BERLIN FLAT

Location

INGLEWOOD-RHEOLA ROAD RHEOLA, LODDON SHIRE

Municipality

LODDON SHIRE

Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7624-0111

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

Hermes Number 7479

Property Number

History

The original discovery of what the discoverer called Byr Lyn, but which the diggers immediately called Berlin, was the opening of Clelland's Gully by Alexander Clelland on 21 August 1868, from which he received an official reward of £100. Mr Know Orme, the warden, wrote to the Secretary of Mines about the opening of the Berlin field - '*The Berlin diggings are distant about twelve miles westward of Inglewood, and four from Kingower, and are on Kingdaraar Creek, which flows into the Loddon after a course of about twenty miles. The population of the 15th instant about 400*'. [James Flett, 1979, The History of Gold Discovery in Victoria, pp. 292-296]

The alluvial gold was being extracted from shallow deposits and was patchy. The gold bearing ground in Clelland's Gully run in an east-west direction and the gold was found at uncertain depths, from an inch or two to about four feet. The gold bearing ground had an average width of 15 metres. Other gullies and flats were

investigated and within 6 months some 340 nuggets from 440 oz. down to one oz. were unearthed. [James Flett, 1979, The History of Gold Discovery in Victoria, pp. 292-296]

The exhaustion of the Berlin rush in 1870 coincides with the region's first sustained quartz mining. By this time, the Berlin or Rheola Goldfield had become Victoria's richest gold nugget field. From the 1870s, occasional big nuggets were found in the area, the last famous one being the 875 ounce 'Hand of Faith' nugget found in 1980 by Kevin Hillier using a metal detector.

From the 1870s, some of the gold bearing gullies were subjected to puddling mining. This form of mining caused significant ground disturbance. Horse-powered puddling machines could process a couple of tons of earth and were introduced to enable the alluvial (or free gold) gold to be separated economically. It consisted of a circular timber-lined trough with centre bearing and a revolving horizontal timber pole with a trailing rake-like implement to break the clayey gravels into a slurry and drawn around by a horse following a circular path. Water was provided by a nearby dam. Operators of a puddling machine working in shallow ground quarried out the whole mass of the gold bearing soil down to natural bedrock. This form of mining took away all the evidence of earlier mining, leaving behind mounds of slimes (alluviums) and pebbles.

The shallow gold bearing ground around Rheola experienced other types of significant ground disturbance. For example, after the First World War, some reworking took place when mechanical devices, operated by oil engines, fitted with copper plates and ripples for amalgamation of gold with a cyanide solution, were used. These machines had the capacity to treat up to six tons of slimes or alluviums an hour. [Age, 12 March 1935, p.12]. In other areas, gold workings were levelled, and the land used for pastoral purposes. On at least one occasion, ground was prepared for fruit growing. In 1932, an article in the *Age* predicted that the cultivation of orchards around Rheola would become a permanent industry.

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The Berlin rush was at its height in 1869 when there were over 2,000 men digging and the field was rapidly extending. It was short-lived. In June 1870, the mining registrar reported that:

The population of Berlin has decreased very considerably during the quarter, and, although gold is being found by a few in very large quantities, many miners will shortly have to leave unless new ground be opened up. [Mining Surveyors' Reports, June 1870]

Miners who stayed on, continued prospecting for large nuggets. E.J. Dunn, a geologist for the Department of Mines, provides the following insights into the geology and the method used to search for large nuggets:

· At Rheola, the country rocks are granite along the course of the principal creek …. The depth of the drift seldom reached 12 feet, and some of the largest nuggets were found at 4 feet or less from the surface. [Report on the Country in the neighbourhood of Wedderburn and Rheola, E.J. Dunn, p.99, 1888]

· It is remarkable that some very heavy nuggets were found not resting on bedrock but sometimes several feet above it in the gravel. Such was the case with the Viscount Canterbury nugget, found at Rheola, as the famous Berlin rush in now named. On this field the gold was so course that washing the gravel was not resorted to. The top material – drift, gravel and clay, etc – was stripped for 10 to 12 feet to the wash-dirt and this later was turned over with a long-handled shovel and thrown back. If there was any gold present it was either seen in the gravel or felt on the shovel. [Memoirs of the Geological Survey of Victoria, E.J. Dunn, Department of mines, 1912, p.4]