



Big John Ewing, the ‘Gold Baron’ did everything in a big way – he spent big sums of money, employed large numbers of men, developed big mines, made a large amount of money, and, in the end, lost everything.

He was born in Alexandria, near Loch Lomond in Dumbartonshire, Scotland, came to Otago in 1863, and after experience at Gabriel’s Gulley and elsewhere, began mining at Surface Hill near St Bathans.

There an employee caught a Chinese man stealing gold from sluiceboxes, and, although the man was already pinioned, Ewing shot him. He was sentenced to 18 months hard labour but a flood of petitions to the Governor saw him released after only four months. To combat charges of racism, a Chinese serving a long sentence was also released.

Back at St Bathans Ewing developed the Kildare Hill claim which was so successful that in 1881 he opened a claim at Vinegar Hill near Cambrian. An outlay of 10,000 pounds was recovered in a few months with 100 men working night and day under electric arc light. Ewing made full use of the hydraulic elevating method of mining to excavate material from great depths.

In 1883 he married Mrs Frances Bunny, widow of the St Bathans postmaster.

With St Bathans storekeeper William McConnochie as a partner, he bought a claim at Matakanui in 1886 and spent 10,000 pounds bringing water to it from Thomsons Creek. They took over the Hercules No 2 claim at Roxburgh in 1892, a claim at Welshmans Gulley near Cambrian the following year, the Bald Hill Sluicing Co at Fruitlands in 1896, and the United Hercules Hydraulic Sluicing Company at Roxburgh in 1897.

Ewing was greatly in demand as a mining consultant and company director. But he had over-reached himself. He was no longer able to give personal attention to his many scattered properties. Water shortages, slips, and lack of auriferous ground led in 1905 to bankruptcy. In a final act of defiance Ewing personally conducted, and won, a legal battle in the Appeal Court with the Scandinavian Water Race Co.

Ewing then organized his last mining venture, the Teviot Molyneux Gold Mining Co to mine Andersons Flat below Roxburgh. After years of expensive preparations, which included a 10,000 pound government subsidy, the project failed.

Ewing died in Dunedin on 30 August 1922 and is buried in the Andersons Bay Cemetery.