

Burke & Wills - The Dig Tree

In 1860–61, Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills led an expedition of 19 men with the intention of crossing Australia from Melbourne in the south, to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the north, a distance of around 3,250 km. At that time most of the inland of Australia had not been explored by non-indigenous people and was completely unknown to the European settlers.

After an extended period of fundraising, several people were considered for the post of leader and the Royal Society of Victoria selected Robert O'Hara Burke as the leader, and William John Wills was recommended as surveyor, navigator and third-in-command. Burke was an Irish-born ex-officer with the Austrian army, and later became police superintendent with virtually no skills in bushcraft. He had no experience in exploration. Wills was more adept than Burke at living in the wilderness, but it was Burke's leadership that was especially detrimental to the mission.

Leaving on 20 August 1860, the expedition took 26 camels and 23 horses. Approximately 20 tonnes of equipment, including enough food to last two years, a cedar-topped oak camp table with 2 chairs, rockets, flags and a Chinese gong was loaded onto 6 wagons. In one of his first mistakes as leader, Burke refused an offer to have the equipment carried up the Murray and Darling rivers by boat. One wagon broke down before it had even left Royal Park and by midnight of the first day the expedition had reached only the edge of Melbourne, where two more wagons broke down. Heavy rains and bad roads made travelling through Victoria difficult and time-consuming.

The expedition arrived in Balranald on 15 September. There, to lighten the load, they left behind their sugar, lime juice and some of their guns and ammunition. At Gambala on 24 September, Burke loaded some of the provisions onto the camels for the first time, and to lessen the burden on the horses he ordered the men to walk and restrict their personal luggage to 14 kg. At Bilbarka, Burke dumped the 270 litres of rum that Landells had brought to feed to the camels in the belief that it prevented scurvy.

At Kinchega, Landells resigned from the expedition, followed by the expedition's surgeon, Dr Hermann Beckler. Third-in-command Wills was promoted to second-in-command. They reached Menindee on 12 October having taken two months to travel 750 km from Melbourne—the regular mail coach did the journey in little more than a week. Two of the expedition's five officers had resigned, thirteen members of the expedition had been fired and eight new men had been hired.



Burke arrived at the Cooper on 11 November and they formed a depot at Camp LXIII (Camp 63) while they conducted reconnaissance to the north. A plague of rats forced the men to move camp and they formed a second depot further downstream at Bullah Bullah Waterhole. This was Camp LXV (Camp 65) and they erected a stockade and named the place Fort Wills.

It was thought that Burke would wait at Cooper Creek until autumn so that they would avoid travel during the Australian summer. However, anxious that John McDouall Stuart not reach the Gulf first and so claim the 2000 pound reward offered by the South Australian government, Burke waited only until Sunday, 16 December before deciding to make a dash for the Gulf of Carpentaria. He split the group again, leaving William Brahe in charge of the depot.

Burke, Wills, John King and Charles Gray set off for the Gulf with six camels, one horse and enough food for just three months. By now it was mid-summer and the daily temperature often reached 50°C in the shade, and in the Strzelecki and Sturt Stony Deserts there was very little shade to be found.

Brahe was ordered by Burke to wait for three months; Wills, however, had the maps and was had a more realistic view of the task ahead, and secretly instructed Brahe to wait for four months.

Except for the heat, travel was easy. Water



was easy to find and the Aborigines, contrary to expectations, were peaceful. On 9 February 1861 they reached the Little Bynoe River, an arm of the Flinders River delta, where they found they could not reach the ocean because of the mangrove swamps in their way. Burke and Wills left the camels behind with King and Gray at Camp CXIX (Camp 119), and set off through the swamps, although after 24 km they decided to turn back. By this stage, they were desperately short of supplies. They had food left for 27 days, but it had already taken them 59 days to travel from Cooper Creek.

The return journey

On their way north, the weather had been hot and dry, but on the way back the wet season broke and the tropical monsoonal rains began. A camel was abandoned when it was unable to continue and three other camels were shot and eaten along the way and they shot their only horse on 10 April. Equipment was abandoned at a number of locations as the number of pack animals was reduced.

Burke and Gray came down with dysentery after eating a python. On 25 March on the Burke River (just south of what is now the town of Boulia), Gray was caught stealing skilligolee (a type of watery porridge) and Burke beat him.

By 8 April Gray could not walk; he died of dysentery at Polygonum Swamp on 17 April. The location of Gray's death is unknown, although it is generally believed to be Lake Massacre in South

Australia. The three surviving men stopped for a day to bury Gray, and to recover their strength—they were by this stage very weak from hunger and exhaustion. They finally reached Cooper Creek on 21 April, only to find that the camp had been abandoned several hours earlier.

Return to Cooper Creek

Burke had asked Brahe and the depot party to remain at the camp on the Cooper for 13 weeks, however they waited for 18 weeks and were running low on supplies and starting to feel the effects of scurvy; they had come to believe that Burke would never return from the gulf. After one of his men had injured his leg, Brahe decided to return to Menindee, but before leaving buried some provisions in case Burke did return, and blazed (cut or carved) a message on a tree to mark the spot.

Brahe left the depot on Cooper Creek on the morning of Sunday, 21 April 1861. Burke, Wills and King returned that evening. Finding the camp deserted, they dug up the cache of supplies, and a letter explaining that the party had given up waiting and had left. Burke's team had missed them by only nine hours. The three men and two remaining camels were exhausted; they had no hope of catching up to the main party.

They decided to rest and recuperate, living off the supplies left in the cache. Wills and King wanted to travel back to Menindee, but Burke overruled them and decided to attempt to reach the furthest outpost of pastoral settlement in South Australia, a cattle station near Mount Hopeless. This would mean travelling southwest through the desert for 240 km (150 miles). They wrote a letter explaining their intentions and reburied it in the cache under the marked tree in case a rescue party visited the area. Unfortunately, they did not change the mark on the tree or alter the date. On 23 April they set off, following the Cooper downstream and then heading out into the Strzelecki Desert towards Mount Hopeless.

Meanwhile, while returning to Menindee, Brahe had met with Wright trying to reach the Cooper with the supplies. The two men decided to go back to Cooper Creek to see if Burke had returned. When they arrived on 8 May, Burke had already left for Mount Hopeless, and the camp was again deserted. Burke and Wills were 56 km (35 miles) away by this point. As the mark and date on the tree were unaltered, Brahe and Wright assumed that Burke had not returned, and did not think to check whether the supplies were still buried. They left to rejoin the main party and return to Menindee.

Yet another delay.

Meanwhile, the other mission led by William Wright was having terrible problems of its own. Wright was supposed to bring supplies up from Menindee to Cooper Creek, but Wright's requests to the Exploration Committee for extra funds to ensure an appropriate fit out of his plant were not acted on until early January, by which time the hot weather and lack of water meant that the party moved extremely slowly. Wright's delay



Thargomindah Visitors Information Centre
Echidna Place
37 Dowling Street,
Thargomindah QLD 4492

07 4621 8095 tourism@bulloo.qld.gov.au
www.thargotourism.com.au

subsequently resulted in his being blamed for the deaths of Burke and Wills.

They were harassed by the Bandjigali and Karenggapa Murries, and three of the men, Dr Ludwig Becker, Charles Stone and William Purcell, died from malnutrition on the trip. On his way north, Wright camped at Koorliatto Waterhole on the Bulloo River. While he was there he met Brahe, who was on his way back from the Cooper to Menindee.

The Dig Tree

The tree at the depot camp that Brahe blazed to mark the location of the buried supplies on the banks of Bullah Bullah Waterhole on Cooper Creek is a coolibah estimated to be around 250 years old. Initially the tree was known as "Brahe's Tree" or the "Depot Tree" and the tree under which Burke died attracted most attention and interest. As a result of the blaze on the tree and the subsequent popularity of the book Dig written in 1935 by Frank Clune, the tree became known as the "Dig Tree". There are three separate blazes on the tree; the camp number, a date blaze and the instruction to dig. Two of the blazes have grown closed and only the camp number blaze remains visible today.

The date blaze indicated the date of arrival and the date of departure "DEC-6-60" carved over "APR-21-61". The camp number blaze shows the initial "B" (for Burke) carved over the Roman numerals for (camp) 65; "B" over "LXV". The exact "DIG" inscription that Brahe carved is not known. It is variously recalled to be "DIG under" or "DIG 3 FT N.W." or "DIG 40 FT N.E." or "DIG 21 APR 61" or a combination of these.

In 1899 John Dick carved a likeness of Burke's face in a nearby tree along with his initials, his wife's initials and the date.

The Dig Tree is a heritage-listed site, having been listed on the Queensland Heritage Register in 2003.

Burke, Wills and King alone at Cooper Creek

After leaving the Dig Tree they rarely travelled more than 5 miles (8 km) a day. One of the two remaining camels, became bogged in Minkie Waterhole and the other, was shot when he could travel no further. Without pack animals, Burke, Wills and King were unable to carry enough water to leave Cooper Creek and cross the Strzelecki Desert to Mount Hopeless, and so the three men were unable to leave the creek. Their supplies were running low and they were malnourished and exhausted. The Cooper Creek Aborigines, the Yandruwandha people, gave them fish, beans called 'padlu' and a type of damper made from the ground sporocarps of the ngardu (nardoo) plant (*Marsilea drummondii*) in exchange for sugar.

At the end of May 1861, Wills returned to the Dig Tree to put his diary, notebook and journals in the cache for safekeeping. Burke bitterly criticised Brahe in his journal for not leaving behind any supplies or animals. While Wills was away from camp, Burke foolishly shot his pistol at one of the Aborigines, causing the whole group to flee. Within a month of the Aborigines' departure, Burke and Wills both perished.

Cause of death

Aborigines fed the explorers seedcakes made from the sporocarps of this plant, Nardoo. Unbeknown to the explorers, ngardu sporocarps contain thiaminase which depletes the body of vitamin B1 (thiamin). It is probable that they were not preparing the seedcakes in accordance with Aboriginal food preparation methods, as the food was a staple among the local people. It has been argued that they did not make the food into the requisite paste to begin with, which might have nullified the deleterious effects they suffered. Despite eating the men got weaker and weaker. Wills wrote in his diary:

"My pulse is at 48 and very weak and my legs and arms are nearly skin and bone. I can only look out like Mr Micawber for something to turn up, but starvation on nardoo is by no means unpleasant, but for the weakness one feels, and the utter inability to move oneself, for as the appetite is concerned, it gives me the greatest satisfaction."

As a result, it is likely that the deaths of Burke and Wills resulted in part from a thiamin deficiency called Beriberi. Evidence to this effect is further provided by King's account, which revealed that Burke complained of leg and back pain shortly before his death.

Death

Towards the end of June 1861 as the three men were following the Cooper upstream to find the Yandruwandha campsite, Wills became too weak to continue. He was left behind at his own insistence at Breerily Waterhole with some food, water and shelter. Burke and King continued upstream for another two days until Burke became too weak to continue. The next morning Burke died. King stayed with his body for two days and then returned downstream to Breerily Waterhole, where he found that Wills had died as well.

The exact dates on which Burke and Wills died are unknown and different dates are given on various memorials in Victoria. The Exploration Committee fixed 28 June 1861 as the date both explorers died. King found a mob of Yandruwandha willing to give him food and shelter and in return he shot birds to contribute to their supplies.

Bulloo
Shire



Rescue Expeditions

In all, six expeditions were sent to search for Burke and Wills.

After six months without receiving word from the Burke expedition, the media began questioning its whereabouts. The **Victorian Relief Expedition left Melbourne on 26 June 1861** under the leadership of Alfred William Howitt. At the Loddon River Howitt met Brahe, who was returning from Cooper Creek. As Brahe did not have knowledge of Burke's whereabouts, Howitt decided a much larger expedition would be required to find the missing party. Leaving three of his men at the river, Howitt returned to Melbourne with Brahe to update the Exploration Committee. On 30 June the expanded expedition left to follow Burke's trail. On 3 September the party reached Cooper Creek, on 11 September the Dig Tree, and four days later Edwin Welch found King living with the Yandruwandha. Over the next nine days Howitt found the remains of Burke and Wills and buried them. In pitiful condition, King survived the two-month trip back to Melbourne, and died eleven years later, aged 33, never having recovered his health. He is buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery.

On 4 August 1861, the HMCSS Victoria under the Command of William Henry Norman sailed from Hobson's Bay in Victoria with orders to search the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The **Queensland Relief Expedition left from Rockhampton on 7 September 1861** with the goal of reaching the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The South Australian House of Assembly chose John McKinlay to lead the **South Australian relief expedition that left Adelaide on 16 August 1861**. On 20 October the grave of a European, thought to be Charles Gray, was found at Polygonum Swamp near Cooper Creek. Finding another grave nearby, McKinlay assumed that the Burke expedition had been killed there and named the site Massacre Lake.

On 9 December 1861 the Victorian Exploration Party, led by Howitt again, left Melbourne for Cooper Creek.

On 13 April 1862, Burke's and Wills' remains were exhumed.

The Dig Tree today

The Dig Tree is situated on private property on "Nappa Merrie Station", which is currently owned by Kidman & Co.

A 'Dig Tree' Advisory Board has been established comprising the Department of Natural Resources, Department of Environment, Bulloo Shire Council, Santos and the Royal Historical Society of Queensland, whose role is to oversee the management of the Tree and its surrounds.

Due to the fact that it has been so well loved, board walks have been constructed around the tree to protect the roots from compaction. Apart from the boardwalk structure, the site as you view it now is as Burke and Wills and companions would have viewed it over 150 years ago.

To maintain and improve facilities, develop and protect the site for the enjoyment of present and future generations a small management fee will apply to visitors wishing to access the 'Dig Tree' site. An entry fee of \$11 per vehicle or \$33 per bus will be collected. Please note that the South Australia Desert Parks Pass does not cover the 'Dig Tree' Site Management Fee.

Camping is permitted at the site anywhere within the fenced area around the 'Dig Tree'. Basic bush camping facilities are provided including firewood.

Please feel free to contact the Ranger on 07 4655 4323 or UHF1 for more information or assistance.

For more information and links to further resources

<http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/downloads/index.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burke_and_Wills_expedition

<http://victoria.slv.vic.gov.au/burkeandwills/expedition/>

Images courtesy of Colin Grant

Map courtesy <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5816/5816-h/5816-h.htm>



Thargomindah Visitors Information Centre
Echidna Place
37 Dowling Street,
Thargomindah QLD 4492

07 4621 8095 tourism@bulloo.qld.gov.au
www.thargotourism.com.au