

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

ELDORADO DREDGE – DREDGING UP THE PAST

By Mary Ryllis Clark, *Discover Historic Victoria*, 1996

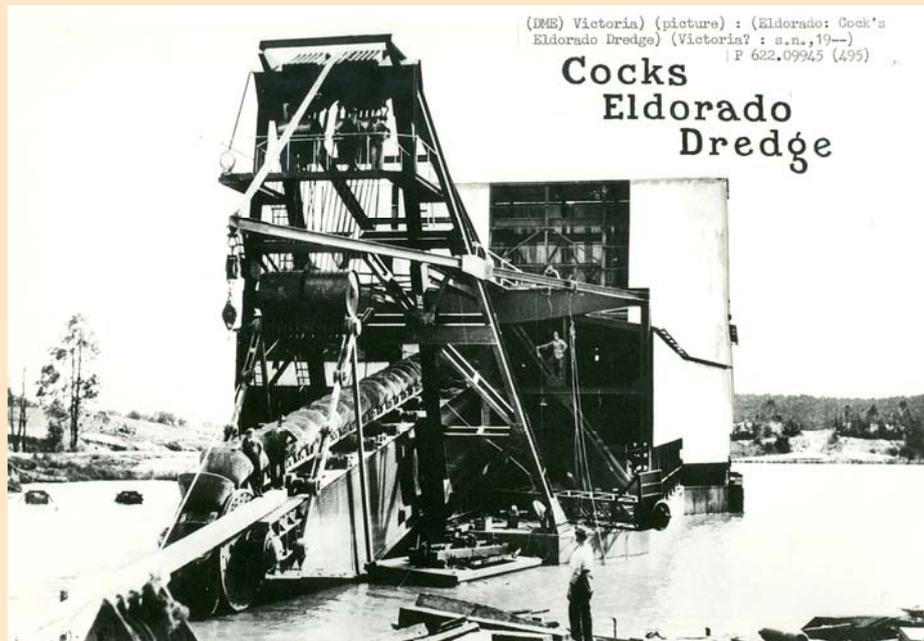
The Eldorado dredge squats like a huge metal monster on a lake of its own making near Reedy Creek. Its engines are dead and its body is slowly rotting away, but its sheer size is amazing.

The dredge is an incongruous relic of the days when men would go to any lengths to rip precious metals out of the earth. The gold seekers came to Eldorado in the 1850s, working their way downstream from Beechworth, looking for the gold in the deep leads - the ancient, gold-bearing watercourses that, over long periods of time, became buried deep underground.

Digging down to the deep leads was a costly, dangerous and heartbreaking experience. It often involved pumping out huge quantities of water to get to the gold. There was a disaster at Eldorado in 1895 when a mine flooded and six men were killed.

There were three main methods of gold mining at Eldorado; deep lead, open cut and dredging. The dredges were like gold-panning factories - digging out the creek beds, flushing the material through a series of large sieves, washing away the rubbish and catching the sediment of heavier gold.

In the early 1930s, the price of gold rose from 8/10/- an ounce to 17. This was a strong incentive to mine some of the deeply buried gold and the 1934 Cocks Eldorado Dredge



The Dredge at Eldorado. Courtesy of DSE.

Company was formed to work some of the local mine leases.

A state-of-the-art, electrically powered dredge was commissioned from Thompson's Engineering and Pipe Company in Castlemaine (a company that still exists). The mighty machine was assembled on site and was ready in June 1936. At that time, it was the largest dredge ever constructed in Australia. It was 64 metres long, 20 metres wide at the stern and 50 metres wide at the bow.

It had 118 closely connected buckets on a conveyor belt. Each bucket weighed 1.4 tonnes and carried a third of a cubic metre of earth. The whole dredge weighed 1880 tonnes and required 900 horsepower to operate, using 14 motors of varying capacity. The sound could be heard for more than 20 kilometres.

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"It was that noisy," says Jack Milne, a local resident who worked on the dredge in the 1930s, "you didn't realise until it stopped. Then the silence was deafening."

Milne's neighbour Nick Ramsey also worked on the dredge and says it was operated 24 hours a day, six days a week, on a shift basis by teams of five or six men. "Sunday was grease up and maintenance day. Five engineers and a blacksmith were employed full-time making spare parts and keeping on top of repairs. One man died doing repair work and was carried up out of the silt by the buckets."

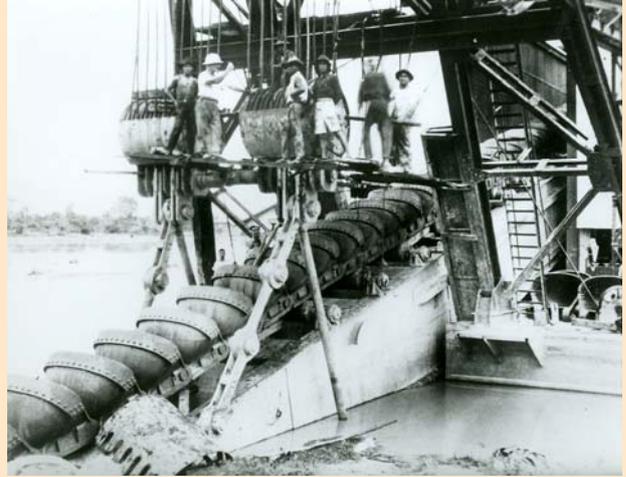
The process of getting the gold was a crude one. The buckets dug down about 30 metres. The dirt was carried up and tipped into a revolving tumbler containing thousands of small holes to separate the larger stones from the sand and clay that contained the gold. Gallons of water were pumped through to assist this process.

The sand and clay were then tipped into vibrating jigs to get the heavier material to sink. This sediment was taken to shore where the gold was extracted through amalgamation with mercury. Tin was also recovered, using a magnetic separator.

The dredge created a large lake in front of itself with its buckets as it was winched along by two cables fixed to the land at either side. All the non-gold-bearing material was spewed out behind. In theory, this was to make good the mess made by the buckets. In practice, the environmental damage was appalling.

The Eldorado dredge operated until 1954. It produced over 70,000 ounces of gold, valued at 750,000 (about \$28 million in today's values).

The dredge was listed on both the State Register of Historic Buildings and the National Estate Register in 1975. This prevented it from being altered or removed. In 1988, the management of it was given to the then



Dredge and crew. Date unknown. Courtesy of DSE.

Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and taken over by Parks Victoria in 1996.

According to Ray Supple, Team Leader Heritage Strategy with Parks Victoria, the dredge is highly significant nationally and very significant on a state level. "The Eldorado dredge is the largest relic of its type in Australia," he says.

Parks Victoria have done some conservation work on the dredge and improved visitor access.

GETTING THERE

Eldorado is about 290 kilometres north-east of Melbourne. Take the Hume Highway and exit at Wangaratta. Two kilometres north of the town, turn right for Eldorado at the North Wangaratta Football Club Oval, just past the North Cedar Caravan Park.

Continue past the Vine Hotel for about 200 metres and take the road which veers to the left. Eldorado is about 10 minutes drive from here.

The dredge is on the left, about one kilometre before the township. Watch for the sign. There are picnic facilities on the bank overlooking the dredge.