

Gold Rush Victoria was as wasteful as we are today

Written by Sarah Hayes, Research Fellow in Archaeology and History, La Trobe University



Gold Rush garbage. S.Hayes. Artefact is part of Heritage Victoria's collection.

Australians are some of the [biggest producers of waste](#) in the world. Our wasteful ways and “[throw away](#)” culture are firmly entrenched. We have a hard time curbing our habits.

To understand why, we might turn our attention to the great social and economic transformation that occurred after the discovery of gold (by Europeans) in Victoria in 1851. Archaeological excavations across Melbourne have uncovered masses of rubbish dating back to the Gold Rush era of the 1850s and 1860s.

Artefacts recovered from sites within Melbourne show that the city's Gold Rush era occupants were incredibly wasteful. You might think that 150 years ago, Victorians would have been thrifty and mended their belongings or sold them on secondhand. But the evidence suggests otherwise.

[Working-class people living in Melbourne's CBD](#) were throwing out so much stuff that the weekly rubbish collections couldn't manage all their trash. Residents were stockpiling rubbish under floorboards, in hidden corners of the backyard or digging holes specifically for it.

Cesspits (old-fashioned long drop toilets) were closed across the city in the early 1870s, leaving large empty holes in the ground. Residents took the opportunity to fill them with their [surplus rubbish](#).

Many of these rubbish dumps remain under current city buildings and have been found and recorded [in cultural heritage management excavations](#).

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You are what you own

The discovery of gold brought a massive increase in population, new wealth, unprecedented access to a global network of consumer goods and great opportunities for social mobility. No one could be sure of your social background in the chaos of this rapid change. The old working, middle and upper class hierarchy became less relevant and it was possible to move up the social ladder.

How, then, did people communicate their status? Through stuff. [Cultural capital](#) refers to how people play the “culture game”: their accent, their clothes, their possessions, their manners, their interests. The argument goes that status is determined by the expression of cultural values and particular behaviours rather than wealth alone.



Dress Circle boxes Queens Theatre. Lucky Diggers in Melbourne 1853. [S.T.Gill. State Library of Victoria.](#)

Everyday choices of consumer goods became powerful in [carving out a new position](#) and a better life in the new city. Your home, your furniture, your tableware, your drinking glasses, your clothes, all became vital markers of your place in society. You were no longer constrained by your situation of birth.

Melbourne society was reinvented and a new, much larger and more diverse middle class

emerged. One that had a new system for determining status based largely on what they bought.

Why do we buy and why can't we stop?

As a globalised world grapples with the problem of fast fashion, fast consumerism and a throw away culture, with massive landfills and climate change, the question of why we consume is more important than ever.

You might want to consume and waste less. But old habits die hard and it's important to [understand why we consume](#) before we are able to make significant changes to our wasteful habits.

Social mobility might not have the currency that it did in the gold rush era, but we are still purchasing to communicate something. What we buy announces our position in the world and our values. Our possessions place us within one group and distance us from another just as they did in the Gold Rush era.

As the [slow movement](#), anti-consumerism and concerns over sustainability gather pace, a new brand of cultural capital may emerge. A cheap polyester jumper and a disposable coffee cup may become a sign of inappropriate excess. A minimal wardrobe of ethically produced clothes and a reusable coffee cup could become the ultimate marker of status.

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