

## Government well, c1895



### Description

This is a sepia photograph, measuring 21 cm x 14 cm, that shows a gang of men who are digging a government well in sand plain country east of Southern Cross, en route to the eastern gold fields soon after the Western Australian gold rush began. To the right of centre a timber frame marks the drill hole bored to locate the underground reservoir or stream of water. The inscription handwritten on the photograph reads 'GOVT WELL SAND PLAINS'.

### Educational value

- This asset depicts one of the numerous wells on the way to WA's gold fields and in the gold fields themselves - built to meet the demand for water, wells were often situated at the foot of granite outcrops, where run-off from rain accumulated in the sand and soil at the base of the impermeable rocks; a map published in Perth in August 1893 included the position of wells; a settlement, sometimes including a tent 'hotel', often grew around a well because it was a natural stopping place.
- It shows one of the few places where prospectors, teamsters and other travellers on the way to the gold fields could have stopped for water - the demand on a well was sometimes so great that it ran completely dry; during exceptionally dry summers authorities would order that only one team should take the route every 24 hours, to prevent the occurrence of situations such as 100 horses waiting for water from a well; water seeped into the holes so slowly that it took hours of waiting and scooping to water the frantic animals.
- It shows the equipment used in the process of making a well - a quadripod (four-legged structure) marks the drill hole; the capstan winch in the centre was used to raise buckets of sand and possibly rock from the bottom of the excavated hole; stacks of timber about 2 m long, cut on the work site, were used to line and shore up the sides of the well; all the work was done with hand tools.



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- It is evidence that the Western Australian Government quickly recognised that water supply was critical to the future of the eastern gold fields and accepted responsibility for the welfare of the incoming stream of gold seekers - the Government surveyed the country for water sources and undertook a large program of building wells and catchments of various kinds; these measures could not support the large numbers of gold seekers, however, and the Government eventually solved the shortage of water with the construction of an expensive gold fields water supply pipeline, which brought water from a dam near Perth.
- It suggests the inadequacy of surface water sources on the eastern gold fields where there are no permanent rivers - underground water sources were tapped through wells and bores but these often proved unsuitable due to salinity; artesian water usually had to be desalinated at great expense; in 1896 Coolgardie had 22 wells, although only three produced a small amount of fresh water, already diminishing and becoming brackish; the government bore at Coolgardie supplied saline water to condenser operators, who onsold it to the public after treatment; one private bore struck fresh water in Coolgardie, but this was an exception.
- It reveals the nature of some of the landscape in WA's eastern gold fields region - red-soil country gives way to yellow sand plains with timber and thick scrub alternating; horses and men alike found the sand plain tough going for lack of water as well as ease of travelling; water would soak away quickly after rain and some stretches were 15-20 km long; passengers in coaches walked alongside to reduce the load and sometimes even pushed them through the sand; teamsters made slow progress over the sand plain in summer, travelling two or three together so they could help each other over the worst section, called the 'Devil's Pinch'.
- It is an example of the work of Roy Millar who took numerous photographs depicting life in the gold fields in the 1890s - he held an exhibition in Coolgardie in 1894.

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**Creator** Roy (William Roy) Millar, photographer, c1895

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