

The Last Days of Burke and Wills – the journey

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Watch and listen to the story of the historic journey of Burke and Wills to cross Australia from south to north.

This video complements an exhibition called The Last Days of Burke and Wills and is part of a talk presented in the Our Story Your Story series at Queensland Museum South Bank.

Transcript

I wanted to introduce a timeline basically, or a summary of the expedition, so that everyone has a clear understanding of what happened and when, an understanding of the key players and also gives us an opportunity to place this site into the significance of the overall story.

So back in the late 1850's, this is when our story is based, Victoria had decided that they needed to cross the continent. There was an idea with Adelaide, there was a competition and the competition was to cross the continent from south to north. So from Melbourne, straight up through here to into the Gulf and from Adelaide again up and to the Gulf.

The idea initial was that the expedition would be one of scientific endeavour; there would be an opportunity to map and navigate the landscape, take scientific observations and record the things that they'd seen on the way. There was also a second point to it all and that was more mercantile. By creating an overland route from Melbourne to the north coast there was an opportunity for that colony of Victoria to generate a telegraph wire, a telegraph that would extend across the continent and give them the power of information coming into the new colony. There was a competition on with Adelaide at the time to see who could get across the continent first of all.

So on the 20th August, an expedition departed from Melbourne. This is an indication of some the things that they carried with them. It was the best equipped expedition of its time. They only travelled eleven miles on the first day because of the enormous amount of supplies that they carried with them, and I

wonder at the thoughts of the men as they carried six tonnes of firewood through those outlying towns through Melbourne and up into Victoria. Some of the more odd things are what I've picked out here, for example 50 rockets they were for signalling each other if they got lost in the outback. The exhibition was organised so that they would be self-sufficient for about 12 – 18 months while they were crossing the continent.

This is the expedition as it set out on that day. Here we have Robert O'Hara Burke leading the half kilometre long wagon train on his horse Billy. We also see this gentleman here George Landells. George was in charge of the camels and he was second in command of the expedition itself. George made a point of dressing up on the day and the media reported his garish oriental clothing as he left. He also made a point of riding the biggest camel in the expedition. The third in command was a man named William John Wills. I don't know who William John Wills is this image but he was a quiet man, he was a surveyor. He was the exact opposite of Robert O'Hara Burke. Robert O'Hara Burke was an Irishman, he served in the military in Europe and then he came to Victoria and worked as a policeman. He subsequently got the job as the leader of the expedition, although stories did abound of him being lost unable to find his way home from the local pub, yet this man was to lead the expedition across the continent. The camels obviously were the key here – they felt that they would be able to give them the edge to get through the desert, the unknown interior of Australia.

So the party travelled from Melbourne up to Menindee. Menindee was basically the last outpost, the last communication line back to Melbourne. Unfortunately they had only averaged about 13 km per day, the wagon trails were slowing them down significantly. So Burke decided to split the group at that point. He was going to push forward to Coopers Creek which was the place they had decided they'd make a depot. Coopers Creek is in north east SA, I'll show you that on a map in a moment. They were going to push forward and once they reached Coopers Creek they would send back for the majority of the stores, send a note and they would bring those up. That was the plan and when once they'd set up their depot at Coopers Creek they'd push on for the gulf and back again. At the same time at Menindee Burke received word that his rival, a Scotsman named Stuart, had also set out from Adelaide and this was a poem that was run in the local newspapers at the time and it talks about the great Australian race. Burke in his mind had a two month jump on his rival Stuart, but he needed to make a move so he pushed from Menindee straight up to Coopers Creek to get there as quickly as possible, leaving behind the majority of the stores and taking seven men with him.

So four months later, 1600km, they made their way to Coopers Creek, they establish a supply base there. They spent about three weeks organising their stores then Burke made the decision to push from that point on up to the Gulf. He'd decided to take three men with him, it was going to be Burke, Wills, Gray and King. The four men, one horse, six camels and it was going to be three months worth of supplies, so enough food to get them up there and back in his mind. So they pushed up and left the Creek. They got close, not close enough to see the sea but close enough that they felt that they had achieved their goal. Unfortunately it had taken them about seven weeks, so as I said they had taken three months worth of food but they were already over their time. They were definitely racing to get there and racing to get back. Unfortunately they were already showing signs of malnutrition which would slow them on the return leg of the journey.

So on the 3rd April 1861 on their return back to the depot at Coopers Creek, close to present-day Birdsville, the party is on the verge of starvation. Their food supplies were running drastically short and at this point Burke orders the group to abandon all their excess equipment. On that day a camel had died which meant that they needed to lighten their load significantly. They wanted to hide their equipment, the idea was that they would come back once they had reached salvation the Creek they'd come back and retrieve this equipment. So they buried it. They dug a hole and they planted their supplies. Wills made a specific note in his diary that his navigation equipment had also been planted at that particular campsite. From there they pushed forward, trying to get back to the depot at Coopers Creek in dire straights. This image here shows three men – unfortunately Gray had passed away four days after the 3rd on the 7th April, however they pushed on and they continued down from Birdsville through northern SA and to the Creek. So they made it on 21st April they got it back to Coopers Creek, the three men Burke, Wills and King. Unfortunately the depot party had left that day, earlier in the morning. They'd left them supplies and a note saying 'Dig' carved into a tree, which gives that site its name – "The Dig Tree" – and it's a site that you can visit today. It's a protected site.

So the men are obviously devastated, left in their mind they'd been abandoned by the supply party. This is an image Longstaff painted. It gives you an idea of the desolation I guess you can imagine yourselves after struggling all that way to find they'd been left a mere eight hours behind. The three men lived on Coopers Creek as best they could. They made two aborted attempts to get to a nearby, in their minds nearby, cattle station which was 250 kms away, but each time the lack of water forced them back onto the creek. It was the only permanent water supply they could find. During this time they also began liaising more closely with the people along the creek – the Yandruwandha people – and they began mimicking the way these people were surviving. One of the things they did was to process nardoo

which is an indigenous plant to Australia. It's kind of like a clover or a fern and it has a seed that you can grind up and make a flour out of. Unfortunately these guys weren't processing it properly – I believe the way it should be processed is that it's heated and then when its ground it's washed and that removes the toxins from it. These guys were simply grinding it, mixing it with water and making flour from it and ultimately they were poisoning themselves each day.

On the 15th September, Alfred Howitt dispatched from Melbourne as a relief expedition, finds King alive on the creek. Unfortunately Burke and Wills had both died on or around the 26th or 28th June. Wills was alone when he passed away and King and Wills were together when Burke died. Howitt buried the remains of the explorers, both Burke and Wills, on the creek and he escorted King straight back to Melbourne as quickly as possible.

August 2010