

Page 1. As good as gold

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All that glisters

Although rumours and traces of gold surfaced in New Zealand as early as the 1820s, the first European discovery of payable gold is attributed to Charles Ring, a Tasmanian who found it at Driving Creek near Coromandel township in 1852. Discoveries near Collingwood in Golden Bay (1856), Gabriels Gully in Otago (1861), Wakamarina in Marlborough (1864) and at Greenstone Creek on the West Coast (1864) followed. Not all discoveries translated into major finds. The ones that did were on Coromandel Peninsula, in Otago and on the West Coast, where there were significant gold rushes followed by decades of mining.

The early mining of the 1860s in Otago and on the West Coast was mainly undertaken by individuals working alluvial deposits (river gravels). In three separate years in the late 1860s and early 1870s the amount of gold won exceeded 20,000 kilograms. These totals have never been bettered. From the 1870s mining became more mechanised. Companies were floated, and dredges and sluicing ventures won more and more gold. Underground mining, which tunnelled out quartz veins that were crushed to release their gold, boomed on the Coromandel Peninsula and West Coast from the 1870s.

Gold mining had declined by the 1920s, and from the 1950s it was a very small industry. The rise of gold prices in the late 1970s brought about a revival, with new technology allowing opencast pits to be dug in Otago and on the Coromandel Peninsula in the 1980s and 1990s.

How much gold?

No one knows exactly how much gold has been found in New Zealand. Official records show that up to 2003 a total of 998.71 tonnes had been mined – about 0.8% of all the gold mined in the world. Because gold-production records have been collected in different ways over the years there are gaps in figures and inconsistencies. Available figures show that up to 2003 a minimum of 312 tonnes had come from the Coromandel Peninsula, 274 tonnes from the West Coast, and 265 tonnes from Otago.

The two major booms in production were in the 1860s (alluvial gold won by diggers) and in the decade after 1900 (underground hard-rock mining). There was a smaller boom starting in the late 1980s (opencast hard-rock mining).

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