



Arrowtown Chinese settlement



Otago

Nestled above Arrowtown on the banks of Bush Creek lies the partially restored Arrowtown Chinese Settlement. The village is a lasting reminder and tribute to the contribution made by the Chinese goldminers and business people to the region's culture, economy and history.

In 1866 fewer than 200 Chinese miners lived in Otago, but by April 1868 the Chinese population in New Zealand had grown to 1,270, most of whom were on the goldfields. In 1871 their numbers peaked at around 4,300. By 1885, the Arrowtown Chinese settlement had grown to about ten huts, a large social hall and at least two stores.

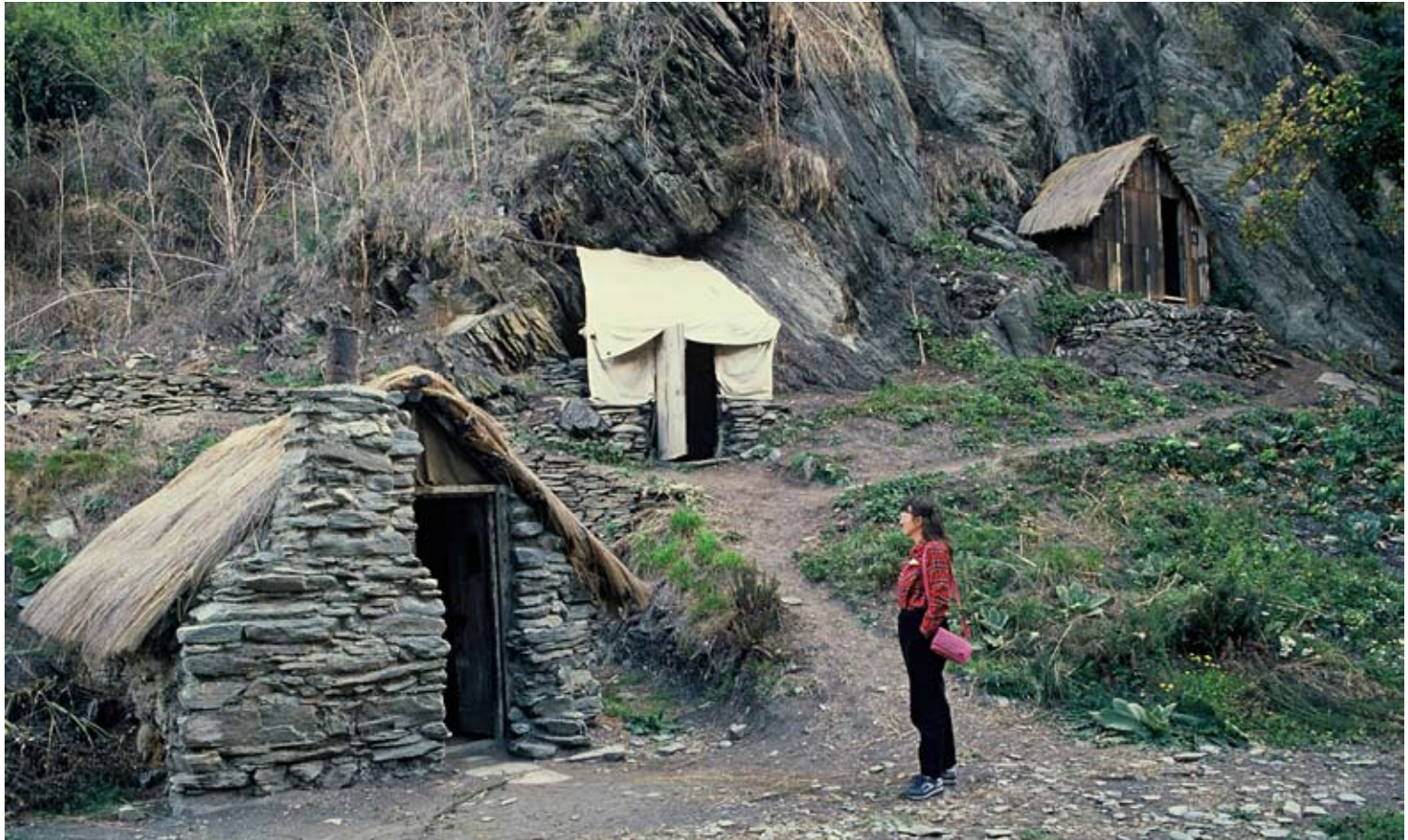
Often victims of discrimination, the Chinese lived on the fringes of European settlements in isolated gullies close to their mining claims. By 1921 only 59 Chinese remained, in large part due to the effects of anti-Chinese immigration legislation.

Background

During the early 1800s the people of the Guangzhou Delta area in China were suffering considerable hardship. The area was over-populated and many people lived in poverty. The destructive effects of British Imperialism and the opium trade were taking their toll.

For many of the rural poor the solution was to finance sons and brothers to travel and work overseas. It was thought that they would become rich and return to their village to enhance their family's position. Most of the men went to California and Australia, but some came to New Zealand.

Photo N. Peat



Chinese gold miners didn't come to mine in the Wakatipu area until after the initial gold rush. When gold was discovered on the West Coast of the South Island in 1864 many gold miners at the Arrow packed up and followed the rush. Business owners in the Wakatipu were suddenly faced with a serious loss of customers. In addition, the wider Otago Province was faced with losing its main source of wealth: income from taxes on gold.

The Otago Provincial Government's solution was to invite the Chinese to come and work on the Otago Goldfields. At first Chinese miners came from places in Australia such as Ballarat, but soon many came direct from their homelands in Guangzhou. Existing goldminers were not keen on competition and as the Chinese travelled inland to the goldfields, they suffered harassment and discrimination.

Life in the Chinese settlement

At first the men in the Chinese settlement at Arrowtown lived together in communal huts, which housed between two and six men each. A range of construction techniques were used for the buildings, including mud brick, mortared stone, wood, corrugated iron, and canvas. Some buildings were thatched, while others had corrugated iron roofs. There was also an extensive garden area.

It seems that the community centred around a large social hall, which was perhaps 15 metres long, until it collapsed or was demolished around 1900. Ah Lum's store (separately registered as an historic place) probably later took over this social function.

It is unlikely that any women ever lived in the settlement, as the first recorded arrival of a Chinese woman in New Zealand was not until 1873. By 1878 there were only nine Chinese women, and only 89 by the turn of the century. Paradoxically about 70% of the Chinese miners were married men.

Did you know?

- The Chinese miners drew their religious beliefs from the three major religious doctrines in China: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. They had many rituals designed to keep evil away or to invite good fortune. Ancestor worship was very important to them, and many maintained small shrines in their huts. Two temples were built, one at Lawrence in 1869 and the other at Round Hill in 1883.
- Some Chinese miners brought their addiction to opium with them, while others took up opium smoking in New Zealand as an escape from the hardships and loneliness they faced. It has been estimated that about 10% of the Chinese mining population was addicted to opium and perhaps as many as 60% smoked occasionally.
- The Chinese were skilled practical people who were quick to see the advantages of western technology, particularly in the area of hydraulic sluicing. Over 45% of all Chinese miners in 1874 were sluicers. Their workings at Round Hill and their water races in the Shotover area are legendary.

Further Information

For further information about the Arrowtown Chinese settlement, contact the Queenstown Visitor Centre, phone 03 442 7935.



Ah Lum's store
Photo S. Hardie

Photo L. Molloy

