

# Asian workers in Australia - 1

The Asians who came to work in Australia during the 1800s were from a number of different countries. Because the colonies were so desperately short of labourers, many of them had been invited and arrived with a contract to work for 3–5 years. It was an opportunity to earn some much needed money to take home to their family.

## People from China

This was the largest group and like other Asians, some came because they were invited. Many more of them just arrived during the gold rushes, wanting to find what they called 'New Gold Mountain' and get rich quickly, then return home.

They were hardworking, helped each other and put up with very poor living conditions. Many of them did very well on the goldfields, but other miners didn't understand them and resented their success. This often led to conflicts like the one at Buckland River where they were attacked by 120 miners who took their gold, destroyed their belongings and burnt their tents. A number of terrified Chinese fled, some drowned in the river, and others became lost in the bush and perished.

Many were farmers with water management skills. Some became market gardeners, shearers and shepherds. Others were cooks, tailors, shopkeepers, laundry workers, furniture builders or fishermen. They made a great contribution to Australia.

## The Japanese

The Japanese arrived much later and in smaller numbers than the Chinese. They worked in sugar crushing mills and laundries, as house servants, in fisheries and in whaling. They were considered to be ambitious, quick to learn and willing to take risks ... all great qualities for the dangerous business of pearl shell diving.

Diving for pearl shell for buttons started in Broome, Western Australia, in the 1860s. In the early days Aboriginal women worked as divers, but after the introduction of breathing equipment, divers mostly from Japan and other Asian countries were used.

In the 1870s pearling began on Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait and by 1883, there were 200 luggers working there. Most had Japanese divers and crew. The 619 Japanese people who were living there in 1898 outnumbered the Europeans.

The success of Australia's pearl shell industry was mainly due to Japanese workers.

## Afghan cameleers

Cameleers and their camels were very important to the economy in the middle of the 19th century. The construction of railways and the overland telegraph were achieved thanks to their efforts. By transporting mail, wool and supplies, and even water, across rough, dry country they helped to develop farming and mining.

Not all the men who came to work with camels were, in fact, Afghans. Some were from other countries and spoke different languages. But they all looked similar to Europeans and were Muslims. They built Australia's first mosque in South Australia in 1861. Cameleers were subjected to racial discrimination and were involved in conflicts with Europeans, particularly bullock teamsters, their business competitors.

The Port Augusta to Alice Springs train, once called the *Afghan Express*, now the *Ghan*, commemorates the cameleers who contributed so much to inland Australia.

