Miners’ Cottages Style 1850–1875

Statement of Significance

Historic context

Bendigo was one of the richest goldfields in the world, in a series of global gold rushes of the 19th century. The wealth from the central Victorian goldfields transformed international banking systems and financed colonial expansion and world trade.

What is significant?

Crown land could be mined under a lease system called a Miner’s Right. A Miner’s Right granted a miner the right to build and live on the site, known as a Residency Area.

The 1850s rush on the Bendigo and Heathcote goldfields was transitory. Miners were mobile, often living in tents along the outlying creeks. However, when alluvial gold finds were substantial, miners would erect small, often prefabricated, timber cottages known as miners’ cottages. These cottages were a rudimentary, cheap, and transportable form of mass housing.

Companies formed in the 1860s with the expansion of deep reef quartz gold mines in Bendigo. Cheap labour was provided by gangs who worked in ‘tribute’ teams. These miners clustered their cottages around the wealthy mines where they worked.

The miners of Cornish and German origin often also used their traditional building skills to build mud brick and stone cottages.

Miners’ cottages are the historic markers of the gold mine sites that were once scattered throughout the Bendigo goldfields. Miners’ cottages along with the grander homes of mine managers, engineers and magnates were the start of permanent settlement in this region.

Miners’ cottages are largely unadorned, single storey and consist of a basic rectangular tent-like each approximately 3-4 metres by 6-9 metres.

The Miners’ Cottage style was also used by early residents in other trades.
Statement of Significance

How is it significant?
The miners’ cottages are of cultural significance for their historic and aesthetic values.

Why is it significant?
Miners’ cottages are historically significant as an example of a modest domestic construction that reflects the different traditions of early migrants, which evolved from vernacular cottages to manufactured buildings.

The topography of each goldfield saw aesthetic adaptations of the miners’ cottages, showing the shifting fortunes of the mines and miners.

Miners’ cottages and Residential Areas are also historically significant as a Victorian Government initiative to enable gold miners to occupy crown land for residential purposes. Holders of a Miner’s Right could take out a residential claim as leasehold and this was vitally important in the development of Victoria’s gold-mining towns.

Miners’ cottages have maintained their vernacular style over time whilst adapting to change, making them an integral part of Greater Bendigo’s goldfields heritage.

Victoria’s Historical Themes

- Peopling Victoria’s places and landscapes
- Migrating and making a home
- Transforming the land
- Gold mining

Contributory Elements

Setting

Setting and location
Miners’ cottages were typically built on a quarter acre block. As many were built before roads were surveyed, miners’ cottages do not always face the road or have regular front setbacks.

Gardens and outbuildings
Blocks were self-sufficient and had outbuildings, vegetable gardens, wells, fruit trees and animal enclosures—some of which survive. Gardens were cottage style.
Contributory Elements

Form

Scale
The basic unit was a tent-like low rectangular box in 3.6m x 9m variations. Cottages were made up of 1 or more boxes, sited at the rear, side or right angled.

Roofs and chimneys
Roofs were a ridge with gable ends or hipped, with a skillion off the rear or another gable end, creating the distinctive zigzag roofline. Each gable would typically have a chimney. Sometimes no eaves.

Building Fabric

Windows and doors
Central timber door with simple, narrow, and modest windows either side. Windows could be double hung and sizes varied. Cornish long house style feature asymmetrical door and multiple windows. Later renovations added more windows and doors.

Details
Verandahs could be decorated with cast iron brackets, friezes or wooden trim. Other features were often applied later, including bay windows, window hoods, elaborate front doors and cladding.

Material and finishes
Cottages were weatherboard, mud brick, or stone, with some made of rendered brick or even rubble. Shingle roofs were often covered by corrugated metal sheets. Floors could be earthen or timber.
Contributory Elements

Building Fabric

Verandahs and posts
Verandahs were basic with simple skillion, hipped, convex or concave, with some decorative features. Many early cottages had none. A number of verandahs were added or altered later to bullnose or inter-war ‘barley sugar’ concrete posts and brick.

Fences and gates
Front fences might be stone or hedge, but were more commonly low timber pickets in a variety of styles.