

BURKE AND WILLS EXPEDITION

20 August - 6 September 2010

150 year anniversary

Day 1 – 20/8/10

It all began on a cold Melbourne morning, much the same as it would have been exactly 150 years previously.

The intrepid band of travellers gathered in the games room of the Apollo Garden's Caravan Park, because it was too damn cold outside.

The coach arrived at approximately 8.15am and we were off to start our adventure.

First stop was the monument of Burke and Wills, erected in the Melbourne CBD, on the corner of Swanston and Collins Streets. The peak hour traffic was not enough to prevent a photo opportunity, as the group blocked at least one lane of traffic in order to take a few snaps.

Back on the bus, it was on to the state library, where we viewed an exhibition on Burke and Wills expedition. The exhibition compiled of various artefacts from their expedition, including the diary and pistol of Robert O'Hara Burke, as well as many paintings done at the time or after their epic quest.

Once we had finished at the library, we trekked over to the Royal Society of Victoria headquarters. It was this same society which organised and funded the original expedition!

We were given a brief but interesting tour, in which we received a talk about the mystery surrounding the deaths of members of the expedition. Next year the state coroner will be investigating the deaths!

After taking in the spectacular artworks, we quickly made tracks over to the site of the actual beginning of the expedition. We were lucky enough to have the pleasure of a musician on site as we took photos; nothing quite completes the mental image of what the start of Burke and Wills adventure would have felt like than the sounds of "Clancy of the Overflow" in the background.

Meeting up with the bus once again, we headed to the Melbourne general cemetery to view the graves of Burke, Wills and King. We were astounded at seeing the size of the granite block which sat atop the graves of Burke and Wills, which was cut as a single piece and transported by horse via specially made roads, as we found out previously during our talk at the Royal Society. King's grave was located further into the cemetery, hidden amongst lopsided and sunken tombstones. What surprised us the most was that Elvis Presley himself was buried there too!

No one managed to fall into an open grave, so we made it safely back on to the tour bus and off to Moonee Ponds to visit the first campsite of the expedition. We all chuckled at how little distance was travelled by the expedition party on the first day, but then again those early explorers did not have the pleasure of being chauffeured around on a tour bus!

After being dropped back at the caravan park by our lovely driver, we hopped into our vehicles and began the journey to our first campsite of Bendigo. On the way we stopped at the site of the first powered flight by an Australian. A mere 7 meter flight it may have been, but an incredible feat it was none the less!

Our drive through the lush, water-logged countryside was accompanied by Vic and Pauline's commentary on the history of the area and references to each expedition campsite. We even got to pose for our film crew as we passed them by!

We arrived at Bendigo safe and sound and enjoyed a peaceful night sleep, in what will be our last night of luxury before we begin camping in the bush.

Day 2 – 21/8/10

Day two began bright and early with a breakfast run to the Beechworth bakery for breakfast. We also bought supplies for lunch during our busy sounding day. By the time we had our fill of toasties, coffee and hot chocolate's, it was already time to regroup outside the National Motel. The convoy took off towards Axedale – retracing our steps to the turnoff to camp 8, alongside the Campaspe River.

We saw some wildlife on our travels, including galahs, ibis, sulphur-crested cockatoos, emus. Pauline and Richard kept us informed – although much of the time our car only heard Vic's responses to other people's comments (that's quite strange!). We had morning tea on Mount Hope – where we climbed to the top of the limestone bluff to get a great look around at the plains. Richard showed us the painting with a line of camels and a line of horses from the expedition crossing the Terrick Terrick Plains – it was not hard to imagine the party making their way across the boggy plains.

We tried to follow the dirt roads between Mt Hope and Tragowel but Vic realised it was going to be a bit messy (he did not think he had the driving skills for the conditions, obviously), so we found another way – the highway, to take us the last 130km to Swan Hill. On the way through we passed the town of Lake Boga and the lake which reminded us of Narrabeen Lakes on Sydney's northern beaches. It was a huge expanse of water, which Vic informs was bone dry – with trees and grass growing in it like any other paddock – in December only 8 months ago.

The wildflowers, poisonous and otherwise were a beautiful touch on sides of the road on the way into Swan Hill. Vic was in a bit of a rush, with the final plaque-seeing stop taking only a matter of minutes. We found out at the caravan park that Vic was in a hurry to meet up with his lady friend and abandon the rest of the party at the camp. Pauline was a name that he slipped in conversation. Taking after his hero, Burke, Vic has taken on the habit of sleeping in stylish accommodation, so we should refer to him as BOB (Bob O'Hara Burke).

In Swan Hill, we took off down to the pioneer settlement like a convoy on a mission. We had a quick look then boarded the paddle steamer PS Pyap. The Captain had lots of great information, including that the Murray sits 8ft higher than normal at the moment and that it is the highest since 1999.

We paddled up river as far as the "Murray Homestead" then turned and came back. Back at the settlement there was time to look around and take in the essence of the mid 1800's and feel the history before we motored on up the road to our campsite on the edge of the river.

The majority of the party walked or drove into town to "The Carriages" where we dined on a red rattler! Food was great – but better was the location and company. Jeremy and Sebastian entertained us with jokes and some lively games of UNO, before we headed toward another scheduled event. The Light and Sound show at the Pioneer Settlement. A very clever way of presenting history. It would have been good to do the Light and Sound Show before the daytime wander and paddle steamer cruise, in my opinion – still a lot of fun.

Finally back to camp to write an essay on a long day in third! place in the convoy.

Day 3 – 22/8/10

We awoke to sunny and mild day. Talk of wild storms did not eventuate.

We met outside Pioneer Settlement at approx 9am and headed across the border to visit Tyntynder Homestead. Once there, we were given a very interesting and informative tour by the manager, Glyniss. It was easy to see that she loves her job, all were spellbound by her knowledge and passion for the property.

What a tough life it must have been there over 150 years ago. Amongst many other things, Glyniss was proud of the fact that her grandmother was born in a tent in 1899 on the banks of the Murray River. Vic was in raptures upon seeing the old piano that Burke is said to have played on at another station earlier in his journey. We found this part of the tour most enjoyable, could have stayed longer.

Upon returning to Swan Hill, everyone filled up with fuel and supplies, and then spent time beside the swollen Murray River for lunch. Set off about 1.30pm towards Balranald. Not much settlement on NSW side of the river as in other border river towns. Land mostly flat and in good condition.

At last we finally left the bitumen, into 4wd high and did some fast dirt driving thru "Tin Tin" Station. The farmers must be pleased to be finally having a good year, but now there is a fear of locust plagues. Arrived about 4.20pm at Turlee Station, found our camp site and set up. Nice surprise of fairly new amenities on site. Looking forward to tomorrow and Mungo area.

Day 4 – 23/8/10

Turlee Station Campground – what a fantastic spot. Camped among a group of dogwood trees with Ruby Saltbush growing underneath, greeted by apostle birds. Facilities include flushing toilets and hot showers. Generous wood supplies. Had spots of light rain overnight (3 am-ish). Morning overcast and light northerly breeze – about 10 degrees. Alex performed a few technical adjustments for some vehicles. Turlee Station, sheep and wheat and some cattle. Sheep sold for \$8.50 in drought, bought back @ \$85.00 each. Cattle \$350 each from WA. Currently spraying for locusts.

Rain at Lillian Creek overnight, Birdsville Track closed according to station owner. What portent for us? On the road at 0900 heading to Lake Mungo visitors centre. Tanya, Aboriginal guide welcomed us and accompanied us on a tour of the Lake Mungo section of the Willandra Lakes Region World Heritage Area.

The history of the Lake Mungo area European settlement and ownership of various stations on display in the visitor centre.

Tanya pointed out various plants and explained their value and use by Aboriginal people. Tanya outlined the story of the discovery of ancient Aboriginal footprints captured in mud of old lake bed, many tracks of animals and humans. Clearly one 1-legged man using a spear to help him walk and evidence of hunting kangaroo. Some animal tracks not recognised by modern people.

Footprints have been covered with 60 tonnes of sand to protect them from deterioration.

Climbed over the dunes at Vigars Well – kids had great fun jumping and rolling down the dunes. Some light showers as we drove – generally quite overcast but not looking too threatening – yet!

Graham from Harry Nanja Tours met the group at the visitor centre. Talked passionately about his people's dreaming and played some very moving didgeridoo pieces.

Moved on to the lunette on the east of the lake. Graham gave a very passionate (and lengthy) 'take' on Aboriginal cultural/political views mixed with some fascinating interpretation of the anthropology/archaeology of the dune system and its geology.

Waited in the car park out of the chilly wind for sunset shots. The cloud cleared and brilliant sunshine at 5pm.

Plant information supplied by Tanya re medicinal use:

Saltbush – wound cleaning, fire sticks, leaves wrapped with cobwebs as wound dressing, food from berries, dye making.

Emu bush – (remophila) antibiotic use.

Broom bush – roofing material and night shelters roofing

Lolly bush – honey like secretions eaten.

Mallee – spears, clubs, digging sticks, didgeridoos, source of water from roots.

Wild grape – edible berries, sharp spires on spears.

Mallee Cypress – chew leaves for headaches and fever.

Salt bush Bush – bane of farmer , damages wool.

Silk Creek Quarry claimed as the oldest quarry in the world – stone used and widely traded for cutting implement, spear points etc.

Emu behaviour changes – will run away when sitting on eggs, but will stay and fight when protecting young.

-----After getting the requisite photos it was back to the campsite dodging rabbits (oops – Vic got one) and sheep (what sheep?) along the way. A quick stop to freshen up and then back to the shearing shed for a candle lit dinner cooked by Sophie – pasta, lamb casserole, green beans, mash followed by baked apples, custard and cream. Nathan was asked to explain a bit about the background of the property, how it is run, type of stock and crops etc and how they got into tourism.

Then home to bed – end of a good day!

Day 5 – 24/8/10

We woke to a lovely, almost cloudless, sunny morning. This was the best morning so far although a little chilly. We waited until the last moment to break camp in the hope that the sun would dry the tent from the heavy dew. Our briefing was scheduled for 8.45 and we were eventually underway at 9.07am.

This is a fairly easy day today and we won't be doing too many kilometres. We waited for a time for John to set up his photo opportunity whilst we were still driving through Turlee Station.

We then passed through Mungo National Park seeing hawks flying overhead, Major Mitchell cockatoos strutting around and emus. We left Lake Mungo to the right on route to Pooncarie. Pauline and Richard were lucky to spot an emu with some chicks.

We were all surprised at how green and lush the surrounding area was as it is usually red earth. There were lots of wild flowers along the road and acacia bushes in full bloom.

Pooncarie was where Burke and Wills crossed the Darling. It had a natural wharf where ships planks were laid down for loading and unloading goods. Burke and Wills loaded some eight tons of supplies on to the paddle steamer "Moolgewanka", which was the 3rd steamer on the Darling and took on baggage to deliver to Menindee. Coming along to Bindara Station on the Coona Point/Bindara Road there was an old bridge which Burke and Wills crossed.

Wills wrote in his diary that he had never seen anything so desolate. But the locals said that they had a wet season, but Wills could not believe them as everywhere was so dry.

During the journey there was a general discussion on the radio as to why the expedition "failed" and why Burke had been chosen as the leader.

Vic had previously been interviewed by 2GB and the presenter had invited him to phone in every Tuesday at 2.30 for a chat. So Vic stopped for his interview and we continued under the guidance of Alex.

Passing through Willotia Station, we came to Bindara Station which was recommended by the coffee shop and gallery in Pooncarie. It is certainly a beautiful camp spot beside the Darling with an en-suite toilet/shower!

Alex is taking the children fishing with a piece of stick and a length of string attached to a piece of chicken. As the owner of the property said .."I don't fancy his chances of catching anything". However, the fishing party is now trying out chicken wire for a yabbie trap. We'll see what happens! However, we'll probably wait until morning before we find out if we've been lucky.

Another great camp fire tonight but the weather is still quite brisk particularly when the sun goes down. Great fun, Great people, Beautiful day – and more to come!

Day 6 – 25/8/10

After last night's camp fire chat was cut short by the wind and rain picking up, we woke this morning to clear blue sunny skies. We left Bindara around 9am this morning to start our day's adventures. Today we travelled along the red tree lined tracks, which thanks to last night's rain, were not too dusty. Being at the front of the convoy today we get a slightly different perspective of things, we have seen many more kangaroos and emus quite close to the side of the road (some chancing their life by running in front of cars as well!).

We stopped for morning tea at the Kinchega Woolshed. Had a little explore around this place originally built in the 1870's from river red gum and corrugated iron. After waiting for Alex (and his flat tyre) to arrive we moved on.

Next stop was the Maiden Hotel in Menindee for a quick beer and then on to see 'Dost Mahomet's' grave. He was one of the camel drivers on the Burke and Wills expedition. From here we headed to Pamamaroo Creek camp site for lunch. This was the site of the base camp where on 19th October, the Burke and Wills expedition team was split and Burke, Wills, Brahe, King, Gray, McDonough Patton and Dost headed north while the balance of the party stayed put for the next year.

The scenery around here was amazing with all the trees showing through the flooded lakes, truly amazing to see the country like this after years of drought.

After lunch we head in to Broken Hill to refuel, restock and have a look around. A slight change in plans also means that the Broken Hill City caravan park is our home for the night, more nice hot showers (and mobile phone and internet reception, which impressed the Parker girls!)

Dinner tonight was at the Musician's Club, most people went and enjoyed a nice meal and a couple of drinks at the bistro, while the club bus ferried us to and from.

We must also take this chance to wish Anne a very, very Happy Birthday! Hip Hip Hooray!
So ends another day on this amazing adventure, with many more (hopefully warmer) days ahead.

Day 7 – 26/8/10

After a dinner in town last night (thanks to Anne for having a birthday while in town!) we snuggled up in our tent in Broken Hill Caravan Park (didn't get to Mutawintji as planned). This morning was grey, cold and windy as we packed up camp and most breakfasted in the warmth of the camp kitchen. However, on leaving Broken Hill just before 9am, it was sunny and clear. Thanks Alex – I know, it is the little things.

The convoy had an uneventful and quiet journey to Mutawintji NP. Quiet as our tail-end Charlie was delayed in BH awaiting a new tyre for his car. We drove through flat country, covered with greenery and roadside flowers, not the usual expanse of red dirt. I guess it would have been relatively easy travelling for B&W and party, though we were off their track a bit.

Arriving at Mutawintji, camp was quickly set up in a gale force wind and we left with our guide for a tour of the historic site – an area of great importance to Aborigines. It was a site of ceremony and celebrations for indigenous people for thousands of years. Up to 1000 people from different tribes would gather. Mutawintji has permanent water and is rich in bush tucker – the potato plant, the spinach plant and lemon grass to name a few.

Mark, our guide, explained some medicinal uses of various plants, including a caterpillar cocoon to protect wounds and promote healing. Mark was a terrific guide, very knowledgeable and gave us lots of information on the amazing Aboriginal artworks. His explanations gave us a real appreciation and understanding of the artworks. Also, the kids loved him! They followed him like the Pied Piper.

* Correction; after a discussion with our historians Pauline and Richard, B&W did not pass directly into what is now Mutawintji NP, but were nearby.

Burke and Wills did pass by Mutwintji and despite it's richness in water, flora and fauna, described it as "dark and gloomy". They filled their waterbags and left. William Wright travelled here on the rescue mission and left his initials among the sacred artworks!

Our group returned to the gale force campsite for lunch. Alex took the kids on a "survival" mission to locate water in the dry creek. Success!! Thick muddy water was discovered.

The windy but clear conditions continued until about 5-6pm. Vic and Alex collected firewood from outside the national park (and apparently argued the whole time). Thanks to the wind dying down we had a late night around the camp fire, sharing stories about meeting famous people. We also gained a deeper insight into Vic and Alex's relationship.

Day 8 – 27/8/10

Well, you know what they say about the best laid plans of mice and men... well this applies to our trip too. All roads to Birdsville and Innamincka have been closed so we are laid up in Mutawintji for a few days...what a shame! The instructions for today were, get up when you like, so that made for a late arising and general ambling around the campfire this morning. The coffee percolators were working hard and many an elaborate breakfast was had.

A day of rest and relaxation! Or was that a few days of rest and relaxation. The decision was made that some members of the party went back to some sightseeing in Broken Hill and Silverton and had a fantastic day visiting both areas. I hear a ride in Mad Max's car was the highlight of the day.

The rest of the party stayed at Mutawinji. Some remained at camp while the remainder of the party took the 6km hike up Mutawinji Gorge. The kids had a ball (literally) playing all the way along the 'gorgeous' walk. The gorge was so green. At the end of the gorge we discovered that some new gums had grown right in the middle. We lined up our new picture and then compared it with the painting done by Ludwig Becker in October 1860. Not a lot had changed!

We returned to camp and relaxed around an early campfire – beer and damper for afternoon tea! The campfire was overflowing with camp ovens and the recipe books were given a good work out. Cheese scones, sundried tomato damper, pasties, potatoes, beef stew just to name a few things tried today. Vic let slip that he was quite enjoying relaxing around the campfire - normally he hates to sit still. Alex can't sit still; he announced he was leading a scouting party up to the ridge for anyone interested. A band of merry men set off to identify some bush tucker (Alex, Bernard, Jim and Norm).

Alex found a bush they could not identify with small red berries, so decided he would ask the ranger what it was. After carrying a branch all the way back, he realised there were no berries left on it when he got back!!

After more food and beverage consumption, Vic entertained us with a poetry reading of accounts of Burke and Wills expedition written by school children, around a beaut campfire with the stars out in glorious array for the first time since we began our expedition.

Day 9 – 28/8/10

Today we should be travelling from Warri Gate to the Dig Tree, however, we are still camped in the beautiful Mutawinji National Park. We are still unsure when the trek northwards will commence in earnest.

The day started with most remaining in bed until about 0700 hours before rising for breakfast. You beauty! We do not have to break camp. It is a fine, cool morning, dry but overcast.

Some decide to remain in camp and others take a drive to Broken Hill. A large number of the tour head towards Wright's cave and then up to the loop in the track. Most of the group start to return to camp. But 7 members decide to do the full walk around the marked walking trail. No one was sure how long it would take. Vic, Alex,

Norm, Aliceson, Bernard, Lyn and Stan undertook the walk. We were concerned when we realized that 7 was the same number who died on the Burke and Wills expedition.

The walk started off with an easy section, but then came some steep climbs to some spectacular scenery reflecting the harsh beauty of our country. The ridge walks were rewarded with never to be forgotten views. The cameras were working overtime.

At one stage Vic got separated from the group and Alex went to search for him. After about 15 minutes Alex located Vic, who had taken a detour to secure some great images.

The intrepid 7 pushed on when we realised that we had only travelled half way along the trail. At one high point, Vic and Alex called their families as Alex's phone always has 5 bars! The second part of the trip was more difficult and the older members of the group were standing up to the challenge well, but were looking forward to the end. At one point we had to come down a steep drop holding on to a rope. Vic was the last one to come down and Alex threatened to cut the rope when Vic had his weight on it. Photographic evidence is available.

We arrived back at camp about 1430 hour – the trip took about five hours. After a quick lunch, we had to go and collect firewood for the night. This was by far the biggest collection so far on the trip.

At about 1700 a game of botchi was played by most tour members. A lot of fun was had by all with 'Big Jim Mac' the winner, Sebastian being the junior champion. Vic provided the prizes – boiled crumble bars.

A good night was had around the fire by all that night. Vic was in a very happy mood as we had received news that the roads to Innamincka were open and that we were leaving in the morning. The night was so good Vic gave another energised rendition of his famous "Goat" joke.

Day 10 – 29/8/10

At last! We are back on the road heading out from Mutawintji where we have been marooned for the last 3 days. The rain has cleared, roads have dried out.

At 8.30 we are driving towards Tibooburra on the Silver City Highway, via the road to White Cliffs. We do not actually get to see White Cliffs.

Everyone is amazed by the amount of vegetation – everywhere we look there is greenery. Those who have been this way previously are stunned by the changes. What is normally a dry and stony landscape is now fairly well covered by small shrubs and assorted ground cover.

Morning tea was on the side of the road not far from Mt Koonenbury. At least there were plenty of toilet trees available. Pressing on we stopped to check out the Tool Tree. There are now 2 of them – the original 'mother' tool and 'baby' tool. It seems they have had a recent coat of paint and some new appliances have appeared.

Back into the dust at 12.30pm we cruised onward to Tibooburra. The highway is generally quite good, even including various sealed sections. Tibooburra at 1.15pm. Time for lunch, refuel the vehicles and see the sights. 10 minutes later we were all standing around wondering what to do.

We did visit the small park which contains art dedicated to the journey of Charles Sturt. It even includes a replica of the whale boat that Sturt's crew carried but eventually abandoned near Tibooburra.

3.00pm – off again to Warri Gate, the entrance to QLD. We stopped for a quick photo opportunity and charged onwards. North of Warri Gate the road was often filled with large puddles. We detoured off the track frequently. On one occasion, even Vic was confounded by a large 'pond' until someone discovered the detour track.

At 5.15pm (not 4.30!) we found "Jenny's Lake". This is a sensational location – beautiful for camping areas beside the water. Plenty of birds around, even a bearded dragon. Perfect!! You could not have requested a more idyllic spot.

Day 11 – 30/8/10

It was hard to leave the picturesque campsite this morning. "Jenny's Lake" was magic, if a little crisp this morning. Vic took us to the spot we camped at four years ago and we were stunned to see it was under water – Vic's claypan lake.

We moved out of the mulga country and into the plains country. We stopped for morning tea near Camp 55, where Burke's party camped on the 9th November 1860.

David and Sebastian decided to plant one of their Burke and Wills 'Geocaches' at this little spot. We drove on to Noccundra and walked into the Noccundra Hotel, which was built in 1882. The publican told us they had not been affected by the road closures that kept us grounded for a few days.

Lunch was at the beautiful waterhole on the Wilson River across the road from the Noccundra Hotel. The beautiful spot where hundreds of water birds have been enjoying the season of plenty. The publican at Noccundra Hotel and some tourists that are not part of our trip were chatting about Burke and Wills and told us about the fact that feral camels are a result of those lost on the expedition. They also mentioned that feral pigs are attributed to Captain Cook's arrival, when a pen of pigs was not built well enough and some pigs escaped.

In our travels we saw plenty of wildlife, including bearded dragons (one at Jenny's Lake, before we left), kangaroos, cows (brahmans, Anguses and Herefords) and of course plenty of birds.

On the negative side, we had plenty of traffic from the oil fields to pass and three of our cars came off second best against the larger trucks and road trains with windscreen chips. The oil field traffic – 4wd vehicles with little red flags on the top of their aerials – look like ants with crumbs following their trails.

After lunch we headed for the final day's destination – the Dig Tree – on Nappa Merrie Station. When we dropped into the Cooper Basin we were all stunned by the verdant growth. 14km of the area had been underwater in the floods in February this year.

The Dig Tree site is amazing – the campsite along the banks of the river is magical. We all had our tents set up early enough to enjoy the calm peaceful environment and watch the waterbirds in the river.

The ranger said that during the floods the whole area was under water, but looking at it now you would never know there had been such phenomenal hardship on this historic site – Camp 65 for the expedition.

Day 12 31/8/10

We left camp at 8.55am for Innamincka. Vic does not want to repeat himself, but still cannot believe how the stony desert country is so green.

Alex reckons Innamincka is Aboriginal for "you goin' to the hole there". Originally it was called Hopetown, but was re-named in 1892. We crossed and stopped Burke & Wills Bridge, amazed by the thousands of pelicans on the water. What an incredible sight. Anna Rose saw a pelican catch a fish for breakfast.

We soon left QLD into SA and had plenty of oncoming traffic to contend with. It was busier than Bourke Street (Victorian saying).

Mountains that looked like the Sphinx in the distance looked like they had been mowed in patterns. We rolled in to Innamincka where we re-fuelled and showered before checking out the pub and info centre. Lunch was taken

on the town common under large coolabah trees. Then returned to camp as unable to visit Burke's grave, due to road closure.

At about 5pm on the bank of Cooper Creek we were treated to an informative talk by Bomber Johnson, Ranger for Nappa Merrie Station.

What an old legend he is, so full of knowledge and stories. He passed around old photos and maps which were very interesting. What a great way to think about Burke and Wills and the Dig Tree story.

Off to Birdsville tomorrow.

Day 13 – 1/9/10

We arose early to break camp before the long drive to Birdsville. Once again there is the constant twitter of the little birds against the whir of wing beats from the pelicans and cormorants flying overhead to start their day. Once again air traffic control must be a nightmare, but no collisions have been observed. We will be sad to leave this idyllic spot, where we have enjoyed 2 days/nights good camping with wonderful bird watching opportunities.

Vic had another piece to camera for John before departing just before 8.30am. Fast and uneventful drive through the St Ann Ranges and spectacular views back over our route. Passed by 14 motor cycles and several vehicles all heading to Birdsville for the races.

Outside temperature steadily rising. 28 degrees at morning tea break, surrounded by red sand dunes, spinifex and native millet. Out of the sand country and into gibber plains but covered in green vegetation.

Arrived at Cordillo Downs woolshed at 10.50am, red mulga trees in the creeks are restricted to this part of South Australia. Characterised by the red bark in tight curls. Temp at 12.11pm – 31 degrees. Norm and Kathy suffered a flat tyre. Alex helped with the tyre change. Group left Cordillo Downs at 12.30pm.

Woolshed history – was built of local stone and curved galvanised steel brought up from Adelaide. Little good local timber was available for the roof so the curved iron was self supporting. Other station buildings used a similar construction. At its peak more than 50,000 sheep were shorn, the wool scoured and dried before transported overland to the rail at Farina.

Dingoes eventually put an end to sheep – one whole years drop of lambs was killed and a gradual transition was to beef production. Stopped for lunch at Cadelga, an abandoned outstation. Many budgerigars nesting in the trees at the waterhole on Cadelga Creek.

Big clouds began to build to the south west with some rainfall apparent from a distance. As we approached Birdsville a few drops fell on the convoy. We were passed by a number of other vehicles at a reckless speed. Arrived Birdsville at 4.30. Crowds building for the weekend races. Boxing tents, porta-loos, lots and lots of tents; many campers in town.

Norm and Cathy had a tyre fixed while the rest moved west of the town towards 'big red' to make camp. Windy spot next to a lake between the dunes – carpet of chamomile.

Spectacular sunset and double rainbow over the dune to the east. A big day and weather permitting we will be back on schedule tomorrow.

Birds seen; Letter-winged kite, budgerigars, the usual waterbirds

Day 14 – 2/9/10

During the night we had a short sharp storm, which passed quite quickly, a burst of rain and a gust of wind which shook the tent – then nothing except for the crying of cattle during the night. Vic had asked for an early morning start – 7.30am – so that we could tackle ‘big red’ (the tallest sand dune in Australia according to our map) before it was too hot and there were too many flies.

We managed to leave by 7.45am and drove around the lake to ‘big red’. We conquered it and had a walk about on top of the dune, amazed at how much water there was lying around on the way to the Simpson Desert. George and Michelle went down the other side of ‘big red’ and then came back up on a different track. We all came back down the way we had gone up and drove back around the lake to pick up Pauline and Rich, who had remained at camp. We continued into Birdsville for any last minute provisions, water or fuel. I have never seen so many people in Birdsville – caravans, tents, trailers, loos and stalls – in all my life.

We visited the “Working Museum” and John Menzies took us through the various sections of the museum. It has to be seen to be believed. It is unbelievable the amount of paraphernalia that he has collected over the years. He even has an invitation to Princess Alice and the gift of a brooch that she gave to the then Governor General who issued the invitation. The collection itself would have to be worth a million dollars.

We had to leave Birdsville to continue our trek north (to try and beat the rain) as the storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. We drove to Bedourie through fairly good roads with some water across the road. After having lunch we continued on to Boulia still trying to beat the rain clouds.

Vic has not been well today and so has booked himself into the hotel in Boulia. As it has been so wet several of our party decided to join him at the hotel! We are all eating dinner at the hotel tonight. Unfortunately, as it was a last minute booking we had to be split up into 2 groups for dinner. We are meeting tomorrow morning at 8.00am to view the Min Min exhibition. This is a surprise, so we wait with bated breath!

Day 15 – 3/9/10

The day started out with rain, mud, puddles the size of swimming pools and lots more mud! Not exactly the best night to be camping, but we all survived! During the wee hours of the morning the wind picked up and the rain kicked in and apart from blowing our tents around a bit, it turned our already wet and muddy campsite into a complete mud bath.

After packing up camp, most of us went to the roadhouse to grab some breakfast. It was here that we saw our first casualty of last night’s rain. A road train had stopped to fill with diesel and had become bogged. We watched as a tractor thingy hooked itself up to the front of the road train and towed it out.

At 9am we met at the Min Min encounter to see a sound and light show in relation to the strange phenomenon that is the Min Min lights (our group was split up into two, with the first show at 8am). We heard some stories and various theories about what these lights are and what causes them. Very interesting show and well worth the visit.

As part of our entrance fee, we were also entitled entry into the stone house museum. James Edward Jones built the stone house in 1888 and it is now one of Boulia’s best attractions. It was home to the Jones family until the early 1970’s, when it was acquired by the Boulia shire council. Out the back of the house there was a fossil display as well, which was quite interesting.

We all met at the café (out of the rain) and were informed by Vic that we would be travelling to Mt Isa today and he had booked us all into cabins in the caravan park tonight. As it turned out, the weather just got better as the day progressed and the chance of rain tonight looks slim, but you never know. And we ain’t gonna pass up the opportunity of a comfy bed, toilet and warm shower!!

It was at Boulia that we said farewell to Stephen and Kathleen, who left the tour to head home and back to work. But we do welcome Tony and Project Pajero to the trip.

This afternoon, we took a detour out to O’Haras Gap and saw some wild camels which I think was exciting for everyone. Got some good photos while they were sitting on the track and subsequently running off.

Arrived in Mt Isa around 6.30pm and checked into our cabins. Most of us took advantage of ‘all you can eat’ buffet in the van park instead of cooking. Nice meal and lovely evening, still 25 deg at 10pm, loving this weather. RIP to the poor bird that decided to commit suicide on our windscreen this afternoon!

Day 16 – 4/9/10

We had a comfy night in warm, dry, air conditioned cabins. After we had woken up and had brekkie we met up in the car park outside the Lake Moondarra Caravan Park. After fuelling up the convoy left Mt Isa heading east to pick up Burke and Will’s track along Corella River near Cloncurry on the Barkly Highway.

After driving for a while we came to a memorial that marked the spot they came through on the 22nd of January 1861, between Mt Isa and Cloncurry on their journey across the continent.

After more uneventful driving on tar we turned down a dirt track which took us to Corella Dam, where we had morning tea. It was nice. Alex found a cane toad in a yabbie trip, yuck. Also, the toilets were filled with green tree frogs! Wouldn’t want one of those jumping up!

Next, we visited the ghost town of Mary Kathleen. It was a uranium mining town and was named after the wife of the man who discovered the mine. It was closed in 1984 and there are no buildings remaining, just rocks, concrete and lots of cow poo! On leaving the ghost town Vic got lost finding the track, maybe because he went around in circles too many times? (I eventually found the Track but it was too washed out to follow- Vic)

Then it was back to Corella Dam, this time for lunch. The gate was opened and closed again. We spent the afternoon searching for a track to follow Corella Creek and Burke and Wills route as closely as possible. Despite many attempts down tracks it remained elusive, but we did find a mining camp, with big signs warning us to ‘Keep Out, this Means YOU!’

We made camp on a station somewhere slightly north of Cloncurry, after much circling and backtracking. The weather held out for us. After dinner we were treated to some entertainment by the GDT Band, starring Jeremy on shovel and the chorus of Jessica, Katelyn, Sebastian and Anna Rose:

GDT we’re dynamite
GDT, When you pee at night
GDT, You might get a fright!
GDT, we’re dynamite
GDT, Wayne is a cranky old man
GDT, When you play with the fire
He’ll hit you with a pan!
GDT we’re dynamite
GDT, Alex burnt the damper bad
GDT, But John’s is so rad
GDT we’re dynamite
GDT, With Alex as tour guide
GDT, You’ll get lost every time
GDT we’re dynamite
GDT
If you play with sticks
GDT
Vic will explode!

What a great show! Alex slaved over a hot fire, perfecting a giant damper swirl wrapped around a stick. Yummy! It was a great night around the camp fire.

Day 17 – 5/9/10

Well after yesterday's adventurous journey traversing Cloncurry many times; as Margaret put it so well "Even Burke and Wills managed to travel 20 miles a day", one hopes we manage to travel a little further today.

Our 8.30am start was delayed with the group having to wait for Vic to repair his car (sorry that should read 'for Alex to repair Vic's car...), we finally headed off at 9.00 from our fantastic camp site. There was no trouble finding the main road today. (One needs to note here that there was no rain forecast on the radar but we still managed to have a down pour whilst packing up this morning. Is there going to be one day without rain?).

We headed up the tar road to the Burke and Wills Roadhouse for morning tea. This was one of the many camp sites for Burke and Wills and stands midway between Cloncurry and Normanton, at the crossroads in the middle of outback QLD.

There was some excitement at the roadhouse when a small frog jumped out of the air conditioner in the ceiling onto Michelle and Jessica who were contentedly eating their hot chips at the dining table.

Back on the tar again, we continued our journey northward. After quite a few kilometres of straight black tar, Vic found a short cut across the countryside. We managed to not get lost this time and came back out on the Savannah Way at the designated spot.

After a brief stop for lunch we made our way through numerous gates (the gate fairy was hard at work today). We finally reached our destination – Camp 119 on the Bynoe River. We visited the memorial at this beautiful spot where Burke and Wills journeyed forth to the gulf while King and Gray remained here. It would have been extremely hard for them as the temperature today was 35 and this is only the beginning of spring. They were here in the middle of summer!

We made camp here for the night and saluted the incredible journey that Burke and Wills had accomplished around a crackling camp fire with wonderful company.

Day 18 – 6/9/10

During the night we had a shower of rain. However, it was so dry and the humidity so low, there was no evidence of the shower next morning.

All up early today as this is the last day and everybody is ready to go – early! A short run to Normanton where we spent two hours shopping, getting fuel and looking at the local sights.

We then made tracks for Karumba and arrived at our final destination. At 5.00pm we all went out to Karumba Point to watch the sunset. On completion all proceeded to the restaurant across the road from the caravan park, a meal of prawns and fish. At the end of the evening the farewells commenced with some lasting late into the evening.