



The Kimberley gold rush of 1885–86

by P. E. Playford

In the mid-1800s Western Australia was regarded as 'the poor relation' of the other Australian colonies. It envied the wealth generated by the major mineral discoveries, especially of gold, in the eastern colonies. As a result, the Western Australian Government decided in 1872 to offer a reward of £5000 (\$10 000) for the discovery of the colony's first payable goldfield. Conditions for payment would be that the field lay within 300 miles (480 km) of a declared port, had produced at least 10 000 ounces (311 035 g) of gold within two years of the discovery, and the gold had been shipped to Great Britain after clearance at a Customs House of the colony.

The Kimberley gold story began with the exploring expedition of Alexander Forrest in 1879 (Fig. 1). He traversed the district from west to east, then continued through to the gold-mining settlement of Pine Creek in the Northern Territory. Forrest commented to the manager of the mine, Adam Johns, on similarities between the rocks at Pine Creek and those seen by his party in the Kimberley. This motivated Johns to mount an expedition to the area, with his mate Phil Saunders as party leader, together with James Quinn and Crawford, an Aborigine (Playford, 1972; Playford and Ruddock, 1985; Clement and Bridge, 1991).

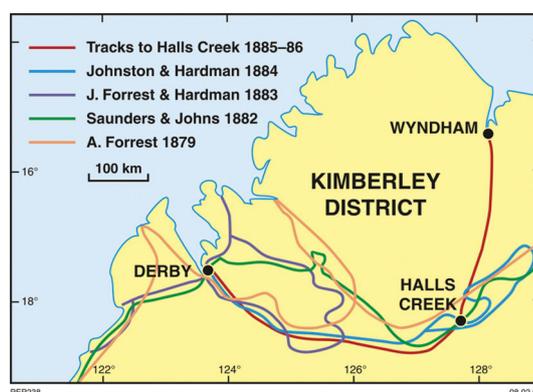


Figure 1. Map showing routes followed by Forrest in 1879, Saunders and Johns in 1882, Forrest and Hardman in 1883, Johnston and Hardman in 1884, and prospectors who joined the Kimberley gold rush of 1885–86

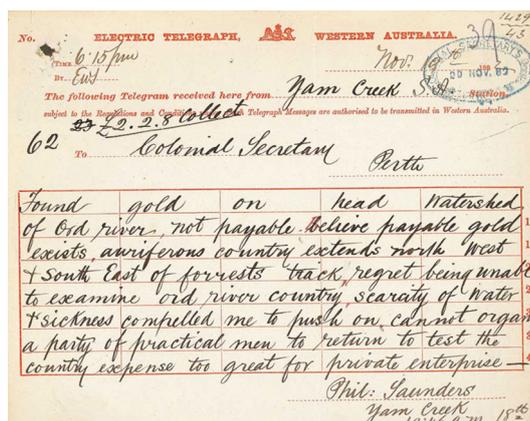


Figure 2. Telegram from Phillip Saunders to the Colonial Secretary, 19 November 1886, announcing the discovery of gold in the East Kimberley

The party sailed from Port Darwin to Cossack in the west Pilbara in July 1881, then set out for the Kimberley (Fig. 1). Saunders found traces of gold at several places in the East Kimberley in August–September 1882, especially in the headwaters of the Ord River. However, Johns had become seriously ill and it was imperative for them to push on without delay to the Northern Territory. Consequently there was insufficient time to evaluate the discovery. Saunders reported this in a telegram to the Western Australia Colonial Secretary, indicating his belief that payable gold could probably be found in the area (Fig. 2).

The Legislative Council debated the best way of following up this exciting report. Some members maintained that practical ('pick-and-shovel') men were needed to prospect the area, whereas others were in favour of sending a geologist. A decision was eventually made to appoint Edward T. Hardman, a geologist from the Irish Geological Survey, to join John Forrest's survey expedition to the West Kimberley (Fig. 1). However, no positive signs of gold were found on that expedition (Hardman, 1884).

Hardman accompanied a second Kimberley surveying expedition, led by H. F. Johnston, to the East Kimberley in 1884 (Fig. 1; Hardman, 1885). Hardman* panned colours of gold in several watercourses in that area, especially in the headwaters of the Elvire River, where the Halls Creek gold discovery would be made during the following year (Fig. 3).

Several prospecting parties set off for the East Kimberley soon after Hardman's 1884 report and map were released. One of these parties, consisting of Charles Hall (party leader), John Slattery, Alexander Nicholson, Joseph McCague, John Campbell, and August Pontt, headed east from Derby to the Elvire River area, where Hardman had reported his best gold showings. On 14 July 1885 they found payable gold at a place they named 'Halls Creek' (Fig. 3).

As soon as the find was announced — in August 1885 — the Kimberley gold rush began. Many thousands of men made their way to the Kimberley from other parts of WA, the eastern colonies, and New Zealand. Most

* Some of Hardman's notebooks with water-colour paintings and sketches made in the field have recently been uncovered in Thirsk, Yorkshire. They show that Hardman was not only a competent and motivated geologist, but also a talented artist. One of the many paintings in his 1883 field book is shown here as Figure 4.

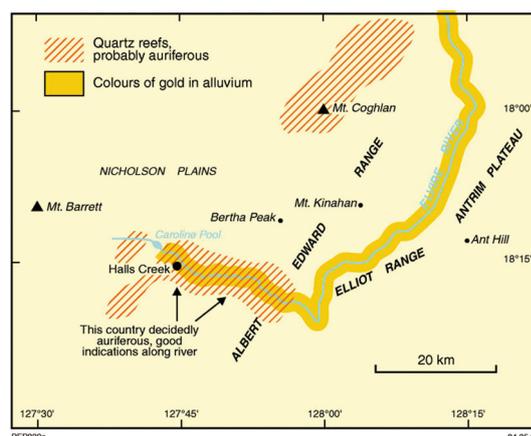


Figure 3. Gold showings and quartz reefs in the Elvire River area, as mapped by Hardman in 1884, showing the location of the Halls Creek gold discovery of 1885 (modified from Playford and Ruddock, 1985)

arrived by ship at Derby or (later) Wyndham, and walked to Halls Creek (a distance of 600 km from Derby or a much rougher 400 km from Wyndham). Others travelled overland from the Northern Territory. Illness and disease were rife at the diggings, and when the first warden, C. D. Price, arrived on 3 September 1886 he found that 'great numbers were stricken down, in a dying condition, helpless, destitute of money, food, or covering, and without mates or friends simply lying down to die'.

A few were lucky enough to locate payable alluvial or reef gold, but most had little or no success. Of those who arrived at the field with possessions, many sold or exchanged them for food within a day or two of arrival, and made their way back to the ports, to escape the misery of Halls Creek. Those who had no possessions were compelled to remain. Warden Price reported that there were about 2000 men at the diggings when he arrived, although the total number who joined the rush is estimated to have been four or five times that number. By the end of 1886 the rush had ended, and in February 1887 only about 600 men remained at the field. In spite of the early promise of several underground mines, Halls Creek never prospered, as ore in the mines petered out at depth and the alluvial gold was soon exhausted.

Applications for the £5000 reward for the gold discovery were lodged by H. F. Johnston, E. T. Hardman, P. Saunders, and C. Hall and party, and



Figure 4. Painting of 'Port Usborne' by E. T. Hardman, May 1883

several others who had found gold in the Halls Creek area during 1885. Johnston based his claim on the fact that he was the leader of the survey party when traces of gold were found in 1884. However, Hardman pointed out that he was the one who had actually found the gold and reported the discovery. He was scathing in his criticism of Johnston, saying that during the survey he had hindered, rather than assisted, in the discovery of gold. Hall and party's claim rested on the fact that they were the first to report the discovery of payable gold at Halls Creek. Saunders did not lodge a claim himself, but a submission from a Justice of the Peace in South Australia, pointing out that Saunders had been the first to report signs of gold in the East Kimberley, was accepted as a claim on Saunders' behalf.

At the conclusion of his temporary appointment as Government Geologist in 1885, Hardman left Western Australia for Ireland to resume his duties with the Geological Survey of Ireland. He died suddenly of typhoid in Dublin on 6 April 1887 at the age of 42 years, leaving a wife and two small children. Had he lived, his ambition to return to Western Australia would soon have been fulfilled. His appointment to the permanent position of Government Geologist (and thereby founder of the Geological Survey of Western Australia) was approved by the Legislative Council on 13 June 1887, before the news of his death two months earlier had reached Perth.

At the time of Hardman's death no decision had been made regarding payment of a reward for the discovery of a payable goldfield. The Government eventually decided, on 31 May 1888, that the full conditions for payment had not been met and therefore the reward would not be paid. The main reason was that the recorded output from the field had been less than the required 10 000 ounces in the two years from 1885. Indeed, total recorded production for the three years from 1886 to 1888 had amounted to only 8668 ounces. However, the Government must have known that the actual production was much larger than this, perhaps more than 20 000 ounces, as claimed by Charles Hall. This is because Western Australia, alone among the Australian colonies, put customs duty on gold (amounting to two shillings and six pence (\$0.25) an ounce), and some miners consequently preferred to smuggle their gold out of the colony.

When the reward was withdrawn it was announced that a gift of £500 would be made to Hardman's widow and another £500 to Hall and his party. None of the recipients were satisfied with this — indeed they objected strongly that the full reward had not been paid, to no avail. Over the next four years Hall's party mounted three unsuccessful law suits against the Government. The last word from Hall came in a sad letter to John Forrest, written from Madagascar in 1896. There is no known record of his death, but he is presumed to have died destitute in that country.

The final appeal from one of Hardman's descendants was made in 1956, when his daughter, Bertha, wrote to the then Prime Minister (Robert Menzies) asking whether the Government could assist her, as she was living under straightened circumstances in retirement in Glasgow. She said that her father had died at an early age because his health had suffered as a result of trekking over the Kimberley, living on 'damper and poor food'. Her appeal was unsuccessful, but it did have the effect of reactivating the Mines Department file 'Reward for discovery of the Kimberley Gold Field' (file 10560/96) and thereby preserving it for posterity.

The other prominent applicant for the reward was the prospector Phil Saunders. He was held in high regard and affection by all who knew him, from diggers to politicians. Saunders never pressed his case for the reward, but many people believed that he deserved official recognition and reward as the first person to find gold in the Kimberley. In 1907 he was 66 years old and working a small gold show, with minimal returns, near Mount Ida. The Mount Ida Progress Association wrote to the Minister for Mines asking that Saunders be granted an appropriate annuity by the

Government in view of his many contributions to gold prospecting in Western Australia. The Government reacted slowly to this request, until the Progress Association wrote again, stating urgently that 'the old gentleman is now rapidly declining and almost blind' and he should receive appropriate monetary assistance when 'his life is apparently very near its close'.

This moving appeal had the desired effect, and Saunders was immediately granted a Government pension of £75 per year. If he were indeed close to death in 1907, he recovered well after receiving the annuity. Indeed he lived on for another 24 years, dying in 1931, at the age of 90 years, from the effects of rolling into his camp fire. By the time of his death, Saunders had received far more reward from the Government than the other discoverers of gold in the Kimberley — £1800 compared with £500 to Hall and his party and £500 to Hardman's widow.

There can be no doubt that the discovery of the Kimberley Goldfield and the dramatic rush that followed are important events in the history of Western Australia. They marked the real beginning of the State's mining industry, by drawing world attention to the colony and its gold potential. Some of the experienced prospectors who joined the Kimberley rush soon moved on to make rich discoveries in the Pilbara and Southern Cross districts (1888), the Murchison (1891), Coolgardie (1892), and Kalgoorlie (1893). Those major discoveries captured the imagination of the world, resulting in a flood of immigrants and investment capital that transformed Western Australia from an impoverished colony in the late 1880s to a wealthy State in 1901.

References

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Postscript

There is a modern postscript to this story. On 25 August 2005 Edward Townley Hardman and Phillip Saunders were inducted into the Australian Prospectors and Miners Hall of Fame, Kalgoorlie. They had been nominated for that honour by the Geological Survey of Western Australia.