

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Gold Bullion Box

At about noon on Sunday 15 June 1862 a coach left Forbes, bound for Orange, on the first stage of its journey to Sydney. Inside were mailbags, and four iron boxes packed with bank notes and gold. Four policemen and a driver travelled in and on the coach. This was the Lachlan 'gold escort'. Every week it left Forbes on the same journey. People would gather to watch its departure.

This time, five hours down the road near the tiny settlement of Eugowra, a group of men were waiting for it, concealed behind a clump of large rocks. 'Bail up!' was the cry and amidst gunfire, frantic horses and wounded policemen, the coach capsized. A treasure of £14,000 was there for the taking.

The heist had been carefully planned and led by a man calling himself Frank Gardiner, and with him was a group of eight or nine others, including John Gilbert, John O'Meally and, probably, Ben Hall. Bullion boxes and bags were loaded on to pack horses and at a camp about five kilometres away from the hold-up site, the men smashed open the boxes with an American tomahawk that Gilbert had bought in Forbes for this purpose. Gardiner had, in the preceding weeks, mingled among the crowd in Forbes on escort day and had probably observed that the boxes were secured only with Chubb padlocks. The boxes were solid and heavy, but ultimately each was only as strong as its weakest link – a padlock.

When news of the Eugowra hold-up broke around the Colony, people were stunned. Never had there been such a violent assault on law and order, or on the smooth running of commercial enterprise. But back on the Lachlan, most of the 'bushrangers', notorious though they were by then, quietly slipped back into the local communities in which many had grown up.



The Gold Bullion Box probably made after the 1862 hold-up. Photo: Lannon Harley, National Museum of Australia.



'Escort Rock' near Eugowra, in 2010. Gardiner and other bushrangers concealed themselves behind this rock. Photo: Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia.

Over time, all were caught, or died in shoot-outs with the police, and most of the booty was recovered. However, one of the immediate ramifications of the affair at Eugowra was that the flaws in the gold escort system needed to be fixed. Boxes that could be hacked open in minutes offered no security for the wealth that the goldfields were generating for the Colony.

Displayed in the National Museum's Landmarks gallery, is a bullion box probably made *after* the 1862 hold-up. Unlikely as it may seem, it constitutes unique evidence of what happened in the bush near Eugowra on that winter afternoon in June 1862.

The box was used for gold escorts by the Sydney Mint, probably from the 1860s to the end of the century. In 2007 the box, and a protective outer box used in transit, were purchased by the National Museum from a private collector. Although there was little information about the objects' provenance, what authenticates the National Museum's bullion box is that the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney has a near-identical box in its collection and there is documentary proof that that box originated from the Sydney Mint. The Mint was established in Macquarie Street in 1855 to convert the gold being discovered in New South Wales into coinage. Some of those early coins will also be on display in Landmarks.

Have a really close look at the box. Could this box be prised open with a tomahawk or a jemmy? No. There is no point of entry. The box was not secured by an external padlock but by an internal lock. In addition, the lid is flush with the sides: hardly a feather could be inserted into the gap. When the box was acquired by the Museum it was locked, and it came without its original key. Advice from locksmiths and historic lock experts is that the lock is exceedingly complex and virtually un-pickable.

The outer box, a much rougher thing, was secured by straps and a padlock. We do not really know why protection was needed when the inner box is so impenetrable. An extra level of deterrence seems hardly necessary, but there we have it.

So there the bullion box sits, closed. What is in it? Nothing probably, so opening it may not tell us any more than we can already observe, which is that an extraordinary degree of skill has been marshalled in the manufacture of these boxes and their locks.

The material evidence suggests that after the Eugowra hold-up, boxes were re-designed to be literally impregnable without the key. The boxes contained wealth that was vital for the prosperity of the Colony; it had to be protected.

Also, Colonial authorities and leading citizens were fearful of the threat to law and order in New South Wales. Wealth had to be earned, it was believed, by honest toil, not seized in a matter of moments through theft with violence. The Sub-Inspector of police in Forbes, Sir Frederick Pottinger, declared that it was his aim to show Ben Hall 'and others of his class in the District that at any rate as yet they could not have everything exactly as they thought fit.' Pottinger made a fool of himself with statements like this because Gardiner and Hall and their associates knew the country of the Lachlan district (and further afield across towards Bathurst and down to Goulburn and Yass) better than Pottinger and his police officers. For several years, Hall and Gilbert, in particular, did have the upper hand until finally, through determined police work, the last of the 'Lachlan' bushrangers were located and killed, in 1865.

Curator's notes:

Curators and conservators at the National Museum continue to be fascinated and frustrated by this bullion box. The collector from whom it was bought had had a key made, which, at some stage during his ownership, apparently did open the box. However, it was subsequently closed and with the passing of time, the lock seized. Now, the lock shifts a little when the key is turned, but it will not yield.

A locksmith was called in and he inserted a blank key into the lock and gently turned it to try to gain an 'impression' of the lock. Again, no success. The lock is too complex for this approach to work. The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney kindly supplied photographs of the key to the bullion box it holds, but although the boxes are identical, the locks are keyed differently. The Powerhouse key will not open the National Museum's box.

Being museum professionals, we cannot risk any damage to the box while trying to open it, so at this stage we are admitting temporary defeat. It seems that 150 years of technological advance gets us precisely nowhere with this particular problem. Or does it? We have not entirely run out of options, so watch this space.

Object biography and curator's notes prepared by Annie-Marie Conde, Curator, National Museum of Australia.

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia is the National Museum's newest and most ambitious gallery to date, bringing together over 1500 objects to create a history of Australia since European settlement.

For more information about the exhibition visit
<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks>