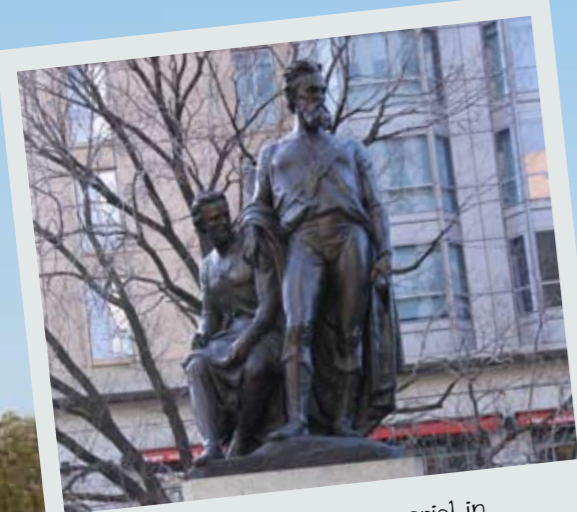


OFF-ROAD
ADVENTURE

Retracing History

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY VIC WIDMAN

On August 20th, 2010 a group of *Overlander* readers set off to recreate the Burke & Wills expedition on its 150th Anniversary.



Burke & Wills memorial in Melbourne CBD.



The Overlander Readers where the Victorian Exploring Expedition started from at Royal Park, Melbourne.

August 20th, 2010 marked 150 years since the ill-fated Burke & Wills Expedition set out from Royal Park in Melbourne, so it seemed fitting that *Overlander* with its own Outback explorer, Vic Widman should commemorate this milestone in Australian history.

Vic and his team from Great Divide Tours were also celebrating 21 years in the Outback tour business, so he jumped at the idea of mounting a trip along the entire route of the Burke & Wills Expedition. Vic tells the tale of their adventure and relives some of the history of our best known explorers.

I'm not sure if Burke & Wills had to contend with the freezing cold weather that greeted our convoy of 13 4WDs on the outskirts of Melbourne on August 20th, 2010, but I do know it was freezing with a maximum temperature of just 8 degrees and the rain that occasionally fell looked more like sleet to me. Moving 13 4WDs around the Melbourne CBD was always going to be a nightmare so I opted for a charter bus for our 30 readers which also included my own historians who had researched the Burke & Wills saga plus a film crew from Lifestyle Video Productions whose task it was to record our little adventure (you can purchase the DVD see details in the article).

Given it was exactly 150 years since the Expedition headed out of Royal Park it was fitting that we also visited this otherwise unobtrusive park and the monument marking the

spot. Others were here too marking this momentous occasion and actor Jack Thompson was among those spotted in the crowd. We paid our respects at the Melbourne General Cemetery, where a massive granite boulder commemorates Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills. A few hundred metres away hidden amongst sagging and ancient gravestones a much less flamboyant memorial marks William John King's grave. King being the only survivor of the four men who made the dash from Cooper Creek to the Gulf and back again must feel a little miffed about his lack of recognition.

Incredibly, the huge party of camels, horses, wagons and men that eventually departed Royal Park at 4pm only made it as far as Moonee Ponds, just 4km down the road. We dropped into the Park where the first of 165 camps was marked with a plaque and some camel sculptures before returning to our own laden 4WDs and starting our journey in earnest.

Books have been written about the Burke & Wills Expedition, one of the best is the Dig Tree by Sarah Murgatroyd, it makes fascinating reading. Our own journey could easily occupy the pages of a fat book too. You don't just drive from one end of Australia to the other over 18 days without lots of stories developing. The following is just a snapshot of our amazing journey.

The plan was to stick as close as possible to the original Burke & Wills route by using roads and tracks that were open to the public. The point being that anyone could actually follow this route and still experience the history and colour of one of the countries most lauded explorers and yet an expedition





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that failed with seven men eventually dying in the process. We passed various camp sites across a freezing and wet Victorian landscape on our way to Swan Hill. Here we visited the Tyntynder Homestead to view a piano that Burke played whilst he stayed at Tragowel Station (near Echuca). The tour provided by Glyniss at Tyntynder turned out to be a highlight amongst many on this trip.

Burke’s route to the Darling River took him through the mallee scrub north-west of Balranald and whilst this proved to be extremely arduous for the wagons and horses, paved roads and hard-packed gravel roads soon saw us pull into Turlee Station on the edge of Mungo National Park. We spent a full day exploring Mungo under leaden skies, but like the parting of the waters, the cloud miraculously cleared half an hour before sunset and we were treated to an almost biblical experience watching the ancient Walls of China glow orange as the sun set and a full moon rose.

This same cloud band had played havoc with our plans, dumping rain on an already saturated Outback and all roads around Innamincka were to be closed for several days. Even the access north of Tibooburra was off limits, so we had little choice but to sit it out. We were able to move onto Pooncarrie where we crossed the Darling River, Burke

actually loaded all of his kit onto a paddle steamer bound for Menindee. We spent a top night at Bindara Station on the Darling where it is said some of Burke’s men had also camped before heading into Menindee.

Menindee played a very important role in the saga of the Burke & Wills Expedition. Not only did Burke make this one of his permanent camps, he also frequented the original Maiden Hotel which unfortunately burnt down in the early 1990’s. We dropped into the refurbished hotel to soak up some atmosphere, visited the burial site of Dost Mohomet who was a member of the Expedition party and visited the camp site established at Pamamaroo where a tree blazed by the Party marks this historic spot.

Inching forward as roads began to open we made it to Broken Hill and then Mutawintji National Park. Burke skirted the edge of the ranges that are now protected by the National Park. William Wright, who was appointed in charge of the Menindee camp after Burke sacked George Landells over a dispute about the management of the camels, had actually spent sometime exploring the fascinating gorges of Mutawintji. In fact we visited a cave where Wright had painted his own initials over the existing Aboriginal art work.

The Burke & Wills Expedition

Robert O’Hara Burke, George Landells and William John Wills and 27 men set out from Melbourne on August 20th, 1860. It took them 56 days to reach Menindee on the Darling River. Burke argued with Landells, was despised by Dr Herman Beckler (scientific and botanical observer) and Ludwig Becker (artist, naturalist and geographer). Burke demanded these men leave their scientific instruments and made them work as camel handlers.

The feuding between Landells and Burke reached breaking point in Menindee where Burke sacked Landells and appointed Wills his second in charge. He appointed William Wright in charge of the resupply group which was to station itself in Menindee. Wright’s job was to send supplies up to the next depot on the Cooper Creek (the Dig Tree as we know it) but he never did.

Burke continued to Cooper Creek in October 1860 arriving there in November. He then split the Expedition once more when he, Wills, King and Gray made a dash for the Gulf of Carpentaria in the height of summer.

The four men walked to Eyre Creek near Birdsville and then to Burke River near Boulia. Reaching camp 119 on the Bynoe River on 10 February 1861. Burke & Wills then tried to reach the Gulf. The mangroves and mud beat them. They returned to camp 119 on February 12th, 1861 and immediately left for the return journey.

By now the men were in terrible condition due to lack of food and the heat, flies and mosquitoes. Their camels and horses either died or were slaughtered for their meat. An argument between Gray and Burke saw Burke beat Gray who subsequently died several days later. It took them 12 hours to bury his body.

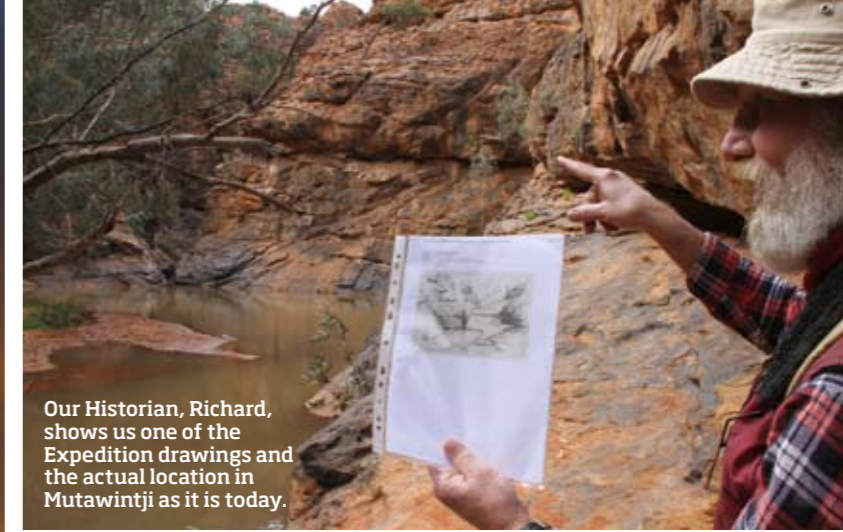
Burke, Wills & King staggered back into Camp 65 on the Cooper Creek only to discover a note buried (hence the Dig Tree inscription) by Brahe who left that very morning. If they had not buried Gray they would have been saved. Wright still had not brought extra supplies up from Menindee having become lost on several occasions and losing some of his men including Becker, Patten, Purcell & Stone.

Burke decided to walk down the Cooper Creek to Mt Hopeless before leaving they reburied some provisions and covered their tracks. Brahe had caught up with Wright and returned to the Dig Tree. There was no evidence anyone had returned to camp, Brahe considered no-one had returned and left for Menindee.

Burke and Wills both passed away on Cooper Creek on or around the 29 June 1861. King survived and was taken in by the local aborigines and was eventually rescued by Alfred Howitt on 25 September 1861. King died in Melbourne on January 15th, 1871.



One of our many bush camps along the route taken by Burke & Wills.



Our Historian, Richard, shows us one of the Expedition drawings and the actual location in Mutawintji as it is today.



The Readers visited some of the many art sites in Mutawintji National Park.



Things are a bit rundown at Cadelga Ruins.



The amazing sunset on the Walls of China at Mungo National Park.

READERS' TRIP

BURKE & WILLS EXPEDITION



The famous Dig Tree on the Cooper Creek.



Numerous memorials and signs dedicated to the Expedition can be found across Australia, this one is near Menindee.

The Warri Gate Road to Noccundra was still closed as were the roads around Innamincka so we had an enforced stay of three nights at beautiful Mutawintji. But no-one complained as we could not have been in a better location and our days were spent exploring all of the walking tracks. We had covered in excess of 12km on foot and this not only allowed us to truly appreciate the beauty of Mutawintji but also the arduous nature of walking through the rugged country which Burke & Wills and their men endured for months on end.

Finally the roads to the north opened and although we were confronted with many large red pools of water and deviations around flooded sections of road we were able to reach Queensland. After a fabulous camp site beside a beautiful lake (which did not exist before the rains) we rolled into the famed Dig Tree. I have been here many times previously and have to say that it is usually dry and dusty and not all that inviting. But this time, after the enormous floods that had swept down the Cooper, which saw the Dig Tree actually disappear under water, the place was one of the best camping locations one could ask for. We camped above the full Cooper Creek amidst green grass and witnessed literally thousands of pelicans and darters as they foraged up and down the Creek for the plentiful fish. Laying in my swag at the crack of dawn listening

BELOW:
Vic ponders
which tourist is
going over the
edge.

to the swoosh of air through the wings of 200 pelicans in a perfect V formation was one of the best experiences of my life.

We had to cross the Burke & Wills bridge on our way to Innamincka but the sight that greeted us from the deck of the bridge was totally unexpected. Either side of the bridge in the silt grey waters of the Cooper Creek there were at least 5000 birds. We spent a long time here soaking up this rare spectacle. 2010 had been a record wet year in the Outback, even the Cooper Creek had crossed the Birdsville Track and emptied into Lake Eyre, this last occurred in 1990!

Sadly the roads to Burke and Wills' grave sites on the Cooper were still closed and their route which closely followed the modern day Walker's Crossing road was also under water and likely to stay that way for many months. So we detoured to Birdsville via Cordillo Downs. Arriving at Birdsville three days before the famed Races was a real shock to the system. There were 5000 people crammed into Birdsville and with further rain on the forecast we knew it was going to get pretty ugly. Camping anywhere near Birdsville was out of the question given the demand for camp sites so we opted for another water view in the most unlikely place – at the foot of Big Red!

That afternoon, with our camp literally on the edge of a lake with Big Red as a backdrop we witnessed a fantastic sunset as thunderstorms rolled across the desert. Another perfect location given the prevailing conditions. The weather news





Winners are Grinners

The Overlander Readers Trip was sponsored by Cooper Tires and a lucky hat draw saw family members David, Maria and Sebastian win a set of cooper ST tyres. Our thanks go to Cooper Tires for supporting this amazing trip.

Information shelter at camp 119 on the Gulf of Carpentaria.



The People

- Jeff & Ben Cooney Prado
- David & Sebastian Gordon and Maria Romeo `Cruiser
- Stephen & Kathleen Hayden Hilux
- Hugh Levinson & Margaret Menadue Prado
- Jim & Pam McCracken `Cruiser
- Michelle Barnett & George Mesk Prado
- Norm, Catherine & Anna-Rose Mirabito `Cruiser
- Aliceson, Bernard, Dannielle, `Cruiser
- Katelyn & Jessica Parker Patrol
- Stan & Lyn Sheldon `Cruiser
- Pauline Clark & Rich Hettig Patrol
- John & Anne Morton `Cruiser
- Alex & Jeremy Caruana `Cruiser
- Vic Widman `Cruiser

was bad so, after a visit to my old mate John Menzies at the Birdsville Working Museum, we restocked and headed out of town. 24 hours later 5000 people were stranded there for five days and the Races were cancelled as the racetrack went under water.

The road to Bedourie had large ponds of water from the previous night's thunderstorms but they proved easy and by end of day we rolled into Boulia. That night we too copped the downpour and although our camping conditions were vastly different to those experienced by Burke, Wills, King and Gray (the four men making the final dash from Cooper Creek to the Gulf) we at least were camped on the Burke River.

Any plans of following the Expeditions route directly north from Boulia were dashed by the 25mm of rain that had fallen overnight and even the sealed road towards Mt Isa saw us driving through axle deep flood waters. As luck would have it, 60km north of Boulia we drove out of the rain band and found we could access the Expedition's original route once more. O'Hara's Gap is marked on the topo maps, this is where the

four explorers found their way through the rocky ranges that lie to the south west of Cloncurry. With the topo map on my lap, the GPS working overtime and a keen eye, I found the two wheeled track that led us to the landmark Gap. This was a great achievement for our group and made up for the soaking we had received the night before.

On the Barkly Highway between Cloncurry and Mt Isa there is plaque that proclaims that Burke & Wills crossed this way on their dash for the Gulf. We found it easily, but more elusive for us was the track along Corella Creek. Shrouded in long forgotten mining tracks around the now abandoned township of Mary Kathleen I eventually found the rough track of my desire. Sadly it had not been travelled in many years and after just a few short kilometres it was badly washed out and progress was impossible. We weren't totally beaten though and after driving east we headed north again on a road that led us to a beautiful homestead where the occupants gladly told us how to access the Corella Creek Road from the north. A beautiful bush camp was had that evening in very remote



Water across the road to Bedourie.

READERS' TRIP

BURKE & WILLS EXPEDITION



One of the 14 trees that were blazed at camp 119.

country, similar no doubt to the many camps Burke & Wills must have experienced.

Almost at the end of our journey we stopped for a cuppa at the Burke & Wills Roadhouse before our last dusty and now very hot drive (the mercury was pushing 36 degrees) to the Savannah Way where we found Camp 119. This is the last marked camp of the Expedition Party. Here Burke and Wills left King and Gray as they slogged through mud and mangroves on their quest to reach the Gulf. Several trees were blazed around camp 119 by King and Gray and some of these are still visible today. We camped nearby on our final night of the tour in an endeavour to soak up the history of the area.

It was a fabulous journey over 7000km of harsh terrain and a true history lesson all the way. The story of Burke and Wills summarised with this article was one of triumph and failure but one that I believe all Overlanders should familiarise themselves with and experience for themselves. 📺



The convoy atop Big Red, note the water in the background.



Buy the DVD of the Trip

Contact Lifestyle Video Productions on
www.lifestylevideos.com.au or (03) 9790 0656
Or Vic Widman at Great Divide Tours via
www.4wd.net.au Or 02 9913 1395