

OTAGO GOLDFIELDS PARK

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Introduction

Since its beginnings, the Otago Goldfields Park has been more of a concept than a physical reality. That is now changing but it has taken 8 years to make the breakthrough. The transition from concept to reality has at times been hesitant and difficult, but perhaps this is to be expected when establishing from scratch a major park complex.

It has been my privilege to have been directly involved with establishing the park from near the outset, and have witnessed a metamorphosis through many and varied stages. Recording this transition will hopefully provide an explanation for the lengthy process of establishment, as well as providing a practical lesson for similar park establishments in the future.

Park Concept

Unlike all the existing national and maritime parks in New Zealand, the Otago Goldfields Park began with an almost total lack of reserves or Crown land under direct control from which to form the nucleus of a park. The starting point was an idea – that of creating a scattered historic reserves complex throughout Central Otago, but with the additional complexity of incorporating private historic sites into the park's structure.

In 1971 the then Director of National Parks and Reserves (Mr P.H.C. Lucas) produced a paper outlining the broad purpose of the park as – "to serve as a prime visitor attraction while preserving as a permanent cultural asset a cross section of the history of the gold rush era of a century ago."



At that time it was envisaged that the content of the park would involve:

- sites of gold discoveries
- sites demonstrating the techniques of gold winning
- one or two deserted gold mining towns
- parts of existing goldfield towns
- mining trails linking historic sites.

The paper further provided a thematic basis for site selection with the adoption of "goldfields themes worthy of inclusion in the Park - discovery, access, methods, social life and major events. Then available sites could be identified representing the best examples of each of these themes for inclusion in the Park."

After consultation with the Historic Places Trust and territorial local authorities and after considerable publicity there was sufficient general support for the park concept for the Minister of Lands in 1973 to approve establishment, as part of the department's wider reserves activities in Otago.

The preliminary publicity to the concept of a goldfields park naturally generated considerable interest among

historical groups who for many years had witnessed their local history in the form of goldfields relics disappearing in the hands of scrap merchants, trophy hunters, and collectors. A means of legal protection such as a goldfields park proved to be a timely device to protect historic features. However, without additional staff appointed to respond to the generated public interest, the department found its activities limited to responding to suggestions from the public, but was unable to evaluate the historical objectiveness of many interested parties who at times tended to take a more local view than a regional or national viewpoint.

Evaluation of the resource

The first opportunity for the department to systematically assess the historic resource and establish a structure for park establishment was provided in 1975 with the appointment of the first full-time ranger for the park.

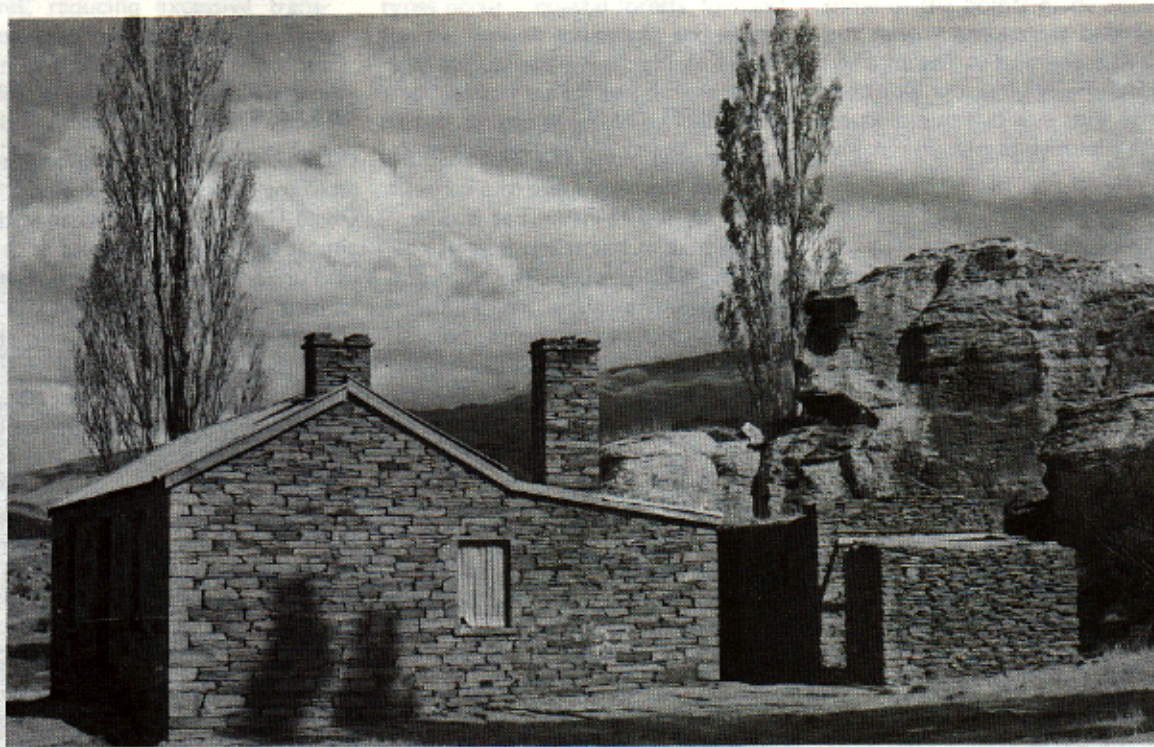
At that time it was realised that in the minds of the public a one entity or 'park' would never exist, if its widely scattered components were historically

or thematically unrelated. Therefore a comprehensive resource survey was initiated involving a year's field investigation, recording, and reporting. The survey turned up many surprises, with 350 separate localities identified, all to varying degrees falling within the broad park concept.

The immensity and diversity of the resource presented a major and immediate problem. If only the best and most representative examples were to be included in the park, then selection criteria had to be devised to objectively evaluate and rank all these sites in priority order. Five major criteria were considered to provide a basis for site evaluation. These were -

- historic significance
- physical evidence remaining
- visual setting
- vulnerability to deterioration
- interpretation opportunities.

A five-point scale was used to numerically score each site within each criteria. Total scores then provided a basis for broadly grouping similar ranking sites.



Mitchell's Cottage, Fruitlands, before restoration.

The representativeness of the individual sites could only be gauged on an expanded thematic framework. This expansion was necessary because the resource survey identified great diversity within the themes. Also it was found that there had to be a change of primary emphasis away from gold rush to the latter mining-industry era. The survey indicated little or no physical remains from the rush era of the early 1860s, with the industry era from 1870 to 1914 being responsible for most of the remaining relics and the mined landscapes so characteristic of Central Otago.

The following categorisation was devised to embrace the full span of goldfields settlement in Otago from 1861 onwards (see table).

Site selection and inclusion

This ranking and categorisation exercise resulted in priorities for inclusion in the park. Ten major areas were recommended for immediate inclusion, and negotiations with Crown lessees had already commenced for two of these areas. Another 20 localities were recommended for inclusion as a

| Theme | Sub Themes |
|-------------------|---|
| Discovery | Pre-rush, rushes |
| Communications | Trails, accommodation, river crossings, supplies, shipping |
| Mining Techniques | 1. Alluvium mining – paddocking, ground sluicing, hydraulic sluicing, hydraulic elevation, dredging, diversions, dams, water races 2. Quartz mining – excavation, ore transportation, milling, motive power, gold recovery |
| Life-Style | Settlement, dwellings, cemeteries, notable events/monuments |

second step, with a further 20 on a deferred basis.

In 1977 an advisory committee was appointed to consider policies for the selection and management of the park. A wide spectrum of interests were represented to tap sources of information and expertise. A heavy programme of field inspections and meetings by the committee resulted in the full ambit of the park being reviewed, with a consensus arising as to what the park is, and where it is to be.

Equally frustrating to both committee members and staff involved was the slow rate of implementation of agreed

actions. One full-time ranger with one recently appointed assistant concentrating on restoration, could have only a limited effect over a broad front. Incomplete negotiations in many areas also limited the ability to provide physical, and to most observers, tangible evidence of a park.

Initial promotion of the park concept, plus the committee's enthusiasm had created high expectations – but at that time these could not be realised owing to insufficient staffing for the park.

The more the committee in its enthusiasm for progress sought regular



Sluiced pinnacles, on protected private land at Bannochburn, to be included in the park.

meetings to push the project along, so the time of staff tended to be committed more to meetings and preparation for them rather than effective effort into implementation in the field. Fortunately more time has been available over the last 2 years for finalising negotiations with land owners. These are either complete, or near complete on 20 areas, restoration well advanced in several areas, and additional staff becoming available at a time when the ground work is largely completed. It is anticipated that only limited further acquisitions will be initiated in the near future as the emphasis is now being placed on effectively managing the areas already in the park.

Last year a concerted effort was made to present the first four areas to the public. This was largely owing to the employment of a researcher who could concentrate on collating historical material and preparing pamphlets as the first interpretation step.

The stone Mitchell's Cottage and grounds near Alexandra were faithfully restored, and used for the official launching of the park in December last year.

A settlement of quite a different character was next to be 'opened'. Cromwell's Chinatown had previously been uncovered by a Historic Places Trust archaeological excavation, and is now managed as part of the goldfields park.

The other two sites identified to the public are the distinctive suspension bridge across the Kawerau River near Queenstown and the 'Invincible' Mine near Glenorchy. All these sites are identified by signs incorporating the park symbol and have either interpretive plaques on-site or pamphlets available to the travelling public.

The successful 'opening' of these sites over a relatively short period was due to the co-ordinated inputs of staff with differing but complementary skills, in field, administration, and technical areas. Now sights are raised towards next summer, with emphasis on working-order exhibits, more publications, sign-posting, and interpretive plaques.

Recently a working-order stamping battery at Golden Point, near Palmerston, was operated over one weekend. The 800 people who arrived



were treated to seeing vintage rock-crushing machinery in action.

Negotiations are near complete to purchase a working-order sluicing claim, to be operated on a full-time basis for public display and involvement. This site will also function as a major information outlet for the park.

Several other sites will have basic interpretive services provided by next summer, with most of the 20 areas identified by signposting or in publications.

Therefore it can be safely said that the original concept is almost a reality. Eight years is a long time, but so was the period taken to create these historic monuments in the first place. If the best and most relevant relics from our past are permanently preserved for present and future, then the department's implementation of this innovative concept has been well justified.

