

Historical Roads of New South Wales

*SILVER
CITY
HIGHWAY*



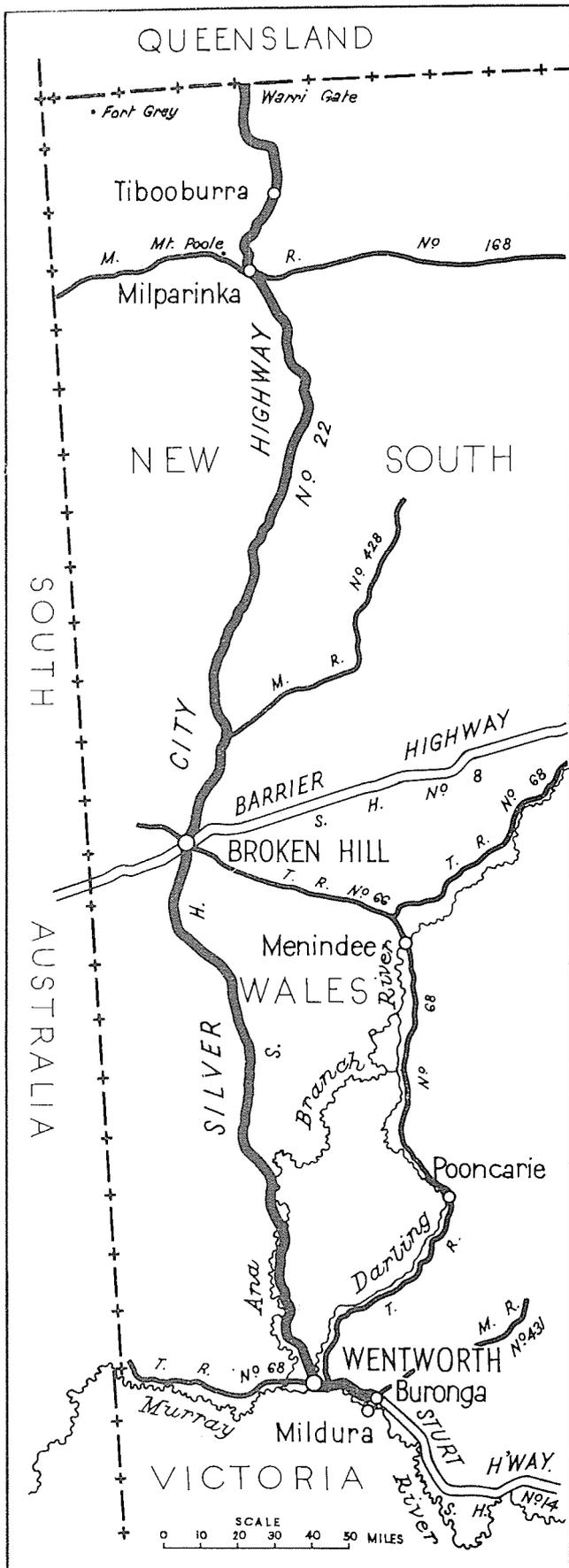
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NEW SOUTH WALES

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THE SILVER CITY HIGHWAY



ALTHOUGH another of the great highways of New South Wales carries the name of Captain Charles Sturt, the area served by the Silver City Highway will always be associated with the epic journey of Sturt and his companions in their heroic attempt to reach the centre of Australia and to resolve some of the geographical problems that were hindering the outward growth of settlement.

Commencing at the village of Buronga on the Murray River opposite Mildura, the Silver City Highway goes for 20 miles in a westerly direction to Wentworth, passing through a series of irrigation areas, then turns north to Broken Hill, running for approximately 70 miles parallel with and close to the Great Anabranch of the Darling River. From Broken Hill the highway continues in a northerly direction through Milparinka to Tibooburra and on to the Queensland border at the Warri Gate, a total distance of 446 miles from its starting point at Buronga. The country passed through by the Silver City Highway is of a generally arid nature, the average annual rainfall varying from 10·8 inches at Wentworth to 7·88 inches at Tibooburra.



Part of the business and shopping centre of Broken Hill

From Wentworth to Broken Hill the road passes through generally undulating country used for sheep grazing purposes. For some 50 miles north of Broken Hill, hilly country associated with the Barrier Range is encountered, but from there on the country is undulating except for some hills in the vicinity of Milparinka. "Gibber" country occurs near Tibourra.

The name "Silver City Highway" was given to the road for the reason that its primary purpose is to connect the city of Broken Hill with points north and south and to serve the great silver-lead industry of the area. The road has a wider significance from an Australian point of view, as it connects directly with the road systems of Victoria and Western Queensland. At Broken Hill it intersects the Barrier Highway which, some 30 miles to the west, connects with the South Australian road system. In effect therefore, the Silver City Highway serves to connect the road systems of four of the States of the Commonwealth, and because of this, consideration was given, at one stage, to naming it the "Four States Highway".

Northwards from Broken Hill the highway roughly parallels, and runs close to, the route followed by Captain Sturt in his last great journey of exploration.

Sturt arrived at Port Jackson in May, 1827, and shortly afterwards was appointed military secretary to Governor Darling. In November of that year, Darling informed the Colonial Secretary that the existence of an inland sea was so generally believed, that he proposed, as soon as the season permitted, to despatch an expedition in an endeavour to ascertain the facts. At about the same time, Captain Sturt wrote to a cousin in England informing him that he was shortly to take an expedition into the interior to ascertain the level of the inland plains and to determine the existence,

or otherwise, of an inland sea. This expedition started from a point near Wellington, New South Wales, in December, 1828, and resulted in the discovery of the Darling River and other discoveries of great geographical importance. Whether or not an inland sea existed was not determined.

In the following year, Sturt carried out an exploration of the River Murray which he followed as far as Lake Alexandrina in South Australia. The great fatigue of his party and shortage of supplies compelled the abandonment of his attempt to reach the southern coast and he returned to Sydney disheartened and disappointed, according to his own account, with the result of his investigations. He nevertheless urged the Governor to direct a more thorough examination of the Encounter Bay district which he had been unable to carry out. An examination of the area was made in 1831 and it resulted in the founding of a settlement, five years later, at the present site of Adelaide.

In 1837 an expedition was fitted out by the Royal Geographical Society with the purpose of penetrating to the centre of the Australian continent from some point on the west or north-west coast of Australia. The expedition, however, failed in its principal objective and the project was abandoned.

In the following year, Sturt undertook to lead an "overlanding" party with cattle for the settlement in South Australia. Cattle had previously been successfully overlanded from Sydney to South Australia, but those responsible had avoided the upper branches of the River Murray and especially that part of the Murray known as the Hume. Sturt, wishing to combine geographical research with his private undertaking, commenced his journey at a point near where Albury is now located and "in so doing connected the whole of the waters of the south-east angle of the Australian

continent". He later wrote, "in this instance, however, . . . no progress was made in advancing our knowledge of the more central parts of the continent".

Attempts to penetrate into the interior were made by E. J. Eyre in 1839 and 1840, but neither succeeded, and for several years no effort was made by the Government to further geographical inquiry.

In 1839 Sturt was invited by Governor Gawler to accept appointment as Surveyor General of the new colony of South Australia, but unknown to the Governor, an appointment to the position had already been made by the Colonial Office and although disappointed, Sturt agreed to occupy the position of Assistant Commissioner of Lands. In 1842 he was appointed Registrar General, but his zeal for exploration was so strong that in 1843 he offered his services to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Stanley, as leader of an expedition to undertake an extensive exploration of the interior. Sturt's proposal was strongly supported by the former Governor Darling and in May, 1844, Captain George Grey, who had succeeded Colonel Gawler as Governor of South Australia, was authorised to fit out an expedition to proceed under Sturt's command into the interior.

In a private letter to the Governor, Lord Stanley wrote—"what Captain Sturt will understand as absolutely prohibited, is any attempt to conduct his party through the tropical regions to the northward, so as to reach the mouths of any of the great rivers. The present expedition will be limited in its object, to ascertaining the existence and character of a supposed chain of hills, or a succession of separate hills, trending down from N.E. to S.W. and forming a great natural division of the continent"

Later, in his narrative of the journey, Sturt published the reasons which led him "After a repose of more than fourteen years" to enter again into the field of discovery.

"I had adopted an impression," he wrote, "that this immense tract of land had formerly been an archipelago of islands and that the apparently boundless plains into which I had descended in my former expeditions were, or rather had been, the sea beds of channels, which at one time separated one island from the other; it was impossible, indeed, to traverse them as I had done, and not feel convinced that they had at one period or the other been covered by the waters of the sea"

The main body of the expedition, the largest and best equipped of any that had previously been despatched on a journey of exploration, left Adelaide on August 10th, 1844. Sturt, accompanied by his Second in Command, James Poole, and Surgeon J. W. Browne, left on August 15, 1844.

The route suggested by the authorities in London to be taken was northwards from Port Augusta, which Eyre had earlier attempted without success. Sturt's plan was to avoid the great salt lakes which had proved an impassable barrier to the earlier explorers, by follow-

ing the Darling to its great bend near Menindee and then to strike north-west into the unknown.

Sturt followed the Murray River as far as its junction with the Darling River Ana-branch along which he travelled until it joined the main stream. He then followed the Darling to Laidley's Ponds (now known as Menindee) where he turned north-west into country dreaded even by the native inhabitants. In a letter to his wife he wrote—"The natives give a fearful account of the distant interior—but not worse than I expected. They shake their heads at me when I tell them I must go. In truth I believe it to be a fearful desert, the bed of a former channel between better lands"

Sturt was well aware that the greatest obstacle to the success of the expedition was the lack of water. He had to provide not only for the men of his party—twelve besides himself, but also for the livestock which was taken to provide transport and fresh food for the expedition. Sturt confessed to "a strange idea that there might (may) be a central sea not far from the Darling" and that he "should go prepared for a voyage". The equipment carried by the expedition, therefore, included a boat as well as 200 sheep, 30 bullocks and eleven horses.

Laidley's Ponds was reached on October 11th and Sturt decided to make for some distant ranges which Poole had seen "rising like islands out of a vast sheet of water". He reached them at a point near to where Broken Hill was later founded. The hills he named "Stanley's Barrier Range" after Lord Stanley.

For several days Sturt and his companions were engaged in exploring and surveying the surrounding country, but principally in a search for water, the lack of which had become serious. On the way to the range the expedition had passed over country that was grassed in places, but which consisted mainly of scrubby hills and stony sandstone gullies. In parts the ground was covered with several boulders of rock which made progress so difficult as to cause Sturt to write, "it appeared as if McAdam had emptied every stone he ever broke to be strewed over this metalled region".

At this part of his journey, Sturt was near to the present location of Broken Hill, but he was pre-occupied with his search for water and seems to have paid little attention to the metalliferous character of the country although he recognised that an ore body was present, for he wrote—"The veins of the metal run north and south as did a similar crop at the S.E. base of the ranges". From a map included in his narrative, his route seems to have almost completely encircled the line of lode, the outcrop of which, like many who followed, he passed by without realising the vast potential wealth beneath his feet.

Still travelling towards the north, always lured a little further by the discovery of a small creek or pond, which dried up almost as soon as it was found, the party endured excessive heat and almost incredible hardship. During the afternoon of the 21st January, 1845, the thermometer registered 131° F. in the shade and 154° F. in the direct rays of the sun.

On January 27th, a rocky glen through which an apparently permanent stream was flowing was found and Sturt considered it a suitable resting place before his next advance. He little thought that he would be compelled to remain there for six weary months. His advance and his retreat were both cut off. To the north no water could be found and the drought had dried up all the pools by which he had been able to penetrate thus far. Sturt named the camping place The Rocky Glen. The site of this camp is in the extreme north-west of New South Wales near Mt. Poole.

The heat was terrific and to escape some of its effects, Sturt constructed an underground room in which his party could rest in comparative comfort. By April, 1845, no rain had fallen for nearly four months, and during their stay at the Depot, by which name the camp came to be known, a dew had never been experienced. "The ground was thoroughly heated to a depth of 3 or 4 feet," Sturt wrote, "and the tremendous heat that prevailed had parched vegetation and drawn moisture from everything Under its effects every screw in our boxes had been drawn and the horn handles of our instruments, as well as our combs, were split into fine laminae."

Sturt made several attempts to reach his objective. Taking small parties with him, he tried in several directions to penetrate the desolate country by which they were surrounded but on each occasion he was forced back. At last he decided to divide his party, retaining nine in all and sending the others back to Adelaide. By these means he hoped to be able to push his researches for a sufficient period to enable him to penetrate the "heartless desert" to such a distance as would leave no doubt with regard to the problem he had been sent out to solve. The water on which the lives of the party depended was getting lower every day. From its original depth of 9 feet it had sunk to less than two and instead of reaching from bank to bank of the creek it had fallen to a narrow line in the centre of the channel.

Rain commenced to fall on the 11th July, but not in sufficient quantity to enable the party to move from their camp except at tremendous risk. By the morning of the 14th, sufficient rain had fallen to allow the returning party to leave and after their departure, Sturt commenced preparations for striking camp.

The second in command of the expedition, James Poole, who for some weeks had been very ill, was included amongst those who Sturt had decided should return to Adelaide, but shortly after their departure, Poole died and the party returned to the Depot. He was buried at the foot of a Grevillia tree growing close to the underground room. The locality is now known as Mount Poole.

- A recent photograph of Preservation Creek ("The Rocky Glen") near Mount Poole
- The burial place of James Poole. The locality is now known as Mount Poole
- Mount Poole Station and the road in approach from Milparinka





The Silver City Highway south of Broken Hill prior to reconstruction and bitumen surfacing

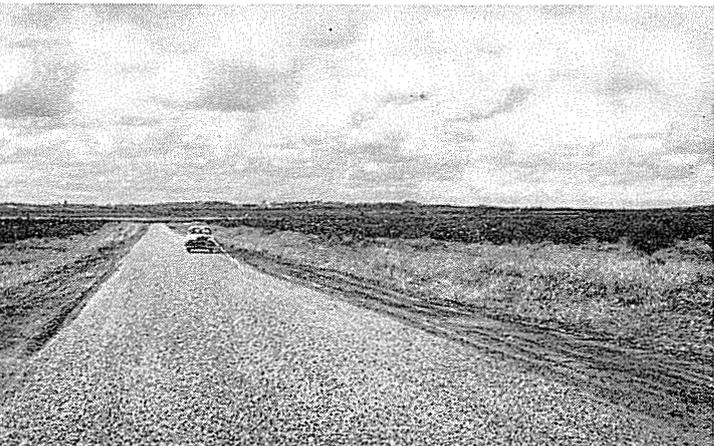
The next day the camp at Rocky Glen was abandoned and a new depot, which they called Fort Grey, was established at a point about 50 miles further north. From here, on July 18th, 1845, Sturt, with four men and provisions for fifteen weeks, started on a journey to the north-west with the object of finding out whether the country was practicable and whether it was connected in any way with any more central body of water.

Their hope of finding practicable country was not realised, but instead a stony desert and a succession of desolate sand hills and salty spinifex ridges barred their progress and rendered their situation dangerous. The rain which had fallen had not broken the drought, surface water was rapidly drying up and they were facing the risk that their retreat would be cut off.

At length, on the 8th September, 1845, Sturt and his companions reached a point "scarcely a degree from the tropic and within 150 miles of the centre of the continent". But by now the position of the party was desperate. The depot was 443 miles distant and little hope of finding water remained. There was no choice but to retreat to the depot, which was reached on October 2nd.

A week later Sturt started on another attempt to reach the centre. This time he travelled due north but again found himself in the "stony desert" which for many years was to preserve his name on the maps of Australia. Again he was forced to retreat towards the depot, but finding comparatively permanent water at Cooper's Creek, he followed it in an attempt to trace its course. The waters of the creek, however, became dispersed among grassy plains and Sturt was told by natives that no water would be found further east. By this time Sturt himself was showing signs of exhaustion and a return to the depot became imperative.

The Silver City Highway south of Broken Hill following reconstruction and bitumen surfacing



The depot was reached on November 13th and was found to have been abandoned, the men left there having been compelled by the failure of their water supply to fall back on the depot at Rocky Glen. Here Sturt arrived on November 17th and at once collapsed.

No rain had fallen for more than five months and the drought was even worse than had already been experienced. To remain at the camp during another summer was to invite almost certain death. The alternative of venturing across 270 miles of probably waterless country was little better, but it was the lesser of two evils, and on 6th December, 1845, the party set out, Sturt being carried, for the first time, in one of the drays. Enough water was found along the route they followed to just keep the party alive, and on December 20th they reached the River Darling at Lake Cawndilla, where they camped. Here they were met by a party sent to their relief and by whom they were brought by slow stages to Adelaide, which was reached on January 19th, 1846.

Although Sturt did not succeed in reaching the goal of his ambition, he settled for all time, a geographical problem which had baffled all previous attempts at its solution.

Of Captain Charles Sturt, it has truly been said: "There were few men who so consistently worked for the public good. He could truthfully say that he had never been tempted to set out on his expeditions by mere love of adventure . . . His impulses were the scientist's desire to extend knowledge and the humanist's eagerness to increase social wealth and happiness."

Sturt returned to England in 1853, where he died in 1869. In that year he was nominated for a Knighthood, but he died before the honour could be gazetted. His true honour, however, lies in the memory of his work and accomplishments and in the description applied to him—"the gentlest and bravest of Australia's explorers".

Throughout its length of 446 miles, there are only two major centres of population located along the line of the Silver City Highway—Wentworth and Broken Hill.

The site of Wentworth, at the junction of the Darling and Murray Rivers, was first visited by white men in 1836 when Surveyor General T. L. Mitchell reached the spot and buried a bottle in which he had placed a note stating that his party was surrounded by hostile natives and he was anxious for the safety of the party. Two years later, Joseph Hawden, with 300 cattle he was taking from Seymour to the settlement at Adelaide, reached the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers and recovered the bottle which Mitchell had buried. Hawden added an account of his own journey and replaced the bottle, where it was later found.

The new South Australian settlement provided a developing market for cattle from the eastern centres and the tracks of the overlanders from Sydney and Melbourne met at the junction of the rivers. Pioneers pushing their way into the virgin lands and gold diggers seeking new fields also followed the well-defined tracks made by the cattlemen and to these,

the Murray-Darling junction was a half-way house. In 1850, the Governor of South Australia, Sir Henry Fox-Young, travelled overland to the junction and settlers followed quickly in his steps.

In 1853 the Governor induced the South Australian Legislature to offer a bonus of £4,000 to the first person who succeeded in taking a steamer upstream as far as the Murray-Darling junction. The bonus was won by Captain Francis Cadell who with the Governor as a passenger, took the "*Lady Augusta*", which had been specially built for the purpose, to the junction settlement, passing, at Swan Hill, the "*Mary Ann*" of Captain Randell, with the first cargo of supplies for the settlers.

Three years after the opening of the "port", the River Murray Navigation Company established a depot



Typical street tree planting by the Broken Hill City Council

for supplying the settlers on the two rivers and to receive the wool brought down by steamers from the Upper Murray.

In the *Government Gazette* of June 21st, 1859, it was announced that a site had been decided upon for a town to be called Wentworth, at the crossing place over the Darling River at its junction with the Murray. In that year Captains Cadell and Randell penetrated, with their steamers, the upper reaches of the Darling River and commenced a river trade of considerable importance. By 1883, for example, 250 river steamers arrived at the "Port of Wentworth" with cargoes totalling 45,098 tons and valued at more than £458,000. Clearances outwards amounted to 242 vessels loaded with 42,726 tons valued at almost £900,000. In that year 92 steamers were regularly employed on the two rivers each having, with a towed barge, a carrying capacity of 200 tons. The extension of the New South Wales and Victorian railways systems to points on the Darling and Murray Rivers gradually brought river traffic to an end, but as late as 1929 a few steamers were still employed carrying passengers on the Murray and "wool ships" were operating on the Darling.

Wentworth was proclaimed a Municipality in 1879. The town now serves the adjacent irrigated fruit-growing areas as well as the surrounding pastoral area, and has a population of more than 4,000 persons.

"The Broken Hill" is so named from the rugged nature of its rocky summit. This hill is the highest point of a narrow ridge which forms a distinctive feature of the undulating plain country on each side. Its official name is "Willyama" an aboriginal word meaning "a youth".

There is a local tradition that from the crest of "the broken hill" Sturt made a sketch of the surrounding country. In the narrative published by Sturt following his return from his journey, there is a sketch of the outlook from the Barrier Ranges. Sturt, however, passed to the east of "the broken hill" and crossed the ranges to the north of where the city is located. It is improbable, therefore, that the sketch was made from the site of the city, but it is probable that the exploring party made their camp near to where the city now stands and under the shadow of a hill that formed the cover of one of the richest silver-lead deposits in the world.

The existence of silver and lead in the area was first discovered in 1876 when one Paddy Green located a deposit at Thackaringa. A rush to the spot took place but the claims were not properly worked until 1880, when fresh shafts were sunk and a lode found, so rich in quality as to attract wide attention.

In 1883 a deposit was found at Silverton and another rush set in. While excitement over this find was at its height, a boundary rider, Charles Rasp, while mustering sheep in "the broken hill" paddock of the Mount Gipps run, noticed a similarity in appearance and formation of "the broken hill" with that of the outcrop at Silverton. In partnership with two contractors named Poole and James who were engaged in sinking wells on the sheep run, Rasp pegged out a claim. He mentioned the matter to George McCulloch, manager and part owner of the Mount Gipps run, and together they pegged out further claims which took in the whole of "the broken hill" itself. The existence of silver chlorides was first noticed in a shaft sunk by Rasp on one of these claims in 1884.

From that beginning a vast industry of great economic importance to Australia has developed. Over the period that has elapsed since mining operations commenced, more than seventy-five million tons of ore have been raised, the value of the metal recovered from which has amounted to over £400,000,000. Average production throughout the period has amounted to 2,000,000 tons annually, the value of which, in one year, was more than £30,000,000. Within a little more than seventy years, a progressive city, with the amenities of modern life and a population in excess of 32,000 has developed in a semi-arid area lying within a rainfall belt of less than ten inches per annum.

A more appropriate name than the Silver City Highway, for the road that serves the "Silver City" and the area beyond, would be difficult to find.