

THE TRUE STORY OF WHITE CLIFFS

Gwen Rowe
White Cliffs History Group

ABSTRACT

Using extracts from the literature, the author has documented the origins of and problems associated with the mining of opal from the historic Australian opal field of White Cliffs.

INTRODUCTION

White Cliffs was Australia's first viable commercial opal field. For about thirty-five years this field was the only major producer of opal for the world's markets. White Cliffs opal was unique in that it represented the world's first seam opal. Consequently, this opal was easier to value, clean, manufacture, and therefore was much sought-after. The White Cliffs opal field also was uniquely rich in opalised pseudomorphs of shells, bones, and even crystals (opal pineapples). All too frequently, at the turn of the 20th century, White Cliffs opal was sold as Hungarian opal (an opal that had not been mined in quantity for almost a century)¹.

White Cliffs, and its associated opal field, are located (Map 1) in arid north western New South Wales at latitude 30° 48' south, longitude 143° 6' east, some 96 km north-north-west of Wilcannia, and 270 km north-east of Broken Hill. Useful descriptions of this opal field have been provided by Jaquet (1893)² and Relph (1960)³ of the Geological Survey of N.S.W.

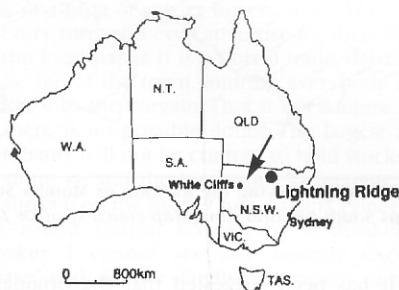
The original discovery of opal was made on Yungunulgra Plains South (See map 2), a leased pastoral run (No. 22) that had been absorbed into the Momba Pastoral Company (owned by Sir Thomas Elder, Robert Barr Smith, and Sir James McCullough) by 1894.

Just over a century after the White Cliffs opal field was discovered, many questions concerning the origin and operations of this opal field remain unanswered.

Address for correspondence:
Gwen R. Rowe
Saltbush Corner
White Cliffs NSW 2836
Australia

Where did the name White Cliffs come from? Who first discovered opal at White Cliffs? When did mining first commence at White Cliffs? What were the causes of the 'troubles' that seemed to plague opal mining operations at White Cliffs?

These are some of the questions that the following extracts from the published literature will aim to answer.



Map 1 Location of the White Cliffs opal field.

ORIGIN OF THE NAME

No documented evidence shows that a White Cliffs paddock ever existed on Momba Station, prior to the discovery of opal. In the late 1880s Momba Station was quite large. It occupied 848,618 ha of grazing land that surrounded the junction of the Paroo River with the Darling River. It ran in excess of 200,000 sheep, 2,500 cattle, 300 horses, and employed 100 stationhands⁴.

Opal was found on Yungunulgra Plains South run, and the name 'White Cliffs' was transferred from a 'White Cliffs locality' that was sited 12 km further west on what was then known as Tarella Station. The original (1881-83) survey map of the Mt Browne Road through Tarella shows a named White Cliffs paddock west of the route, in an area later known as the Bunker, then Gemville. The present White Cliffs opal field cannot be seen from the original White Cliffs paddock.

A news item in *The Broken Hill Barrier Daily Miner*, of 25th July, 1893, reported that travellers to the northern goldfields had noted men were mining at the Bunker "an area known for many years as the White Cliffs".

WHITE CLIFFS AND ITS OPAL



Fig. 1 White Cliffs opal 'pineapples'. Opal pseudomorphs after the mineral ikaite. (Australian Museum photograph)

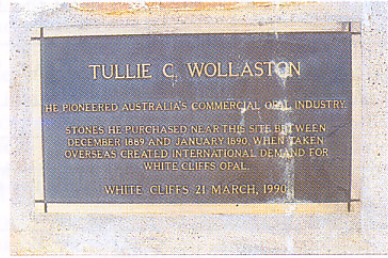


Fig. 2 Memorial plaque to opal pioneer Tully Wollaston. (A. Smallwood photograph)



Fig. 3 'The Blocks', the oldest and most mined workings at White Cliffs. (A. Smallwood photograph)

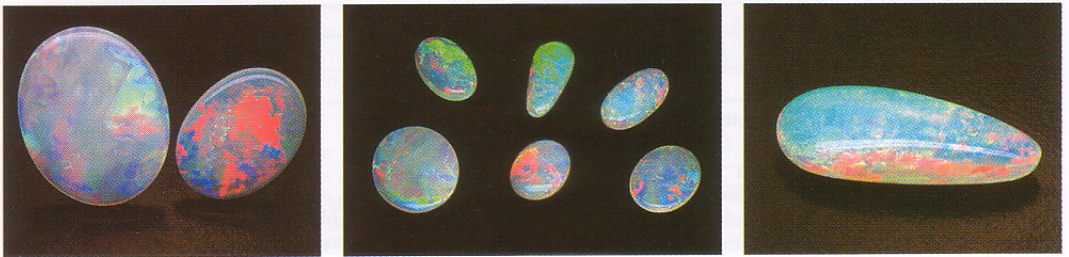


Fig. 5 A selection of polished light opal from White Cliffs. (R.G. Weber photograph)

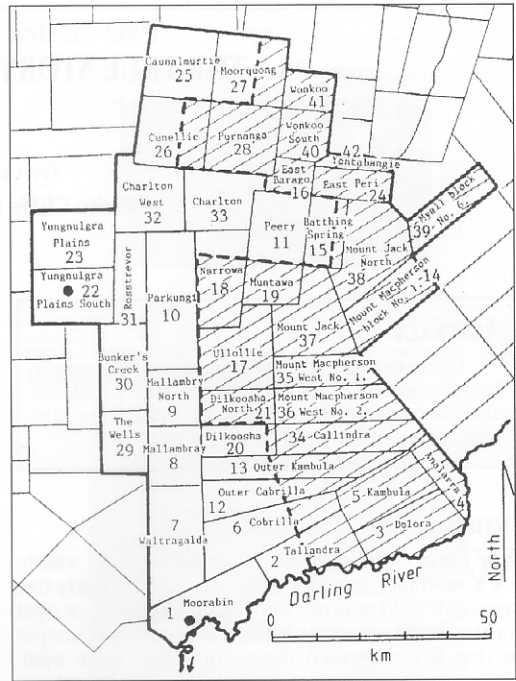
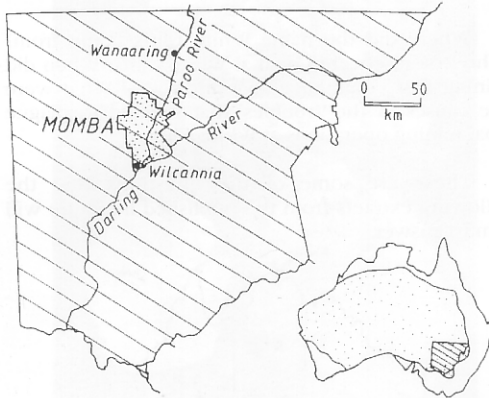


Fig. 4. Present day workings at 'Westside', White Cliffs, on the western fringe of 'The Blocks' area. (A. Smallwood photograph)



Fig. 6. View south from Turleys Hill, towards Smiths Hill. No opal found in this area, but this area is the site of White Cliffs famed underground motel. (A. Smallwood photograph)

MOMBA STATION



Map 2 Map showing the location of Momba Station, and the site where opal was first discovered on Yungnulgra Plains South pastoral run. (Map courtesy of Dr John Pickard, Macquarie University)

It has been suggested that the original White Cliffs paddock was named for "a few low, scraggy hills which showed scuffs of dirty white along their sides" and were perhaps reminiscent of the far away White Cliffs of Dover¹.

WHEN DISCOVERED

Early Evidence

Although 1884 seems accepted as the time opal was first discovered at White Cliffs, a search of the (then) N.S.W. Department of Mines and Agriculture records (in the State Archives) back to 1862 has discovered no claims registered on this opal field before March 1890. In addition, various Departmental brochures, issued between 1890 and 1969, do not substantiate claims for the 1884 discovery date.

Without mentioning anything about opal mining at White Cliffs, enterprising men like E.F. Murphy (then an outback stationhand and 'wharfie' at Wilcannia), E.B.L. Dickens (who managed the Momba Station, before becoming a stock and station agent, and later was elected M.P. for Wilcannia for the years 1889 to 1894), and Walterus Brown (owner-editor the *Wilcannia Times*, estate agent and Police Magistrate), all travelled extensively and worked, from the 1870s to 1881, throughout what was to become the vast Albert Goldfield from the 1870s to 1881, without mentioning anything about opal mining at White Cliffs.

Volume 7/3087 of the *N.S.W. Mines Register* revealed that George J. Hooley registered the 80 acre Block 1 at 12.39 p.m. on 21st March, 1890 (See figure 1). Alfred Richardson, Richard Charles Turner, and William Harvey Clouston, who Momba Pastoral Holdings had hired with Hooley to cull kangaroos that had been using scarce water needed for sheep, registered Blocks 3,4,5 (each of 40 acres) on 27 June, 1890. It was Charles Turner, amateur geologist, who sent opal samples to Tullie C. Wollaston, a colleague in the South Australian Survey Department. The story of the discovery and early days of mining at White Cliffs was provided by Wollaston in his evidence to the 1901 Royal Commission that is reproduced *verbatim* below.

LATER EVIDENCE

The following appendices F⁵ and G⁵ represent evidence presented to the 1901 Royal Commission that was set up by the N.S.W. Legislative Assembly to inquire into the status and conditions of the opal mining industry at White Cliffs. This Royal Commission had two major purposes. Primarily, the Royal Commission sought to determine what reasons lay behind vocal and persistent complaints from White Cliffs opal miners who were forced to work on a tributary basis for owners of opal leases. Secondly, the Commission was instructed to investigate ways of making the burgeoning opal industry at White Cliffs compliant with the existing NSW Mines Act.

APPENDIX F. STATEMENT RESPECTING THE OPAL INDUSTRY AT WHITE CLIFFS

[By T.C. Wollaston, Esq., Adelaide]

In the early summer of 1889 some surface specimens of opal were sent down to me in Adelaide, from White Cliffs, to determine whether they were of any value. I had only returned a few weeks from England, where at the time there was very little market for that gem; in fact opals had almost passed out of their place amongst precious stones, partly on account of a stupid modern superstition, but mainly because there was no supply. The Hungarian mines had failed, and the Australian fields were not yet opened up, though the placing of the first sandstone opal from Queensland upon the market had been the chief object of my visit to the old country. Merchants in the trade advised me not to waste time pottering with opals, as there was no demand, &c.; and I mention this to show that at the time the leases were granted at White Cliffs, neither the Government or anyone else foresaw what a great producer White Cliffs would become, or what a large measure of popularity the opal was destined to enjoy. To revert to the specimens, these were very fine, containing several pseudomorphs after calcite, bones, wood &c., and I at once made a trip to the spot. There were two tents and a bough shed, and the party of kangaroo shooters who had found the stones were, on my arrival, discussing the advisability of pitching them into the nearest pot-hole and continuing their search for the merry marsupial. I was asked to make an offer for the parcel, and I named £140, prepared to spring £10, but my bid was promptly snapped. That was the first purchase of White Cliffs opal, and started the field. Leases were applied for and granted in the ordinary way, just as they are in Queensland today. I had already leased opal ground in Queensland and found adequate control impossible. I therefore stood off White Cliffs, being content to buy opals when found. Shortly after this visit I returned to London, and in my absence my partner, Mr D. Morton Tweedie, continued to buy the stone won at White Cliffs. Australian opal was slowly winning its way, and by degrees other buyers now and then gave the new fields a look in, and a spasmodic competition began. In those days there was no doubt whatever that the miners were treated with little consideration (See Appendix G), and suspicions allowed to grow that they were the seed of the present rampant evil. I feel quite sure that in most instances those suspicions were unfounded, for I, as a buyer, saw a good deal of the lessees in my visits, and with one exception, they were not men who would rob the miners. At any rate I never saw any such indication, nor heard anything improper even hinted at. All the same it was most natural that the miners should be dissatisfied, when they were expected to give in their opal every day as they found it, and never see it again, classed or unclassified, have no say in the valuation, no proof of

what was paid for it, but simply 'Here, Jim, here's your whack,' after the buyer had gone. I believe there was no open complaint, and for some time I knew nothing of the arrangements with the men, nor was it my business. I would make a visit at the instance of one of the lessees, perhaps spend two days buying, and return by next coach. However, later on in the history of the field, I bought an interest in the Wilcannia Blocks Syndicate, which owned Blocks 5, 6, 7, and 8, which were managed by Mr E.F. Murphy. He knew the grievances of the men, and was at that time working for their removal. As a business man, I did what little I could to help, and the right of the miners to seal their opal on handing in, assist in classing and valuing, and be present at its sale, was conceded and presently became general. But the old suspicions rankled, and men who thought they had been robbed determined to 'get even; and what was begun under a burning sense of wrong continued as an easy way of making fat dividends, and continued until this day as an organised robbery. This is mainly the work of a gang of *spieler* buyers, who tempt the men at every turn, and even advertise for their illicit opal in the local paper. It is a horrid trade, debasing the public life of the town, injuring everybody and the market into the bargain. That it does injure the market there is no possible doubt. The largest and best merchants will not be content to hold stocks of opal, if stone — and the best stone — may at any time be thrown on the market by a Banana Prince, or hawked round Hatton Garden by a third-class pawnbroker. I cannot see any remedy except repurchase, and as the English Company which bought the principal leases is not paying, and cannot pay under existing conditions, I think they would be likely to consider any fair offer. I should say £10,000 would be a fair price, for £250,000 worth of stones, at least, must have been won since the leases were sold. The Company should have worked the mines with picked labour, and were so recommended by those who knew best, but they preferred the easier method, and now it would be very difficult, and even unjust, to dismiss the large number of tributers employed, and in their places install one-fifth the number on wages. The miners now, and for the past two years, have received full prices for their opal considering the low rates ruling in the markets which absorb them; in fact, for some time past honest buyers have asked themselves whether the business is worth pursuing — terms cash, high rates for inferior stone (with the chance of the best going to the *spielers*), holding stocks on an unsteady market for months, and then barely getting cost. Honest men cannot average down with stolen goods.

Briefly then, opal robbery and illicit trading at White Cliffs are rife, and consequently the opal market is unsteady and depressed. The future is most uncertain unless better conditions prevail. The only remedy is repurchase, and as the present Company, at best, is barely paying working expenses, I think £10,000 should obtain the Blocks 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, The miners would readily pay £1 per annum for an opal right, and so recoup the Government for the outlay.

As regards selling opals by auction, it is unworkable, and quite out of the question; so are all schemes that aim at monopoly. The diamond mines at Kimberley are controlled, but the cases are not in any way analogous. Opal is scattered over too wide an area in Australia, and even if all the mines could be absorbed by one strong Corporation, we cannot, in this country, make slaves of our men, and unless we do, the result is as we see at White Cliffs. If, when the miner wins his opal, it is his own, all the trouble vanishes, and no restrictions or registrations are necessary. Make competition fair, and let the best men win. I have, I think, a longer and wider personal experience in the opal industry than any other buyer in Australia, and I do not hesitate to affirm that repurchase of the opal leases as a remedy for the existing evil is the only course open that will be of any service whatever.

THE TRIBUTE SYSTEM

When opal mining first commenced at White Cliffs only about 30 men were employed on daily wages to work the leases. Soon, however, the notorious tribute system (first used in Cornwall, and later adapted to the copper mines of South Australia) was introduced to the White Cliffs field. As indicated in the agreement (Appendix G), reproduced below, tributors provided labour, the leaseholders provided tools, and the value of opal recovered was shared — in early days 50/50, but later more equitably. For example, E.F. Murphy, who was Company Manager for White Cliffs Opal Mines to 1898 insisted on a tribute share of 75% and in some cases 85%. Other leaseholders followed suit until the usual tribute stood at a ratio of 75 per cent for the miner and 25 per cent for the lessee.

APPENDIX G.

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT made this twenty-ninth day of March, 1899, between the owners of Mineral Lease No. , county Yungunulgra, parish Kirk, known as 'surveyed portion, Block 1,' herein called 'the said Company', of the one part, and W.D. Tupper, J. Hatch, C. Green, J. Green, J. Fittock, and H. McDonald, herein called 'said employees' of the other part. Whereas the said Company hereby agrees to pay as wages 75 per cent. of the current market field value of the opal won by the employees of Block 1, it is hereby agreed as follows:-

1. That the said employees shall find tools and everything requisite for the proper working of the ground.
2. That the said employees shall be under the guidance of the Company's manager as to where they shall work and in what manner they shall work the ground.

3. That all opal won by said employees or their servants, if any, as under, shall be bought in on the day on which the same is won to the office of the said Company, and there placed under the seal of the said employees, or any of them, until such time as it may be mutually agreed upon between parties to this agreement to clean, class, and sell the same, and that it shall be compulsory on the part of the said employees to be present at such cleaning, classing, and selling.
4. That no one of the said employees, or any of their servants, if any, shall trade, deal in, sell, or in any way traffic in opal without the express authority of the manager of the said Company.
5. That not less than six or more than twenty men shall be employed in all under this agreement, either as partners or the said employees or their servants.
6. That any person or persons employed by the said employees as partners shall be parties to this agreement, and sign the same accordingly, with the written consent of the employees.
7. That the servant or servants employed by the said employees in working the ground referred to shall be subject to clause 4 of this agreement, and signify their consent in writing hereunder, with the written consent of the said employees.
8. That three months notice on either side shall terminate this agreement.

Signed on behalf of the said Company in the presence of:-
W.D. Tupper
J. Hatch

Signed by the above-named employees in the presence of:
J. Green
C. Green
Henry A. Longden
J. Fittock

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Charles Rasp Library (Broken Hill) for allowing access to copies of *The Barrier Daily Miner* and various Annual Reports of the NSW Mines Department. The following sources were consulted to provide background information on White Cliffs identities such as Walterus Brown (*Wilcannia Paddlewheel Newsletter* and *White Cliffs Life Weekly* papers of 1887-97 and 1900-03), E.B. L. Dickens (*A tale of two brothers* by Mary Lazerus) and E.F. Murphy (*Western life* and *They struck opal*). Old maps and Mines Registers were made available courtesy of the Archives Authority of N.S.W.

REGISTER OF MINERAL LEASE APPLICATIONS,			DISTRICT OF <i>Mitchell</i>	
Local Number of Application.	Date of Application, and date and hour of Receipt.	Name of Applicant.	Description of Lease, and Locality.	Area.
<i>App. 21/10/1890</i> <i>Recd. 21/11/1890</i>	<i>1890-</i> <i>March 21</i> <i>at</i> <i>1/2 3000 acres</i>	<i>Geo. J. Hooley</i>	<i>Formed</i> <i>Opal</i> <i>situated at</i> <i>'White-cliffs'</i>	<i>80 acres</i>

Fig. 1. Entry in the Register of Mineral Lease Applications granting George J. Hooley lease of Block 1 on 21 March, 1890.

REFERENCES

1. Rowe, G.R. (1983) Saltbush rainbow: The early days at White Cliffs. Rowe: White Cliffs.
2. Jaquet, J.B. (1893) report on White cliffs opal fields, Wilcannia. Annual Report Department of Mines N.S.W. for 1892. p. 142.
3. Relph, R.E. (1960) White Cliffs opal field. Department of Mines Technical reports. vol 7. pp 7-17.
4. Wilcannia — Momba Station. Undated information brochure. White Cliffs History Group.
5. Report of the Royal Commission to enquire into the Opal Industry at White Cliffs including Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence and Appendices, 1901. p. 82. Government Printer: Sydney.



ADVERTISING RATES 1997

Advertising charges are based on an annual **4 issue** basis. Charges are for black and white advertising, **per issue.**

	Aust. \$.
Full page	350.00
Half page	200.00
One third page	150.00
One quarter page	100.00

2400 copies of the journal are circulated to all members of The Gemmological Association of Australia, Australian subscribers and to subscribers worldwide. Circulation of the journal continues to grow steadily.

Advertising in colour is welcomed. Quotations supplied on request. Please give details of size, number of insertions and how copy will be supplied.

Phone: (07) 3355 5080
Fax: (07) 3355 6282

Your advertisement in The Australian Gemmologist will be read around Australia and around the world.

AUSTRALIAN OPAL MINES

- Boulder Opal pieces.....\$12.00 – \$200.00 each
- Mine Run Opal (Beginner's Opal).....\$2.50 per oz
- Better Mine Run.....\$5.00 per oz
- Multi-coloured Opal Special.....\$10.00 per oz
- Black Seam Opal Mintubi.....\$20.00 per oz
- Grey Base, Blue/Green Special.....\$15.00 per oz
- Chips.....\$2.00 – \$25.00 per oz
- Mixed Opals.....\$25.00 per oz
- Black Seam Opal Mintubi, Special.....\$45.00 per oz
- White Base (full colour, reds & greens)....\$50.00 per oz
- Mixed Opal Special.....\$80.00 per oz
- Beautiful Reds, Oranges, Greens.....\$100.00 per oz
- Mixed Opals Better Quality.....\$200.00 per oz
- Black Seam Opal Mintubi.....\$400.00 per oz
- Gem Quality.....\$1000 per oz
- Semi-Black Opal from.....\$1000-\$3000 per oz
- Mixed Opal (some large stones).....\$30.00 per oz

Small (on approval) Opal Parcels sent on request.

VALUE TRIPLETS (all sizes available)

'Calibrated Solids' from \$1.00 per carat

PLUS POSTAGE

Box 345 Magill, S.A. 5072

☎ (08) 332 4049 FAX: (08) 332 9631

We accept Visa Card; American Express

FOR ALL YOUR OPAL NEEDS

Full cash refund if not to your requirements.

OVERSEAS BUYERS WELCOME