

Italians in evidence in 19th Century Australia

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There are places in four Australian states where Italians settled during the second half of the nineteenth century and where buildings still survive to provide us with evidence of their early association.

Prior to 1850 few Italians had chosen to migrate to Australia but with large numbers of Swiss-Italians they joined the excited European movement to the goldfields, a migration which was to eventuate in a much more international colonial society. Escaping drastic employment prohibitions imposed by the Austrian occupiers of Lombardy, over 2,000 Swiss-Italians from the canton of Ticino came to Victoria and New South Wales between 1853 and 1856, purchasing their passages from Italian agents representing French and German shipping companies. *1*

An unknown number of northern Italians from Lombardy and Piedmont left at the same time and groups continued to migrate up until the end of the century. The sudden Ticinese emigration had, on the other hand, virtually stopped by 1857.

Two particular places where a great deal of evidence of their settlement exists are Daylesford-Hepburn in central Victoria and Hunters Hill in New South Wales.

In the Daylesford area the estimated population (which would have included the Ticinese) was 800 in 1861 and an outstanding assortment of buildings, has survived as a reminder of the large numbers:

“As we struggle about we notice that....there is a strong Italian element -Italian miners, Italian tradespeople and professional men . . .” 2

Special services were introduced including an Italian library holding newspapers from northern Italian and Swiss towns and villages and Italian speaking Court interpreters and Relief Funds. Hotels, mostly weatherboard buildings, with names like the William Tell, Traversi's, Basili's, Bedolla's and Lucia Brignoli's Helvetia, provided the migrants with amusements ranging from balls, to wrestling matches to 'dancing' girls.

Almost all the Daylesford Italians were occupied on surrounding goldfields until 1860 but many huts, cottages, shops, and billiard saloons were intentionally makeshift and cheap in construction and have disappeared. Yet there is a unique reminder, Italian Hill, worked by eight or nine parties of miners and tunnelled with passages some as long as 2000' (609m) by 1860s and one that was 6000'(1828 m) by the 1880s. This description of Daylesford written in 1864 explains:

“Its former name was Jim Crow, long known as a poor man's diggings ... The first step to render it a large permanent field was made by a party of Italians, who drove tunnels into the hillside ... The district consisting as it does of broken country affords fine opportunities for this description of mining, and tunnelling soon became the feature of the place. Many of the hills are now completely honeycombed with mole-like passages.” 3

Another newspaper report mentions vineyards planted at the tunnel openings as a sort of recreational or fresh-air activity.

Farming, dairying and wine production were favourite Italian land uses and the houses have large cellars. The old Gervasoni homestead at Yandoit makes a very positive statement about the scale of commitment of some of the Italian and Swiss-Italian pioneers. By 1860 many of the migrants were turning away from mining towards farming and at Yandoit, a hilly place north of Daylesford, there is abundant evidence of

those early settlers, the Gervasoni, Righetti, Invernazzi and Sartori families, whose proud descendants still occupy their properties.

Nazzaro Sartori named his 1870s house Locarno after the Swiss town where the migrants bought their passages to Australia . Two other Ticinese associated buildings are at Eganstown, once known as the Blanket Flat diggings, a two storey red brick house built in the 1860s by Maurizio Morganti and the other Lafranchi's Swiss Mountain Hotel.

Probably the best known building, complete with its distinctively Italian painted ceilings, is Pietro Lucini's old Macaroni Factory which was initially his Roma Hotel. Lucini from Sardinia and Fabrizio Crippa from Milan had mining leases, stores, abattoirs as well as a shared interest in the Hepburn Mineral Springs.

'The enterprising Italians amongst us seem determined to take the lead in the cultivation of gardens and vineyards', wrote one reporter praising Crippa's showpiece property planted with seven acres (2.8 ha) of vines which were estimated that summer of 1864 to produce 20 tons of grapes. Crippa's 'noble' Parma House on Main Road , Hepburn Springs, is built of rendered brick with stone featuring in a similar style to Lucini's building, and as a contemporary pair they are important national heritage items with a specific Italian nineteenth century connection.

In fact, as a collection of heritage items close to the old Daylesford-Hepburn-Yandoit gold diggings the Italian houses, farm buildings, huts and stone walls enclosing their farms, are exceptional and well preserved. Italians and Swiss-Italians accounted for over ten per cent of the early 1860s Daylesford population and were as locally influential perhaps as the nineteenth century German immigrant farmers in the Barossa Valley of South Australia.

1. Giorgio Cheda, *L'Emigrazione Ticinese in Australia* , published in Locarno, Switzerland and soon to be published in Australia translated by A. Pagliaro.
2. Daylesford Express, 22 October 1864 .
3. Ibid.
4. Heritage of Hunters Hill (Hunters Hill Trust, 1982).
5. New Italy Souvenir Brochure (Mitchell Library, 1961).
6. See Isobel Wilkinson, *Forgotten Country* (Lismore: 1980).
7. Charles Gamba, *A Report on The Italian Fishermen of Fremantle* (Perth : 1950). dates the arrival 1881.
8. Gianfranco Cresciani, *The Italians ABC* 1985.

Roslyn Maguire was awarded the 1986 C. H. Currey Fellowship for research into nineteenth century, Italian immigration.