

## Waikaia – A Gold Story

It's important to state from the outset that this village and surrounding areas history is built on gold. In some respects it follows a similar tale to the rest of the gold rushes, in other respects it was quite different. When you grow up in an area, you take a lot of things for granted. And it has not been until I starting working in museums up in Dunedin, that the enormity of Waikaia's gold history really dawned on me. I am fortunate my great-grandfather found enough gold near the original site of Switzers to buy some land upon which our family farm still sits today, but there is no doubt not all miners were as fortunate.

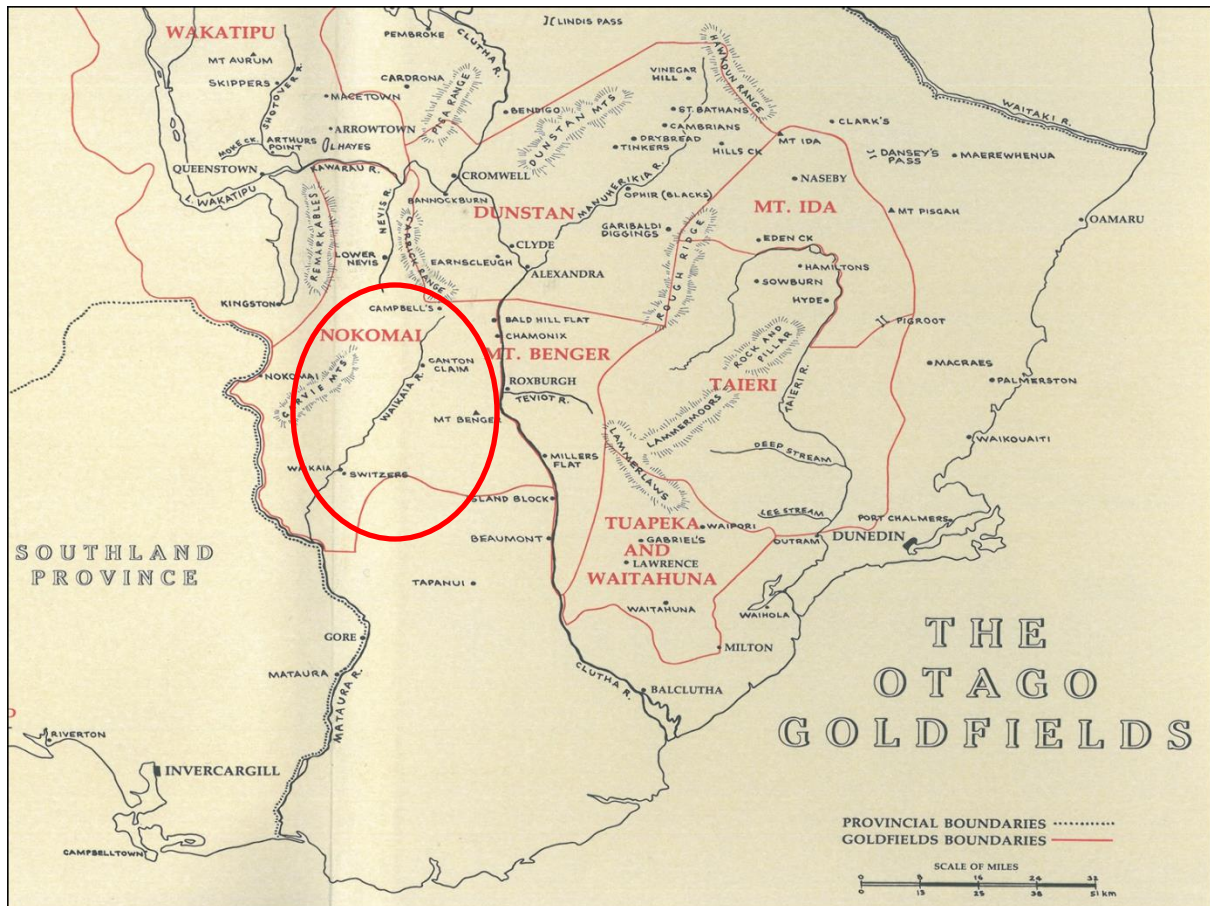


The Waikaia Forest

In October 1861, there was very little sign of human habitation here in the Waikaia Valley. There were some nearby local sheep runs and subsequent homesteads, but most of the land remained unbroken, consisting of hillside bush and valley floor swamp land.

As with most reports when talking gold, there is great variation as to the 'who' and 'when' gold was first found in the area. But most sources agree that there was a large party of miners at work along Winding Creek by November 1861, just two or three months after the initial rush to Gabriel's Gully. These miners were probably the most westerly of the short lived 'Blue Mountains' rush that was an off shoot of

the first Tuapeka rush. For the next 50 years, the search for gold was the focus of majority of people who lived in this area.



The Otago Goldfields / Windows on a Chinese Past, Dr James Ng

Now there is two things of note for those of new to the Waikaia gold story. The first is the enormous size of the Switzers gold field. Because of early warden rulings, sometimes the field covers from the Pomahaka River in the east to the Nokomai diggings in west, and from Potter’s Hut in the North to Pyramid in the south. Now in total, that covers about 1600 square kilometres. Obviously, this area wasn’t all being prospected at once. But over the course of 50 years, and as the search for gold developed from panning to sluicing to dredging, there wasn’t much of this area that remained unprospected.

The second point of note, which may surprise you, is the comparative remoteness of this area. The principle route to reach this here was from Lawrence, and the railway did not reach there until 1877. As the crow flies, it was a 50 mile journey from Lawrence to Waikaia. Most of the first phase of miners had to do this on foot until the regular coach service was up and running by the 1870s. The railway began to be built to Waikaia as a branch of the Waimea line around 1880, but the company went

bust and it wasn't until 1909 that the railway reached here, by that point the dredging boom was beginning to decline. For the first couple of years, the miners relied on supplies from the run holders until stores were set up. Store owners were slower to set up here than in other places because of the remoteness of the fields and the difficulties in gaining supplies, but also because of the fluctuating numbers of miners which I'll talk about later. So like many of the goldfields, this was a tough place to get to, but as we know, these were tough people we're talking about.



Chinese Village, Waikaia / Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago

The remoteness has also left a gap in information we have on the early years. As miners chopped and changed fields regularly, we have to rely on a few select snippets from miners memoirs and newspaper clippings. Photographs in particular are rare, especially for such a large area. But many of the key locations remain inaccessible other than on foot. In some senses, this has worked in favour of preserving these sites – and this is particularly relevant to the Upper Waikaia diggings.

Despite good returns, the 100 or so miners that were here in November 1861 quickly vanished with the news of the Dunstan finds in 1862. It was reported that there was only 12 miners left in the area over the winter months of 1862. However, by

November 1862 there were over 400 miners hard at work in Potter's Gully at the base of the Old Man Range.



Gold mine sited near Waikaia / Switzers Museum

Thus began a rollercoaster ride for this area as miners rushed from one place to the next in search for their fortunes. Gullies were opened up, trees were chopped down and very basic living shelters were constructed. Probably one of the best yielding zones was first mined by a jolly Welshman named Jim Evans in 1862. I think his story encapsulates the early miners saga. He found gold in a new part of the Switzers field, only about a kilometre from where we are here at the pub. He soon ran short of supplies, and went off in search of a runholder – there were few other miners around during this period, and no store owners yet. He climbed Mt Wendon, the highest point in the area and spotted a homestead for food. He then travelled that 70km to Lawrence to obtain a license, where he was redirected all the way to Queenstown to obtain a license for the Switzers field. Stoically, he reached Nokomai, gathered supplies and 5 mining companions, and reached Winding Creek via the Dome two days later. Upon arriving at his newly licensed claim he found that 40 other miners had set up operations since he had left two weeks earlier. His claim was to become known as Welshmen's Gully, and is often noted as the most consistent of many

claims around the area. Around 300 ounces of gold weekly were won from the area throughout the late 1860s.



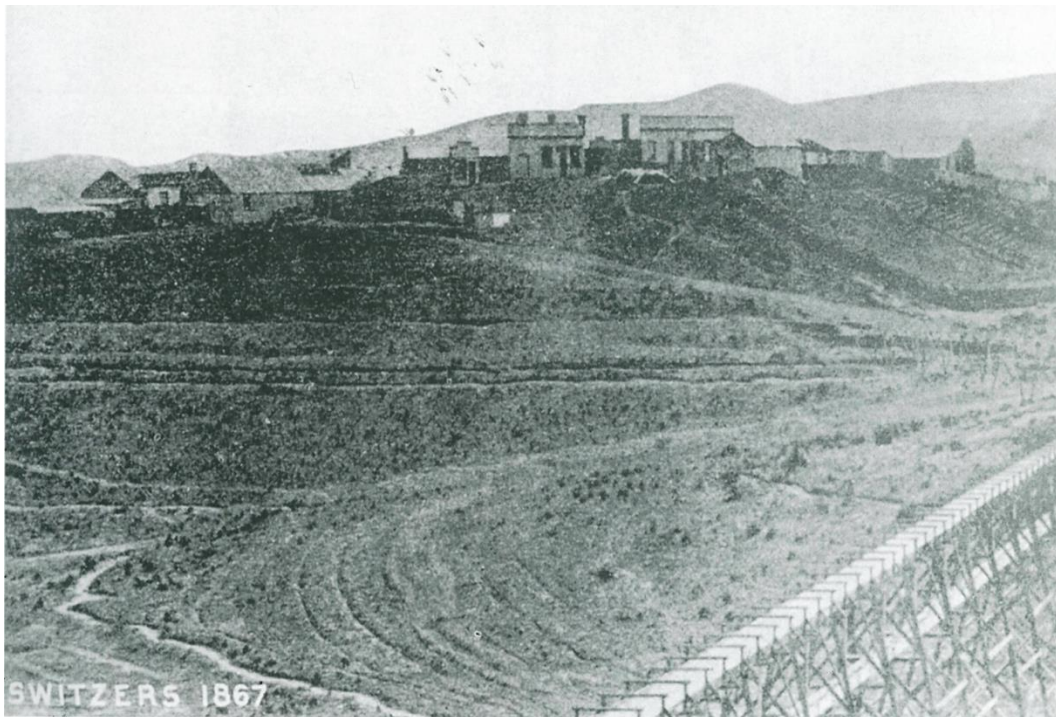
Miners on a claim / Toitu Otago Settlers Museum

A steady stream of miners began to establish themselves around the Switzers field, and a bustling population began to establish itself as the goldfields road from south of the Mataura River became established.



Mining community in their 'Sunday best' attire / Toitu Otago Settlers Museum

At its peak, it's said there were nearly 4,000 miners on the Waikaia fields (that figure include 1000 Chinese). Again, different areas on the field had hot periods. One visitor in 1874 reported that there were only 20 or 30 miners at work near Waikaia, but he was quite unaware of a huge population at work in the Upper Waikaia region. The town of Switzers was actually originally 3km from our location here. The village needed to move three times, as they kept siting it in the middle of gold rich territory.

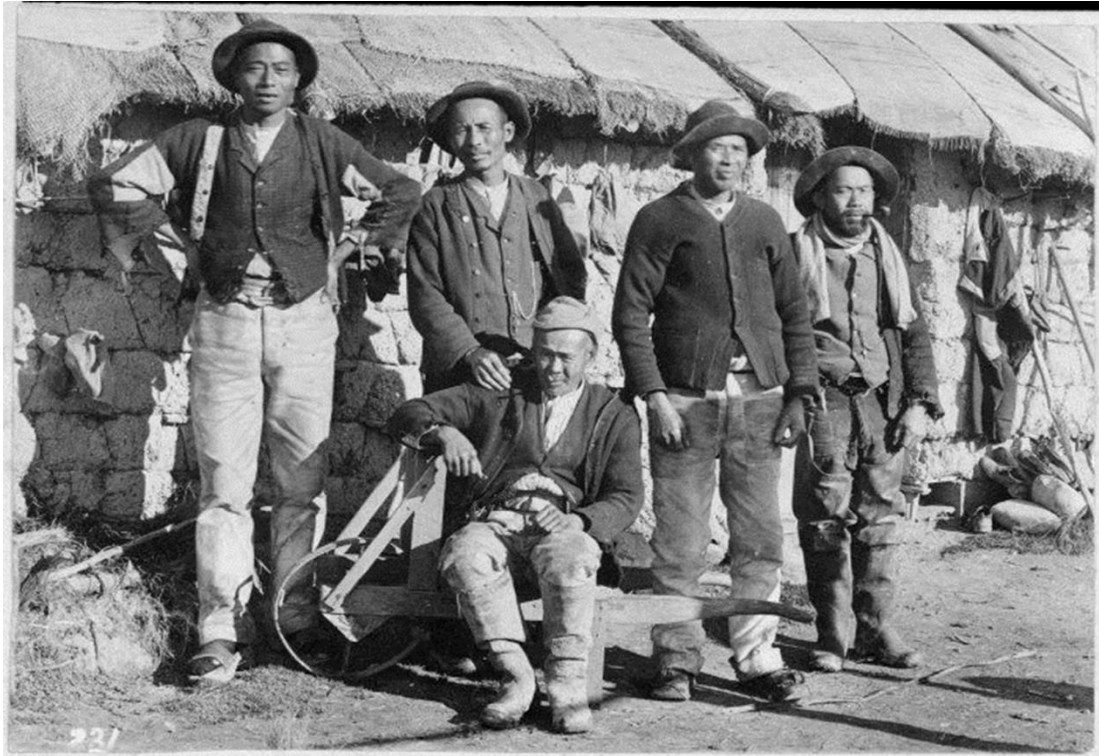


The original Switzers, 1867 / Otago Witness

By 1880, the last site of the original Switzers village had been largely sluiced away, and our current site here at Waikaia had become the main supply depot for miners. Some visitors found it difficult to actually pinpoint the site of the village over the first few decades as between here and Awatere Station was often described as 'littered with shacks, makeshift hotels and tents'. Logistically, it appears that Waikaia was more law abiding than other fields. But then it needs to be remembered that police weren't designated here until after the initial two rushes, and we have records of makeshift courts being runs by the miners themselves with stiff justice being handed out by the jury.

One of the first cases that came before the new court house that was built across the road here was for assault, after there as a pitched battle fought between four Chinese and five Europeans wielding picks and shovels over a water claim. There

were occasional murders and plenty of drunkenness, and some of the townsfolk did comment the village at times resembled 'the wild west'.



Chinese Miners at Muddy Creek, Waikaia / Toitu Otago Settlers Museum

A hospital ran for many years in the village to assist injured miners. Most needed to be treated for crush wounds from earth falls or mishaps with explosives. Pneumonia was commonly treated as miners spent so much time in contact with water during bitterly cold periods. A numbers of miners were injured in the large earthquake of 1871 which destroyed a number of piping operations.



The Rev. Don at a Chinese house near Waikaia / Toitu Otago settlers Museum

Goldfields were dangerous places. I get the feeling a modern day OSH investigator would have a heart attack if he saw many of the methods and antics which went on around this area. As well as the countless injuries, there are forty known deaths that occurred through mining accidents near Waikaia. Many of these happened from unexpected falls of earth. A young Irishman was killed when he attempted to remove an unexploded charge with his pick. An unknown number of deaths happened from the bitter cold of winter.



A rare picture of a Chinese dwelling in winter / Switzers Museum

At least 30 miners near the Upper Waikaia field are believed to have died in a severe storm in July 1863. Two separate miners who died from snow resulted in the areas being named after them, namely Stronach's Bush and Pitt Spur. Recent research has suggested that as many as 200 miners may have perished in the snow of the Old Man Range during the first two decades of the gold rushes.

By the late 1870s, Waikaia had become one of the largest centres in Southland, with a resident population of nearly 3,000. The Bank of Otago ran a branch in Switzers, and it's now interesting to note that when a branch later opened in Gore, its head office was here in Waikaia until 1900.

Perhaps one of the frustrating things about researching this era is that we seldom find out about the average miner. We know plenty about a few of the winners, we know a little bit about the losers, but as for those in between, not much is recorded.



So despite us knowing that many conglomerates or organisations made big fortunes in this area, we know that many individuals failed to find much gold, to the extent whereby the mid-1870s, Waikaia was considered by most Europeans as a 'poor mans' diggings. But this region had only given up its easy to find gold. The real fortunes were deeper in the earth and required hard work to extract. And the first group to begin to go over the field more delicately and industrially, were the Chinese

The first Chinese appeared on the Otago goldfields at the invitation of the Otago Provincial Council in December 1865, and not long after, Chinese began to appear on the Switzers diggings. There were 20 Chinese miners here by 1869, but three years later, there were at least 430 at work.



Chinese at work near Winding Creek, Waikaia / Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago

The first Chinese that came to the Switzers fields were mainly from the county of Upper Panyu, which is just below the city of Guangzhou, or Canton, in modern China. They were noted for their strong sense of kinship, but often shunned Chinese from other counties whilst in New Zealand. Despite their enterprise, most Cantonese gold-seekers were illiterate even in Chinese, and few could speak English. They had only a rudimentary knowledge of geography – they went, they said, to the 'Gold Hills' (United States) and the 'New Gold Hills' (Australia and New Zealand). The teaching of

geography had been restricted by the authorities in their homeland. The Cantonese had little or no experience of mining; indeed, two New Zealand missionaries noted that local mining was actually prohibited in their homeland.

The Otago Provincial Council had made a promise to protect Chinese from the discrimination that had been experienced on goldfields in California and Victoria. This promise was first put to the test here in Switzers just after February 1868, when a group of Europeans assaulted four Chinese. The Council offered a £50 reward for information that led to the assailants arrest.

A petition organised by the Arrow Miners Association in 1871 aimed to reduce the prospect of further Chinese migration to the goldfields. Outside of the Arrow district, the only other place this found support was here in the Switzers district, where 155 disgruntled Europeans signed the petition. At the time of that petition, there was roughly the same number of European miners to Chinese, and jealousy was ripe here in Waikaia as the very thorough Chinese were winning gold from claims deserted by more careless Europeans

Europeans protested about a policemen checking miners' rights at Waikaia in 1877, despite their belief that they should only apply to the Chinese.



Chinese miner outside his dwelling / Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago

But the impact of the Chinese on the economy was in little doubt. Many of the anti-Chinese factions claimed that the Chinese miners were pilfering the gold here and taking it back home with them. In 1871, George Bailey, the mining agent of the Waikaia goldfield, pointed out that the Chinese rarely sent gold all the way back to China. He added, 'if it not be for the Chinese, our total gold exports would be halved'.



Chinese on the Otago goldfields / Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago

Chinese from the Upper Waikaia area around the Whitcomb and Canton rarely ventured down to Waikaia village. Its roughly a 40 kilometre route from Potter's Gully to Waikaia, so most of the miners from Potter's in summer used Roxburgh as their supply base, as although it was a steep climb and decent, it was only half the distance. In winter however, they usually travelled down to Waikaia for supplies as the Old Man Range was covered in deep snow.

The highly successful Argyle Water Race Company was managed by Sue Ting from 1880, and a Chinese conglomerate bought the company whilst he was still managing it in 1885.

The Switzers warden, J.N Wood, told the Select Committee on Chinese Immigration in 1871 that ' I find the Chinese are an industrious and orderly race and a great

acquisition in the absence of European miners to the goldfield as they open up and work ground that has been abandoned by Europeans.

Wood was obviously respected for his fairness by the Chinese of the Waikaia fields, and they presented him with a gratuitous gift when he was transferred from Waikaia to Naseby in 1881.

The anti-Chinese feeling around Waikaia abated as they became a majority in the community for 20 years until 1886. Respect grew for their hard work, and their custom of European stores was welcomed as other miners began to drift off to other diggings.

I understand some of you went to the Chinese cemetery today. One of the reasons Chinese graves are surprisingly rare around southern goldfields was the spiritual belief and wish of the Chinese to be buried in their homeland. Through the Poon Fah Association – which was formed by Chinese miners to send sick, elderly men back to China as well as exhumed bodies, around 700 bodies were exhumed and sent to China.



Chinese near Waikaia with one of the Rev. Don's sons / Toitu Otago Settlers Museum

Many of you will know that the larger portion of those exhumed bodies never reached China, as the ship, the SS Vetnor, sank off the Hokianga Harbour with the

loss of all but 10 of the bodies. The news of this caused a great ruction amongst the remaining Chinese across the goldfields, as they felt they had failed their various kinsmen.

Here at Waikaia, the story is told of a policeman being sent up to the claim at Yankee Gully where a Chinese man was heard to be yelling out as if in trouble. When he reached the hut, the Policeman found the man wailing away. 'What's the matter with you, why do you make such a noise? He asked. My friend died, said the Chinaman, a long time ago. Why do you make such a row when he has been dead such a long time? Asked the Policeman. 'Oh, him gone down in ship, he go to hell very quick now'. And that was the belief of the Cantonese, that their kinsmen spirits cannot rest until it is laid to rest in their homeland. I know as a child we were warned to be careful when playing near the cemetery, as we might suddenly be consumed by the ground.

Dr Jim Ng suggests that around 1000 Chinese miners died between 1866 and 1900 in southern New Zealand. If 700 of those bodies were exhumed to be sent back to China, that leaves a possible 300 still buried around the goldfields. There is certainly not that many identified graves around the cemeteries, so there is probably a good project there for a Phd student sometime to identify those missing Chinese graves.

There was a Chinese store and boarding house built in the relocated village, run by three different proprietors, the most well-known of whom, was Chow Yorke. He was still at Waikaia running his store in 1907.

Newspapers in Dunedin lauded the Chinese enterprise for reinvigorating the declining Waikaia goldfield's in 1874 by introducing the extensive use of waterwheels and pumps.

A court case involving two Chinese at Waikaia in 1882 packed the courthouse with over 100 Chinamen present. What the case was about is not really known, but the primitive courthouse was not used to such activity, and the floor collapsed. Fortunately it was not more than a foot off the ground, so there were no recorded injuries.

There were 8 recorded suicides of Chinese in this district between 1879 and 1890. These usually came due to news from back in China, gambling losses, or insanity. Many of the European miners recalled attending Chinese gambling hall at Switzers, which was permeated with the sweet scent of opium.

Around the township, little remains of the Chinese influence. Diggings themselves however still have a distinct Chinese flavour, particularly at the top of the Waikaia Valley.

Information about the Chinese at the Upper Waikaia area, or the Canton River, is not as well-known as other fields. They famously alleged to have mined 6 meters under the river (although this claim is disputed), and that the Chinese made more than three times the earnings from the area than the original European miners had. It was said that 3 parties of Chinese working on the Canton were some of the few across Otago to make 'significant fortunes'.



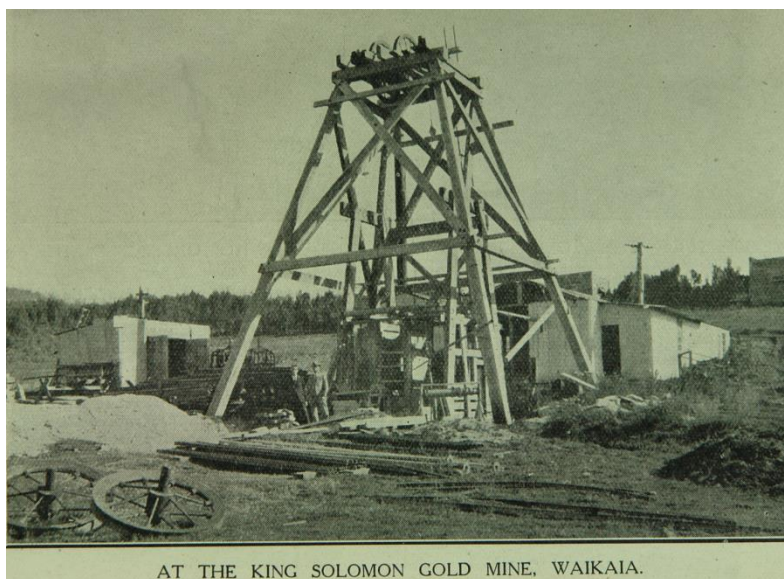
The Upper Waikaia (Canton) gold fields in contemporary times

The dredging boom initiated elsewhere in Otago by Choie Sew Hoy and his son Choie Kum Poy was to have a large effect on Waikaia. Sew Hoy's dredging company at nearby Nokomai led to similar ventures succeeding here. After Sew Hoy had come to Nokomai in 1894, the Otago witness reported of the 'dazzling' promises of the Waikaia area with prospective dredging expeditions planned.



A dredging operation, 1890s / Toitu Otago Settlers Museum

The European owners of the famous Break-em-all claim thought they were selling the claim in a state of decline in 1878, but were surprised when Chinese purchasers developed it successfully by systematically going back over the diggings with water wheels and pumps. I'm told that you are going to see King Solomon's mine tomorrow, so I won't go into that, other than to mention it was the last large scaling mining operation working in the area - before the modern era.

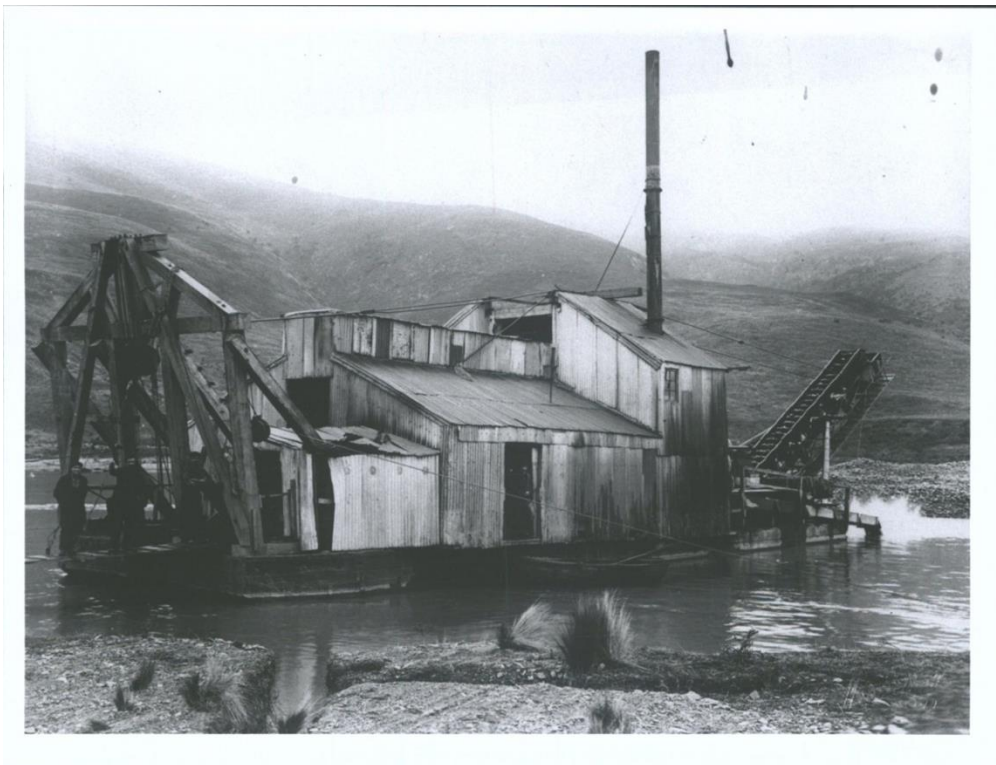


King Solomon's Mine / Otago Witness

There were still 11 Chinese miners here at work during the First World War, probably the largest number left at work across the goldfields.

The last Chinese miner here at Waikaia was Li Kee Hing, better known as Charlie King. He was the last full-blooded Chinese here in the community and lived up the gully in a sod hut with grass growing on its roof. Whilst he was primarily a miner, he did odd jobs around the village for free drinks or a meal. In the early 1930s, Li was sent to the Old Men's Home in Invercargill, but he disliked it and returned to Waikaia for another 4 or five years. He died in 1938, but before his death, he gave his one possession of value, his jade bangle, to Dr Jim Ng's father. Dr Ng subsequently presented this bangle to the Waikaia museum 3 years ago at the village's 150th jubilee.

The last major period of mining was of course the dredging that took place mainly on the Waikaia river, with around 30 recorded dredges working the riverbed between 1890 and the 1920s. This was a real boom period for Waikaia, as the railroad reached the village and the dredges offered good employment. A second rugby team was even started up by the dredge workers, aptly named 'Waikaia Pirates'.



A dredge busy at Work near Freshford, 1910s / Toitu Otago settlers Museum

Perhaps one of the more depressing things for me is how much gold they left behind! That becomes apparent when you see the operations you saw down at Freshford



today, which was itself at the heart of this areas' dredging productions at the turn of the 19th century.

Now I certainly haven't covered Waikaia's gold history in-depth tonight, I've merely tried to give you a bit of an overview. I've guessed my crowd is very familiar with the Otago rushes, so I've tried to keep it as Waikaia focused as possible. If you would like to know more there are several detailed books available for sale across the road at the museum. Working in the field of museums, I want to acknowledge the fantastic work that the Otago Goldfields Heritage Trust do in preserving and interpreting our goldfields. It is really heartening to see such an active and enthusiastic group preserving the provinces history. I'd like to thank you for inviting me to talk to you, and also for travelling down to our slice of paradise to explore the Waikaia diggings.

I'd like to lastly point out that coat of arms for the local rugby team features a pick and gold pan, and the village colours are of course blue, and gold.



Waikaia rugby team, 2007.