



# Owen Springs - Self Drive



## Welcome!

The Owen Springs Self Drive takes you along a 50km stretch of road, steeped in pioneering history. You can either start from Larapinta Drive and head south, or begin from the Stuart Highway, and make your way north through the Reserve. Each point of interest is clearly marked on the map, and the drive takes about 1½ hours one-way to complete.

## For your safety

A 4WD is essential to drive through the Reserve. The track contains some sandy sections that may be difficult to pass, particularly after rain. Please ensure you are aware of how to operate a 4WD, and carry appropriate recovery gear.

## Introduction to the drive

As you drive through the Reserve, you will be immersed in the stories of those who helped open up the Territory. Travel the path taken by explorer John McDouall Stuart, who made his way up the Hugh River on one of his 3 epic expeditions to cross Australia from south to north. Visualise the endless kilometres of wire of the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL), as the morse-coded messages snaked their way through Lawrence Gorge. You can almost smell the sweat from the horses and hear the rumble of hooves as a mob of cattle is rounded up into the old yards on one of the earliest cattle stations in Central Australia.

## 1. Milners Hut

This area (*now the Ranger station, emergency contact only*) became the site for the new homestead after the old homestead was abandoned in the 1950s. All that stood here in the early days was the hut, a bore and water troughs for the cattle. Betty Thompson and her husband Ron worked here in 1950. Ron was a ringer, and Betty looked after the hut. Betty says, "I would not see anyone for 2 weeks or more at a time...during the day I pumped water so the cattle could drink, collected wood for the stove, and looked after my one year old baby". Conditions were very basic compared to today's standards. There was no electricity and the kitchen comprised of a wood stove, a bench, a Coolgardie safe, a 44 gallon drum of flour and a cast iron kettle for boiling water. Betty slept on the veranda, although she was used to sleeping on the ground, so the hut was "like a mansion to me".



Milners Hut 1950

The last family to manage Owen Springs as a cattle station was the Brumby family (1965 to 2002). In 2000, floods devastated Central Australia, and all of this area was under water. Shane Brumby was

## Wildlife Watch

- Red-tailed Black Cockatoos flying overhead
- Reptiles like the Central-netted Dragon sitting on an old wooden post
- Euros on the rocky slopes of Lawrence Gorge
- Budgies flying at high speed in the open grasslands
- A Perentie sunning itself on the warm track
- Major Mitchell Cockatoos perched high on an Acacia Bush
- If you're really lucky you might even see a well camouflaged Australian Bustard

the Manager at the time, "The floods in 2000 were pretty scary...we lost everything, cars, furniture, everything went". The water level rose 6 to 8 inches (15-20cm) through the buildings and Shane had to evacuate his family in the early hours of the morning to higher ground.

## 2. Aboriginal Stockmens Quarters

The two old tin buildings by the Hugh River were used by the Aboriginal stockmen and their families. The buildings here include living quarters, a shower shed and a toilet. Aboriginal people have worked on cattle

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stations across the Northern Territory from the very early days of the pastoral industry, and without them, the industry would have struggled to survive. Just like old Milners Hut, living conditions for the Aboriginal families were very basic in the early days, with none of the modern household comforts that we now take for granted.

### 3. The Airstrip

The airstrip was built in about 2000. It was used fairly regularly for work on and around the station (a plane was hired from Alice Springs). The Alice Springs Aero Club also used the airstrip for flying training and made regular landings and take-offs from the airstrip. The land east of the fence line is now used by the NT Government to trial initiatives to improve the productivity of the cattle industry.

### 4. Down the road...

All the old yards and fence posts that you can see scattered throughout the Reserve (including the bronco branding yard just north of the old homestead) were made from the hard mulga wood growing around the surrounding country. It was only later that steel yards were built. Much of the vegetation you can see along the roadside was eaten by cattle. In dry times, cattle will often eat bark and leaves off shrubs and trees (known as topfeed). Species of topfeed include Mulgas, Whitewoods and Eremophila species.

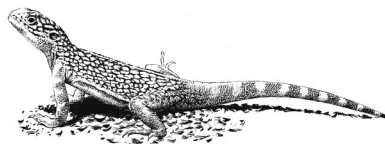
### 5. The Old Homestead

In 1873 two log huts were built on this site by William Gilbert... the first homestead in Central Australia. Since Gilbert, two names synonymous with the pastoral industry have owned Owen Springs Station. Sir Thomas Elder and Sir Sidney Kidman both owned the station in the late 1800s, with Elder attempting to breed horses for the Indian Army. The Hayes family bought Owen Springs in 1907, sold it in 1930 and then re-acquired it in 1936. William and Mary Hayes first came to Central Australia in 1884 transporting wagon loads of steel posts to replace the timber ones on the OTL. Another horse breeder of note in this area was Jim Cummings (the great uncle of horse trainer Bart Cummings) who raised horses on nearby Ellery Creek Station for racing purposes. The stone buildings here today are thought to have been built during 1886-1887 just after Elder purchased the station.

### 6. A river somewhere

Over time, the Hugh River's usually dry creek bed has slowly chiselled out a path, providing water and refuge for a range of

plants and animals. The river presents visitors with ample wildlife spotting opportunities. Some of the more common birds you might see include Rainbow Bee-eaters, Port Lincoln Parrots, Kites, and Red-tailed Black Cockatoos. Other animals that you may spot while driving through include Red Kangaroos and the occasional Black-footed Rock Wallaby. Those with a keen eye will glimpse a lizard here and there on the track or on a nearby rock catching some of the sun's warming rays. More common species include the Central-netted Dragon, and the Long-nosed Water Dragon. Sand Goannas and the largest lizard in Australia, the Perentie, are also found in the Reserve.



*Central Netted Dragon*

In the days before Owen Springs became a Reserve, it was not uncommon for settlers to look to wildlife to supplement their food supplies. Bustards and Kangaroos for example would have made good eating. Once in 1950, when Betty Thompson ran out of food for the ringers working on the Station, she cooked up a meal of 'bush chicken'. When asked by the men where she had found a chicken out here she confessed that the meat was actually from some Galahs that she had shot the day before.



*Australian Ringneck*

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## Information Sheet

### 7. Haunted Tree Bore

This site was used as a cattle camp for drovers, who sometimes encountered trouble while camped here with their stock. The cattle always seemed to be spooked, although there was no apparent reason for it, hence the name Haunted Tree Bore. Bores like this one are essential sources of water in land that only receives 300mm of rain on average each year (that's less than a coke can!). Bores were scattered throughout the station and water was originally pumped to the surface using wind power. Now pumps are powered by diesel engines, and underground water is still used to supply the ranger station. The bore and water tank that sat here were destroyed by the same flood that inundated the station homestead in 2000. Look closely at some of the trees in the river and you will notice the height of the debris, indicating the level of previous floods.

### 8. Stuart and the Overland Telegraph Line

Stuart's expeditions across the centre of the continent ultimately paved the way for the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL) and then the expansion of the pastoral industry as more land became available. He first visited what he later named Owen Springs on the 11th of April, 1860. The waterhole he camped at was not in fact a spring, rather a temporary waterhole in the river. He named it after an SA Member of

Parliament, and supporter of his expedition, William Owen.

It was only on his third attempt (1862) in crossing the continent from the south to the north that he actually succeeded. He was paid £2,000 pounds for his efforts. Unfortunately his health suffered as a result of the hardships of his experiences and he died at the age of only 50 in 1866. His funeral was attended by seven people.

Much of the OTL was surveyed along Stuart's original expedition path. The line was constructed between 1870 and 1872, with telegraph poles (firstly timber from alongside the path of the OTL, but as this got eaten by termites they were replaced with metal poles) placed every 80 or so metres along its entire length (36,000 poles in total!) How many trees can you see that have the potential to become telegraph poles?

The service track along side the OTL became the main road to Alice Springs. It wasn't until 1898/99 that the OTL was re-routed through Heavitree Gap at Alice Springs, and the old line passing through Owen Springs was dismantled.

### 9. Redbank Yard: Life on a Cattle Station

On average the Brumby's ran 8000 to 10,000 head of cattle, and sometimes as many as 16,000. The workers would spend three to four months each year away from the homestead in stock

camp around the station. "An average day you'd be up at 4.30 in the morning, and you'd go all day and if you got back for lunch you'd be lucky. But it was daylight till dark". All the work was done on horseback, in all extremes of weather, "It didn't seem to make a lot of difference because you were there, you were in it all the time, the heat and that. We didn't have air conditioned vehicles and stuff like that, I guess you just grew used to it". Shane Brumby.

### Further reading:

'*Explorations in Australia: The Journals of John McDouall Stuart.*' (1984) Hesperian Press.

Thomson, A. (1999) '*The Singing Line: The story of the man who strung the Telegraph across Australia, and the woman who gave her name to Alice Springs.*' Chatto and Windus, London.

Bailey, J. (2006) '*Mr Stuart's Track: The forgotten life of Australia's greatest explorer.*' Macmillan Australia.

[www.southernaustralianhistory.com.au/stuart.htm](http://www.southernaustralianhistory.com.au/stuart.htm)

For more information about people such as Kidman, Elder and Stuart visit <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/adbonline.htm>

A fact sheet about Owen Springs Reserve is available from Parks and Wildlife or Central Australian Tourism.

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