

# In 1863 they took a little trip .....

by Mary Trayes

## PRELUDE

In the heady days of the very first gold rushes on the West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand, what we today call the Tai Poutini coast, a party of Australian gold miners led by a young man named William Walsh headed out from the port of Nelson for a place called Lyell. The date was late May 1863.

Good gold had been reported at Lyell late the previous year but when the party set off there was just a canvas-town with a few diggers on the side of Lyell Creek in the Upper Buller Gorge. In fact they had already been there once, presumably by taking the difficult route up the Buller River which was a large, deep and swiftly flowing body of water. It was difficult because the only way to get stores and mining gear upriver was to use canoes, poling and pulling them turn. There were no tracks through the Lower Buller Gorge, where the explorer Brunner and his Māori guides had almost come unstuck in 1848 – the beech forests containing very little food and the riverbanks being difficult to traverse along. Crossing the river was taking your life into your hands.

Presumably, like so many other miners, Walsh and party had soon run out of stores on their first trip up to Lyell so they headed back downriver – it took only hours to go down against days or weeks coming up – then took the next boat back to Nelson, from whence they set off once again, this time overland, some of the way being by then well known, with some tracks.

Five weeks later they were back in Nelson again, still not having got to Lyell but instead having some different adventures along the way (as you will soon read). Their find of a substantial cave and how they surveyed it is a gem, but would you believe to this day, the cave as described has not been found, partly because of a few subterfuges used to cover their exact tracks, and partly because it was another 100 years before some New Zealand cavers found a copy of the newspaper article.



*Some of the limestone bluffs between the Matakītiki and Maruia River valleys south of Murchison where the 'Lost Cave' is thought to be.*

Unfortunately in 1909, at about 70 years old he met his demise in a tributary of that river, the Maruia, by trying to cross it on horseback when it was in flood.

Obituaries for him like the one shown are short, and say nothing about caves, but it just has to be the same man because strangely in the mid-Maruia area there is a stream called Caves Stream and a road named Caves Road.

*The Colonist, Nelson, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1909.*

Unfortunately the second reason only gave bits of the article specifically about the cave, so that when he and his mates were exploring the Inangahua Junction area (on the way to Lyell between the Lower and Upper Buller Gorges), he thought the cave was somewhere in that vicinity, 'lost' maybe due to earthquake activity.

However, twenty-first century internet tools tell a different story – 'Papers Past online', MapsPast, geology papers etc – and having conferred with fellow ACKMA member, Ian Millar, we think the cave is probably somewhere south of Murchison.

**And this being a BIG area to go looking, the Aussie contingent coming to the May 2023 ACKMA Conference are dutifully asked to put some time into helping re-find the cave, because after all it was a bunch of Australians who so carefully lost it.**

As per some news items found on 'Papers Past', William Walsh stayed on in New Zealand and rounded out his day's goldmining up and down the Buller River.

### SETTLER WASHED FROM HIS HORSE.

(By Telegraph.)

(From Our Own Correspondents.)  
Murchison, January 20.

A very old and highly-respected resident of Maruia named William Walsh was drowned at what is known as Caslam's Ford, at Mid-Maruia, yesterday afternoon. Deceased, who was returning from Murchison, was washed from his horse while attempting to cross the ford. The body has not been recovered. The late Mr Walsh was closely identified with the early mining days of the Buller and was a partner in the First Spoon Dredge at Fern Flat. He was about 70 years of age.

## THE STORY

*NOTE: the Lake Howick referred to in the article is now known by its' Māori name, Lake 'Rotoroa.' MT*

*The Colonist, Volume VI, Issue 589, 16 June 1863, Page 3*

### **"JOURNAL OF A PARTY OF EXPLORERS TOWARDS THE LYELL."**

#### **"INTERESTING DISCOVERIES"**

"Sir —Having just returned after an unsuccessful attempt to reach the Lyell, the following particulars may not be uninteresting to your readers.

I, in company with my mates, three in number, started from Nelson for the Lyell diggings, about five weeks ago, by the overland route. The country between here and Lake Howick, is too well known to the public to require any representation.

We reached the lake on the sixth day after starting from Nelson, and up to this point I must, say the roads are tolerably good. After travelling a distance of three or four miles, on the following morning, we met a party of diggers returning from the Lyell, who, by their representation of the diggings, stayed the further progress of our journey in that direction. Besides, as the party were without provisions, and very much fatigued, we supplied them from our stores, an act which of itself would compel us to return for a fresh supply. However, after making many inquiries of our "weary friends" about the district in which we were then located, we resolved upon supplying ourselves with as much provisions as we could bring from the nearest store, which was many miles off, and pass the winter, if possible, in prospecting that portion of the district southward of the lake.

Accordingly we started for the store, which we reached the third day, and after supplying ourselves with what we thought necessary, we again started for the lake, which place we reached without much difficulty. Here we arrived only to make a fresh start, for on the following morning we set out on our prospecting expedition: overcoming every difficulty in hopes of finding a new Eldorado. The first three days of our journey were passed without any memorandum or note, of events or objects, but as we were penetrating into a country which we believed to be totally unknown, on the fourth day, we commenced a diary, of which the following is a copy.

Camp No. 1. —Travelled about six miles to-day, through high, thickly timbered ranges, in a south-easterly direction; weather wet; prospected —found the colour several times.

Camp No. 2.—Travelled four miles, southerly direction; hills thickly timbered and difficult to travel: obtained a colour of gold, very fine, and many indications; woodhens very plentiful.

Camp No. 3.—Travelled five miles, easterly direction; country same as yesterday; no gold, but many indications; nights frosty and very cold.

Camp No. 4.—Travelled five miles; country much the same, but thick scrub and supplejack. No gold. Wild pigs in abundance.

Camp No 5.—Travelled four miles ; same direction as yesterday, southerly direction; obtained the colour of gold. Weather cold and frosty.

Camp No. 6. —Four miles, westerly direction ; an entire change of weather; change in formation of country; gully or creek regularly rock-bound; great indications of gold—obtained a colour only.

Camp No. 7.—We remained three days here, owing to one of our party being unable to proceed, through a hurt received by falling over some brushwood immediately previous to camping. However, we were not less eager in our search for gold than on previous occasions, as we spent three days in penetrating into the bush in different directions, through some places indeed almost impassable from rocks of an unusual size, and most remarkable in formation. This portion of the locality indicated no signs of gold, being stratified in its formation, and composed of tertiary deposits. On the following day we followed up an almost impassable rivulet for a distance of about four miles, where we found some indications of gold, the bed of the stream consisting of crystalline mica schist, whilst the upper part was strewn with large quartz stones. Here we made a most diligent search, but only succeeded in obtaining a "colour." Here, too, our attention was drawn to a large opening or entrance into the face of — as it did appear — a solid rock some three or four hundred feet high, and almost perpendicular.

Upon examination it proved to be a regular "cave" and so mysterious in formation as to excite our curiosity about the nature of its contents. Accordingly two of us entered with the utmost caution, the others remaining outside, and we had not proceeded far when it became so very regular in its formation as to compel us to think we were entering the abode of some eminent Maori chief, carefully excavated. Having proceeded in all to a distance of about fifty feet in the living rock, the light began to grow dim and the objects imperceptible. Under these circumstances we considered it unsafe to proceed any further inwards, and after a consultation, determined upon abandoning the attempt for the present. We returned to our companions, whom we found closely examining some indistinct marks immediately outside the cave, and after further deliberation resolved upon making this our course on the morrow, when we would provide ourselves with the necessary requisites to explore the interior. We returned home, and next morning, finding that our disabled companion was able to proceed with us, we started in the intended direction, and reached there in good camping time.

We again entered the cave this time with lighted candles and revolvers loaded. We found the cave to be about fifteen feet high, eleven feet in width, and pretty evenly arched, with a partially level bottom. Here and there might be seen open joints in the rock but taking it on the whole it might be considered solid.

Nine or ten yards further than we penetrated the previous day we found a complete change. Here the cave is irregular, confused, and disorderly in formation. Water was pouring from the crevices with considerable force and disappearing through the joints beneath us. A little farther on it appeared to come to a close but proved after examination to be sufficiently large to admit of passing through. We went on and found the opening expand into another cave, higher, wider, and evidently longer than the first, though very irregular. About sixty feet further in, the

cave becomes still wider and higher, being here about forty feet in height, of a cylindrical formation, and having on its floor, and abutting from its sides, huge masses of rock with very open joints, and disproportionately connected. At length we reached the extreme end and proceeded to collect a large assortment of stones of different kinds, with which the place abounded. We also found a number of bones of various kinds, and with these we filled a large handkerchief. They appeared to be chiefly the bones of small birds. The bones, as we believe, of a dog we found a little apart, and some of them we also preserved.

At one place we estimated the height and width of the cave to be respectively 180 and 80 feet.

We then procured a supplejack, six yards long, measured the entire distance, from the opening to the extreme end of the cave, and found it to be exactly twenty-five lengths, or 450 feet.

On examining the stones we found some of them to be crystalline rock; others, palaeozoic;—these two we found almost together, as also some quartz stones. Some also proved to be of the alluvial and diluvial formation; variegated sandstone, and red conglomerate zechstein formation; but the greater part appeared to be of the oolitic formation. Our selection also contained one very curious piece, about a foot long, three inches in thickness, and about five inches in width, but irregularly shaped on the edges.

The outward appearance partially indicated bones of ichthyosaurus; and on slicing the stone this appearance was confirmed. We preserved a sample of each from the different specimens, and the choicest of the bones, and deposited them near our camping ground until our return. I may add, that close to the entrance of the cave, we found a Maori battle-axe the morning following, which article we placed with the others.

We started again on our gold-explorations, following up the little stream for a distance of about five miles through an extremely rough and rocky passage, prospecting all the time, but without any success, and continued our journey on the following day for a distance of about four or five miles. Here the country was so thickly timbered as almost to baffle all hopes of continuing our journey, scrub and supplejack abounding everywhere: the little creek regularly rockbound, compelling us to walk during the greater part of our time in the bed of it, and in the water, which was in some places four feet in depth. However, we made another attempt on the following morning, and succeeded in making about five miles, travelling from early morning until late at night. The country looked still worse, and although we obtained the colour, there was not that indication of gold to induce us to proceed further through a country which seemed to defy our combined exertions. Besides, as our provisions were beginning to grow short, owing in a great measure to the ravages of the rats, we thought the best course to adopt would be to go back to Camp No. 6, where we should have the opportunity of shooting wild pigs.

Numerous birds, of different varieties, were to be seen everywhere through this locality, especially at a little lake of about five acres, which lay enclosed between huge masses of granite at our last camping place. In journeying round this lake, and while endeavouring to scramble through a most difficult pass, consisting of large blocks of granite thickly covered with brushwood, we were rather surprised by coming upon a beaten track, though evidently long since abandoned, which intercepted our course. This we followed up for a considerable distance, until it became almost indistinct by branching off in several directions.

Returning again, we chose the opposite course which led to the summit of a precipice overlooking the Lake and elevated to a height of upwards of 300 feet. At the extreme end we were astonished by finding some broken shells, the fragments of which induced us to make an investigation as to their primitive formation. From this we found the shell to be upwards of one fourth of an inch in thickness, although much decayed. After comparing the relation these fragments bore to each other, more especially from the appearance of the end pieces, we believed them to be parts of two eggs, which they most undoubtedly were. They were placed in what we supposed to be a bed or nest of rough material, but great size, and resembling to our eye the habitation of some ferocious beast, notwithstanding the presence of some leaves, moss, and other things. The eggs must have been of an enormous size from the appearance of the fragments, a portion of which we preserved but ultimately it shared the fate of the other articles."

## LOCATION MAP

Extract from NZ Road Map showing top of South Island. State Highway 6 goes up the Buller River to Lyell and beyond. State Highway 65 follows the Maruia River south to Springs Junction. '?' denotes the wider area where the Australian miners are thought to have gone.

