



PATH TO RICHES

ALLAN WHITING tackles a Vic High Country track that travels through spectacular gold-mining country



Steeped in goldmining history, this area offers exciting driving for soft-roader vehicles as well as dual-range 4X4s. Tracks lead to historical European and Aboriginal sites of interest for the modern-day explorer.

The first section of this trek, along Howqua Track as far as Sheeppark Flat, is fine for soft-roaders. From Fry's Hut to Wren's Flat, however, the track is very steep and loose in places and calls for vehicles with low-range gearing and plenty of ground clearance.

The drive from Mansfield to Merrijig (last chance to top up your grog supply) is along sealed roads, through pleasant pastoral country. A little more than 1km east of Merrijig is the turn-off onto the graded dirt of Howqua Track, which climbs over Timbertop Saddle before dropping down to Sheeppark Flat, in Howqua River valley. Along the way there's a short walking track to Mt Timbertop and it is possible, from here, to walk down to Sheeppark Flat, via Red Hill.

Sheeppark Flat offers plenty of flat grassed campsites and has drop dunnies. There's also bush-camping along Howqua River at Fry's Hut, Davons Flat, Pickerings Flat and Tunnel Bend. It's only a short walk from Sheeppark Flat to Fry's Hut Track, which leads to Howqua Hills historic area.

Aborigines used Howqua River as a major trade and war-party route across the Great Dividing Range. They also had several quarries in the area.

European settlement began in the 1840s when the land, now in the historic area, formed part of the Howqua run, taken up by the pastoral company Watson and Hunter; grazing continues there.

The discovery of alluvial gold at Cameron's Creek in the 1860s heralded major changes for the valley. A gold-bearing reef was discovered in the 1870s and mining started in earnest. The main mining companies were Mountain Chief, Great Rand and Howqua United; most remaining relics are of structures built by these companies. The population soared and in 1888 the township of Howqua was proclaimed. The rush was short-lived and by 1905 all major goldmining operations had ceased.

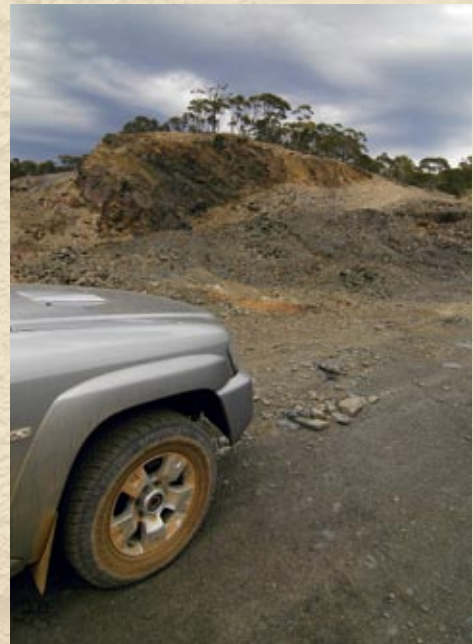


Sheeppark Flat is a great picnic spot (this pic); the well-preserved Fry's Hut (middle left, right); travelling along Howqua Track (top right)

From Fry's Hut to Wren's Flat it is steep and slippery - ideal 4X4 territory



The tranquil Jamieson River (this pic); slate mine site (top right); camping at Wren's Flat (below right)



A 100m tunnel through Tunnel Spur was blasted in 1884 to link Howqua River, via a four-kilometre water race, to a massive waterwheel, 18m in diameter. Gold ore was roasted in a furnace and the chimney still stands on the site.

Fry's Hut is the area's best preserved relic of this type. Built by Fred Fry in the late 1930s, the hut remained his home until his death in 1971.

Fred's life in the Howqua Valley was the basis of Neville Shute's novel *The Far Country*, published in 1950.

Fred Fry was an excellent bush carpenter and his handiwork is evident in the enduring structure of Fry's Hut.

The track winds its way to Tobacco Flat, once the site of nicotine leaf growth, as were many of the river flats in Howqua River and Jamieson River valleys.

The track crosses a shallow creek and then

climbs steeply out of Ware's Flat, on its way to an old slate mine on Mitchells Track. The track runs through the old mine site, with a dizzying drop off to the west.

Not far from the mine site the track plunges very steeply down to a bush-camping area at Mitchell's Hut. This section of the track is pure clay and becomes treacherous after only light rain. It was bulldozed in late 2006, just before the summer fire onslaught, and the surface was very loose.

The last section to Wren's Flat was very dusty when we drove it, necessitating a big gap between vehicles.

Wren's Flat bush-camping area is on the bank of Jamieson River. It's a pleasant walk along the bank to the ruins of a hut and a large swimming hole.

From Wren's Flat it's a graded road drive south-east to Licola, or north-west to Jamieson. 44

A short walk from Wren's Flat leads to an old hut and swimming hole