The Marked Tree Line: The Gorman's Gap Walking Trail

by Pamela Hahn

Allan Cunningham discovered the Darling Downs in 1827, but the first squatters, the Leslie Brothers, did not arrive to set up their headquarters at Toolburra until March 1840. Gilbert Elliot and Arthur Hodgson soon followed, arriving on the downs on 10 September 1840 in fog so dense they could not see their horses' heads. When it lifted they found themselves in close proximity to an Aboriginal camp. The Aborigines bolted in fear and Hodgson, entering one of their bark shelters, found a knife marked "Rogerson — Maker — Eton". Himself an Etonian, he named the run Eton Vale and named the mountain near the camp site Rubieslaw after Elliot’s birthplace in Scotland.

Maintaining the new runs over a supply line stretching back 600 miles to Maitland soon led to a desperate situation. A shorter line required finding a dray route over the range to the Darling Downs, but Moreton Bay was a penal settlement with the area within 50 miles barred to the squatters without a permit to enter.

The Leslies rode down a pass in the range discovered by Allan Cunningham in 1827 (Cunningham's Gap) to the Bremer Valley but were afraid to go closer for fear of arrest and returned. They reported the steep slope on the eastern side of the gap impossible for drays.

Gilbert Elliot and the famous bullocky Joe Archer lowered two drays with the wheels removed, down Cunningham’s Gap and went on to Moreton Bay were Elliott used his influence as former aide-de-camp of Governor Gipps, Governor of New South Wales, to obtain supplies. They met Lieutenant Owen Gorman, Commandant of the settlement who called on convict John Sterry Baker to prove his claim to know a dray route to the Downs. Baker had lived with the Goomburra Aborigines for 14 years, walking with them many times on a track to the summit of the range, the track destined to become the Marked Tree Line and save the runs of the squatters.

Baker, a shepherd born in Norfolk, England, in 1798, was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1819 and transported to Australia. He was transferred to Moreton Bay in 1825 after a further sentence in New South Wales. On 8 January 1826 he fled into the bush and was rescued by Aborigines near Lockyer Creek, who saved him from starvation. He was accepted by the tribe as "Boraltchou" and acquired an
Aboriginal wife. Through the extraordinary Aboriginal news system he learned of the impending closure of the Penal Settlement to which he returned and was taken back into custody.

Owen Gorman was born in Clogham, Ireland, in 1799. He was promoted to Lieutenant, 80th Leicestershire Regiment in 1833, and was Commandant at Moreton Bay from July 1839 to May 1842. Elliot and Archer enjoyed his hospitality. Aware of the impossibility of getting the heavily-laden drays up Cunningham's Gap, they were left at Brisbane in the hope that Gorman, with his trust in Baker, could find a more practical route across the Great Dividing Range. Under Gorman's directions, the convict constructed "a queer specimen of the Irish jaunting car". His intention was to investigate reports that several Aborigines had been shot by newly arrived settlers, to seek the murderers of Assistant Surveyor Granville Stapylton and thirdly to find the new road. In this third objective Gorman was successful. Gorman in his report wrote that "no drays with any sort of loading can pass thro' Cunningham's Pass, but that drays may pass with very little difficulty carrying about a ton and a half each on the route I went." With Gorman riding and walking a strong dark-brown pony mare, and Baker trudging beside him, the party and "the cart" with a big bullock between the shafts, made the actual ascent of the range on Saturday 17 October 1840 and reached the tarpaulin which marked Eton Vale two days later.

Elliot soon verified Gorman's statement when he arrived with loaded drays at Eton Vale on 12 November 1840. The event was so important that Ernest Dalrymple of Toolburra rode over to join James Rogers and Henry Stuart Russell at the top of the Gap when Elliot arrived. This spot, named simply "Top Camp" became the camp for all the teamsters who followed, and the spot, now known as Preston, has been marked by a cairn.

Elliot's two heavily-laden drays were each pulled by thirty-six bullocks and controlled by the trusty Joe Archer who followed the line of marked trees from the bottom of the range, at the junction of Hell Hole and Flagstone Creeks. (In March 1942, Hell Hole Creek was renamed Glen Lomond Creek.) Every chain a large tree had been scarfed of bark to a height of eight feet all the way to the top of the range. Today, 152 years later, barely three marked trees remain. Age and many bushfires have taken their toll.

Elliot related to Russell the difficulties of the ascent, "of country full enough of gullies and 'break-necks' which it has taken us the last three days to get over; full enough, I say, to spoil a saint's temper, to say nothing of a bullock-drivers."

The more the road was used, the more Gorman's route eroded and justified the name Hell Hole which was applied to the road. W.J.B.
The Camel’s Hump monument, erected 5 September 1987. The caption reads “It was here that Lieut. Gorman took his compass bearing — 17th October 1840. This cairn marks one of the most difficult parts of the first bullock supply route from the coast. However nature will yield to the determination of man and beast.”
“Billy” Gray wrote “Many a good poler [bullock] has his neck broken at Hells Hole.” The atrociously bad sections of the road had to be accepted as it was the only proven route to Moreton Bay, but documented descriptions of its gloom and perils testify to the strength, fortitude and courage of the pioneers, and especially the unsung heroes, the bullock-drivers.

Gorman’s Gap Road remained in regular use only two years. Arthur Hodgson explored a second route in 1842. It was used for five years when it, in turn, was superseded by a third route on the line of the Toowoomba Toll Bar road.

In 1979 Mr Erich Volker of Mount Rascal (Drayton, Toowoomba) inspired Mr Tom McVeigh, then Federal Member for Darling Downs, Mr John Cleary, a Toowoomba solicitor, and an enthusiastic local committee to undertake the task of marking the route and bringing official recognition of its National importance. The long-forgotten track was put back on the map when 350 people took part in a re-enactment walk from Flagstone Creek to Preston Heights. Mr Brian Lewis, a great-grandson of Lt. Owen Gorman, accompanied the walk and unveiled a commemorative road sign at Preston.

The assistance of Mr J.K. (Keith) Jarrott F.C.A., member of the Library Board of Queensland and Honorary Secretary, National Parks Association of Queensland, in this project was invaluable, and turned legend into proven fact.

The monuments erected at the top and bottom of the road on 17 October 1982 were unveiled by the Governor, Sir James Ramsay, during another re-enactment of the ascent during which two teams of bullocks, drawing wagons, strained and battled their way to the top, ably controlled by master-bullock drivers and trainers, the late Eric Morton, Mr Fergus Campbell, Mr Tom Pugh and the late Percy Nauman.

The Camel’s Hump monument was erected on 5 September 1987 at the spot where Gorman took his compass bearing on 17 October 1840. It was unveiled by Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, former Premier of Queensland, during the Bi-Centennial year 1988, on Sunday 16 October. The monument itself is unique, as the photograph shows; the symbolic wheels and axle are a tribute to the determination of man and beast, while the “crown” is a nickel-coated brass tank engraved by Luke Sternsdorf with the names of every member of the committee since inception. This monument is a one kilometre walk from the top monument at Preston, and a 4.4 km walk up from the lower monument at Flagstone Creek.
The total walk of Gorman’s Gap Road, the Marked Tree Line, is 5.4 km each way, and should only be attempted by those who are fit. The upper end may be reached travelling south along Ruthven Street towards Hodgsonvale but turning left past the electricity substation into Upper Flagstone Creek Road. The bottom is reached from Flagstone Creek road which branches of the Helidon-Grantham road.

The Camel’s Hump monument was erected by the committee and their relatives. The ten years work by the Committee was recorded on film by Wally Brunner with narrative by Bob Moncrieff and copies lodged with the film and Sound Archives in Canberra, and on video, with the Toowoomba Historical Society.

But for the determination of Gilbert Elliot, Joe Archer, Owen Gorman, John Steery Baker, Arthur Hodgson and James “Cockey” Rogers, who faced hardship, deprivation, near-starvation and loneliness, the runs on Allan Cunningham’s “glorious Darling Downs” would probably have been abandoned. As it was, towns sprang up at the bullock-teams resting camps, such as “The Springs” (Drayton) and “The Swamp” (Toowoomba).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**BOOK REVIEW: Christopher S. Milligan and John C.H. Foley, Australian Hospital Ship CENTAUR: the Myth of Immunity** (Nairana Publications, 6A Doncaster Street, Hendra, $24.95)

During the earlier part of 1943 the eastern seaboard of Australia was being ravaged as the result of Japanese submarine attacks on allied shipping. Ship after ship was being sent to the bottom although some like the A.U.S.N. liner *Ormiston* managed to make the safety of port although seriously damaged. The eastern suburbs of Sydney (including Bondi) and Newcastle had been shelled from sea while Townsville and Mossman had been visited by Japanese flying-boats out of Rabaul, fortunately without any real damage.

At about 2p.m. on Saturday 15 May 1943, an Avro Anson aircraft from R.A.A.F. Lowood was nearing the end of a convoy anti-