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GOLDFIELDS JEWELLERY



TOUCHED BY GOLD: 'BOUNTY LASS' PHOEBE MORGAN AND HER LEGACY

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HER GREAT GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER

In 1853 a seventeen-year-old Welsh girl, Phoebe Louisa Morgan, found herself orphaned in London when her parents, exiles from the Snowdonia area, died in a cholera epidemic in the borough of Southwark. Having seen and read about Australia at the Great Exhibition in London and after reading about the excitement of the gold rushes in the newspapers of the day, she sailed on the barque *Mooltan*, arriving in Victoria in August 1853. Phoebe went into service as a ladies' maid for a few months with Mr Gladstone of Geelong but the pretty and vivacious teenager, with her Welsh colouring and grandmother's name, soon married cabinetmaker John Clarke. Together they journeyed to the diggings at Sailor's Gully near Sandhurst (Bendigo), where she set up in business catering for miners from her tent (Fig. 1). A lantern was hung and a table was constructed of boxes on which she placed their tin dishes, pots, pannikins, knives, forks and spoons in regimented order. A camp oven and kettle were set up on a tripod over the campfire. Cords were stretched on which to hang garments, and the mining equipment placed near the front of the tent. Indulged by her husband, the thrifty lass bought whole sides of lamb and cadged offal and muttonheads which, with the addition of an onion or two made tasty dishes, stews and broths that miners paid for with nuggets. A kerchief on a pole beside the tent indicated she had leftover food for sale. Each night Phoebe would whitewash the logs she used for seats in her informal dining area, sweep the ground and place the nuggets under one of the stumps. No one guessed this was her hidden safe.

Tragically, it was here that her eldest child drowned in a water hole, and in 1856 the family moved on to Heathcote, where a son was born. At age twenty-three, Phoebe's husband died of enteritis. Widowed and a single mother, Phoebe set up her tent and store and again served meals to hungry diggers. She was not without admirers. Before long she married a Quaker, Frederick Wheeler, who was a Londoner from fashionable Marylebone. Frederick came to the country lured by gold and had set up as a storekeeper in Redcastle, near Heathcote. He was attracted to the lively young widow with genteel manners. That he was a Quaker was to cause problems later on; the children of Quakers who married 'outs' were considered to be illegitimate by the Society of Friends, though legitimate by the State. A son, Herbert, was born to the new couple in 1861, before tragedy struck again a few months later when his half-brother died from meningitis. In an attempt to console her, Frederick gave Phoebe a large gold foliate brooch similar to the one in Fig. 2. He then moved the family to Myer's Flat, near Sandhurst (now Bendigo), which had become a thriving town.

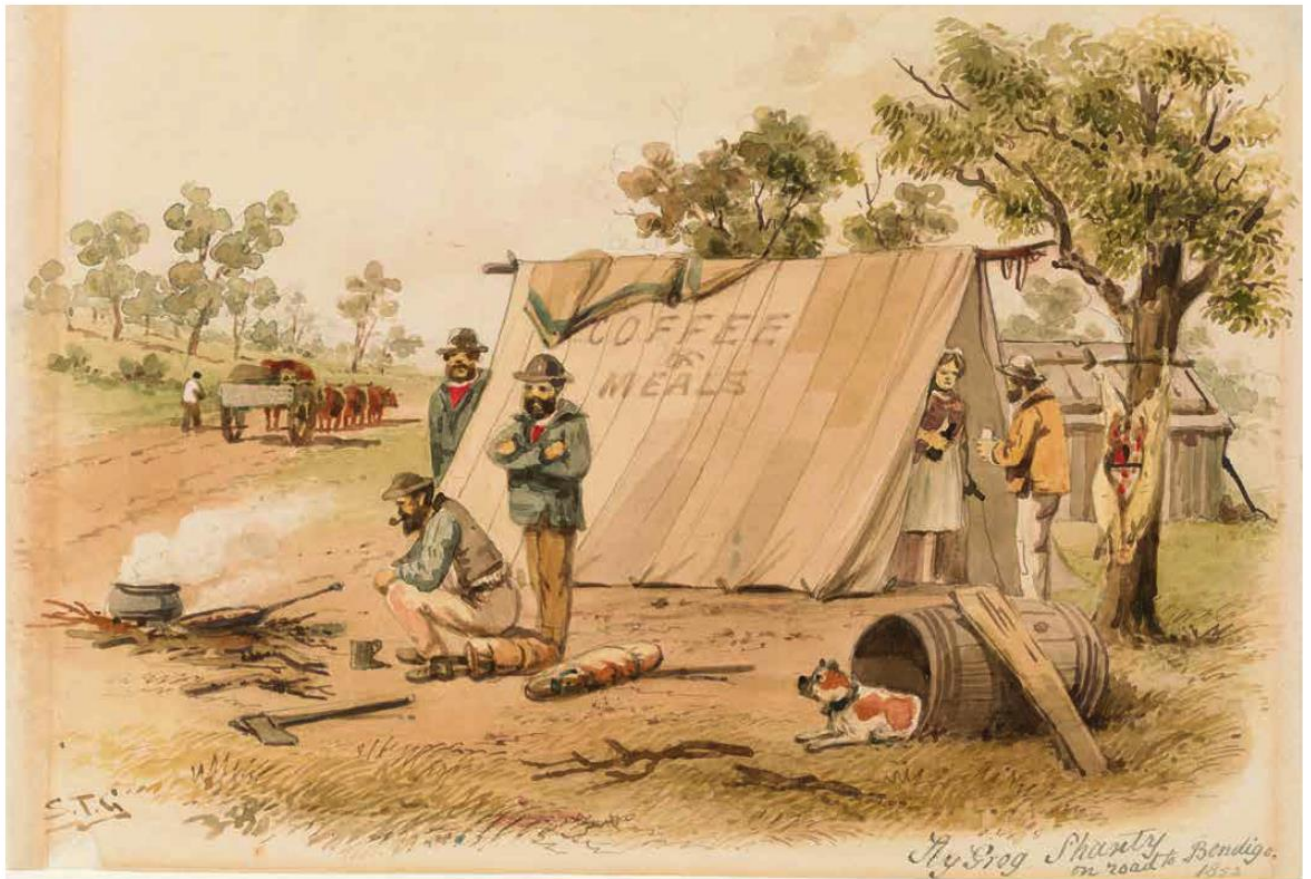
The family continued to move to follow the gold rushes, and were soon in Eaglehawk, where Phoebe ran their large home as a boarding house. Four more children were born, but one, Sarah May, tragically died of dysentery. After the birth of their youngest daughter Frederica Georgina Elizabeth, Phoebe and Frederick decided to rent the two-storey Prince of Wales Hotel in Sandhurst. With a number of servants, life was much more comfortable. This good fortune was not to last.

OPPOSITE

Rica Wheeler, Phoebe's youngest daughter, as a teenager, Melbourne 1888.

IMAGE

courtesy Dorothy Erickson



New laws were enacted in England in regard to Quaker marriages. The couple thought it best to part before they were mired in laws soon to be enacted in Victoria and declared herself a widow to avoid embarrassment. She planned to run a Temperance Hotel with the help of her older girls. "Look before you leap" and "a bird in the hand is worth two in a bush" were two of Phoebe's sayings her daughters recalled.

Sadly the new-born died. Phoebe then moved to live in prominent businessman William Clarke's Sandhurst home as a wet nurse to his young his son Clive. In 1874 Clive was weaned and the family left the gold fields to re-establish themselves in Echuca, on the Murray River in Victoria's north. At the time Echuca was the fastest-growing town in Victoria and Phoebe thought it would have many potential customers for her proposed new restaurant.

Phoebe started by managing The Red Gum Home at McGrowther's Mill, which catered meals for the mill workers. She then bought a mill owner's 12-room house in East Echuca and opened the profitable Phoenix Hotel with a son-in-law as the listed licensee. Mixing with the gentry, Phoebe married again, this time to Peter Hamling, the owner of a transport business.

Unfortunately, as it would later become apparent, this decision was unwise as his intentions were far from clear. After the marriage, Phoebe decided to lease the hotel, and was pleased to note the Married Women's Act of 1878 allowed her control of her own earnings. She advertised a change of address and business, leaving the Phoenix Hotel, and instead leased a two-storey building with stables and cottage under the name 'City of Sandhurst Hotel'. It was here in 1879 that she was poisoned.

FIG. 1 Phoebe's tent may well have looked like this but she did not sell liquor.

ST Gill 'Sly grog shanty on the road to Bendigo 1852'.

State Library Victoria



Newspapers reported she 'swallowed an ounce of sugar of lead, dissolved in water, which she mistook for Epsom salts', leaving her in a 'very dangerous condition'. Family lore suggests that her husband poisoned her in order to gain control of her properties; something he had apparently been attempting to do for some time. His own children by an earlier marriage rallied round Phoebe and Peter Hamling left town in disgrace.

Upon recovery, Phoebe continued to manage the City of Sandhurst Hotel; a job with no shortage of challenges.

One evening in 1880, the outlawed Kelly gang arrived at the hotel and asked for food and lodging. Phoebe accepted, with her daughters locked safely upstairs. The following morning after serving breakfast they found a sovereign under each of the gang member's plates. It was a story they would tell their grandchildren. When the lease of the City of Sandhurst Hotel expired, Phoebe returned to the Phoenix Hotel, although it was no longer as profitable.

In 1885, with her youngest two children in tow, she moved to Melbourne, and purchased land at Werribee as an investment. When her youngest and tomboyish daughter Frederica (also known as Rica) married her employer in 1888, Phoebe decided to accept some work in Alexander. Phoebe travelled there by hansom cab: a journey that was to end with tragedy. The drunken driver lost control of his horse on the hilly road, collided with a tree and overturned the cab. Phoebe was mortally wounded.



Broken in the accident, Phoebe's brooch was divided into four pieces – one for each daughter. The youngest, Frederica Georgina Elizabeth Wheeler (named after Phoebe's best-loved husband) had spent a lot of time with her mother, and knew her stories well. These she passed on to her own granddaughter Rica Erickson, who committed them to print in *The Misfortunes of Phoebe*. Phoebe herself had written her own life story in an old exercise book, however no one seems to have it now.

Rica was also married and widowed at a young age. Like her mother, Rica was also resourceful. Once widowed, Rica trained as a midwife to support her children then followed the lure of gold to the goldfields of Western Australia in 1906 to join her sister. She then set up her shingle in Boulder City and became the local legend known as Nurse Cooke.

It was here Rica had her quarter of her mother Phoebe's brooch made by local jewellers Mazzuccelli into a new jewel. The style was that of the time, a light double bar brooch similar to many made on the Western Australian goldfields illustrated in Fig. 3.

Her mother Phoebe's brooch, on the contrary, had been a large bulla style of brooch worn high at the throat. It was typical of the goldfields brooches made during the NSW and Victorian gold rushes in the 1850s–60s when great 'bulla' brooches were the fashion.

LEFT

FIG. 2 This Victorian goldfields brooch made in the 1850s is similar to the brooch Frederick Wheeler gave to his wife Phoebe. Private Collection

RIGHT

FIG. 3 The brooch made by Mazzuccelli's using part of Phoebe's brooch.

IMAGE courtesy Dorothy Erickson



Western Australian goldfields jewellery, some forty years after Phoebe's gift from Frederick demonstrate much simpler designs. Fashion and pragmatism played its part too. In Western Australian gold fields jewellery was much lighter than that of the earlier east coast fashions.

Western Australian goldfields jewellery was popular in the Aesthetic period, where sporting jewellery, name brooches, bar brooches and lace pins were fashionable. The hot Westralian climate was also a factor in jewellery design. Where Victoria has a climate more akin to southern England or France, Perth, capital of Western Australia, has a Mediterranean / Californian climate while Boulder and other Western Australian goldfields were in the dry and dusty desert interior more suited to light cotton clothing for much of the year. This affected jewellery fashion, as the wearer's ability to support heavier brooches in this climate was thwarted by fabric, and trends of the late Victorian era meant that over-the-top big gold pieces were no longer de rigueur.

Distinctive work was made utilizing swans or mining implements combined with nuggets or an arch spelling out the name of the mine, town or occasion. Rica's brooch was however a little different. It had a recycled element of material, historical and sentimental importance.

FIG. 4 Frederica (Rica) Cooke wearing her brooch.
IMAGE courtesy Dorothy Erickson

The maker, Matthew Ernest Mazzucchelli, had begun an apprenticeship with Benjamin Cohen in Melbourne and completed it in Stawell, Victoria, where his father, a Swiss, was living having arrived in Victoria as an engineer in the mining industry. When Matthew's apprenticeship finished, his family travelled west to repair family fortunes lost in the Victorian bank crashes of the 1890s. The firm began as Mazzucchelli & Downes in Boulder City, Frederica Cooke sought out Mazzucchelli and had the very sentimental memento of her mother incorporated into a new brooch typical of the period.

Only three known pieces are marked with 'M&D' of the firm Mazzucchelli & Downes. One is a fifteen-carat gold brooch presented to Nurse Cooke in 1909 in recognition of her professional efforts. It is in the form of a Goldfields' Infantry Regiment badge. On the verso is inscribed 'To Nurse Cooke from members of E company with heartfelt thanks 30/9/09'. Mazzucchelli also made Nurse Cooke a wedding ring to a new husband.

The bar-brooch incorporating the treasured fragment of Ricas's mother's brooch was constructed of hollow tube terminated with gallery-strip and scrolls. The central section features, in place of the usual nugget, the torn leaves of the brooch originally made on the Sandhurst field during the Victorian gold rushes as a present from Frederick Wheeler to Phoebe Morgan.

Nurse Cooke was a familiar figure wearing her pinstripe hospital-blue uniform with long sleeves and floor length hem, carrying her nursing bag as she walked briskly on her rounds. She often wore the brooch at her neck (Fig. 4). When her daughters married she delivered their children, and claimed to have delivered over 1,000 babies and never lost a mother or a full-term child. She retired at seventy-three. Her story is told in *Reflections: Profiles of 150 Women who helped make Western Australian History*, edited by Daphne Popham. With a halo of white curls and a wicked twinkle in her eye she entertained her adoring great grandchildren with sometimes risqué tales of her and her mother's life on the Victorian goldfields. The brooch meanwhile was, passed on to be treasured by other generations. ✨