

Sturt's Central Australian Expedition 1844-1845

Crossing the Barrier Ranges

On August 10th 1844 Captain Charles Sturt led the Central Australian Expedition through the streets of Adelaide, then along the Murray and the Darling Rivers before heading where no European had been before. The quest was to find the sea which Sturt and his sponsors believed occupied the heart of Australia.

The expedition's outfit consisted of:

- 11 horses.
- 30 bullocks.
- 1 boat and boat carriage. 1 horse dray.
- 1 spring cart.
- 3 drays.

In addition there were 200 sheep for food, two sheep dogs, and four kangaroo dogs.

The journey failed to find the mythical lake, but ultimately led to the description and interpretation of vast areas of inland Australia, which would later be opened up for pastoralism and mining.

The route through western New South Wales was significantly further than the shorter distance to the centre, through South Australia. However, the commonly held belief of the time was that a series of linked horse-shoe lakes surrounded the northern reaches of the Flinders Ranges. By taking the eastern route the impenetrable sand-dunes and the lakes would be avoided.

Sturt was a careful explorer. The lives of sixteen men depended upon the decisions he made, the most critical being the location of water in a hostile, arid environment. After leaving the relative safety of the rivers, Sturt travelled northwesterly across the plains from Menindie and set up camp amongst the hills to the east of present day Broken Hill. Small survey parties of men were sent in search of routes across the ranges to the west, and to find waterholes where the expedition would be able to make camp.

Once it was established that water was available, the expedition moved onwards, dragging carts and waggons laden with stores, and even a wooden boat to sail on the inland sea. The crossed the rocky gullies and narrow creek gorges of the Barrier Ranges until the expedition stood on the plain to the west, Mundi Mundi.



Figure 1 Waterhole in the Barrier Ranges

Moving to the north

Having struggled across the Barrier Ranges a campsite was established near a gorge on west-flowing Campbell's Creek on the edge of the Mundi Mundi Plain. A day or so later another, further north, a soak-hole on Morphett's Creek, was reached. There, from November 29th 1844, the group waited as two expedition members, Poole and Browne, travelled on horseback to the west toward "Lake Torrens". Crossing sand-dunes and salt flats they rode until they were within sight of Mt Searle in South Australia, at thelake blanch....but found no route that would enable the expedition to continue safely in a westerly direction. They followed their tracks back to inform Sturt that there was no option other than to continue in the northerly direction.



Figure 3 The rugged Barrier Ranges

Flood now rode ahead to find the next campsite and discovered a good waterhole forty miles north on a creek that was later named Flood's Creek. After abandoning a dray in Morphett's Creek where it was bogged, they travelled on to Flood's Creek and set up camp for a week.

Poole, Browne and Mack continued northwards as far as the Queensland border in order to search for, and map the locations of, further water supplies. Sturt, Stuart and Flood headed east across the Coko Range to the plains beyond toward the Nuntherungie Hills. Each party returned to camp on Christmas day 1844, Sturt passing just to the south of Bancannia Lake.

With the weather increasingly hot and rainless Sturt worried about water supplies drying up and was keen to keep moving. The expedition broke camp from Flood's Creek on December 28th. The wagons and carts struggled across pine ridges, sand-dunes and dry salty lagoons, whilst Sturt rode to the Pinnacle Hill to the east, the most northern hill of the Barrier Ranges. From his vantage point he could see the dust rising from the wagon wheels to the west.

Depot Glen

To the north of the expedition route from Flood's Creek lies Mt Arrowsmith, a magnetic hill Sturt named after his London based cartographer. The expedition travelled from the southwest across the southern slopes of the hill and camped on a creek running to the east into Lake Bullea. Then, with the new-year's temperatures in the extreme, the expedition continued northwards, across Mt Browne Creek to Evelyn Creek, near where the township of Milparinka not sits.

Here they set up camp whilst Sturt lead a further expedition northwards, crossing the Queensland border to the west of the Grey Range and travelling as far north as the Wilson River. Finding no water, they too returned to the safety of the Evelyn Creek.

In Sturt's absence other members of the group had discovered Preservation Creek, a tributary of the Evelyn, where a long sheet of water lay within a rocky glen and provided the possibility of water for almost twelve months. On February 1st, 1845, the expedition relocated to this site. Named Depot Glen, it would become one of the most famous locations in Australian exploratory history. Without possibility of retreat or advancement, the expedition remained entrapped at Depot Glen for almost six months. The summer seemed relentless with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees F for several weeks and many members of the expedition party suffered from scurvy. An underground room was constructed in the bank of the gorge to offer relief from the heat, and comfort to Poole who was especially ill.

To relieve the monotony of camp-life, Sturt's men walked daily to the top of the nearby "red hill" Mt Poole, to construct a stone cairn, 21 feet square at the base, 18 feet high. In time it has become a memorial to Poole the only expedition member not to survive.



Figure 4 Sturt's Cairn, Mt Poole

Sturt continues the quest

Sturt knew that it was impossible to move forward with the expedition, or even retreat, but was unable to rest. Taking three of his men with him, he again headed northwards, across the border into Queensland. He followed his earlier trail but this time travelled further west of the junction of the Warri Warri Creek and Wilson Rivers.

Locating a westward flowing creek (Frome's) he followed it to where it ended in Pinnaroo Lake. After the harshness of the country they had passed through before, Sturt found this locality far more favourable and named it "The Park". Later the area would be called Fort Grey, after the Governor of South Australia.

Returning to Depot Glen, Sturt noted that many of the native birds which had frequented the waterhole had left, an ominous sign, he noted, of receding water supplies.

Within a few days Sturt and Browne again headed off, this journey was to search the country to the east of Depot Glen for water. They travelled almost 160 kms to Yantara Lake but found nothing and returned to camp. Little wonder that Sturt was pessimistic. The future of the expedition seemed very bleak.

Periodically Depot Glen was visited by members of the local aboriginal tribes. On one occasion the arrival of an elderly man fueled hope. Seeing the boat, and recognizing its significance, the old man pointed towards the northwest, the very direction in which Sturt believed the inland sea lay, as if indicating a large expanse of water.

Still, they waited, continuing to build the cairn, sending out small scouting parties to explore the wider local area, and chaining a survey line of some 50 kilometres.

Release from Depot Glen

By June 1845 James Poole was desperately ill and Sturt began to make plans for him to be taken to Adelaide, just as soon as it rained enough to allow. He was to be accompanied by five men, as well as one to "nurse" him during the journey. A special bed of sheep skins was prepared on a cart and letters were written to the South Australian Government requesting additional stores. Rain began to fall on July 12th and two days later the creeks around the glen filled with water.

On July 16th 1845 the expedition left Depot Glen, Sturt's party moved along the survey line to the north-west, Poole and his carers along the south-bound route. Sturt had travelled just six kilometres when a messenger from Poole's party rode up with the news that Poole died. His body was returned to Depot Glen and buried nearby beneath a beefwood tree. Today it still bears the inscription carved into the bark: JP 1845. Remarkably he was the only man to die on the expedition, despite the conditions under which they travelled and lived. Others, including Sturt, also suffered terribly from scurvy, the heat and lack of water.

The day after the sad burial of Poole, the retreating party again set off for Adelaide. Sturt and his team also returned to their task of following their previously chained course to the north-west, and continuing their expedition. The intention was to set up a base camp at Fort Grey, and to examine further the route to the west, around the end of Lake "Torrens" in the hope that this option would allow them to proceed further north through what was already known to be very difficult country.

Beyond Fort Grey

Whilst most of the remaining members of the expedition remained at Fort Grey (Lake Pinnaroo) where they were to establish a stockade and endeavour to germinate and grow some of the seeds they carried with them, Sturt moved quickly to examine the country to the west of the South Australian border adjacent to Lake Torrens. Finding no passage north of the sand-dunes and lakes he began his journey back to the fort on August 5th 1845.

Soon after, accompanied by Browne, Flood, Lewis and Cowley Sturt again struck out for the north-west. With a massive effort across a barren, waterless landscape, the group reached their most northern point on the edge of the Simpson Desert on September 8th. Convinced that they could not continue toward the centre of Australia they retreated to Fort Grey.

Sturt then decided to take fresh men and scout to the north and east. This time he took just three men, Stuart, Mack and Morgan, and followed their old course to Strzelecki Creek and on to the Cooper Creek. Sturt had planned to go east along the Cooper but rainfall in the area encouraged him somewhat and the expedition turned to the north instead.

They dug wells to capture rainfall, but it was to no avail and again they were forced to retreat. Returning to Cooper Creek, the party made one more desperate attempt to locate the inland sea and rode east along the Cooper until, on November 3rd they finally accepted the futility of their efforts. Sick, almost blind, Sturt retreated to Fort Grey.

Retreat.

Before leaving Browne in charge at Fort Grey, Sturt had given instructions that if they were forced to retreat from the stockade, they should fall back to Depot Glen. Upon return to Fort Grey Sturt found that all had indeed left. Ill and disappointed, Sturt rode on to Depot Glen where the expedition was reunited.

Browne and Flood rode on to Flood's Creek in search of water and returned to Depot Glen with good news. Sturt instructed the men to kill four bullocks and with their skins they made large water vessels. Leaving behind most of their stores, and the boat, they slowly began the long journey home. Too ill to ride his horse, Sturt was now uncomfortably confined to a bed on one of the drays.

The retreat was successful, and assisted by some wild berries found on bushes near Morphett's Creek, Sturt's health improved to the point that, on January 19th 1846, he rode into Adelaide and his home.