

Tabletop Goldmines Tour

Note: Coordinates are GDA94 as shown on post-2000 1:25000 LPI maps. For GPS use WGS84 datum.

The following itinerary defines options for walking a loop through the diggings between Kiandra and Tabletop, something we undertook last April in a leisurely voyage of exploration to plot evidence of historical sites and tracks onto the GPS, and avoid a boring yo-yo trek in and out the Tabletop Fire Trail.

The first day's objective was to follow the route of the Commissioner's Gully Track to the Four Mile. For a hundred years this was the main access track in to the Four and Nine Mile diggings, and in a good snow year it is a sheltered and scenic skiing route in to Four Mile Hut.

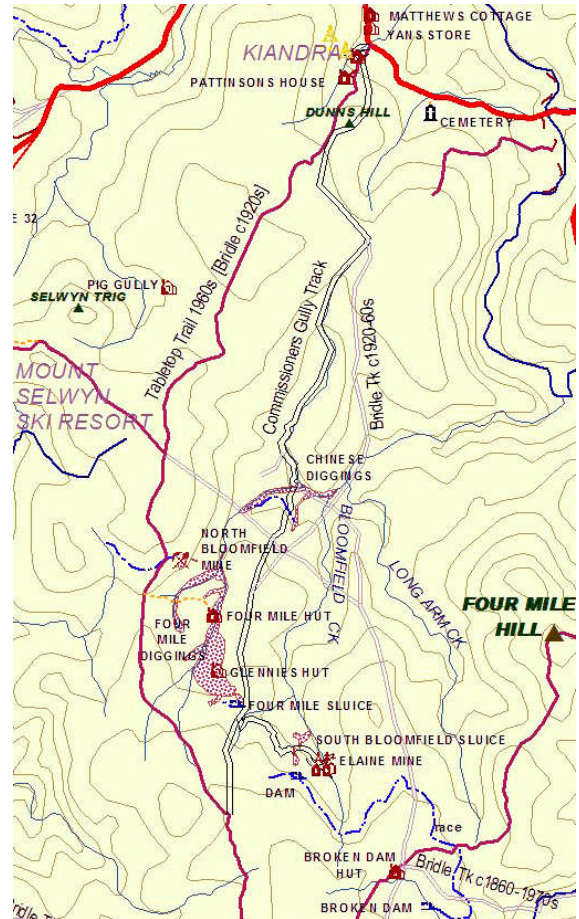
From the highway at Kiandra, the early route of the Track can be seen as a prominent scar heading straight up Dunn's Hill ~150m to the left of the current fire trail. Where the fire trail comes into a saddle halfway up the climb, the Track comes alongside for 200 metres. Well, amidst the evidence of what appears to be four lanes of old tracks climbing side-by-side is probably the early Track . . .



Commissioners Gully Track, April 2008

The Track becomes indistinguishable where it veers south away from the fire trail, probably passing around a bog at 344e 271n before climbing diagonally southwest toward the 66kV powerline. Between the bog and powerline it is evident as a shallow trench, becoming indistinct at the powerline clearing. Continuing past the powerline toward a saddle above the head of Commissioner's Gully Creek, we followed some very feint traces but overshot the point where the Track is believed to

turn fairly sharply to the right to pass down the western side of the creeks headwaters. Perhaps we had ended up following evidence of a bridle path that once departed the Track at the saddle.



Plunging down through the open forest, we soon reached the open valley floor but the Track was not regained until rounding a clump of trees on the west bank half a kilometre down. From there it becomes increasingly prominent as a cutting, evident even under snow, until a point where the creek turns southeast toward Four Mile Creek. Unknowingly we left the Track, which keeps close to the creek, instead following a more prominent bridle track cutting that climbs southwest to a saddle – this is a well-known short-cut when skiing. That is the last we saw of the Track, as we dropped down into the Chinese diggings on lower Four Mile Creek and thence climbed the opposite spur and skirted the east side of Four Mile Creek up to the hut.

The Chinese diggings date from 1880-81. They comprise alluvial workings that extend from the

'falls' on Four Mile Creek down to Long Arm Creek. Mines records indicate nuggets of 2-5 oz were recovered here, and a 3' x 3' race that was cut through the rock at the upstream end, but we were unaware of this during our visit.

The Commissioner's Gully Track crosses Four Mile Creek close to the Commissioner's Gully Creek outlet before climbing the west side of a creek on the opposite bank. Old aerial photos show more mine workings part way up the Track's climb. The Track probably keeps to the east side of the ridge without crossing into the watershed of Four Mile Creek until a point half a kilometre south of the hut, and even then probably remains high on the crest.

Day 2. Four Mile Hut is a jewel. A miner's hut nestled in a mining landscape, and yet historically disparate. Bill Hughes' hut of the 1930s is that of a reclusive sort of figure, toiling alone amidst the sounds of the bush, whilst the landscape character of Four Mile Creek was defined by a vast swarm of miners, in a time when the hills rang to the sound of metal on stone and vast quantities of earth were shifted around the valley floor 75 years prior to Bill. The 1000 miners who worked the Four Mile in the rush of 1860 were likely all in their graves by the time the current hut came to be.

550m south of Four Mile Hut is a site that bridges this historical divide. A stone fireplace and a number of broken rusty shovel heads, just off the edge of the worked ground (334 223), marks the site of Glennies Hut (GPS 633451e 6022297n). Bill Glennie had worked the Four Mile 'for many years' by 1881. In later years at Kiandra he befriended a young Bill Hughes. Perhaps Glennie's stories of life out on the diggings inspired Bill Hughes to follow a similar life.

800m south of Four Mile Hut is the Four Mile sluicing hole, a large neat cleft with sides of bare red earth and snowgums growing out of the bottom (336 220). Half way along it's western edge is a small earth-walled holding dam, fed by a raceline out of the Bloomfield Creek catchment. It doesn't really seem large enough to have been the main storage for sluicing. Does a bigger dam exist up the hillside somewhere, or was the water channeled over from the dam above Elaine Mine? 200m west is what appears to be another large sluiced area. Here the

bottom is covered in uneven ground and mullock heaps, suggesting it was worked for years after sluicing finished. Halfway along the northern edge is a neatly-carved 'V' channel ~9m deep which appears to serve as a possible tailrace or drain.



Four Mile Sluice Hole

The 1880s was the decade of sluicing on the Kiandra Goldfield. The Three Mile Dam was completed in 1882 to provide water for the biggest operations at New Chum Hill, and by 1884-5 sluicing was progressing at the Four-, Eight-, Nine-, and Fifteen Mile, North and South Bloomfield. The smaller sluicing operations all folded by 1886, the Nine Mile in 1889, leaving only the New Chum Hill – with its superior water supply - to carry on.

The head of the first sluicing hole occurs on the crest of a spur. The Commissioner's Gully Track must have passed close by to the east but no evidence is visible. It then ascended the west side of the first gully – I recall on a previous trip seeing a very feint depression high up the gully - before following the present route of the Tabletop Fire Trail from the bend at 335 208 through to the Nine Mile.

But our objective this day was elsewhere - the Elaine Mine and Broken Dam hut. On two occasions I have missed the Elaine completely, having adopted a route that climbed gradually up the Bloomfield valley but which eventually brought me out near the Nine Mile before I could be bothered pulling the map out. The trick is to contour, or even drop slightly, as you approach the first gully. 30m beyond this gully is feint evidence of an old track/race that contours round the hillside to cross the tailrace of the South Bloomfield sluicing hole at 342 215. This sluice hole is contemporary with the Four Mile sluices, indeed it may have been a combined operation/lease. It was short-lived and unremarkable - except for the water supply infrastructure that remains today. (Un)Broken

Dam was the primary water storage from which a major race departed northward, crossing a saddle (and the Four Mile Hill Fire Trail) southwest of Four Mile Hill and continuing a further 3.5km to a holding dam above the Elaine Mine (GPS 634132 6021231). The dam is also fed by a short race from the north.

The dam is one of the most interesting engineering feats in the Park. Crescent shaped in plan, it is most unusual in that it wraps around the *outside* of a spur, necessitating the dam wall be *longer* than the reservoir it confines. A long, narrow terrace was excavated for the 100m-long reservoir, and the dam wall – two skins of coursed rubble 3m high with earth and rubble fill between – resembles castle ramparts on the hillside. The quickest way to locate it is to ascend straight up the hillside from the Elaine mine for ~350m, crossing a smaller earth-walled dam 50m before it.



South Bloomfield Dam above Elaine Mine

I digress. From the South Bloomfield sluice hole the route to the Elaine is a gradual descent along the valley to the southeast. There is some evidence of a high level track/race, passing 50m above the mine, but the overgrown main track is lower down and arrives at the site past an old steam engine. The defining landscape feature here is the vast spoil heap that extends in a straight line across the Bloomfield Creek gully like a dam wall 10m high. At the head of the spoil is the open tunnel entrance. A large terrace extends each side of the entrance with a boiler to the north and hut sites to the south. Up until the 2003 bushfires, this terrace was stacked high with split shoring timbers ready to use in the tunnel. Post-fire I remember a crosscut saw lying where the well-dried stacks had turned to vapour, but couldn't find it this visit.

The Elaine Mine was one of the great mining failures of the Kiandra Goldfield. Between 1926 and 1937 they tunneled 2000' (620m) into the heart of the ridge, almost 2/3 of the way to the Tabletop Trail! They dug exploratory shafts 50' up from the main drive and down from the surface. Not only could they not find gold they couldn't even locate the *Kiandra Lead*, the gold-bearing ore body that extends continuously from the Nine Mile through South Bloomfield to the Four Mile and on to Kiandra.

Elaine was the last major mining venture on the Kiandra Goldfield, and the site is strewn with abandoned equipment. There are at least four hut sites here. One sits in isolation 120m to the south; probably being the mine manager's hut.

From the Elaine mine we climbed the ridge on the opposite bank and followed it south to Broken Dam Hut. We crossed the raceline from Broken Dam enroute, and it would have been more interesting to follow that around the hillside but we had cravings for tea and lying about in the afternoon sun.



Tabletop hut site

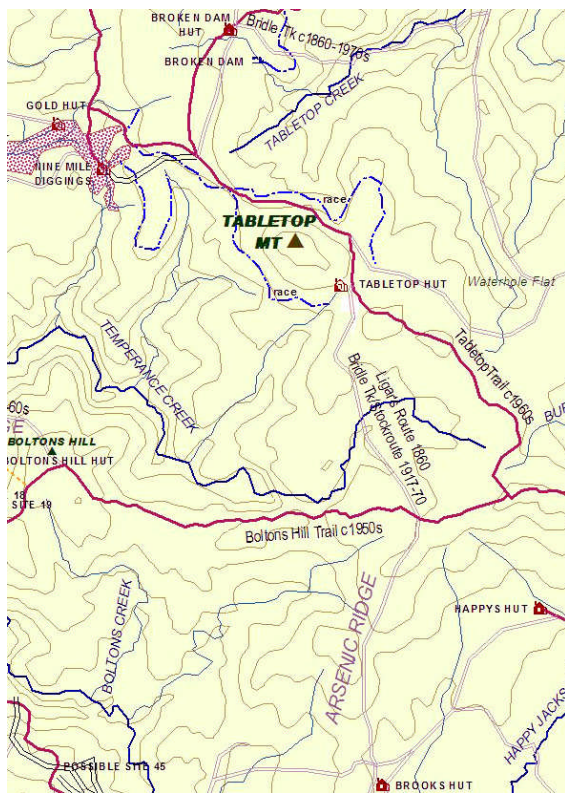
Day 3 was predominantly a fire trail run through to Happys Hut. We dallied at the saddle south of Mt Tabletop to search for the old track though to Arsenic Ridge and find the ruin of Tabletop Hut on the northwestern treeline (GPS 636416 6017320).

A collapsed stone chimney, the broken lid off a camp stove and a few sheets of iron mark the site of this weatherboard hut of the 1920s-1950s.

The track is evident as a very faint depression and line of exotic grasses/weed inside of the tree belt 150m south of the saddle. Some old maps show the hut further south along the track, which is where we

spent the first hour searching fruitlessly. I have a vague recollection of an early topo map that showed there was an SMA emergency airstrip in the saddle.

The track through to Arsenic ridge is historically significant as part of Ligar's Route bringing miners to Kiandra from Victoria in 1860-61. It became indistinct after a few hundred metres, so we didn't follow it this time. I have since checked out the route on *Google Earth*, and it appears predominantly open and sections of track even appear visible! Having slowly pieced together Ligar's likely route as far as Tooma, I intend to come back and trace the Tooma Dam-Kiandra section one day.



Only after returning home did I discover an alternate walking route we could have taken that morning. On the western side of the saddle north of Tabletop Mt, the two major racelines which feed the Nine Mile diggings converge. One wraps around the southwest side of Tabletop, to a creek just below Tabletop Hut, and the second wraps around the northeast side of Tabletop to a creek on the east side of the same saddle. The northeast option is probably the preferred walking option. The raceline must be filled in where it passes under the Fire Trail in the saddle north of Tabletop Mt but should be easily found

downhill of the Trail as you head south. Michael Pearson claims there is a cutting 10' deep where this raceline cuts across a low saddle enroute to its source, possibly at about 367 185.



Happy Hut in a ghost forest post-bushfire

Day 4 was a return from Happys along the Trail to Broken Dam Hut. This section of the trip would have been better if we had made a loop by coming or returning via the old Arsenic Ridge-Tabletop Hut track.

The afternoon was spent at the Nine Mile diggings. Commencing at the large stone holding dam beside the Fire Trail at 340 190, we circumnavigated the vast Empress sluice hole, and stumbled over an arena of hut sites, spoil heaps, small dams and racelines. This is an incredibly complex, layered landscape with alluvial workings, sluice workings and adit or tunnel workings spanning more than 60 years. I have pieced together a detailed history to inflict upon you another day. One could easily spend 3-4 days exploring and mapping the features of the Nine Mile.

Day 5 involved the regular cross-country shortcut northwest from Broken Dam Hut to rejoin the Tabletop Trail and a scoot out to Kiandra. The Trail was in existence as a bridle track at a fairly early stage – possibly 1890s – but doesn't appear to have been developed as a vehicle track until after the Second World War. We had a short diversion to the North Bloomfield diggings enroute.

North Bloomfield is reached by leaving the Trail at 329 234, the bend at the bottom of that slope that terrorizes first-time skiers on their way from Selwyn to Four Mile. A raceline extends east from just below

the bend, through a succession of small dams and racelines, until a sluice cut is reached after about 120m (GPS 633039 6023345). Sluicing here also dates from the 1884-85 period although further on, at the base of the largest cut opposite the old engine, is believed to be a collapsed tunnel from a later period (GPS 633082 6023393). On the ridge above the east side of the cut I glimpsed a vague suggestion of some possible camp or hut sites. This is the only diggings we encountered that was overgrown with forest regrowth to the point exploration was hampered.

A fit person could cover the ground we covered in two days but might miss the pleasure that comes from the discovery and contemplation of the more discrete clues that exist of human occupation and industry. This is an incredibly rich area in which to dwell, especially if you leave the highway of the Tabletop Trail behind.

Thanks to Phil and Mike for sharing the experience.