When gold was found at Lambing Flat in 1860, it wasn’t just another goldfield. This was a very rich, vast area that could be worked easily with little capital or equipment. It was the discovery every unskilled miner had been waiting for. Gold was proving hard to find as the fields ran out. Thousands of miners and prospectors rushed to the new field—in a vastly more systematic way than European miners, who worked alone or in small groups.

Chinese teams were prepared to invest time and labour in building infrastructure such as water courses and dams to underpin their efforts. Water was typically a very scarce resource on the diggings, so the way the Chinese were able to provide for their own needs was a major point of difference. This led to jealousy at their success in re-working ground others often found unpayable. Europeans accused the Chinese of “taking their gold”, fuelling the resentment.

When gold was found at Lambing Flat in 1860, he could have chosen several names for his image. For example, ‘Yet another occasion of mob rule exciting Chinese miners from their claims’, as mob rule had already erupted in several places across the New South Wales and Victorian goldfields.

Gill chose the potent caption ‘Might vs Right’ for his image, capturing the sense that the Lambing Flat riots were more than just another event in an unfolding social drama. The riots were the culmination of racial tension and hatred against the goldfields that had been building for years.

Gill saw that this was not just another territorial dispute over gold-bearing ground, but a conflict with a major racial dimension that divided the goldfields communities, as well as people in towns and cities far removed from the diggings.

What paced riot policies have in the fledging colony of NSW? Should mob rule dictate public policy? In the wake of the Lambing Flat riots, some answers would finally be found to these long-running, troubled issues.

Organised labour

Unlike others, Chinese miners arrived in NSW in organised groups of around 100 complete with leaders, an approach allowed them to undertake mining in a vastly more systematic way than European miners, who worked alone or in small groups.

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A ticking bomb

While anti-Chinese sentiment was widespread, the highly dispersed nature and small number of miners on many of the NSW diggings had usually acted to prevent major confrontation.

Many predicted that it needed only a rush to a goldfield rich enough to attract a large concentration of European and Chinese miners for an explosive situation to develop.

With 8,000 miners on the Burrangong and Lambing Flat goldfields in January 1861, the stage was set for confrontation.

On 27 January, a crowd estimated at 1,500 miners gathered and drove the Chinese off the fields.

The assistant gold commissioner and outnumbered police could do little as the riot ensued. Reinforcements arrived soon after and the Chinese were ordered to return.

Deserting the field

To defuse the situation, the police restricted the Chinese to very limited sections of the field. But maintaining a force of 230 police and military on the field was an expensive solution for the government.

When the military were withdrawn in late May, tensions immediately flared, fuelled by news that the Chinese had successfully defended their claim, at Native Dog Creek, from European miners who tried to drive them off.

The riots came to a head on Sunday 30 June 1861 when 2,000 to 3,000 miners, armed with pick handles, formed up under flags and banners and resolved to expel the Chinese from the field once and for all.

In a brutal expulsion that included scalping some ‘Celestials’ as their pigeons were cut off, the Chinese were banished on a cold midwinter night, with no equipment or provisions. As they had back in January, 1,274 Chinese miners took shelter at James Roberts’ property ‘Corryong’, 20 km away near Murrumburrah. Roberts’ family and employees fed and sheltered them for two weeks.

Military response

Police reinforcements arrived on the field a week later. Soon after, three of the ringleaders were arrested on 14 July. That night, 1,200 miners attacked the police lock-up to free the men, resulting in one death when the police fired and charged the crowd. The next day the men were released.

The riot led the assistant gold commissioner to read the British Parliament’s Riot Act of 1714 that gave local authorities the power to declare a group of twelve or more people to be an unlawful assembly, and order them to disperse or face punishment.

Police reinforcements soon arrived. On 17 July Martial Law was declared and a detachment of troops sent from Sydney to enforce it.

Government reaction

Such a blatant uprising against law and order shocked the colony, with popular opinion blaming it on the presence of the Chinese. Parliament passed an anti-Chinese Immigration Bill and restricted where the Chinese could mine. This is regarded as the beginning of the ‘White Australia Policy’, restricting non-European immigration, which endures to this day.

The riots were the culmination of racial tension and hatred across NSW, Victoria and beyond. It has been said that half the Chinese who won the gold, are brought to life by commemorating the event, consoling and sharing their heritage.

Chinese Tribute Gardens, Young

Chinese miners would have fled past this site en route to Currawong back in 1861. The gardens were built as a tribute to them and their violent and inhumane treatment in the Lambing Flat riots, and their role in Young's history. The gardens are built around the former Chinaman's Dam. Originally constructed by two German brothers, it was later sold to Chinese miners in the 1870s.

Open access, free entry

Lambing Flat Folk Museum, Young

Campbell St, Young

This is the perfect start to your exploration of the Lambing Flat story. The museum is located in the 1883 Young Public School building. The original ‘Roll-Up Banner’ that led the rioting miners march in 1861 is of national significance. The collection also includes a range of artefacts. Open 7 days 10 - 4, entry $5 ph 02 6382 2248

Blackguard Gully, Young

Located off Murringo Road, Young

Chinese miners were brutally expelled from Blackguard Gully, one of the major Chinese camps on the goldfield, in January and again in June 1861. Evicted into the surrounding country with no equipment or provisions, the Chinese walked the 20 km south to seek refuge on James Roberts’s ‘Currawong’ property near Murrumburrah. Open access, free entry.

Chinese Tribute Gardens, Young

Platone Road, Young

Chinese miners would have fled past this site on route to Currawong back in 1861. The gardens were built as a tribute to them and their violent and inhumane treatment in the Lambing Flat riots, and their role in Young’s history. The gardens are built around the former Chinaman’s Dam. Originally constructed by two German brothers, it was later sold to Chinese miners in the 1870s.

Open access, free entry

St Mark’s Church, Currawong

Currawong Rd, 10km from Murrumburrah

The Roberts family built the bluestone Anglican Church 10 km northwest of Murrumburrah in 1918-19 adjacent to Currawong Station, where James Roberts sheltered 1,274 Chinese miners from the Lambing Flat riots in 1861. Communion is celebrated in St Mark’s 1st Sunday of the month 8 am.

Open access to grounds only.

Chinese Cemetery, Murrumburrah

Burley Griffin Way, Murrumburrah

The Chinese section in the south-east corner of Murrumburrah Cemetery is the burial site of at least 21 Chinese men aged from 36 – 80, who died between 1881 and 1925. Their occupations included vegetable gardeners, cooks, storekeepers, miners, labourers, a skin buyer and vegetable hawkers.

Open access, free entry

Harden-Murrumburrah Historical Museum

Albury St, Murrumburrah

The Harden-Murrumburrah Historical Museum is housed in the imposing 1912 School of Arts building. Displays feature the local history of gold mining, agriculture, railways, the 1st Australian Light Horse regiment and domestic life. Open Saturday 10:30 – 4:30, Sunday 2 – 4:30 or by appointment. Adults $2, children 50c. Group bookings and school groups welcome. ph 02 6382 2105

PLACES TO VISIT ON THE GOLD TRAILS IN YOUNG AND HARDEN

Discover the subtle rural landscapes of the Young / Harden region from a base in either of these regional centres.

Explore the places where miners once staked their claims in search of the deposits of alluvial gold, washed down from the rich quartz veins in the surrounding rock.

The country roads make for memorable touring, in cars, motor bikes, bicycles or simply on foot.