

## HISTORY AND HERITAGE

- Gold was first discovered in 1859 in the Buller Gorge
- In 1870 quartz reefs bearing gold discovered at Reefton
- Red Federation of Labour established 1909 after the 1908 Blackball lunch-time strike
- Richard John Seddon, businessman and miners' advocate, was first mayor of Kumara in 1877, elected to House of Representatives in 1879, and was Premier of New Zealand from 1893 until his death in 1906.

From the 1840s European surveyors and government officials probed the West Coast wilderness, usually accompanied by local Maori. **Charles Heaphy** and **Thomas Brunner** explored and mapped the upper Buller River in 1846, seeking land for settlement. **Julius Haast** undertook geological surveys in the south west from the early 1860s. Other surveyors included Charles Douglas, Arthur Harper and S Locke (1857), John Whitcombe and Jakob Lauper (1863), A J Barrington (1864) and James Hector (1863).

Many new settlements sprang up after gold was discovered in 1859, some are still in existence while others are historic sites such as Notown and Goldsborough. During 1865-67 more than 37,000 passengers arrived in Hokitika, one third of them Irish diggers who brought strong Catholicism with them, later establishing Catholic Schools and making the religion dominant by 1920. Apart from Australian and English settlers, Chinese were the other significant migrant group, making up 6% of the regional population in 1874.

**West Coast gold** was found on alluvial fields around the central Westland rivers and adjacent flats near Hokitika. **Hydraulic sluicing** began after the 1860s and in the 1890s large dredges worked the river beds to recover gold. **Kumara** was the site of the last alluvial gold rush in 1876, and was one of the most productive. Its system of water races, channels, underground ditches, and tail races was the most extensive in NZ.

**Quartz miners** at Reefton in 1886 were the first workers to use electricity.



**Thomas Brunner** identified coal in the Grey Valley in 1847. A decade later it was found on the 600m Denniston plateau. The coal industry began in the 1860s and dominated the economy for more than 50 years. It was financed by private capital to reach seams in remote, difficult and deep locations. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Westport Coal Company was one of the largest companies in the colony, its shareholders largely from Otago and Melbourne. The larger mines were nationalised in 1947, just before competition from electricity and oil saw their output and employment fall.

The extensive remains of what was once one of New Zealand's most productive coalmines, now sits in silence. Scene of the infamous Brunner Mine disaster over 100 years ago when 65 lives were lost, today the site houses ruins of coal-mining and coke making structures, including rare beehive ovens. The north and south aspects of the site are linked by the "Brunner Bridge", built in 1876.

The small town of Birchfield, north of Westport, was once the site of the largest iron foundry in the Southern Hemisphere. The foundry produced the iron which was used to construct "The Iron Bridge" near Murchison (1890). These are two of the many pioneer bridges administered by the Department of Conservation.

In August **1888**, Reefton became the first town in the Southern Hemisphere to fire up both carbon arc and Edison/Swan carbon-filament street lighting, just six years after publicly reticulated electricity supplies became commercially available in the USA. **The Bottled Lighting Walkway** goes to the site of the powerhouse at Reefton.



## WALKING IN THE PAST

Amongst other historical sites, **The New Zealand Historic Places Trust** protects the Seddon House site at Kumara, foundations of the home to Richard John “King Dick” Seddon, the colourful Premier of New Zealand 1893-1906, and the Brunner Mine memorial site, where 65 people were killed in a mine explosion in 1896. The **Department of Conservation** manages 96 sites of historic significance. There are about 50 local history and heritage groups and organisations. **Shantytown** is the Coast’s iconic heritage site, a replica gold mining town of the 1860’s, but there are dozens of smaller places throughout the region which offer the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of early settlers, such as the **Coaltown Museum** (near Westport) **Reefton Goldfields Journey** (3-5 days), **Ross Goldfields Walkway**, **Nelson Creek Historic Gold Workings Walks** north east of Greymouth on State Highway 7, and the **Moonlight Creek Track**. The **Waiuta Historic Reserve** near Ikamatua is a large gold

mining ghost town, closed in 1951. The Adams Flat Hut (1882) and Adams Grave are on the Fenian Walking Track in the Fenian Goldfield (Buller) and the Denniston Historic Area.

One of the most used historic tracks is the two day **Croesus Track** between Blackball and Barrytown - historic Croesus Top Hut was used by quartz miners and then later by Depression era prospectors. Other tracks include the Buller Coalfields Heritage Trail, and **Charming Creek Walkway** at Seddonville which follows old mining tramlines and tracks. There are **heritage walks** at Granity, Reefton, Ross Goldfields, and through Goldsborough on State Highway 6 south of Greymouth.

After the Second World War damage to native vegetation by introduced possums and deer was the subject of an intensified eradication programme. Many deer cullers living in the back country hunting for months, gave rise to a new character in the



New Zealand imagination, best captured in Barry Crump’s “A Good Keen Man”. Among the 157 backcountry huts managed by the Department of Conservation is Slaty Creek Hut a rare and simple deer cullers hut made with pit sawn totara in the Ahaura catchment.

In South Westland the **Chancellor Hut** (built 1929-31) was important in the development of active sports within the Westland National Park. **Historic huts** include the Prices Flat Hut (1908) on Whitcombe Pass Route and Locke Stream Hut (1939) in the Hokitika area, and Almer Hut (1950), Cape Defiance Hut (1912) now at the **Franz Josef** Visitor Centre and Hende’s Hut (1907) in the Franz Josef Glacier Valley.

**New Zealand Historic Places** [www.historic.org.nz](http://www.historic.org.nz)  
**Department of Conservation** [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)  
**Friends of Denniston Hill** [www.denniston.co.nz](http://www.denniston.co.nz)

*Development West Coast has provided funding towards several community heritage projects, local museums, historical societies and heritage parks.*