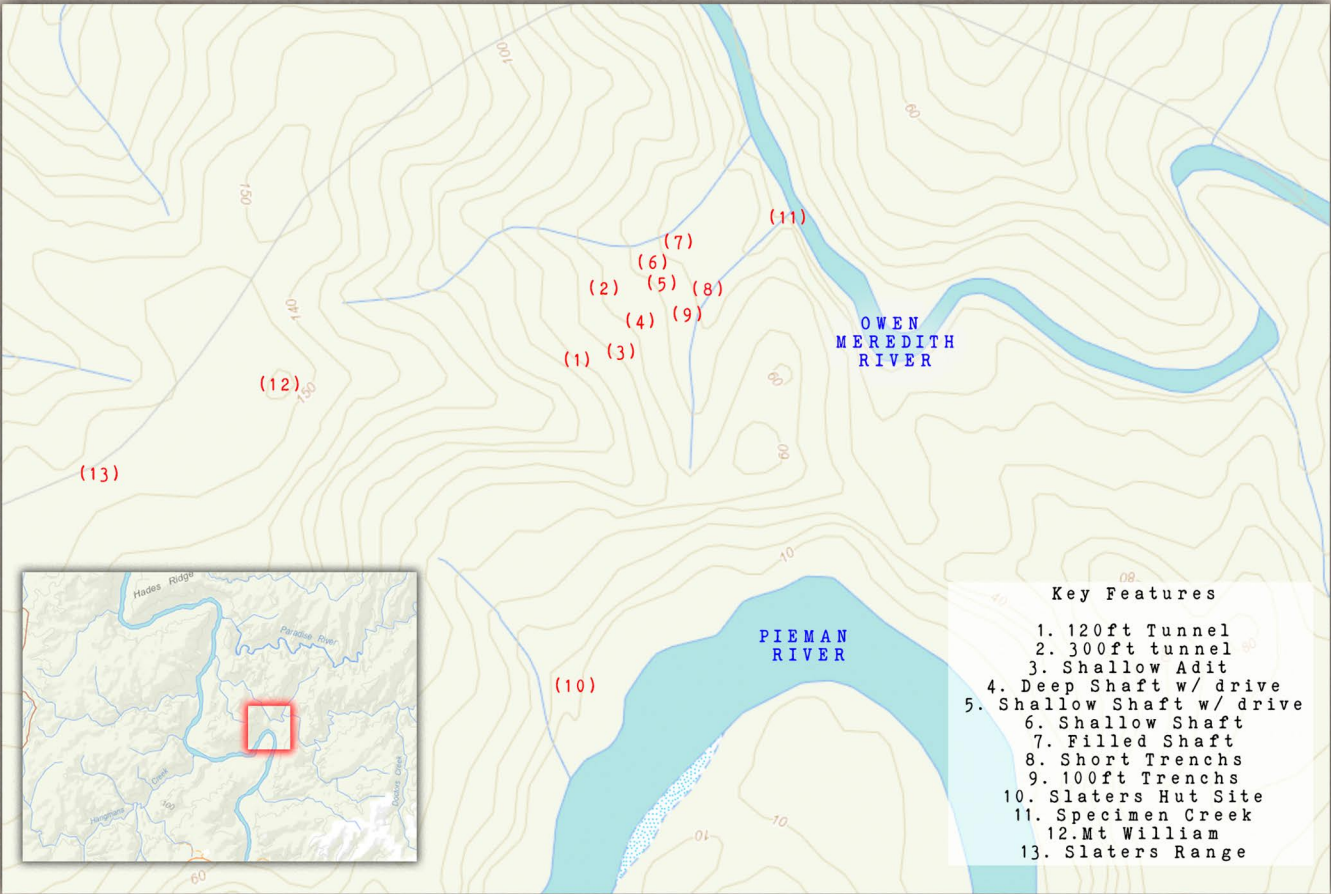
Shaft inside 300ft Tunnel



Tramway remains
300ft Tunnel



Bottles at end of tunnel
300ft Tunnel



List of Main Discoveries



Slaters Range Placenames Tasmania Proposal

References

- (1.) Mercury - Friday 3 September 1880, page 3 (The West Coast Goldfields)
- (2.) Mercury - Monday 14 August 1882, page 4 (Government Advertisements)
- (3.) Zeehan and Dundas Herald - Wednesday 5 November 1919, page 1
- (4.) Launceston Examiner (Tas. : 1842 - 1899), Tuesday 30 June 1874, page 3
- (5.) Tasmanian (Launceston, Tas. : 1881 - 1895), Saturday 12 August 1882
- (6.) The Cyclopedia of Tasmania - Early West Coast Discoveries
- (7.) Pioneers of Tasmania's West Coast by C. J. Binks
- (8.) A History of Corinna and The Pieman River by Peter MacFie page 19
- (9-13.) Mercury - Friday 3 September 1880, page 3 (The West Coast Goldfields)
- (14.) Mercury - Friday 9 September 1881, page 3