



Ghost Towns

Tasmania's Forgotten Stories



The ruins of Linda.



Lake Plimsoll.



The old footings Dundas.



Pillinger boiler.



Gormanston Hall.

History has a way of producing stories that fascinate and capture the imagination of us all. Tasmania's west is full of wonderful stories of ghosts and interesting incidents.

Story and photography by
ANDY TOPE

I find western Tasmania a fascinating place. It's wild, rugged, feels 20 years behind much of mainland Australia and its landscape is littered with crumbling testaments to a bygone era. Ghost towns. Basing myself in the remarkably intact ghost town of Gormanston, I explored four other such places that lie scattered amongst the region's forests and hills, harbouring forgotten stories beneath rusted iron and splintered rubble.

Gormanston

While the town post office closed in 1979, and most of the town's buildings (which are few) wearily endure through shattered panes and dark, crumbling hulls, Gormanston is not technically a ghost town anymore. Gormanston – according

to my friend and resident Luke Campbell, who lives with his family in what was formerly the town bank – now contains two houses that are permanently occupied. As of 2013, the town's population was officially six. Just how did Gormanston come to its present state?

A letter from a dead man:

"Seven hundred level. North Lyell mine, 12-10-12. If anyone should find this note convey to my wife. Dear Agnes. – I will say good-bye. Sure I will not see you again any more. I am pleased to have made a little provision for you and poor little Lorna. Be good to our little darling. My mate, Len Burke, is done, and poor old V. and Driver too. Good-bye, with love to all. Your loving husband, Joe McCarthy."

These are the final words of a man to his wife, a man about to perish in the North Mount Lyell disaster, one of the greatest disasters in Australian mining history. On a late Saturday morning in 1912, a fire raged through the somber catacombs of the Mount Lyell copper mine. For many workers, the alert reached them too late. Forty-two men perished on the mountain that day.

The nearest settlement to the disaster was Gormanston, a small town perched on the slopes of Mount Owen in western Tasmania. Built for the Mount Lyell Mining and Railway Company operations for the Iron Blow open cut copper mine, Gormanston was used as a relief centre for the disaster. And, like many towns that shone briefly

during the mining booms in western Tasmania, it soon waned. People decamped, buildings were moved or left to crumble and the town became a forlorn testament to a bygone era.

Upon entering Gormanston, I was pleasantly surprised. The place has real atmosphere. Stopping roughly half a kilometre from town, I beeped my horn while talking to Luke on the phone. "Is that you?" he said. I found this amusing. Gormanston is a place of little activity, where a noise can easily betray the presence of an outsider.

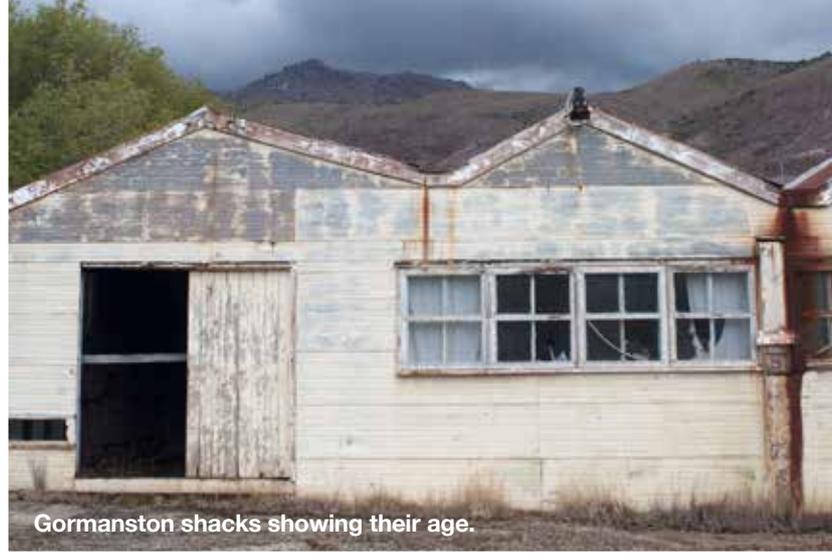
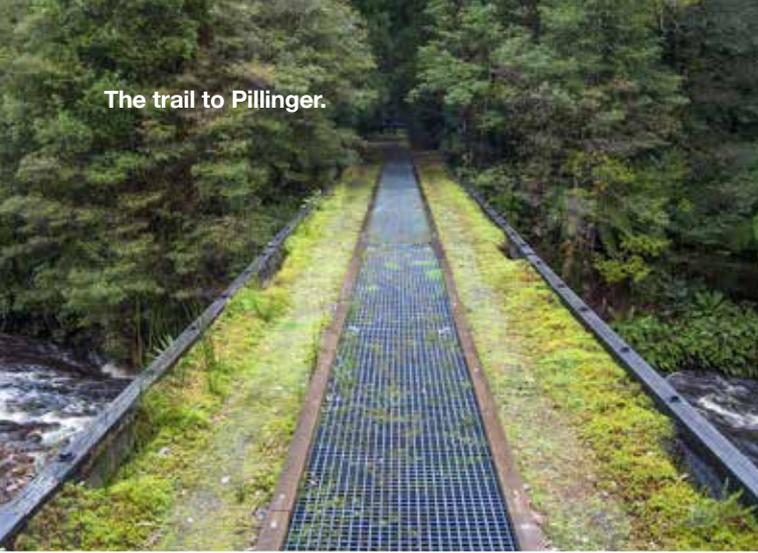
Rolling into town, the gravel crunched noisily under my tyres, piercing the ghostly silence of the streets. Several rabbits darted across the road, while a cool, overcast sky lent the place an otherworldly air. It's

hard to imagine that this small, all but lifeless town was once home to eleven pubs. Eleven! After being welcomed by Luke and his family, we decided to explore, heading to an old abandoned hall near the top of town.

Here slabs of timber and iron peeled away in gaping chunks, within and without. It was as if we were hiding in Dresden in the '40s, evading the bombs that had all but shattered our hideout. As the light faded fast behind the hills, I used my phone to illuminate a hive of bees hidden in the corner. Later that evening my friend and photographer Dee Kramer found, rather curiously, that his photos of the hall had disappeared, while other shots remained.

Several days after returning from my

The trail to Pillinger.



Gormanston shacks showing their age.

visit to Gormanston, Luke phoned me. He knows I'm always sniffing for a story. "A local told me six or seven ghosts roam these streets Tope. There could be a reason Dee's photos disappeared." Of course I had not a skerrick of proof for such a story, but if ever there were a place for 42 souls to escape from the smouldering, caliginous tunnels of Mount Lyell, Gormanston would be a wonderful (and likely) spot.

Linda

Roughly a kilometre walk downhill from Gormanston lies the ghost town of Linda and its only surviving edifice, the Royal Hotel, which was abandoned during the 1950s. This once thriving town, which is located in the Linda Valley in Tasmania's West Coast Range, served to support the North Mount Lyell mine. Once the mine was taken over by the Mount Lyell Mining and Railway company in 1903, its residents began shifting uphill to Gormanston.

The town was also used to transport ore from the Mount Lyell mine to Crotty, which is now submerged beneath Lake Burbury, while metal was transported to Pillinger (which I'll discuss shortly). Walking downhill from Gormanston, our party descended upon the Royal Hotel. Here photographer Dee Kramer flew his drone amongst the ruins, which I'm sure inflamed the curiosity of the town's sole resident, who watched warily from the cafe next door.

Apart from the hotel, whose scarred, grey pillars have been given an 'atmospheric boost' with pentagrams and phrases such as "help me", there's not a whole lot to see in Linda anymore. However, the surrounding countryside contains plenty of character. If you look hard enough, you might even find the forsaken cemetery on the slopes of a nearby hill.

Pillinger

Pillinger is an adventure to get to. Accessible via a two-hour walk from the car park, this ghost town rests on the edge of the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National

Park, in the Kelly Basin. Skirting the chocolate coloured Bird River, the 11-kilometre return walk to Pillinger meanders through lush rainforest, over slippery bridges, through tunnels of trees, past varied wildlife and tumbling cascades. Our walk to this historic site was as wet as it was beautiful. Bring some good wet weather gear.

The walk follows an old train line, built between 1898 and 1900, which is visible in parts along the forest. The once thriving community of Pillinger comprised both East and West Pillinger and was home to 1000 people at its peak. East Pillinger contained two boilers which powered several brick kilns and a sawmill. In West Pillinger, on the edge of Kelly Basin, a 240-metre-long wharf helped transport bricks and timber onto boats.

Located several hundred metres from East Pillinger, West Pillinger was a government town comprising stores, a community mess hall (much like a modern day café) a hotel and a police station. The place held regular sporting events and parties, suggesting it was once a thriving community. The nearby town of Strahan, however, was eventually favoured due to mining politics and the last of Pillinger's residents left in 1943.

Arriving at Kelly Basin absolutely saturated (it had been steadily raining the whole way), we managed to dry out a little on an adjacent wharf before wandering amongst the brick rubble, past the remains of a bakery, tools, a train carriage and over to the remarkably intact boilers at East Pillinger. The lush, iridescent forest lends the ruins a wild, adventurous air, making it a little difficult to imagine that a settlement once clanged, banged and whistled with life in this all but forgotten part of the world.

Dundas

About five minutes drive from the town of Zeehan – where Houdini tightrope-walked across the main street – lies Dun-

das, another mining town gone bust. Dundas is located in a fairly obscure part of the country, and it was with a bit of luck that we found the sign into the old ghost town, which led us down a labyrinth of dirt roads, some of which branched off into goodness knows where.

Pressed for time and taking a couple of wrong turns, we arrived at more of a ruin than a ghost town. At one time, however, Dundas contained a post office which operated from 1890 to 1930 and its own newspaper, entitled the Zeehan and Dundas Herald (1902 – 1922). The Adelaide Mine near Dundas is purportedly home to rare minerals, with one particular specimen, Dundasite, being named after the town.

At Dundas, I slipped on some clay, nearly shattering my lens, fired off a couple of shots and left feeling liked I'd missed even the faintest whiff of the party by about 100 years.

Williamsford

Formed as a mining community to support the nearby town of Rosebery, Williamsford similarly exudes an air of embarrassment, as if it was a mistake best left forgotten, containing barely any remains of its general store, post office and hotel. The prominent feature of Williamsford was its haulage system, named Hercules, which climbed over 500 metres in altitude and stretched over 1.5 kilometres. The haulage was closed in 1986 with the development of mining techniques in Rosebery.

A lone plaque reveals that pioneers brought Williamsford to life during the late 19th century in cold, wet, unforgiving country, the rugged environment failing to hamper their indomitable spirits. During its time, Hercules hauled minerals such as lead and zinc, which came from fine-grained volcanic sediments. Ore was also harvested and transported to Rosebery via an aerial ropeway, which still hangs precariously across the Murchison Highway – a curious relic of times gone by.

