A remote high country “road” across the Dunstan Mountains where some examples of early gold mining and evidence of early pastoral history can still be seen along the roadside.

Thomson Gorge Road – Dunstan Mountains
Historic Sites
4WD (summer 2WD) & Walking, or Biking Tour

An historical tour (following a dry weather road with fords) of old gold mining and places of interest representing the early days of mining at the northern end of the Bendigo gold field and the history of Matukanui.

This tour can be taken starting either from Omakau (in the east) or Bendigo (in the west).

The tour is described from east to west through the old goldmining town of Matukanui (Tinkers), the Manuherikia Plains, on through the gorge, over the saddle, ending at the old Bendigo Township. The tour can also be taken from west to east by reading this brochure in reverse.

Supporters & Financial Assistance
- Otago Goldfields Heritage Trust
- Cromwell & District Promotions Group
- Department of Conservation – for assistance with middle presentation.

Researched by:
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Caution
Visitors are warned, that following this guide, you do so at your own risk. Some of these sites are on private property, and respect to the property owners would be appreciated. Access may also be denied at some sites at times of stock movement and this time is recommended that you take a torch if you intend to do any tunnel exploring.

RURAL RESPONSIBILITY CODE
- Ask permission before going on private property. (DOC can provide contacts.)
- If access is denied, it is for a good reason so please respect the landowner’s wishes.
- Leave all gates as you find them, open or closed. There are some 23 gates and many are boundary gates which are always to be left closed.
- Try not to disturb any stock.
- Take only photos, leave only footprints. Please take your litter home with you.

NAMING OF BENDIGO
According to Geoffrey Duff in his book “Sheep May Safely Graze”, the name Bendigo originates from an English Methodist lay-preacher who advertised himself as Abednego of Nottingham. The press corrupted his name to Bendigo Thomson because during his earlier fighting career, he was in the habit of bending down to do his opponent’s blows.

When a mate of Bendigo Thomson immigrated to Australia, he worked on Ravenwood Station in Victoria as a shepherd and lived in a hut beside a creek, which he named after his old friend “Bendigo” Thomson. This creek in turn gave its name to the diggings that followed the discovery in 1851, of gold nearby and later also to the city, which in time grew up around the Bendigo Goldfield.

Bendigo Creek in Otāgo, was named by the first miners who came from Australia when they discovered that this creek was worth prospecting.

MORVEN HILLS - BENDIGO STATION
The first run holders on the western flanks of the Dunstan Mountains were the McLean family. In 1888 the family leased four large runs totalling 400,000 acres and named the whole property Morven Hills.

Morven Hills was split up as a result of the 1910 Land Act into some 32 pastoral leases. At the final ballot, Run 236 of 13,000 acres was to become Bendigo Station.

In the early 1990s Bendigo Station, then running some 13,000 sheep and 200 beef cattle, was one of the first Crown pastoral leases to undergo tenure review. The result was that the lower parts of the Bendigo pastoral lease became freehold, while the high altitude summer grazing blocks were returned to the Crown - the Bendigo Conservation Area. In addition, all of the main Bendigo goldmining sites have been returned to the Crown - the Bendigo Historic Reserve, with areas of Kanuka bush formed the Bendigo Scenic Reserve.

Freehold ownership of the lower country of the Upper Clutha basin has enabled a change in land use from pastoralism to viticulture. Here this new freehold land is well suited to vineyard development, much of which can be seen from the Bendigo Loop Road. Large areas of new vineyards on the terraces and north-facing slopes are a good example of a major new viticulture industry, which is rapidly developing in the Upper Clutha basin and in Central Otago generally.

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THE ROAD OVER THE DUNSTAN MOUNTAINS

The low saddle over the Dunstan Mountains is not regular one used by early Maori as their more regular track to their summer camps at Lake Hawea and Lake Wanaka was on the Lindis Pass.

In late 1862, the first miners crossing over from the Manuherikia Valley to the Upper Clutha Valley found gold in the Bendigo Creek at the same time as other miners who had made their way up through the Dunstan (Cromwell) Gorge, following the true left bank of the Mollyneux (Clutha) River.

A Government promise in 1899 to build the Thomson Gorge Road as a R.A.D. project. “The gorge track” was however, in continuous use by travellers and shepherds with their flocks. In 1908 the Vincent County Council had a shepherd’s hut built next to the Creek, below the Orange Hill, below Bendigo.

In 1975 the Vincent County Council (now Central Otago District Council) started a dry weather route over the Saddle but it was completed by Matukanui Station. The Council paid for the road was paid for by the run holders and funding from Government through backcountry access funds. Today, much of the Thomson Gorge Road is often in poor condition, because of only occasional maintenance work. The road is now mainly used by 4WD vehicles and mountain bikes.

The full loop trip (some 140 km) – from Alexandra, over the Saddle and back through the Cromwell Gorge is available most of the year, though on occasions fresh winter snow can temporarily close the road.

All gates should be left as found while all boundary gates must be left shut. There are up to 23 gates and 6 shallow fords to cross. The actual number depends on which route is taken.

STARTING FROM ALEXANDRA

A good half-day outing, though if you wish to visit the Bendigo Historic Reserve you should allow a whole day.

From Alexandra, leave on SH 85 to Omakau and at the Commercial Hotel, turn left in to Racecourse Road and continue straight on to the Thomson Gorge Road. Alternatively, you can take a side trip to the old gold mining town of Tinkers, today known as Matukanui. See Note 1 for more details.

To go to Tinkers, turn left at the end of Racecourse Road, and then turn right on to Nicky Road (signposted Matukanui) and explore the township before returning to the Thomson Gorge Road.

Further back on Thomson Gorge Road, a steady climb with some ford crossings brings you to the saddle at 900 m. The road now drops down passing through the northern end of the Bendigo Goldfields. At the fork, the track ahead goes to the Bendigo Flats, the old Bendigo Township site, and via the Bendigo Loop Road to SH 8. The road that goes to the right comes out to to Ardour Road, which takes you to the Lindis crossing road on SH 8. From here, a left turn takes you past Bendigo Loop Road to Alexandra.

1 MATUKANUI - today a small ‘ghost’ town

In the early days, from 1863 till about 1923, the town was known as Tinkers, but by the late 1890’s, the town was starting to be called Matukanui. There was a very rich ground strike at the point where the Dunstan Fault line comes close to the surface. The diggings provided stability and lasting work, initially for small groups of miners who in 1864 used water from Thomson Creek. This water was first used by these small groups for sluicing, and later by larger groups formed by amalgamation of smaller groups, for hydraulic elevation sluicing, starting in the 1890s.
4 OLD STONE HUT AND CATTLE YARDS
Close to Thompson Creek the County built the hut in 1898 for the drovers and travellers, and the hut is still used today.

The cattle yards nearby, were built by Matakani Station in the 1980s. The headwaters of Thompson Creek lie far beyond.

5 SADDLE CROSSING - 900m above sea level
At the boundary gate, on the saddles, Thompson Gore Road turns left onto Ardoug Station. (The ridge track to the north goes to Mt Kirrama in the North Queensland Conservation Area.)

The fine view to the west from the saddle is looking over the catchment of Rise and Shine Creek, down to the Upper Clutha Basin and Horizon Flats with Mount Aspiring National Park and the Southern Alps in the distance.

The next gate takes you to Bendigo Station. Further on, a sharp right turn follows the Rise and Shine Creek down towards Bendigo Station over the higher cliffs (some southwards). A little further on the upward track leads into the Bendigo Conservation Area.

6 NORTH END BENDIGO REFS
In total, there are three reefs and areas of workings along or close to the Rise and Shine Creek, which are all close to the Thomson Gore No. 1 (Rise and Shine) Reef, sluice workings, Come-In-Time Reef and the Alta Reef.

7 THE RISE AND SHINE REEF SITES
The Rise and Shine Reef was the most easterly of the reefs, at the north end of the Bendigo goldfields workings. This was not a true quartz reef, but consisted of bands of variscite stone.

The Rise and Shine sluicing workings covered a 20-year period of hydraulic sluicing between 1866 and 1886. A party of Swedish miners constructed a race to carry water from Thompson Creek on the eastern side of Bendigo Station over the cliffs to the sluicing operation. Evidence of these workings can be seen in the sluicing scars as you drive down the gully.

The dispute with the owners was settled by then worked by The Eureka Co. It took over the abandoned Alta battery - five frames (further down the Rise And Shine gulley) in 1874/1875 and constructed a mill on the site of the Alta. This was too unsuccessful and in 1876 closed down. McLaughlin who had a claim at the reef site in the 1860s put a stamper battery close to the site of the Alta battery. A five-stamp "fed" cattle yard and had some success for a year or two.

The last attempt on the Eureka claims commenced in 1983, when a shaft was sunk on the southern side of the valley, not too far from the old Eureka claims. From these workings, a reef of bluish quartz was struck. Prospects looked good, so the Bendigo Rise and Shine Co. was floated. A small butti-mill was erected to test the quality of the ore. There were difficulties in the company was in debt and after two years, had gone into liquidation.

In 1933 a newcomer, The Bendigo Shine Again Gold Mining Co. took over the claims. A five-stamp battery, driven by a diesel motor, was erected about 500m from the workings. The company struggled until 1943 when the mine was closed down permanently.

For over thirty years, the battery remained a landmark in the gully until the Mines Department declared the claim abandoned and put the battery up for sale. A Cromwell schoolteacher, John Anderson, bought the battery and set it up behind the Golden Age Hotel - the Middle Pub in Cromwell, calling it "The Goldminner". Later, the Woodbury brothers, ex Glenorchy schoolteacher mineral workers, bought the battery and ran it from September to April above the Frankton-Queenstown Road. The project was launched in May 1972, construction started in June 1972, opened in 1973 and closed in 1982. Some of the village relics went to the Arrowtown Museum and its believed the battery pieces are now at the Goldfields Mining Centre, Kawarau Gorge.

At the bottom of the valley, both below and to the left of the "red" cattle yards are significant mining relics, a holding dam for water supply down further, while mining platforms, crushed stockades, drives are those mainly associated with The Bendigo Shine Again Gold Mining Co.

8 THECOME-IN-TIME REF
In 1880 the Come-In-Time Reef was the last of the Bendigo reefs to be discovered. John Kane located it on a sharp ridge separating Rise and Shine Creek from Shepherds Creek. Open workings and tunneling out old and new workings extend east along both sides of the ridge long which the present road runs.

Although a trial crushing was not very promising, a company was formed in 1882 to develop the Come-In-Time Reef. The mining rights to the Eureka battery was shifted from across the gully, likely on to the present site. A double tramway and steel rope conveyor transferred ore from the pit to a battery at the mouth of the gully containing 300 tons or ore yielded a discarding 110 ounces of gold. Six months after the second crushing all operations ceased.

In 1908, the mine was re-started and opened back across the gully and over the ridge to the Alta claim.

In 1908, a new company, Come-In-Time Mining Co. was formed and acquired an interest in the Cromwell Property Gold Mining Company. Half of the twenty stamp "Mataiia" battery (i.e. Ten stamps) was shifted in 1909 to its present site. The 1910 report stated that only a mere 4 ounces of gold was recovered.

The final attempt to work the reef was made in 1919 by James Dunyar and party. They used the same battery (Cameron's) and took over Cameron's aerial rope-way, which had been erected in 1912 to bring ore across the opposite slope. For a short time ore was from the Alta reef (over the ridge to the south of the Come-In-Time reef) was crushed but within two years all work on both reefs had ceased.

Today on the left of Thompson Gore Road, a marked track leads down past the entrance of the mine tunnel and then on down to the battery. With the aid of a torch, the tunnel can be explored for some 60 metres into the hill. Portions of the cableway gear can still be seen high up on the opposite slope below the crest of the ridge.

The battery was restored in 2006 with funding assistance from Central Lakes Trust, The Community Trust of Otango and from the Ruapehu District Council. The site is well used and sound for visitors to better understand how it once worked.

9 THE ALTA REEF
In 1870 Williamson and party found the Alta Reef and formed the Alta Company to work the reef. (The reef lies south and over the ridge opposite the present Come-In-Time battery.) The company continued to provide for relatives, local entertainers and a five stamp battery in Rise and Shine gulley with a race to drive the battery and a tramway linking the workings. Problems were encountered in trying to recover the gold from the crushed rock.

Heavy yellowish white material [later identified as scheelite] hindered the process, forcing the mine to close down and the plant was then sold in January 1875 to the Eureka Co.

In 1887, another attempt was made to revive the Alta reef claim by forming a small company to work the mine. A shaft was sunk and the reef was located, no payable ore was found. In 1902 the claim was taken up again. The five stamp Come-In-Time battery was then shifted right next to the claim (remains st from there today) and powered by a seven ton diesel engine.

Though there was some initial success, results were patchy and even the attempts to mine the scheelite were not successful and by 1936 the mine was closed and the diesel engine sold to Mount Harris to run their generating plant.

In 1912, Sandy Cameron and brother Jack, pottering along the reef came upon a patch of gold ore containing both gold and scheelite. They erected a aerial cableway and lowered the quartz ore to the old Come-In-Time battery, which they took over after it had been abandoned near the Rise and Shine Creek. The Cameron brothers made quite good returns until the gold ore ran out.

The final attempt to work the Alta reef (as well as the Come-In-Time reef) was made by the former mining village to the north of the Come-In-Time battery and the aerial ropeway. Results were not encouraging and Ike everyone else, they finally abandoned the deposit.

10 BENDIGO GULLY WORKINGS
After leaving the three Rise and Shine reefs, the road heads down towards the Upper Clutha Basin. The left fork leads towards Bendigo Creek and a second left fork leads down to the creek and Bendigo Creek.

The gully lies between the upper and lower Bendigo Gorges, the site of the earliest workings at Bendigo and the main Bendigo alluvial workings between 1859 and 1865. Most of the lower part of Bendigo Creek, from the gorge to the Clutha River, continued to be worked by the occasional miner. The only recorded evidence of these early workings is the large group of stone ruins, which in 1866 was the site of Goodells Bendigo Gully Hotel. In 1875, Goodall sold it to Smith & O'Donnell who ran it as store, post office and hotel. The hotel was destroyed by fire in 1872, and in 1876 a public meeting house was constructed on the same site. The O'Donnell's continued to run the hotel until 1890 and was known as the Clutha Hotel.

In 1867/68 small scale sluicing took place to the south of the gully slopes of Bendigo Creek. Sludge run-pits built on Bendigo Creek and because clear water was required for the Cromwell Company's battery at the mouth of the gully below, sluicing was forced to cease.