



step back in time

Much is known about Bendigo's booming gold era but a gentle wander through our historic centre with Bendigo Walking Tours is an opportunity to discover intriguing and often forgotten stories about larrikins, philanthropists and radicals who made their mark during this illustrious time

By Paula Hubert

It's a perfect evening for a twilight walking tour around the city. Bendigo Magazine has joined a couple from Canberra here on a short stay and keen to learn more about Bendigo's history from our guides Jill Hanlon and Peter Hargreaves. We start our relaxed-paced tour at the Conservatory, an ideal spot to take in the surrounding grandiose Victorian architecture, before heading through Rosalind Park's Camp Hill area and then onto View Street.

What makes this two-hour tour unique is Jill and Peter's shared passion for social history. Backed by Bendigo Tourism, the tour is thankfully devoid of "rote" gold rush narrative. Furnished with knowledge of colourful characters and extraordinary feats, the guides have made story-telling an art form – rave reviews on forum sites such as TripAdvisor think so, too.

Jill and Peter are delighted that people enjoy their take on social history whilst discovering Bendigo on foot.

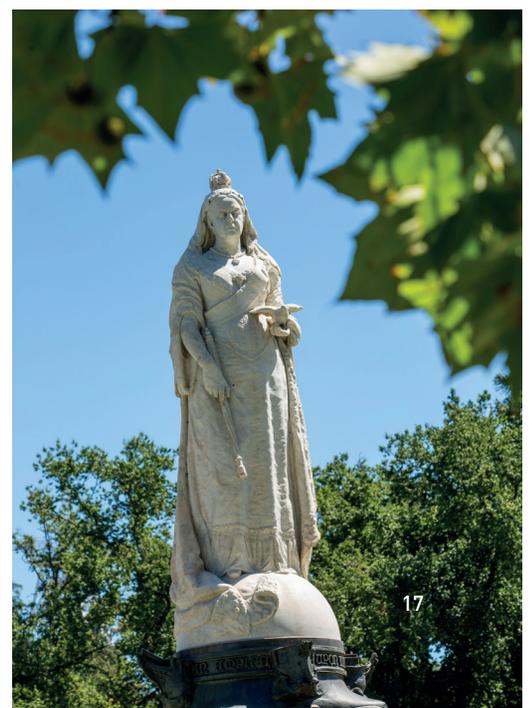
"As a shared activity it can provide a perspective, an empathy, a visual and an appreciation of our place at another time," Jill says, explaining their aim.

"How the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung became the Western world's richest city in such a short period of time. It's a unique story – how gold changed lives and turned the class system upside down."

Jill came up with the idea for a walking tour here after participating in something similar in San Francisco a few years back. Peter agreed that it was a great opportunity.

"We want to shine a unique light on Bendigo for people who visit and live here," Peter says.

"Rather than just giving people events, dates



and numbers, we try to make sense of why this became an influential part of the world. People used their position, their wealth, their courage and commitment for democracy. Milestones that have shaped our nation came out of the Victorian goldfields.

"Bendigo was prominent in campaigns for democracy, votes for men and women, early trade unionism and the march to Federation."

Peter admits that he's a self-confessed 'history tragic'. His passion for Bendigo's social history was ignited by the writings of Bendigo journalist David Horsfall and Frank Cusack's 'great book' Bendigo – A History.

"You can be a history tragic but you need a walking-tour tragic like Jill to know what makes a great tour," he says.

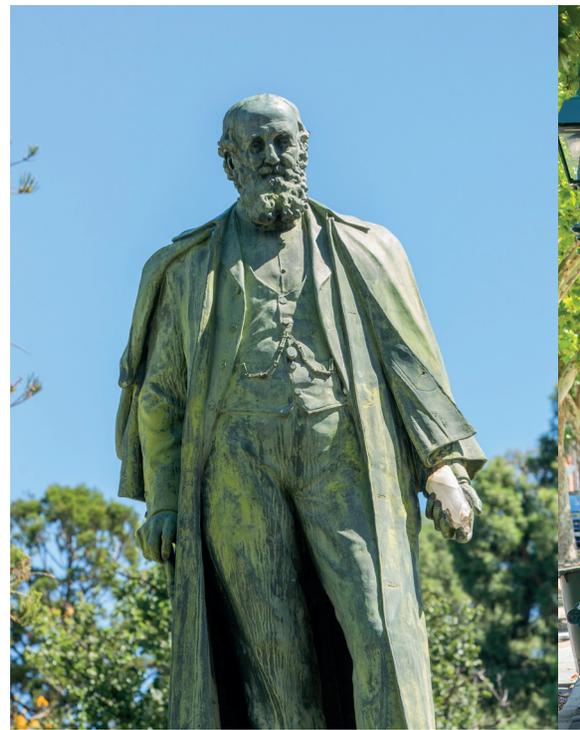
Without giving too much away about the content of the tour, the guides recount many quirky tales, such as the hustlers who made a fortune in gold from mischievous methods and the catalogue of disasters that occurred during a royal visit.

"We spent a year identifying the topics and tracking down information," Peter explains. "We often had a thread of information or a rumour about something that might have happened. Then we'd start digging through newspaper articles and material in the library."

Jill and Peter also bring to life insights from a young man who wrote letters to his family back in the UK during the 1850s-1880s.

"Others from that time describe how 'the rolling thunder' of the crushing batteries stopped around 6pm on Saturdays," Jill says. "People would promenade up and down the bustling and vibrant streets like View Street." On Bendigo's night life, British adventurer and writer William Stamer wrote "there is nothing outside London to equal it".

The tour also mentions prominent figures of the time who sought social and political change. Philanthropist Caroline Chisholm lobbied for better living conditions on the goldfields and raised awareness about the





plight of female migrants. In 1945 the first crèche outside Melbourne opened here after generations of females campaigned for the right to work and have good childcare.

The couple's fact-finding mission is also close to their own family history. Both have a 'long connection with the Victorian Gold Rush'. Peter's great grandfather was born in a tent on the Bendigo diggings in 1859.

Jill's ancestors were mining in Ballarat during the Eureka Rebellion of 1854. Her mother's family in Kyneton during the 'Rush' went on to establish Shepparton's Furphy Foundry – famous for the Furphy water cart.

The two hours fly by and our very enjoyable twilight tour ends at the Wine Bank on View with a complimentary glass of wine. On cue, Peter shrewdly drops in a lovely anecdote about this former Classical-designed Union Bank, built in 1876.

"My father would talk of his first job with the bank – cycling out to the mines to return with an ingot in his old school satchel."

Another story to take home that's gold.

Bendigo Walking Tours can be booked online at www.bendigotourism.com

Tours run twice a day during autumn, spring and summer. ■