

MILPARINKA AND WHITE CLIFFS

Although written a number of years later, this article from *The Town and Country Journal* is an excellent introduction to the history of White Cliffs:

White Cliffs, the richest and most extensively worked opal field in Australia lies to the west of the Paroo River, in the pastoral district of Mitchell and mining district of Albert. The district of Albert being the furthest west in the province of New South Wales, embracing all that trackless and unfertile country known by bushmen as the "Corner." The pastoral holdings of Tilchi on the South Australian border and Fort Grey, named after one of the ill fated Burke and Wills party in their memorable journey to the Gulf of Carpentaria on the Queensland boundary line, occupy the unenviable position of the north-west corner of the colony.

The gold mining centres of Milparinka, Tibooburra, Mount Browne, and the lately discovered Waratta are included in this district, and are 120 miles north-west from the opal fields, the corner being another 100 miles further out. The opal fields are situated in a picturesque break of a long line of stunted hills and straggling spurs running nearly parallel with the Paroo Channel, 25 miles from Momba Station, where the chief homestead of Momba Pastoral Company and extensive holdings are. The parish is named Kirk and the county Yungulgra.

These hills, in which the opal has been discovered, continue many miles north towards the Queensland border, and are in a direct line with the opal finds in that territory. Opal has also been found at Burnanga Station, 40 miles north of White Cliffs. Travelling south from Purnanga the hills afford many scenes of striking native beauty, bold and rugged in places, while at other localities, peaceful and enchanting. Seven miles from White Cliffs they terminate abruptly into a group of stately bluffs and weather-worn chalk cliffs, white and barren on the surface. Leaving these, the country opens out onto rolling rises, sloping down to the broad Keraro Plains extending away to the east. Near the town the hills become more elevated, and pursue an irregular course towards Broken Hill, where they converge to form the well-known Barrier Mountains. At Caparulo Station, 20 miles from White Cliffs, the lime and ironstone ceases, and the country becomes of a cretaceous nature.

The first precious sedimentary opal reported in New South Wales was found in 1881 by Warden W. H. J. Slee at Circa Station, 12 miles east of Milparinka. There is little known about this discovery, other than what he later wrote in the department's 1895 annual report, in part of which

REGISTER OF MINERAL LEASE APPLICATIONS,

DISTRICT OF *Mitchell*

Local Number of Application.	Date of Application, and date and hour of Receipt.	Names of Applicants.	Description of Lease, and Locality.	Area.
<i>44/1 24/10/190</i> <i>fixed</i> <i>21/11/90</i>	<i>1890.</i> <i>March 21</i> <i>at</i> <i>12.30 o'clock</i>	<i>Geo. J. Hoorley</i>	<i>Transect</i> <i>Opal</i> <i>situated at</i> <i>White-cliffs</i>	<i>80 acres</i>



This specimen is in the private collection of Dawn Daley and was found in the creek behind the Shell Service Station, only 100 metres off the main road.

he said:

Fourteen years ago I forwarded several small pieces of fairly good opal showing red and green colours, found by me near Milparinka, which was associated with gypsum, to Mr C. S. Wilkinson, the Government geologist who pronounced it good.

Unfortunately, there is no record where this find was actually made, but it is now well documented that opal can occur over vast areas of unprospected country in western New South Wales.

Many of the early settlers, especially the shepherds, would have no doubt found traces of opal throughout that vast area, even if they didn't know what they had discovered. There are many such stories. One is of a shepherd finding pretty glass on Momba Station in 1884 on the hills around the now famous opal fields of White Cliffs. A pioneer's plaque on the field today reads:

To the unknown miners of 1884, and to George J. Hooley, Richard Charles Turner, Alfred Richardson and William Henry Clouston.

While culling roos on Momba Station, Hooley found opal near here in December 1889.

The first opal-mining lease was registered at 12.30pm on 21 March 1890 in the name of George J. Hooley.

The mystery of the 1884 miners is remarkable, as they left no records of registered claims or leases, or any form of support, either in the Mines Department or any of the district or State newspapers. Not even a mullock dump was left to show that they had been there, yet many at White Cliffs over recent years have claimed that a town area

was declared there on 11 July 1885.

Gwen Rowe, the White Cliffs Opal Centenary Secretary, in a letter to the editor of the *Lightning Flash* newspaper early in 1990, said:

The pioneer commercial opal field of White Cliffs will begin to celebrate its Opal Centenary on the 21 March, 1990... Officially, White Cliffs was proclaimed an opal mining town on 11 July, 1885, though its real growth did not begin till renewed interest in opal from overseas followed new discoveries by four roo shooters George Hooley, Charlie Turner, Alf Richardson and Will Clouston in December 1889...

To better understand what did take place on 11 July 1885 is to go back to the beginning of Momba Station's history. The first lease, known as Run No. 1, was granted on 18 April 1855 and consisted of 64,000 acres. Three years later Momba had acquired another ten leases, and by 1865, 28 runs had been granted in various names totalling 1,635,480 acres. By 1879 this had grown to 42 runs and covered an area of 2,095,364 acres. By 1889, at the time of the roo shooters' opal discovery, Momba Pastoral Company controlled the lot.

Earlier in 1884, many of the large runs in the Western Division of New South Wales were divided into two, with the owners being allowed to retain one portion while the resumed section was thrown open for selection. The owners were given an Occupation Licence over any unselected parts of a resumed area. On 11 July 1885, Momba, with other runs in the division was divided into two. These details are recorded in Gazette No. 278 for 1885.

It happened that the future site of White Cliffs was in the Momba resumed area. The 1894 and 1897 Gazettes, when referring to the town area of White Cliffs, state that it is within the resumed area of Momba Pastoral Holding No. 55, and was notified 11 July 1885.

It is easy to understand why the misconception of 11 July 1885, as the date for the declaration of the first village at White Cliffs, has occurred when this background information is not known or understood.

The first recorded declaration of White Cliffs becoming a village is on 9 June 1894, in Gazette No. 376. This was after a considerable amount of agitation by the fast-growing population. It reads in part:

“WESTERN DIVISION.
Land District of Wilcannia.

Within the resumed area of Momba Pastoral
Holding No. 55.

Notified 11th July, 1885.

Boundaries of village lands at White Cliffs.”

It then goes on to define the boundaries of the village. Notice that the date 11 July 1885 is referring to the fact that the area of the new town boundaries is within the resumed Momba Pastoral Holding No. 55, the date on which the holding was resumed.

That aside, the most obvious factor that no village existed before the big rush of 1893 is the lack of any evidence of the area having ever been occupied or worked before the roo shooters' discovery three years earlier. The fact is there was not one mullock dump at White Cliffs in 1889 when Hooley picked up the opal, when dozens or even hundreds could have been expected had a town area been granted.

The reason I have gone into some detail on this point is that, not knowing about the resumption of the grazing leases on 11 July 1885, I believed the monument to the unknown miners of 1884, to be correct. Like others I was misled for years. I had originally been given a section of Gazette 838, which in 1897 notified the extension of the town boundaries. Misinterpretation led me to believe that the Right Honourable Henry Robert Viscount Hampton, Governor of the Colony of New South Wales, had proclaimed White Cliffs a village on 11 July 1885. It wasn't until after I had used the infor-

mation in another book that I discovered the error.

The fact is that poor quality opal was originally discovered in the White Cliffs area around 1884 by Sam Gardener, a fencer, while sinking postholes. Page 127 in the 1891 Department of Mines Annual Report states: "Opal was first discovered here about six years ago, but no notice was taken of it at the time."

In 1870, A. L. Garot, a Wilcannia jeweller, ran advertisements in newspapers wanting to purchase opal, which at the time was being mined along the Bulloo River in Queensland. Had there been any available locally, it would have been recorded. Also, had mining taken place prior to the 1889 discovery, E. F. Murphy, the famous opal buyer, who at the time was residing in Wilcannia, would have mentioned it in his book *They Struck Opal*.

A similar thing happened at Lightning Ridge where opal was recorded there on two occasions up to 23 years before it was rediscovered and worked in 1901.

It's of interest to note the name White Cliffs is used on the registration form of the first opal lease, which illustrates it was a name in common use at the time. Although there were no hills or paddocks on Momba Station with that name, there



One of the very first camps at White Cliffs. Photo courtesy of Erich Scriba.



Edmund Francis Murphy

During his lifetime, he became the most trusted and experienced opal dealer in Australia. So broad was his experience that it spanned every facet of the industry, even retail, in his later years.

was a local paddock known as the White Cliffs on the neighbouring station of Tarella.

In 1893, opal was found in the White Cliffs paddock some 12 miles from White Cliffs, by a man named Jenkins, who took out a 40-acre lease. He named his discovery The Bunker, after the nearby creek. The Barrier Miner, in a short article on 25 July 1893, reported men working at what they referred to as the Bunker, an area which they said had been known for many years as the White Cliffs.

Discovered early in December 1889 by shooters culling kangaroos on Momba Station, White Cliffs was the beginning of an unprecedented era in the history of Australian opal. It soon became Australia's premier field.

The four men credited with the discovery were Alfred Richardson, George Hooley, Charles Turner and William Clouston. Stories abound as to how they found it, but the most accepted one is that used by the Department of Mines in their annual report for 1892:

In 1889 a kangaroo shooter, while tracking a wounded kangaroo, picked up a piece of precious opal, which displayed an unusual brilliancy of colour. This discovery on becoming known led to a more careful search being made of the surface, and several other pieces of opal were discovered. Trenching was next resorted to and the discovery of opal in situ followed.

In a lengthy retrospective article on the discovery and history of White Cliffs, written in

February 1908 by the editor of the "Opal Miner", White Cliffs' third newspaper, he said:

In the month of May 1889, the first step towards developing what has since proved to be the richest deposit of opal yet known in the world, was taken when Messrs. A Richardson and party, turned up the first payable opal discovered on the White Cliffs opal field. In October the same year, the party pegged out a prospecting claim on what is now known as Block 1, of the White Cliffs Opal Mining Co's leases. In the following December, the discovery of payable opal was reported to Mr Walter Brown, then Mining Warden at Wilcannia, and a lease was applied for and granted in March 1890.

Hooley is credited with having picked up the floaters, which had weathered from a nearby hill. Having little knowledge of what he had found, but suspecting it may be of some value, showed it to Charlie Turner, a surveyor-cum-geologist who was on the station at the time. He recognised it as opal and suggested they let him forward it to Tullie Wollaston, an Adelaide buyer he knew.

William Skipper, later in September 1938, who was on Momba Station at the time, recalled the event this way:

George Hooley and Charles Turner, a son of a stipendiary magistrate at Mount Gambier in South Australia, were the two men tracking the wounded kangaroo when the piece of opal was picked up. Both Hooley and Turner had just returned to Momba Station, after a holiday, accompanied by William Clouston, a brother of the Mayor of Port Adelaide. They had arranged with the manager of Momba Station to do the dumping and wool pressing at the forthcoming shearing, while Clouston was given the position of bookkeeper.

Alf Richardson was not yet on the scene, but his sister, Miss Edith Richardson, was. She had come up to work on Momba in 1887. The following year she married George Hooley and was then instrumental in getting her father and five brothers positions on the station. It was after the discovery of the opal that Richardson and Clouston became involved.

Records show it was December 1889 when they arrived in Wilcannia to register the first claim, only to be told by the Crown Land Agent there was nothing in the Act which covered opal mining. This may seem a little strange, as opal mining leases had been granted 12 years earlier south of Bathurst.

The matter took nearly three months to finalise, during which time there was always the possibility their discovery could cause a rush. Eventually, they were advised to peg the area as a mineral claim, and in due course, the word "opal" was inserted in their lease. Granted on 21 March 1890

in the name of George H. Hooley, it was a reward claim of 80 acres for his discovery, the only such lease on the field. All the other leases up to 1895 were 40 acres and thereafter were reduced to 4 acres until the introduction of 100 feet x 100 feet claims a little later.

Wollaston, the first buyer on the field, was a young 26-year-old family man who had only been buying opal for 12 months when he received the White Cliffs parcel. He had already undertaken some buying ventures into the harsh western Queensland fields as well as a trip to London, where he endeavoured to develop a permanent market for Australian opal.

He had just arrived home from a long and strenuous trip, which had taken him through the Kyabra Hills in western Queensland from Eromanga to Windorah, to find the roo shooters' opal awaiting him. Not only was he surprised to find the parcel of opal, but also the type of opal it contained. He was so impressed with its possibilities that after only two days rest he was on the road again. This time his visit resulted in the development of one of the most famous opal fields in the world, White Cliffs.

Travelling by train to Broken Hill and then by coach to Wilcannia, he was fortunate enough to be given a ride on a buckboard on its way to Mount Browne. He was met by George Hooley with a saddle horse for the remainder of the journey to Momba Station.

By the time he arrived the men had set up a comfortable camp, with two tents and a bough shed, and were fully engaged in searching for opal in some shallow trenches. Since sending the parcel, they had already produced some fine specimens, which included opalised shells, bones, wood and strange bunches of opal crystals, later to be named pineapples. Like its sandstone cousin from Queensland, the opal was free from adhering matrix and came away from its bedding in naturally jointed seams, which fitted together like mosaic patchwork. There was no question as to the quality of the opal, yet, as he said, it was different, more like the better grade Hungarian material with its white base.

The men had no idea as to the value of their opal, if any, and were at quite a loss to ask a price. As Wollaston later said, they knew nothing and he knew little more, as this was a completely new type of opal. As would anyone in their position, they asked him to make an offer. I think it more appropriate that Wollaston recount the event himself:

I have no doubt that I could have got the whole lot -

specimens and all for £10. In fact, they told me afterwards, if I had turned it down, they had decided to throw the stuff among the gibbers and continue their shooting, at which they were making good money.

I had to stumble at it the best way I could - it was a new type and I was new at the game. I thought I could risk £150 if only I could manage to scrape it together. I would offer £140, and give myself room to spring £10 - but I got no chance!

On my naming the figure there was a great calm. They were simply paralysed, but only for a moment, then eight eager hands shot out! But I did not regret making a fair offer, and I saved my tenner anyway.

One can't help but believe someone was looking after Wollaston. Not only was he the first buyer on the field, but he had just returned from Queensland with an incredible £1,000 parcel of magnificent sandstone opal from the Little Wonder mine. With his capital now stretched to the limit, he had purchased the first production from what was to become a great opal field.

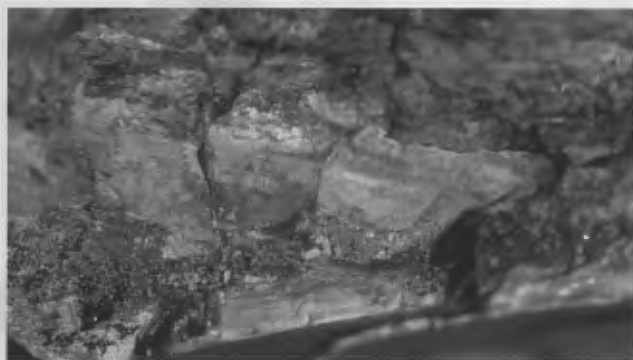
He said: "Hard work, indeed, it proved, to 'encompass' these two parcels of opal and book passages for myself and wife to London, but with the help of friends it was managed."

On arrival in London he arranged with the Hasluck Brothers, with whom he was doing business, to engage another cutter. Due now to a steady supply, within one year they had six cutters engaged entirely on Australian opal and selling the product as quickly as they could turn it out.

Many of the doubters had now changed their minds. Even the larger wholesalers, who had



*Mrs June Anne Smith
The first woman to live at White Cliffs.*



Opalised wood.

advised him not to waste his time and money, were changing their attitude, and were anxious to take large parcels in the rough, a method of selling which he adopted after a number of years.

He said: "Before I left again for Australia the trade in opal was brisk. I had already been away too long from the mines, for although my partner, D. Morton Tweedie, kept things going, he could not be away from the office for extended trips, and perhaps, too, he hardly understood the psychology of the rough miner."

There were large parcels at White Cliffs and in Queensland waiting his return. Fortunately, he arrived back in White Cliffs at a crucial moment to find all the men assembled listening to a Melbourne buyer named Levy. During his absence opal had been hard to dispose of, and the men, 18 of them, were keen to sell their product. His plan was to eliminate any opposition and contract the miners to himself by guaranteeing to buy £300 worth of their opal every month, with the possibility of more.

To participate in the scheme they would have to ballot among themselves to see whose opal would be sold first, then hold the rest, awaiting his return. He would gradually build up his market buying more. Many were inclined to accept his offer, as, at this stage of development of the field, buyers were few and far between. Besides, their faith in the gem had yet to be established and to them £5 an ounce, the going price, was a lot of money.

Wollaston relates how he took on Levy. Jumping onto a table, he said:

Lads, if you've got opal I am a buyer - I make no restrictions - sell where you like, and let the best man win." This appeared the right stuff for them! I remember I gave £150 for one stone and spent £3,000 clearing the field.

It was during this visit that Wollaston first met E. F. Murphy, later to become known to all as Ted. He recalls buying a parcel from him for £200.

It was the beginning of a long and trusted relationship which spanned more than 40 years.

Within five months, and after clearing the Queensland fields, Wollaston was off again to London, something which occupied much of his time over the next ten years. With high hopes, he carried his largest parcel, which proved so successful that he returned via New York, Chicago and San Francisco, organising markets for the new prized gem. Thanks to Tullie Wollaston's untiring efforts, Australian opal was no longer a neglected stone.

It was in December 1889 that Murphy first saw the opal when Hooley and his friends came into Wilcannia to register their lease. Early the following year, he and Alfred Andrews visited their camp with the intention of inspecting the area with regards to pegging a lease.

By this time Murphy had decided to sell his Wilcannia business and move out to the diggings where nine blocks had already been taken up. He later said in 1898:

I took up Block 10, which was a duffer, I also bought an interest in Block 11 with George Hooley and the late Skip McKenzie.

It wasn't until March 1891 that Murphy moved to White Cliffs on a permanent basis, where he began work on Block 11. Being young and ambitious, and after finding nothing of interest, he left Block 11 and went prospecting. He later said times were tough and they had great difficulty in procuring rations, meat and water. He eventually found his first patch of opal on Sullivan's Block in 1892, which he sold to Newman & Sons in Melbourne for £27.

Early in 1892, in conjunction with Tom Burton and others, he leased Blocks 5, 6, 7 and 8, after which a meeting was held in Wilcannia on 18 June 1892 to form the Wilcannia Opal Mining Company, with Murphy appointed as secretary. It was the forerunner of a number of companies which were to be formed during the life of the field. The Company employed Murphy and Burton for three months at £2. 5s a week, with all tools supplied, during which time they found £15 worth of opal, which was not a paying proposition for the Company. On 17 September 1892 a special meeting was held in Wilcannia to consider the matter, where it was decided to allow both Burton and Murphy to work on tribute, on a 50 - 50 basis, half the opal theirs and half the Company's.

Not interested in the project, Burton sold his share before they started, leaving Murphy the honour of being the first tributer on the field. He found £15 worth of opal in the first fortnight,

and averaged £10 a week as his portion for the next seven months. Seeing possible benefits from the system, the company at its meeting on 19 November 1892 decided to employ another eight men on tribute, appointing Murphy the field manager with permission to tribute in his spare time.

The system proved so successful that, at a meeting on 23 January 1893, he was empowered to employ an unlimited number of tributers. This was the true beginning of the White Cliffs fields under the guidance of Murphy. It was his intellect, which organised the Wilcannia Opal Mining Company and his foresight which, at a special meeting on 5 October 1893, replaced the old company with the Wilcannia Blocks Syndicate. He was destined to become one of Australia's finest judges, of both white and black opal.

He later wrote in 1948:

At the end of 1889, Messrs Richardson, Turner, Hooley and Clouston arrived in Wilcannia to secure rights to mine opal on Momba Station. Always one for a new adventure, I decided to join them. So after selling the whole of my stock by public auction, I moved to White Cliffs, and eventually after some time became the owner of Blocks No. 5 and No. 6.

A trusted and honest man, he had a wonderful gift for organisation, and as the field developed, he served on almost every committee as secretary or chairman. He later became one of White Cliffs' first Justices of the Peace, Magistrate and Coroner, besides a wedding celebrant and funeral conductor. His highest honour was being elevated to the High Court of New South Wales as custodian of minors, making him responsible for the many abandoned children during the latter years of the field. Although the town was prosperous, only a small percentage of the miners did well; many were starving and living off kangaroos, rabbits and the odd stolen sheep from nearby properties.

Early in the development of the field, White Cliffs was on a slow but steady upward trend, held back only by a crippling drought which covered most of the western areas of New South Wales. This affected Wollaston's marketing progress, as he required a steady supply of opal at prices which could be maintained at a fair level to all.

It's not always easy to maintain a constant supply of opal to any market at a balanced price. I know from my own years of experience as a buyer on the Queensland and Lightning Ridge fields how hard this can be, yet it must be done if



One of the early camps to be found on the field. Photo courtesy of Erich Scriba.

the miner, the field and the buyer are to prosper. White Cliffs did prosper.

Within six years of the first 1893 rush there were five hotels, with most of the rooms occupied by European dealers buying for the cutting factories of Germany. Three newspapers operated over the life of the field. The first, *The Western Life*, started in November 1897 and ran to June 1898. It was reprinted under the same name from 1900 to 1903 before being replaced by *The Opal Miner*, which published its last issue on 4 June 1904. The third paper started a little later and was called "*Opal Miner*." [not to be confused with the earlier paper, "*The Opal Miner*,"] The oldest copy that I know of the *Opal Miner* is dated 1914 and is in the Broken Hill Museum at Silverton.

With halls, clubs, shops, hotels, churches and two schools, it had all the necessary amenities of life which together make a successful town. It is interesting to note that the principal of the first school was Ernest Patrick O'Reilly, the father of the famous Australian Test Cricketer Bill O'Reilly. Don Bradman once said that O'Reilly was the greatest bowler he had ever faced.

By the end of 1890 there were at least nine large leases operating or suspended from work under labour conditions due to the drought. The original four, Hooley, Turner, Clouston and Richardson, worked together on the first lease, but according to mining records a division developed among them and Turner registered Block 3, Richardson Block 4 and Clouston Block 7.

However, Hooley and Turner later amalgamated, and with strong business backing through Murphy from Wilcannia, formed the first serious syndicate on the field, the Wilcannia Blocks Syndicate. Opal was now flowing freely from the field and, desirous of obtaining as much ground as possible and by whatever means legally conceivable, they objected to anything they thought could be acquired through the courts.

Three small chaotic shanty camps were developing and spreading out across the dusty leases, with little resemblance or appearance of organisation. The area was dry and desolate and the only available water had to be carted miles from one of Momba's tanks. So severe was the drought that there was no more than a dozen men

on the field during the first year and the second averaged only 18, but climbed to 30 by July 1893, just before the first big strikes were made.

The first death on the field was a baby, who was buried in a shaft, a custom which had been used on most Queensland fields for years. Murphy goes on to describe the event:

The temperature at this time was 120 degrees in the shade. Mr and Mrs Smith's baby died, and we made a coffin from some candleboxes, then buried the poor little mite in a ready dug thirteen foot hole. Then the Hooley's elder child - a fine little boy about three - took ill with convulsions. The nearest doctor or chemist was sixty miles away in Wilcannia...I borrowed a pair of horses and buggy... At dusk we had only crossed the Bunker Creek, 12 miles out, when the child died and we decided to return to camp... The father had ridden off to Tarella Station to get a burial permit. The mother sat beside me crying - and 12 miles of that on a lonely bush road in the dark, made one of the saddest drives I have ever experienced.

There was no direct postal service, only the Mount Browne coaches which passed twice a week, 12 miles to the west during the night. The miners took it in turns to ride over in the dark, a job that no one enjoyed, as the coach rarely arrived on time, sometimes up to a day late.

A summary of the field by the Mines Department from their annual report for 1890:

The opal mines are situated on Momba Pastoral Co.'s run, 60 miles northwest of Wilcannia. Opals have been found within a few feet of the surface, in layers between a hard siliceous sandstone. As much as £5 per oz is being offered for good specimens. During the year, 195 lb. of noble opal has been found.

If the department's figures are correct, the first year's production exceeded 3000 ounces of opal. This is quite good for only a handful of men under stressful conditions. Remember the large stone, which Wollaston purchased on his second visit for £150 when he stood on the table and contested the Melbourne buyer? We are not told its weight, so it's impossible to arrive at a price per ounce, but had it been top quality, at £5 per ounce, it would have weighed 30 ounces, possibly the largest piece of opal produced during the first year. Of course, the poorer the quality, the larger the stone would have been.