

## NED KELLY COUNTRY

### A strange journey in the footsteps of the Australian outlaw

*(The Sunday Telegraph)*

*Ned Kelly was born in a ramshackle hut,  
He battled since he was a kid;  
He grew up with bad men, robbers and thieves  
And learnt all the things that they did.*

Rollicking ballads of this kind play all day long on the main street of Glenrowan. To call the place a one-horse town would be generous, but it has one claim to fame, and it is determined to make the most of it. It was here on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1880 that Ned Kelly – bushranger *par excellence* and walking prototype of the Chieftain tank – was finally captured by the Victoria police, after a bloody siege at Anne Jone's Inn.

Prolonged exposure to such doggerel has clearly taken its toll on the populace, which includes an unusual number of eccentrics. Outside Kate Kelly's Tea House, a 24-foot statue of Ned in his home-made armour stands as a monument to their lost sense of proportion. Further down the road, Ned Kelly's Last Stand – an animated theatre featuring mechanical figures, lasers, giant spiders and an artificial shower of rain – is so heroically tacky that you can only gaze at it in wonder. 'Most visitors to Glenrowan wouldn't know if the county shithouse fell on them,' proclaims a 'message from the Head Dreamer' painted on the wall outside. 'Snap out of your preconceived ideas and go and see this magnificent show. If you have a friend who turns out to be a pain in the neck and does not wish to go – Don't let them spoil your day!'

Glenrowan is a headache for the Australian Tourist Commission, which would like to take more tasteful advantage of the impending Ned Kelly boom. Following the success of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, two feature films about the country's most famous criminal – or folk hero, as others would have it – are about to turn him into an international commodity. But

while the Tourist Commission dreams of a Ned Kelly Trail with a serious historical centre (preferably in the picturesque town of Beechworth, where Kelly was indicted) the Glenrowan Gang is no more inclined than Ned himself to co-operate with central Government.

Ned Kelly country lies two hours north of Melbourne, and covers an area which Peter Carey compares to a wedge of pie, with the Great Dividing Range as its crust and the town of Wangaratta as its apex. Finding your way around is not easy, partly because the sites associated with Kelly are widely scattered, and partly because roadsigns bearing his name tend to get removed either by souvenir-hunters or by locals keen to stem the tourist invasion. Glenrowan has the advantage of being both central to the story and easily accessible – hence its status as Kelly capital.

The town has two rough-and-ready museums: Kate's Cottage, a replica of Ned's childhood home with a peacock and a pair of talking cockatoos thrown in for good measure; and the basement of Glen Rowan Cobb & Co, a souvenir shop whose proprietor sports a Ned Kelly beard and requires little prompting to share his exhaustive knowledge of the outlaw's family tree. As for the siege site, it is marked out with a bizarre collection of ten-foot painted wooden figures representing bushrangers, policemen, railway passengers and so on. Staring at them in bemusement, the words of Philbrick in *Decline and Fall* come to mind: 'Crikey! Loonies! This is where I shoot.'

Beechworth, half an hour's drive away through broad avenues of eucalyptus bordering neat farmland, is quite another matter. Its Historic and Cultural Precinct of nineteenth-century granite buildings is impeccably signposted and conserved, from the police stables to the still-functioning telegraph office. The courtroom is almost unchanged since Ned Kelly stood in the dock, while around the corner in the Burke Museum you can peer at newspaper reports and photographs of the gang, and relics of the 1852 gold rush which brought the town into being.

To explore further, however, you need a local guide such as Pat Doyle, who led me to the site of Aaron Sherritt's house a few miles outside the town. Sherritt, a suspected informer, was murdered here by the Kelly Gang while the four policemen assigned to protect him cowered under his bed. There is nothing to mark the spot apart from an enduring patch of irises from his garden, but squinting up at the rough hills where the gang kept look-out – and the caves where the police lay in wait for them – one gets a far stronger sense of the story's drama than anywhere in Glenrowan.

Stringybark Creek, where the gang claimed its first victims – three pursuing policemen – lies due south in the splendidly named Wombat Ranges, and the drive up to it is an idyllic one. The road from Benalla via Tatong winds up through heavily wooded hills, past banks of red earth and purple flowers, and crimson rozellas perched in the tall eucalypts. Unfortunately the tarmac ends several miles short of the creek, which means that in a regular hire-car you can go no further – though for mountain-bikers it is ideal terrain.

Beside the creek, a plaque on a boulder commemorates the policemen who died 'during the execution of their duty in a gunfight with a group of men later known as the "Kelly Gang".' (The boulder's predecessor was apparently ripped out of the ground by a Kelly fanatic with a four-wheel drive.) Standing there in the dappled sunlight, listening to exultant birdsong and the wind in the trees, it seems an extraordinary peaceful site for one of the country's most notorious crimes.

If you prefer not to spend the entire time thinking about murder and mayhem, there is a more cheerful alternative, because this area is also known for its food and wine. Milawa, the home of Brown Brothers wines, also produces some of Australia's best cheese, and even Glenrowan has some decent vineyards. An hour's drive south on the Hume Freeway via Euroa – scene of one of the Kelly Gang's bank robberies – you will find the Strathbogie and

Nagambie Lakes wine regions, and the small town of Avenel, whose Harvest Home Hotel boasts an exceptionally good restaurant.

It was in Avenel that the eleven-year-old Ned demonstrated his fearless character by plunging into Hughes Creek to save his schoolmate Robert Shelton from drowning. The Shelton homestead still stands, operating as a B&B in what its owners call ‘a state of arrested decay’, with scraps of Victorian paper clinging to the walls. The creek is best avoided in dry weather, when it becomes popular with snakes – as does the small cemetery where Ned’s father lies buried.

The last stop on the road to Melbourne is the hamlet of Beveridge, where Ned was born. Here too the signposts are hard to find, but persistence will lead you to woebegone, tumbledown property, fenced off with a notice reading ‘Please keep out – unstable premises.’ This is the ramshackle hut of the song, built by Ned’s father in 1854, and it will be lucky to celebrate its 150<sup>th</sup> birthday.

But if Ned’s birthplace has been neglected, the same cannot be said of the scene of his death. Old Melbourne Gaol is now run by Australia’s National Trust, and the main cell block – a grim three-storey building based on Pentonville – has been adapted as a macabre but fascinating museum. On the ground floor, the cells tell the story of individual prisoners, and through them the history of the city (which began, after all, as a penal settlement.) The exhibits include an iron mask, and a pair of leather gloves designed to prevent inmates from self-abuse. By way of Kellyana, there is Ned’s pistol and death mask, and the suit of armour worn by his brother Dan.

There is also the cell in which Ned spent his last hours, and the scaffold from which he was hanged. (His mother, who was a prisoner in the women’s section, was working in a laundry 30 yards away at the time.) With its discoloured walls and grimy, heavily barred window, the condemned cell cannot fail to give you the creeps, while the scaffold – though decommissioned – will have you treading gingerly around its edge.

By chance, the day of my visit – 11<sup>th</sup> November – was the anniversary of Ned's death, and a party of visitors had sneaked in a colourful wreath of artificial flowers to place on the scaffold's trap. They came, the manager told me, every year, leaving a card with a short, defiant inscription attached to the gaudy flowers: 'They hanged the man – but they will never kill the legend.'