

READINGS IN

NORTH QUEENSLAND MINING HISTORY

VOLUME II

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II

MINING ON THE HODGKINSON

Noreen Kirkman

The Hodgkinson Goldfield, extending over an area of approximately 2,000 square miles along the valley of the Hodgkinson River, was proclaimed on 15 June 1876. Although geologically similar to the great alluvial producer to its north - the Palmer - the Hodgkinson was predominantly a reefing field, with its major mines in the vicinity of Kingsborough, Thornborough and Northcote.¹ It was however a "poor relation" of the Palmer Goldfield, for while the gold output of the Palmer well exceeded a million ounces in its first decade, the yield on the Hodgkinson came to less than one-sixth that amount for a corresponding period. Though Robert Logan Jack proclaimed that it was "most undeservedly a 'neglected goldfield'",² and official reports retained an optimistic outlook until the first decade of the twentieth century, it was clear by 1908 that its small yield no longer justified separate goldfield administration. As the warden wrote: "THE HODGKINSON, the impoverished inheritor of former renown, rests its claim to distinction as a goldfield of the past rather than on recent achievement".³ Accordingly in 1909, it was incorporated into the Chillagoe Gold and Mineral Field and the value of rare metals soon surpassed the earnings from gold. Yet just as Ravenswood and Charters Towers had been responsible for Townsville's development as a major seaport, the Hodgkinson gave life to Cairns and Port Douglas and prompted settlement throughout the Cairns hinterland.

The circumstances in which payable gold was discovered on the Hodgkinson River are still shrouded in mystery. The river was named as early as September 1874 by J.V. Mulligan in honour of the incumbent member for Burke, W.O. Hodgkinson, once mining warden on the Etheridge. In the following year Mulligan led a government sponsored prospecting party through "the country at the heads of the Mitchell and other rivers"

1. See K. Levingston, Vol. I, Chapter 1, pp.10-12.

2. R.L. Jack, Notes on the Present Condition of the Hodgkinson Gold Field, GSQ bulletin 4, p.1.

3. A.R. 1908, p.9.

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in search of payable gold, but after six months' trekking they failed to report any find. Despite the government's withdrawal of support and instruction to disband the party, Mulligan and the government geologist, Frederick Warner, persisted with their investigations.⁴ In February 1876, the *Queenslander* reported that Mulligan had decided to focus on the Hodgkinson River and await the wet season, anticipating a valuable discovery. Confident Mulligan asserted that there was a goldfield in the region: "The field is on the Hodgkinson, a river twice as wide as the Palmer, and, as yet, known to very few people".⁵ Of the "few people" whose curiosity was aroused, William MacLeod was unknown to Mulligan, but not for long. MacLeod's party was already working the river in late January 1876 when Mulligan's small group approached them only to be greeted by a ragged volley of gunfire. Afterwards MacLeod's men told Mulligan that he had been mistaken for "a blackfellow going to spear the horses".⁶ When the rain set in at the end of the month - extraordinarily late for the wet - payable gold was found by both parties in different localities during February.⁷ According to Mulligan, a compromise was reached as to publicly disclosing their finds:

MacLeod, Kennedy and ourselves understood each other respecting the Hodgkinson River for some time, and now understand each other respecting the reporting of the field, which will be a large reefing field. 8

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4. Memorandum, Department of Mines, 31 March 1875, 75/2022 A/8711, Q.S.A.; Annotation dated 11 October 1875 on J.V. Mulligan to H.E. King, 25 September 1875, 75/1750 *ibid*.
 5. *Queenslander*, 19 February, 25 March 1876.
 6. See reprint of Mulligan's diary, *ibid.*, 1 April 1876. The true nature of this incident, which occurred on 26 January 1876, is not clear. But taken at face value, it is a revealing comment on the nature of Aboriginal-European contact in the district.
 7. Mulligan noted in his diary that he discovered gold on 7 February 1876, and that when he encountered MacLeod's camp on 21 February they were "getting payable gold in different gullies". See *Cooktown Herald*, 18 March 1876.
 8. *Queenslander*, 1 April 1876.

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An official statement by Mulligan was lodged with Thomas Coward, the warden at Byerstown, administrative centre of the Upper Palmer. It was suggested that the reefs were "large and numerous and show freely in the stone - the alluvial is payable in places but patchy".⁹

News that rich discoveries had been made on the Hodgkinson River, almost equidistant from Maytown and the port of Cooktown, spread rapidly throughout the Palmer. The chief warden, P.F. Sellheim was ordered to supervise the rush but was hampered by the flooding of the Mitchell River. By the time Sellheim's assistant, W.R.O. Hill, arrived on the Hodgkinson on 19 April there were already 2,000 men on the ground, very few of whom were "making wages".¹⁰ The amount of alluvial gold was limited, though three nuggets weighing 16, 20, 21 ounces respectively were uncovered; this discouraged attempts to introduce methods other than panning or dishing: no cradles had been brought to the field by late May 1876. Soon however shortage of rations, the absence of permanent administration and the fear of destitution in the face of little or no gold, forced an early exodus of diggers from the field. In fact Hill passed no fewer than 700 men returning to Byerstown, "all of whom gave most discouraging accounts of the rush".¹¹ The influx of disillusioned miners to Byerstown placed a severe strain on the settlement's facilities where nearly all stores had been exhausted by the middle of April.¹² Amid the atmosphere of despair, Mulligan and MacLeod were accused of misleading the far northern mining community and absconding with alluvial gold accumulated on previous prospecting excursions. The *Cooktown Herald* reported rumours of a "swindle", and that Mulligan had left for Cardwell with a hundredweight of gold in tow.¹³

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9. Statement in the names of Mulligan, Warner, Ableson, MacLeod, Kennedy and Crosby, 9 March 1876, 76/429 A/8711 Q.S.A.
 10. W.R.O. Hill to Minister for Mines, 24 April 1876 76/9 MWO 13A/G1 Q.S.A. It was estimated by one miner at Hemmants Town that only five percent were making adequate finds.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. *Cooktown Herald*, 12 April 1876.
 13. *Ibid.*, 19, 26 April 1876; *Queenslander*, 13 May 1876.

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According to F.J.W. Beardmore, a leading Cooktown businessman, the area was exhausted: "All the ground spoken of by Mulligan is old worked-out ground, as McLeod and Kennedy had thoroughly worked it for nearly two years, and others had also worked it, and left it as not payable".¹⁴ Despite whispers of possible riots and grog-shanty talk of threats to Mulligan's life, the disenchantment was not manifested in violence.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Hill telegraphed the Mines Minister that the position on the Hodgkinson was grim: "Alluvial no good, no large finds very few making tucker. Alluvial rush must be stopped if possible or starvation and more serious results must issue."¹⁶ Sellheim also denounced the gold-field as "a total failure", and recommended that "every effort be made to stop such an insane rush".¹⁷ Acting on Sellheim's urgings, the Colonial Secretary urged his counterparts throughout the country to display placards dissuading diggers from heading to North Queensland and informing them that the Hodgkinson was a fizzer.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the poor rewards for alluvial miners, some men recognized the reefing potential of the field. But they too encountered difficulties arising from disputes over ground as miners' rights had to be lodged at Byerstown, Maytown or Cooktown. Rather than ameliorating the confusion, Hill's short visit in April only served to alienate the prospectors, locking up valuable claims and creating a conspicuous clique of angry reefers. The *Cooktown Herald* aired their grievances on 21 June 1876:

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14. F.J.W. Beardmore to editor, *Brisbane Courier*, 22 April 1876. A similar accusation was levelled by an unidentified special correspondent in *Queenslander*, 6 May 1876.
 15. A meeting of diggers exonerated Mulligan of instigating a rush, on the basis of the note of responsibility explicit in Mulligan's calls for caution. *Cooktown Herald*, 3 May 1876.
 16. Telegram, W.R.O. Hill to Minister for Mines, 76/9 MWO 13A/G1 Q.S.A.
 17. Telegram, 21 April 1876, 76/1022 COL/A 221 Q.S.A.; *Queenslander*, 22, 29 April 1876.
 18. See correspondence 24, 25 April 1876, 76/1054 COL/A221 Q.S.A.

THE NEW RUSH

CAUTION!

The Police Magistrate has received instructions to issue the following notice:—

“ *Department of Public Mines,
“ Brisbane, April 22nd, 1876.* ”

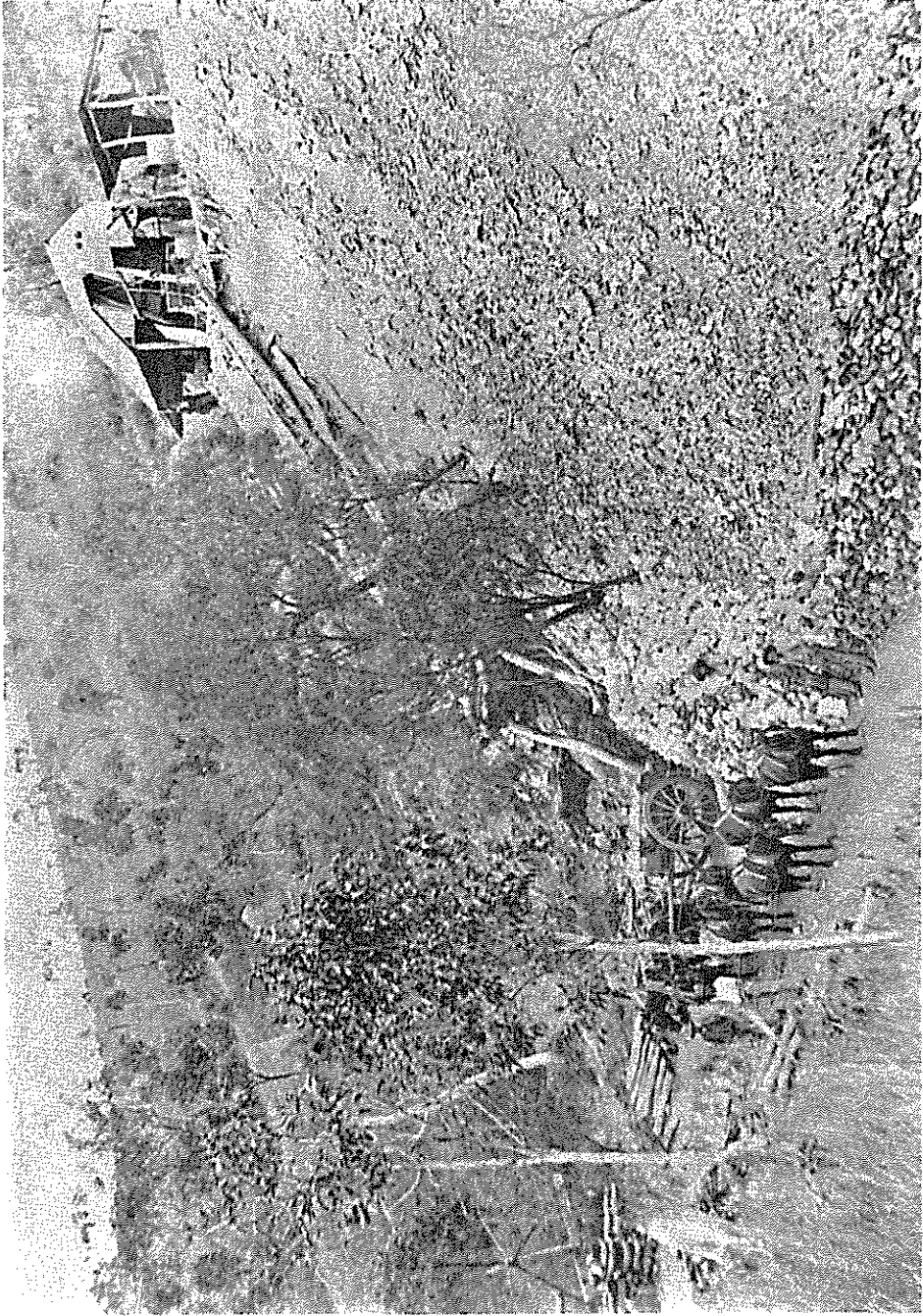
“ Reliable information has been received by this Department from the Warden of the Palmer River Gold Fields, who has just returned from a visit to the locality, that the NEW RUSH is a TOTAL FAILURE.

“ All the Diggers are making their way back, and great dissatisfaction and distress prevail amongst them.”

*Court House, Rockhampton.
April 22nd 1876.*

Printed at the “ *Advertiser* ” Working Printing Office, North-street, Rockhampton.

FIG 7: Government Poster, 1876 [MISC 43 Q.S.A.]



P33: Early Mining at Thornborough c.1880 [Oxley Library]

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This reefing district has been almost ruined by the Government not sending us a warden. £20,000 worth of capital has been utterly wasted in the ground, because the holders of numbers of reef can do nothing in the shape of developement [sic] until they are made certain of the ground they hold.

But once the goldfield had been proclaimed, reefing and dollying started in earnest. Howard St. George was despatched from Cooktown and was kept busy laying off reefs and solving disputes.

Crushing machines were brought to the field with impressive haste, inspired by the glowing descriptions of the reefs. The first was E.W. Spain's XL which was located at Glen Mowbray, having been intended for the Palmer.¹⁹ It was quickly followed by others which were located at centres of reefing activity - Tyrconnell, Watsonville (later Woodville) and Beaconsfield - along with Plant and Jackson's Vulcan machine at Kingston (Kingsborough) and Martin's Hercules at Thornborough, the latter having been hauled by seven teams from the Etheridge.²⁰ A parcel of ore from Mulligan and company's King Attila P.C. was the first to be crushed on the field on 1 December 1876 by the XL. All told, eight machines were operating on the Hodgkinson within a year of its discovery. Another four arrived in the following twelve months.²¹

Faith in the permanency of the reefs was reflected in building activity: by the end of 1876 there had been an influx of entrepreneurs. As the *Cooktown Courier* reported:

Shanty keepers are swarming in running up houses with the usual bush accommodation, in great hopes of good crushings and thirsty 'foolish' miners. The 'ladies' are pretty well represented, but nothing to what are expected to arrive. 22

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19. *Cooktown Herald*, 26 August 1876.
 20. The Brisbane was situated at the Tyrconnell, the Magnet at Watsonville and the Monarch at Beaconsfield. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 17 March 1877.
 21. W.J.M., Thornborough, to editor, *Cooktown Courier*, 2 May 1877; *A.R.* 1877, p.11.
 22. Cosmopolitan to editor, *Cooktown Courier*, 6 December 1876.

In almost every case settlements were located in close proximity to major reefs at which machine sites were established. By mid-1877, Kingsborough had a population of 1,100 and Thornborough 1,000;²³ no other township was over 300. The degree of confidence and optimism was rare for northern goldfields. Warden Mowbray, who succeeded St. George, remarked that "business establishments on the field appear to be fully equal to the requirements of double the population".²⁴ Regular church services were held in 1877, at least one Catholic chapel was built, and committees were formed to finance others.²⁵ This contrasted with the Palmer River field, where despite much greater population and heady prosperity no Christian church was ever constructed. At Thornborough, a school, two banks, hospital and school of arts were established,²⁶ and soon a vigorous campaign was underway to encourage brick construction. At the forefront of the agitation was J.S. Reid, pioneering newspaperman who had sold up his *Cooktown Courier* and launched the *Hodgkinson Mining News*. According to Reid:

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23. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 30 June 1877.
24. *A.R.* 1877, p.12. The warden went on to say: "In Thornborough there are two banks, an assay office, two jewellers, two butchers, nine general stores, and twenty public-houses; in Watsonville, four general stores, five public-houses, and one butcher; Kingsborough, eight general stores, two butchers, and twelve public-houses; in Stewartown, four general stores, one butcher, and six public-houses; in Northcote, one general store, two butchers, and three public-houses; in Beaconsfield, one general store, four public-houses, and one butcher; in Merton, two general stores, one butcher, and two public-houses; and at Glen Mowbray, a general store, a butcher, and two public-houses."
25. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 9 June 1877, 19 January 1878. The Anglican clergyman from Port Douglas, Clifden Eager, also conducted services.
26. A school was opened by Mr. Dodwell in October 1877, and the state school in October the following year. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 20 October 1877, 14 September, 5, 20 October 1878. Branches of the Bank of New South Wales and Queensland National Bank were opened in 1877. *A.R.* 1877, p.12. The hospital was made of galvanized iron and catered for twenty. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 11 August 1877. At the end of 1878, Anderson's Club Hotel was purchased for £80 for a School of Arts, Kingsborough, which eventually housed standard works of poetry, fiction, and history. *Ibid.*, 14 December 1878, 7 June 1879.

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The promise of stability which Thornborough can congratulate itself on enjoying, and the reasonable price of bricks and bricklaying, should induce intending builders to discard wood altogether and erect permanent and seemly houses straight away. 27

The second court house, finished in early 1878, with its white-washed brick walls shaded by narrow verandahs, embodied the belief that the Hodgkinson had a long life as a reefing field.

The demand for goods and machinery gave impetus to surveys for a more direct route to the coast and a suitable port. However the range and coastal swamps made the task a difficult one. By the end of 1877 the Hodgkinson was serviced by an untidy network of tracks leading to a cluster of coastal settlements, namely Cairns, White Cliffs, Port Salisbury (soon known as Port Douglas) and Smithfield, all on Trinity Bay. After Cairns and Smithfield were severely damaged by cyclone in March 1878, machine owners tended to favour Port Douglas. In a memorial to the Works Minister they argued for an access road to the port. As the *Hodgkinson Mining News* recorded:

That Messrs Plant and Jackson, Martin Bros., and Mr Buls, machine owners on the Hodgkinson together with the principal merchants on the gold-field, have been here to inspect the road for themselves, and now so thoroughly satisfied that this is the road to which they must look to furnish them with cheap carriage so essential to the development of the Hodgkinson gold-fields, that they have ordered all future shipments to be despatched to this port. 28

However, the facility of Port Douglas did not materially effect the number of crushing plants or encourage new and efficient machinery.

Gold-bearing reefs on the Hodgkinson - of which approximately 400 distinct lines were identified - varied in width from twenty feet, as

27. *Ibid.*, 28 July 1877.

28. *Ibid.*, 3 November 1877, 10 August 1878, 30 August 1879. Cobb & Co. and the government also supported the route via Granite Gap to Port Douglas.

found at the Tyrconnell P.C., to extremely narrow "pipes" which were difficult to trace. Their irregularity, and sometimes abrupt pinching-out, discouraged many smaller miners without sufficient capital to prospect shows at depth. Often, claims were abandoned prematurely, and in the absence of outside capital most mines were being worked on revenue from crushing returns. In an effort to conserve money, reefers cut back on timbering, which was criticised by the Inspector of Mines, and resorted to primitive handling methods.²⁹ While wooden-handled windlasses and greenhide buckets were only to be expected in the early days of the field, smaller claims were still employing them as late as 1884.³⁰ Invariably accounts of the field stressed the inefficiency of mining techniques:

At the Explorer, Homeward Bound, Union and Home Rule the water was pulled up by bucket, necessitating two or three men's extra labour. The stone in each and all the mines was shovelled down the pass (the only shovelling it should get), shovelled into buckets and dumped into the paddock, shovelled again into the drays, broken by hand labour in the battery yard, and then shovelled into the barrow to the battery.... 31

By 1882 there were only four mines (two of which were later wound up) worked by steam machinery, totalling twenty-six horsepower; there were only nine with horse drawn whips or whims.

In contrast, however, the battery owners were highly mechanised. By 1882 there were ten mills powered by steam engines aggregating 133 horsepower, as well as thirteen Berdans, six Wheeler pans, and other appliances.³² But to ensure a return on their outlay and to offset their high operating costs, the machine owners were obliged to strike

29. A.R. 1883, p.72. See also *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 27 October 1877; A.R. 1884, p.69.

30. A.R. 1877, p.11; 1884, p.69.

31. G.J.E., "The Hodgkinson District", *The North Queensland Mining Annual* (Charters Towers 1891), p.125.

32. A.R. 1882, p.22.

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expensive crushing charges which, in turn, militated against the mines' profitability. With rates as high as £2 per ton in 1877, the *Hodgkinson Mining News* was widely acclaimed for its criticism of the machine owners for refusing to cut costs. Their action had brought "capital into contest with labour" and had left miners "utterly unable to hold against the powerful combination...who were evidently determined to make the miners pay for the heavy cost of the erection of machines on the field".³³ Early in 1878, the Vulcan battery reduced rates to £1/2/6. The ring having been broken, crushing rates came down dramatically and thereafter fluctuated from between 12/- and 20/- per ton. Water supplies were crucial for the machine owners, and only after sufficient dams were built were they able to maintain continuous crushings; some mills relocated for better water supplies.³⁴ Even so, the benefits of more cost efficient batteries only went a small way in compensating the miners, for carriage rates remained a major impost. Carriers made up for the lack of feed and the uncertainty of consignments of stone by averaging their rates which were as high as thirty shillings per ton in 1877 and £1/2/6 in 1879.³⁵

The advent of company mining in the early 1880s was a dismal failure.³⁶ The first and longest lasting of these companies, Tyrconnell

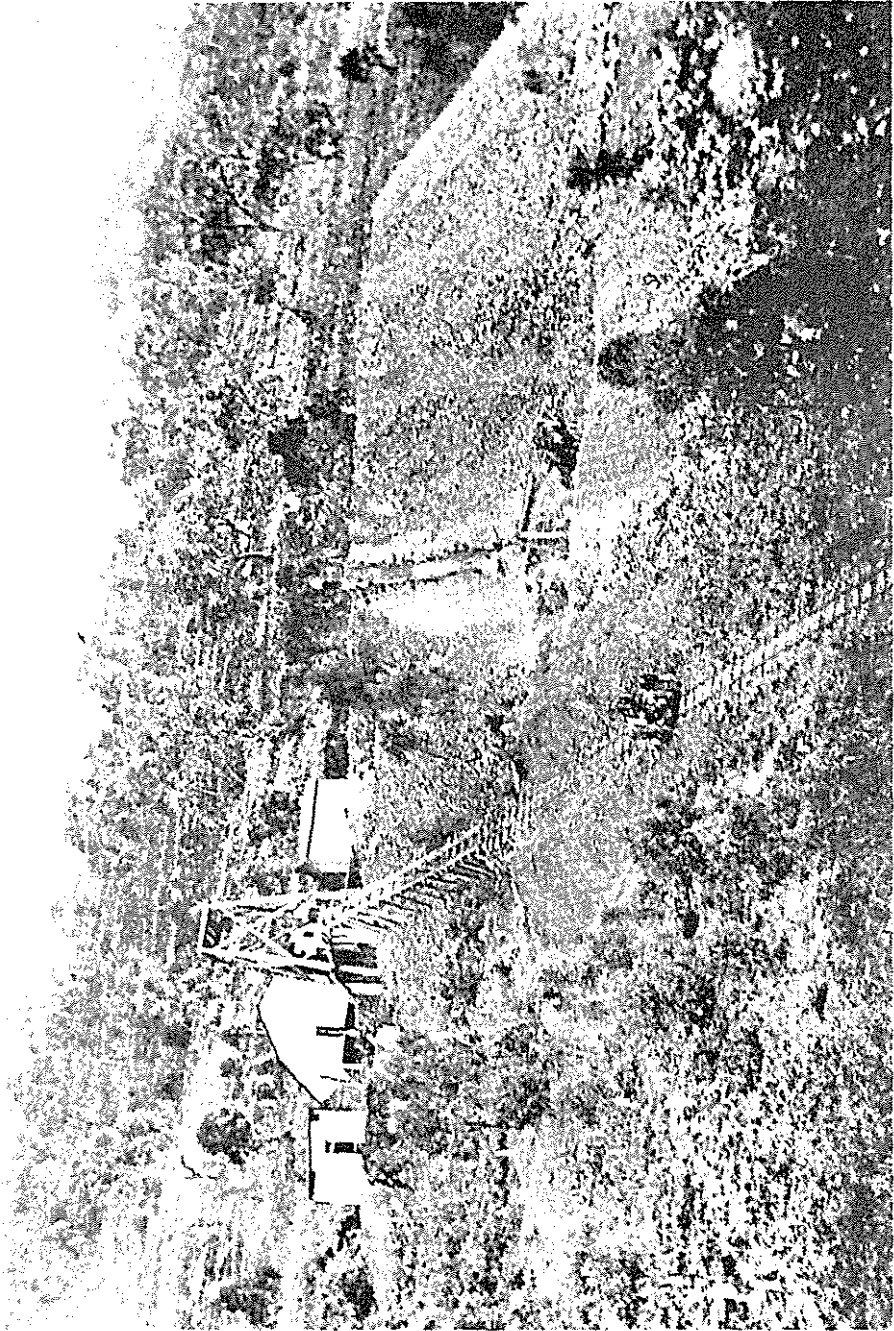
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33. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 3 November 1877. Immediately after the first crushing on the Hodgkinson miners talked of holding a meeting to protest against the rate of crushing. A year later the situation was much the same despite the existence of 12 machines on the field. *Cooktown Courier*, 2 December 1876, and *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 31 March 1877.
34. Small dams were built at the Beaconsfield, Hercules and Vulcan machine sites. The XL was removed to Northcote, and then to Deep Creek because of the lack of water.
35. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 31 March 1877; *A.R.* 1879, p.20.
36. There were two unsuccessful attempts prior to 1877 to form companies. The Pioneer Gold Mining Company, with J.V. Mulligan a director, tried to promote prospecting by a tunnel to the major Thornborough reefs. The Kingsborough Quartz Crushing Limited planned to erect a co-operative battery at Kingsborough.

Gold Mining Co., was formed to purchase and work the Tyrconnell and Lizzie Redmond lines of reef. Considerable capital was invested sinking the Tyrconnell to 430 feet, the deepest shaft on the field in 1884, and acquiring the Vulcan mill. But operations were self-defeating: the mill remained at Kingsborough and the cost of carriage was too high to transport stone from the mine to the battery. With funds exhausted in less than two years, the Tyrconnell mine was let on tribute and the machinery was listed for auction. The other companies had even shorter lives. The first crushing of the Home Rule Gold Mining Limited of 459 tons for a miserable 178 ounces of gold was "about the poorest crushings that have taken place on the Hodgkinson".³⁷ Like the Homeward Bound Gold Mining Co. and the Hodgkinson Union Gold Mining Co. it folded within twelve months. The only other attempt at company mining in this period was connected not with gold, but antimony. A semi-metal similar in appearance to zinc, antimony was added to lead as a hardening agent. It had been mined at Northcote as early as 1877, and by 1882 there were eight lease applications in force absorbing a sizeable labour force. In response to the demand for a reduction works, the Northcote Antimony Smelting Co. was formed and commenced operations in early 1884. However, inadequate capital outlay on plant and disappointing returns, over which there had been long delays, compelled the board to close down at the end of the year.³⁸ The failure of company mining and the prolonged drought of 1883-85 influenced the downturn in the fortunes of the Hodgkinson. European miners were attracted to tin discoveries on the Barron, Wild and Tate Rivers, and silver at Silver Valley, and the population decreased dramatically. Chinese became correspondingly more conspicuous.

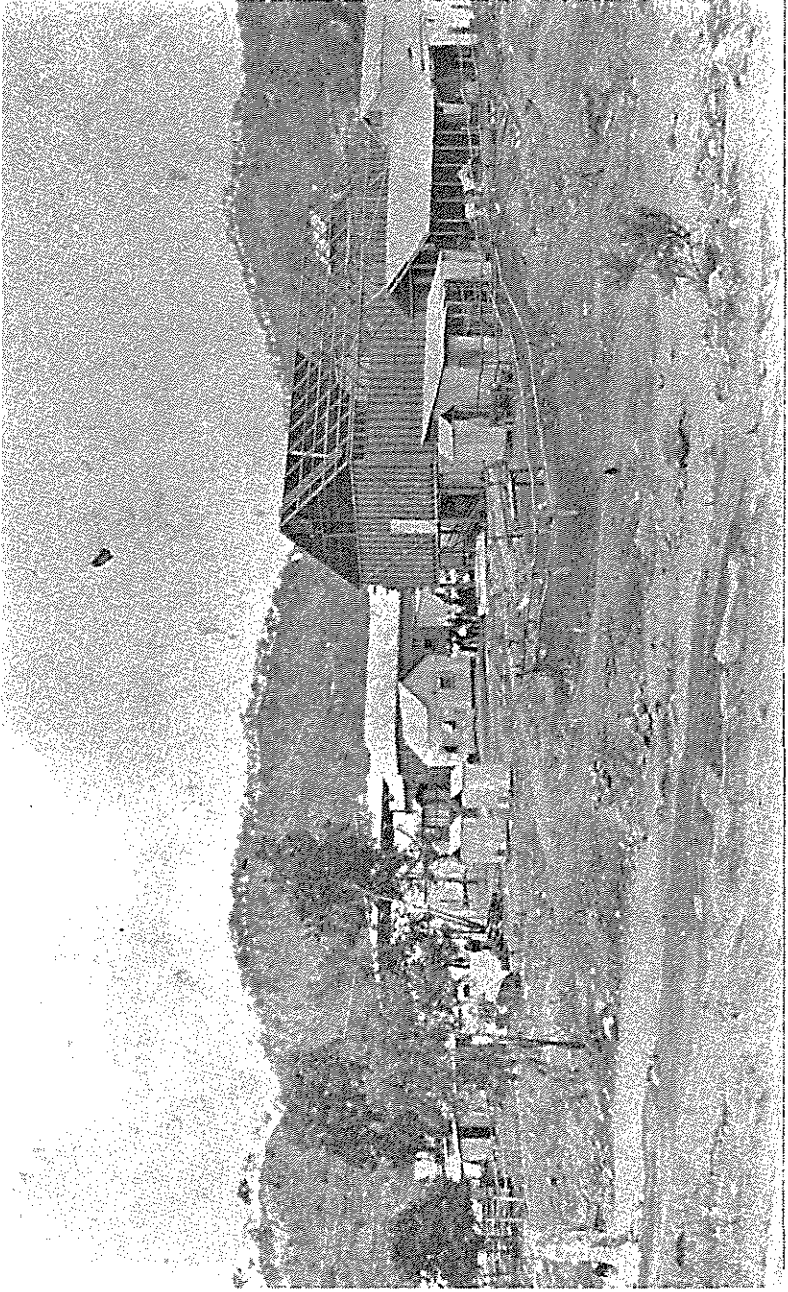
Despite the anti-Chinese vitriol of the *Hodgkinson Mining News*, Chinese were not involved to any great extent in alluvial mining. As the editor unwittingly admitted in April 1877: "This is a reefing diggings, not alluvial, and there is not a single Chinaman that we know

37. A.R. 1882, p.18.

38. A.R. 1884, p.24.



P34: General Grant mine, Kingsborough [A.R. 1901]



P35: Gilders' picture show under construction, Wolfram
[Cairns Historical Society]

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of connected with mining of any sort on the field".³⁹ This was before the failure of the Lukinville rush of 1878, after which the Chinese population of the Hodgkinson climbed temporarily to 2,000. Still the 1878 legislation which provided for a moratorium of three years from the discovery of a field before miners' rights could be issued to Asiatics or Africans was effective in reducing the number of Chinese to 220 by the end of 1879.⁴⁰ Those who remained found the service industry more lucrative than gully-raking, and engaged in a wide range of activities from providing firewood to offering a first class table at Wah Lee's Canton Hotel in MacLeod Street, Thornborough.⁴¹ By 1885 Chinese market gardening was a prosperous industry, as the mining warden noted: "Besides vegetables, they produced 137 tons maize worth £1,918; 38 tons of English potatoes worth £760 and 37½ tons of sweet potatoes worth £150."⁴² With a shortage of European labour at the batteries, at least one major partnership recruited Chinese workers. As Jackson explained to a public meeting:

To prevent the entire suspension of work at his mills he had been compelled to employ some Chinamen to carry in wood to it - no teams being procurable. It was a matter of necessity or he would never have employed Chinamen. He was paying them as much as he paid Europeans, and therefore it was not for the sake of cheap labour he had them - indeed he never thought Chinese labour cheap. 43

By the mid-1880s as many as forty-three Chinese were engaged in quartz-mining at the Union No. 1 Tunnel and the Black Ball.

This new source of labour, however, could not arrest the decline of the field, which was exacerbated by rushes to Croydon and the Kimberleys in 1886 and by attractive wages at the Montalbion silver mines. Several

39. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 7 April 1877.

40. *A.R.* 1878, p.24; 1879, p.19.

41. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 30 June 1877. Wah Lee was from Ravenswood. He worked his hotel for nearly forty years.

42. *A.R.* 1885, p.28.

43. *Hodgkinson Mining News*, 11 January 1879.

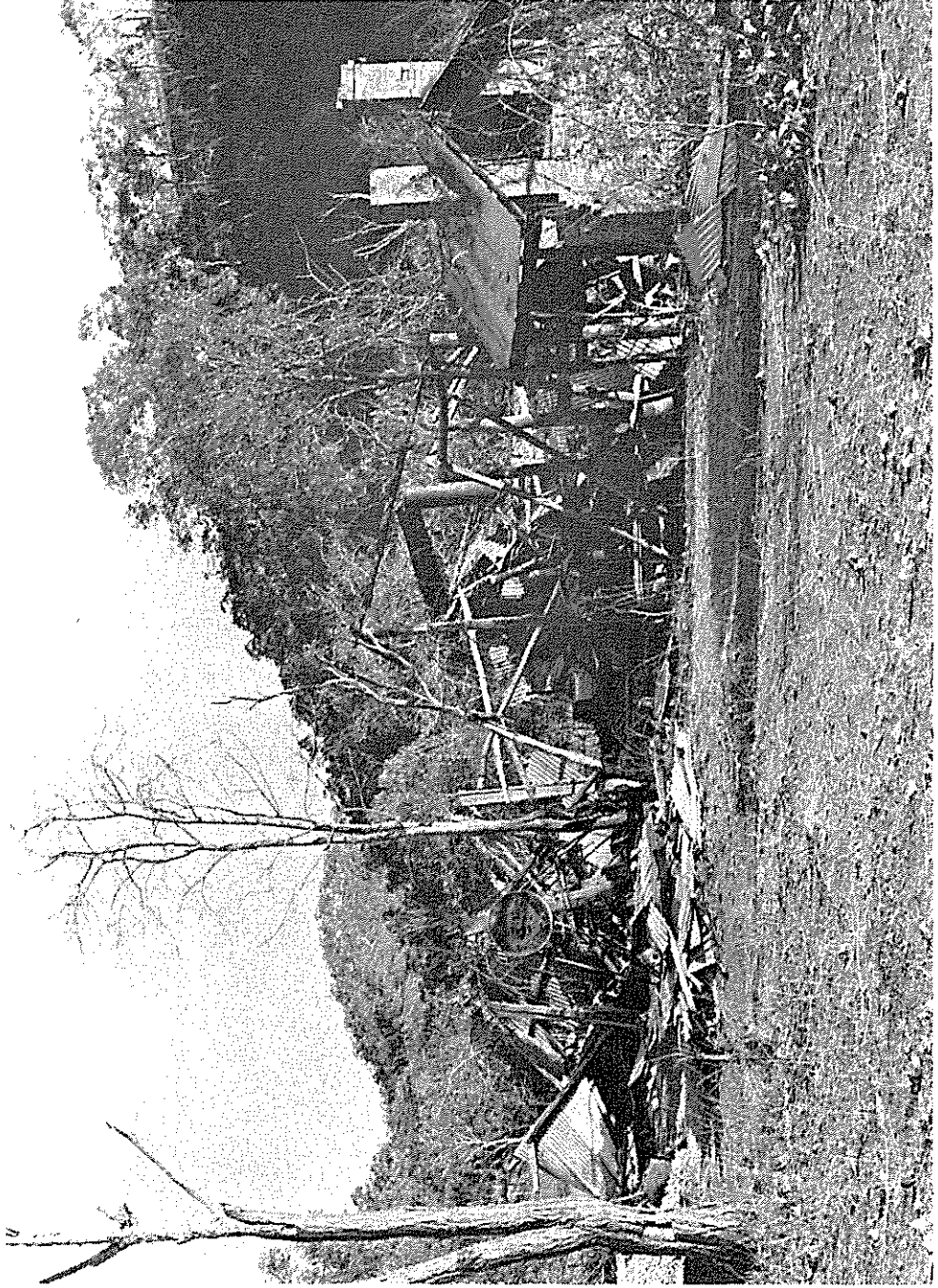
mills were dismantled and removed to other fields.⁴⁴ Within fifteen years of its discovery the yield had dwindled to just over five hundred ounces for an entire year. Though Sellheim contended that "the Hodgkinson cannot be said to be fairly tested yet", it was on the verge of complete desertion by 1891.⁴⁵

For five years, during the depression of the 1890s, the field was moribund apart from a few gougers. Quite unexpectedly there was a revival. The opening of the Cairns-Mareeba railway in 1893 had made the field more accessible; the increasing use of the cyanide process throughout North Queensland promised improved returns for reefing fields. In 1896 there were new finds in the Kingsborough district which led to the erection of the Reconstruction mill, formerly the Good Hope battery from Limestone, and a cyanide plant. The real spur came in 1897 when British money - the Cecil Syndicate - focused on the General Grant mine. With an infusion of capital not previously witnessed in the area, the syndicate erected sophisticated surface plant and sunk the shaft to 580 feet. Following close on the confidence generated by the Cecil Syndicate, and partly inspired by a boom in gold scrip stimulated by the West Australian boom, no fewer than eleven companies were floated to work the Hodgkinson over the next few years. These included the Great Dyke Gold Mining Company, the Monarch Gold Mining Company and the Cyanide Gold Recovery Company. The Hodgkinson United Gold Mining Company opened the General Grant No. 1 South to 735 feet, the deepest shaft on the field, and soon the population began to return. The revival was reflected in the resurgence of building activity in the older almost abandoned settlements. As the warden reported:

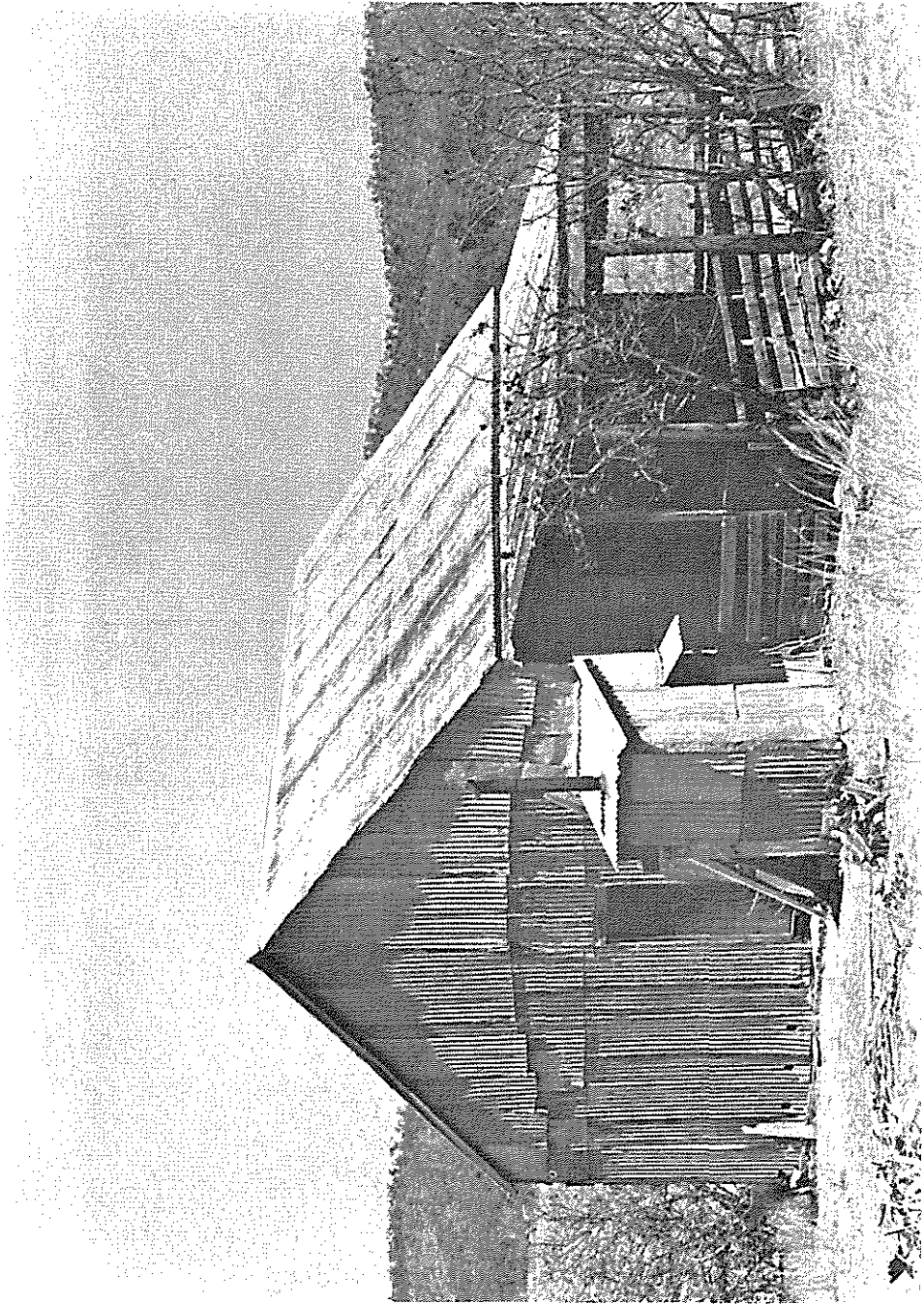
The field in general appears to be steadily progressing, and the population daily increasing. Many of the old hands are

44. The Mowbray mill was removed to the Etheridge and the Lady Marianne to Herberton. *A.R.* 1890, p.32; 1891, p.75. The Vulcan was re-erected at "Sam the Roman's Camp". *A.R.* 1896, p.72.

45. *A.R.* 1891, p.6.



P36: Reconstruction Battery, Kingsborough, 1979 [Ron Burnett]



P37: Former Canton Hotel, 1979 [P. Bell]

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returning here with their families, which has caused quite a demand for dwelling houses. Judging from the activity they are showing in the way of new buildings both at Thornborough and Kingsborough, the latter place in particular, would lead one to believe they have come to stay. 46

The revival, however, was as ephemeral as it was unexpected, not least because of disappointing results. The first crushing from the deep General Grant No. 1 South yielded under fifteen pennyweights to the ton. The warden commented that "the funds of the company were completely exhausted and an effort was made to reconstruct, but failing the company went into liquidation". The whole concern - mine, plant and battery - went under the hammer for a paltry £650.⁴⁷ Similarly the crushings from the Cecil Syndicate's mine did not even recoup the £8,000 outlaid on a ten million gallons capacity dam and the erection costs on the mill and cyanide plant.⁴⁸ Rather than waste public funds on a goldfield with little yield, the Mines Department abolished the separate administration and incorporated the Hodgkinson into the Chillagoe Gold and Mineral Field in 1909. It was a realistic move for the local men were now turning to other forms of mining. As the Under-Secretary for Mines noted:

As a goldfield the Hodgkinson has ceased to command much consideration, such prosperity as the field enjoys and any attention that it receives being due to its stores of wolfram, molybdenite and antimony. 49

Demand for high grade wolfram, after the development of tungsten as a lamp filament in 1904, and for molybdenite for use in patent alloys, led to an early interest in rare metals by British firms, the most

46. *A.R.* 1898, p.67.

47. *A.R.* 1904, p.115.

48. *A.R.* 1905, p.78; 1906, p.7.

49. *A.R.* 1910, p.8.

prominent being George G. Blackwell & Sons of Liverpool.⁵⁰ Prices for both metals were high - up to £200 per ton for molybdenite and £140 per ton for wolfram - and attracted many goldminers to "a very lucrative occupation". Of the 1,136 people on the Hodgkinson in 1904, 700 were rare metal miners working at Wolfram Camp,⁵¹ where molybdenite and bismuth were found in association with the wolfram ore. By 1909, when the field was abolished, wolfram was returning £41,820 compared to the value of gold production at £7,089. But the rare metals industry was not as stable as statistics might indicate: there was an insecurity in unknown overseas markets where demand fluctuated erratically, and local miners were never sure of their returns. A Wolfram Co-operative Association was formed to arrange advances and shipments through intermediaries such as the New Zealand Loan & Mercantile Agency and W.J. Lempriere & Co., but generally the local industry was poorly organised.

In 1907 the Irvinebank Mining Company bought into most of the wolfram mines. As the warden recorded:

Wolfram has undoubtedly been the saviour of this field. It has been accountable for nearly three-fourths of the value of the mineral production of the year, and has given employment to an average of 550 men. Applications by the individual miners for a claim of one man's ground are, however, becoming less frequent, and the Irvinebank Mining Company are the owners of almost the whole of Wolfram Camp. In fact, with the exception of Larkin and Party's, P. Vallely's, and the claim known as Nicholls's, there are practically no other claims of any importance in which the company named are not interested. The company has not been slow either in taking advantage of its chances, and has already erected an 8-h.p. winding plant on one of the principal claims, the Wheate. They have also erected a most effective and up-to-date plant

50. A.R. 1904, pp.79-80. The names Tungsten and Wolfram are interchangeable, the chemical symbol being W. See W. Alexander & A. Street, *Metals in the Service of Man* (Harmondsworth 1979), pp.275-6.

51. A.R. 1904, pp.79-80.

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for the treatment of their stone on the ground; and, judging by present appearances, the majority of the claims at Old Wolfram Camp seem to have fallen into very capable hands. 52

The company's output was substantially reduced in 1908-9 by a miners' strike over hours and safety,⁵³ coinciding with a sudden drop in the price of wolfram. After the dispute was settled, the company was obliged to spend additional funds on development before the mines could be reworked.

Just prior to World War I, new companies became involved in rare metals, with disillusioning results. In 1912, the Societe Francaise de Metaux Rares installed £50,000 worth of machinery at Wolfram Camp, only to be liquidated the following year.⁵⁴ Soon after the Irvinebank Mining Company withdrew; but the advent of the Thermo-Electric Ore Reduction Corporation sustained the district through the war years with the government paying fixed prices. The company however failed to survive the slump in metal prices after the return to free market forces in March 1920. Within weeks Wolfram Camp was almost deserted:

It is improbable that the lessees of the richer holdings at Wolfram Camp will reopen their mines until molybdenite has increased to at least £3 per unit and a market offers for wolfram at not less than £1. The mines are full of water and the expense of recommissioning them would be heavy. 55

Wolfram was worked periodically in the interwar years and during the 1940s, with government assistance, but the scale of operations was far from impressive.⁵⁶

52. A.R. 1907, p.87.

53. For details of the dispute, see A.R. 1909, p.39; D.W. Hunt, "Mining Unionism in the Far North", *Lectures in North Queensland History*, Third Series, pp.35ff.

54. A.R. 1912, p.44; 1913, p.42.

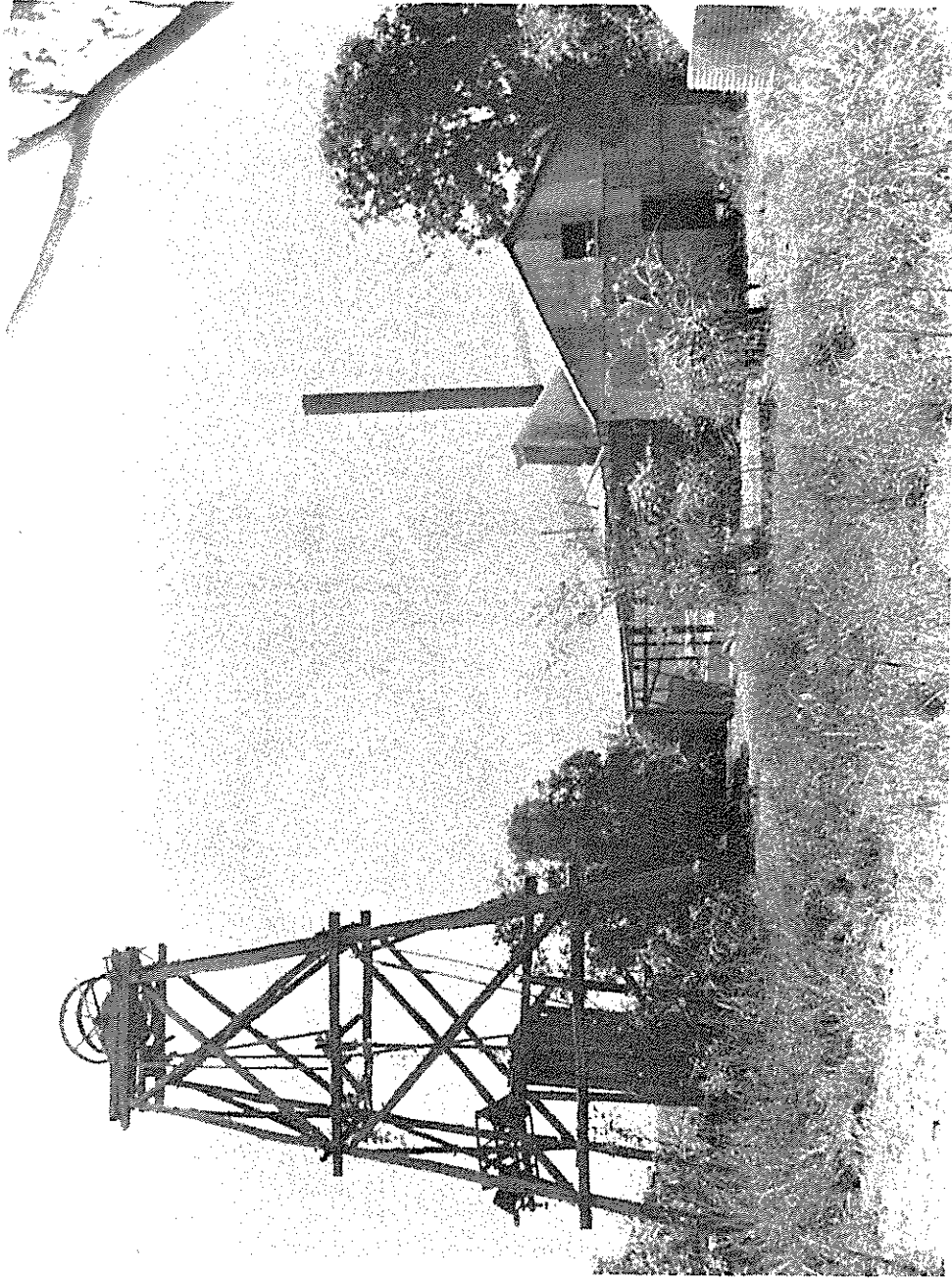
55. A.R. 1920, p.49.

56. In 1926, the Queensland Rare Metal Company commenced work on the Larkin and Forget-Me-Not ground, but had not realized expectations. There was even a rush to Wolfram Camp in 1937, and the increased demand during the Second World War sustained mining for that metal. A.R. 1926, p.37; A.R. 1937, p.53; A.R. 1942, p.38; A.R. 1944, p.43.

Meanwhile, Mount Mulligan had become the centre for yet another branch of mining. The possibility of cheap local coke for the ailing base metal industry at Chillagoe and Irvinebank led to a vigorous development programme at Mount Mulligan and the construction of a railway from Dimbulah to the mine. The line passed close to Thornborough, but hopes for a gold revival were not realised, partly due to the outbreak of war in Europe, which drained the labour force of the country's mining fields. Despite the extraordinary expectations which Mount Mulligan engendered, the coal mines had relatively little impact on the surrounding district. A metallurgical coking proposal came to nothing, and the coal mine did little more than marginally reduce the cost of local railway coal. Even in its peak production period, the mine accounted for less than four percent of the state's output. The 1921 disaster was its chief historical claim, galvanising the entire Hodgkinson community in the relief work that followed.⁵⁷ The mine eventually closed in 1958, long after Thornborough, Wolfram Camp and the other settlements had been abandoned to the white-ants.

As a goldfield, the Hodgkinson had experienced a heady but brief rush and had quickly evolved into a moderately successful reefing district: its gold averaged £3/10/0 per ounce and total output aggregated 173,603 ounces to 1886. Due to its remoteness, the Hodgkinson still harbours a considerable amount of abandoned and derelict machinery, which escaped the scrap metal dealers of the interwar years, a testimony to better days long past. The Tyrconnell headframe, mill and surface plant remains seemingly in working order, and Wah Lee's Canton Hotel is still located in Thornborough, occupied by a long time resident. Plans to rework the Tyrconnell, abandoned in 1942, have proved fruitless, but typical of most North Queensland goldfields, there are always a few people with local knowledge confident that a new discovery will be made some day to restore the field to its former proportions.

57. For details of Mount Mulligan, see Bell, Vol. 1, Chapter 9, and his monograph, *The Mount Mulligan Disaster* (Townsville 1978).



P38: Tyrconnell Headframe and engine house, 1979 [P. Bell]

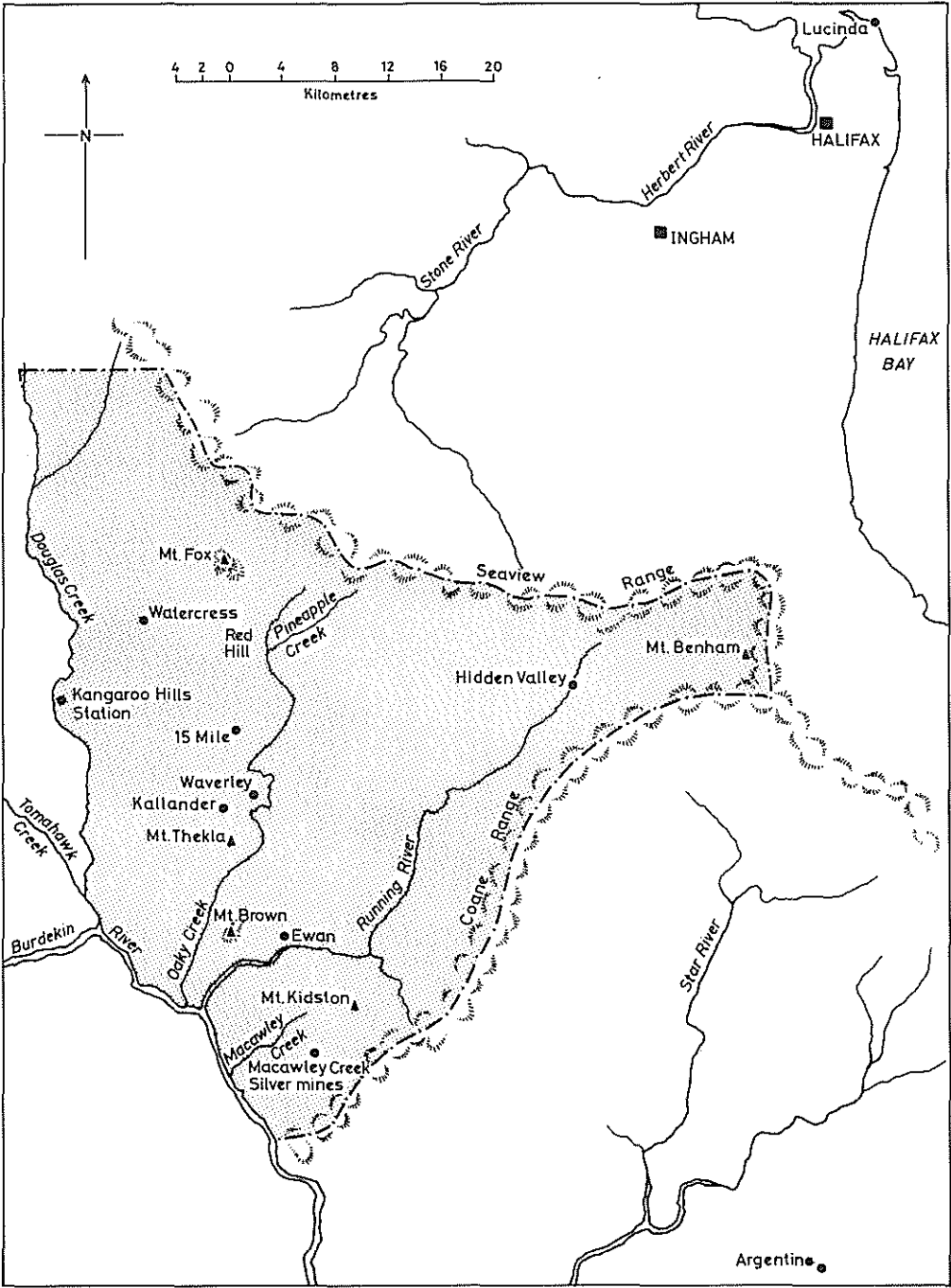


FIG 8: Kangaroo Hills Field.

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