

Taken from 'The Journals of John McDouall Stuart.'

### Test Your Expedition Party

Stuart's expedition was successful because of his experience, careful planning, discipline, bush skills and persistence. However, he laid down strict rules for his party.

If your 'expedition party' would like to travel by Stuart's rules, first nominate two officers - Exploration Leader and Stock Control Officer - and some expeditioners. Here are the rules:

### Rules Enforced by Expedition Leader

- Officers to see that orders to be promptly and willingly obeyed. Any disobedience, disagreement or neglect of duty must at once be reported to the Leader.
- The officers will ensure that every man does an equal share of work.

- No horses are to be abused, kicked, or struck about the head.
- Everyone must be up at break of day, the bedclothes etc to be done up and put into their proper places.
- Horses brought in and unhobbled.
- No one is to leave the line of march without the leaders knowledge (or his Officer-in-charge).
- When leaving the camp no one is to go without arms and ammunition.
- No one is to fire on natives without orders unless in self defense.
- No swearing or improper language.
- No journal to be kept or notes taken (except the Naturalist).
- Saddles are not to be sat upon (except when on a horse).
- Anyone detached on special duty from camp or on the march must report himself on his return.

### Rules Enforced by Supply Control Officer

- Nothing to be taken out of bags without the Stock Control Officer's knowledge.
- When anything is removed from a pack it is to be packed up in the same manner as it was found.
- Each pair of bags to be of equal weight.
- Breakfast to be ready at the same time for which an ½ hour will be allowed.
- Riding horses saddled first and everything belonging to them placed on the saddles.
- When on the march, no water is to be used from the canteens without permission from the leader.

Taken from 'Regulations of the Great Northern Exploring Expedition, 1862.'

For more information see our website: [www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks](http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks) or contact Tourism Top End (08)89 362499 1300 138886 [www.tourismtopend.com.au](http://www.tourismtopend.com.au)



## Mary River National Park (proposed) Point Stuart Coastal Reserve



### Information Sheet

This Reserve protects the historic location where, on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1862, John McDouall Stuart's exploring expedition reached the sea after riding over 2,000 miles across the continent (about 3,400 km). This epic south to north journey led to the route of the overland telegraph line; Britain annexing the NT to South Australia (1863); pastoralism, settlement, the Stuart Highway and rail links.

### Access Dry Season Only

Turn north off the Arnhem Hwy east of the Bark Hut, on to the Pt Stuart Rd, continue 52 km to the Pt Stuart 4WD Track gates (usually open June to October depending on road conditions). Continue 27 km to the Reserve gates, then 1.5 km to the Day Use Area.

### Walk to Coast via Memorial (Sorry - no road access!)

**Start:** Day Use Area

**Distance:** 5 km return

**Conditions:** exposed floodplain and broken ground.

**Time:** Allow 2 hours return.



### Drinking Water

Carry and drink plenty of water - there is none in the Reserve. Calculate your needs at 6 litres per person per day.

### A Great Explorer

John McDouall Stuart was arguably the greatest inland explorer of Australia. He was an experienced surveyor and bushman; had led expeditions to the north and

west of South Australia (SA) looking for copper, gold and pastoral lands; and, from his previous attempts to cross the continent, knew a well watered route between Adelaide and the 'interior'.

### Telegraph links

By 1861 the four mainland colonies (Victoria, NSW, SA and Qld) were telegraphically linked. Interest and pressure grew to link Australia to England and Europe by extending the British submarine cable from Java to the nearest land point on the continent where Darwin now stands.

### Reward Offered

The SA government was keen to discover a route for the proposed telegraph link to Britain, and offered £2,000 to the first person to cross the continent from SA to the north coast.

### Financing the Journey

Stuart's friends, William Finke and pastoralists James and John Chambers financed the expedition hoping Stuart would also find new pastoral lands.

### Stuart's Previous Attempts

Stuart had a strong personal ambition to cross the continent, and had previously attempted to do so. In March 1860 he led a party of William Kekwick, Benjamin Head and 13 horses. They reached Attack Creek (70 km north of Tennant Creek) but turned

turn back after an almost fatal attack by hostile Aboriginal people.

Stuart then set out (Jan 1861) with a larger party of 10 men and 44 horses. They advanced 150 miles (250 km) beyond Attack Creek, but the tough, stony Sturt Plains were too hard on the horses (their shoes wore out, concealed potholes were dangerous, and water was scarce) so Stuart turned back to ensure the expedition survived the return journey.

### Burke and Wills

The Victorian government was also keen to support a successful expedition to cross the continent. Burke and Wills set off from Melbourne on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1860, reached the Gulf of Carpentaria on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1861, but tragically died on their return journey.

Stuart knew of their success and death before he set out in October 1861 for his last successful attempt.



John McDouall Stuart 1815 - 1866



# Stuart's Great Northern Exploring Expedition across the Continent: October 1861 - July 1862

## An Epic Journey

Stuart's last expedition party was larger than his previous parties. It consisted of 72 horses and 10 men: Stuart (Commander), William Kekwick (2nd in Command), Francis Thring (3rd Officer, Cadet Surveyor), William Auld (Assistant), Stephen King Jnr, John Billiatt, James Frew Jnr, Heath Nash, John McGorrerey (Shoeing Smith), Frederick Waterhouse (Government Naturalist).

They officially left North Adelaide on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1861. When they reached the previous camp at Newcastle Waters where they rested the horses for a week before attempting to cross Sturt's Plains. Stuart scouted ahead finding waterholes, creeks, springs and rivers, which he named after his exploration party. As they neared the coast they followed what we now know as the Mary River, camped near what is now Mistake Billabong and Shady Camp. Then, via a similar route to today's Pt Stuart 4WD track, they reached the northern coastal floodplains.

## 'The sea has been reached'

On 24<sup>th</sup> July 1862, Stuart rode ahead on the coastal plains, he could hear the sea. The rest of the party crossed the plains and entered the thick monsoon vine forest. The party continued onto the beach and were '...gratified and delighted to behold the water of the Indian Ocean in Van Diemen Gulf.' Stuart dipped his feet then washed his face and hands in the sea.

Stuart noted in his journal: ... *the beach is not above four feet above the level of the sea. I can see to the horizon to the east the dim shade of the land on the west side of the mouth of the Alligator River which has some high sand hills on it.*

To mark the place where they reached the coast, Stuart had his initials JMDS carved into a large tree. They camped near a small

running creek to allow their horses time to graze. Stuart named this Thring Creek in appreciation for Francis Thring's '...conduct throughout the journey.'

The next morning Stuart sent Thring out to scout ahead and find a way around the boggy wetlands to the mouth of the river. Thring returned with news that it was far too boggy for the horses. Stuart, always conscious of the safety and well being of his expedition party, decided not to waste the strength of the horses on finding the mouth of what he thought was the Adelaide River. ... *'the sea has been reached, which was the great object of the expedition, and a practicable route found through a splendid country from Newcastle Waters to it, abounding, for a great part of the way, in running streams well stocked with fish; and this has been accomplished at a season of the year during which we have not had a drop of rain.'*

## Flag Raising

On the 25<sup>th</sup> July, exactly 9 months after their departure, Stuart's party cleared an area and stripped the tallest mangrove tree. They raised a flag made by Elizabeth Chambers, daughter of James (expedition financier). The Union Jack had Stuart's initials sewn in the middle. Stuart named the area Chambers Bay, in honour of Elizabeth and buried a box containing details of the expedition.

## The Return Journey

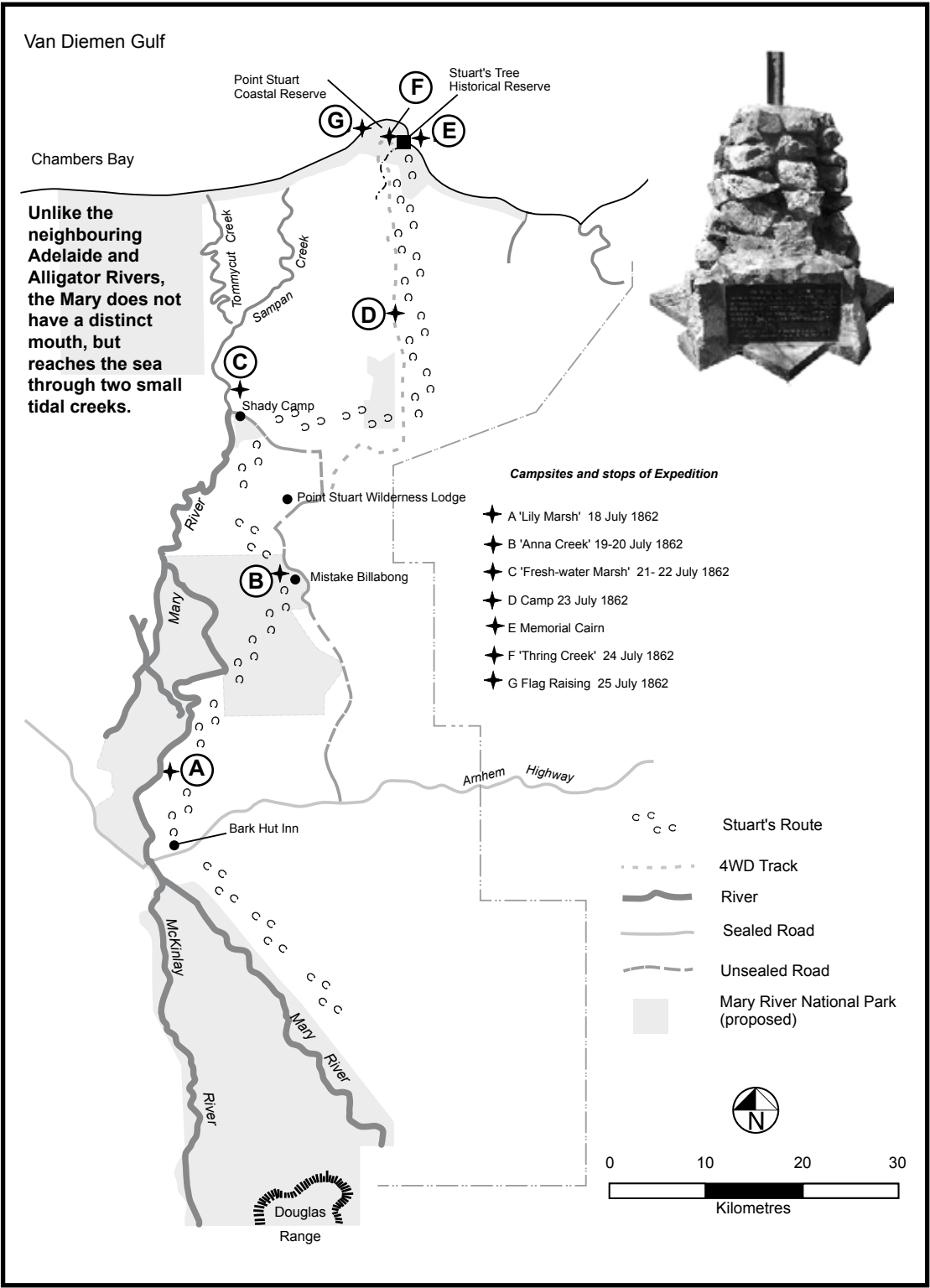
Stuart was very ill, suffering terribly from the effects of scurvy, and secretly doubted he could survive the return journey. Auld took observations for him, because Stuart had lost the use of his hand. As the journey continued, Stuart lost the ability to ride, so, in a stretcher made by McGorrerey, the men carried Stuart between two horses for the last 576 miles

(960 km). Their care saved his life. After 5 months they returned, on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1862.

As an expedition leader, Stuart had travelled over 12,000 miles (about 20,000 km) in just over 4 years, usually under harsh conditions, with limited rations and little or poor water.

## Adelaide's Biggest Celebration

On 21<sup>st</sup> January 1863 Stuart and his expedition party and its 48 remaining horses were cheered down King William Street, and the people of Adelaide witnessed the biggest celebration of the town's 26 years. Sadly, on the same day Victorians stood in silent tribute as the remains of Burke and Wills were laid to rest.



Stuart received the £2,000 reward for reaching the coast, but his expeditions ruined his health. He returned to Britain where his achievements meant little. He died in London on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1866 aged 50, and was buried at Kensal Green.

## The Mystery of Stuart's Tree

Stuart's diaries stated he reached the coast west of the Adelaide River, rather than west of the Mary River.

It was understandable that Stuart mistook his coastal position. He calculated latitude using the sun and stars, but without a chronometer, he could not accurately calculate longitude. Just half a degree of longitude separates the Adelaide and Mary Rivers. Also, he used a map produced from the Admiralty surveys of the Beagle in 1838-39 which identified the Adelaide River as the only river west of the Alligator Rivers. Interestingly, Waterhouse (government naturalist on the expedition) reported to the S.A. Parliament that he suspected they had travelled to the coast via a completely different river. In the 20 years it took to officially find the tree, there was doubt about Stuart's success, although an NT Government resident report states that Wolna Aboriginal people remembered Stuart's arrival and knew the location of the tree.

'Sonie remembered his uncle telling him how he first saw the flag while walking on the beach, and that at first he thought it debbil debbil called by the natives, Peyarn (evil spirit); how his uncle took down the flag and followed the white's tracks till he was knocked up, and then returned, when he cut up the flag and divided it amongst his friends.'

In 1884 a search party set out by steamer from Palmerston (now Darwin) and found the tree

with assistance of local Wolna Aboriginal people. Several years later the Government Resident on a visit to the site suggested the tree be cut down and the engraved piece sent to the Adelaide Museum. This was opposed as an act of vandalism. In 1902, a fire burnt the tree to a charred stump.

In 1971 the Reserves Board of the NT placed a memorial cairn where the tree once stood, which is still in place today.



Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people beneath Stuart's Tree carved with large 2 ft (61 cm) initials. Photo Paul Foelsche 1885.

## Reflections on a Great Man

'... nothing touches one more than the remembrance of the deeds of a truly brave man. We had the honour of having served one.' Auld, Expedition Member

'He was simply a marvel for horseback traverse. His map was so correct that we used simply to put a protractor and scale on it, get the bearing and distance, and ride with the same confidence as we would ride from Adelaide to Gawler.' R. Knuckey, Overland Telegraph Line

## References:

- The Journals of John McDouall Stuart. Hardman, William. Hesperian Press, Western Australia, 1986.
- JM Stuart, Webster, M. Melbourne University Press, Australia. 1958.
- <http://www.johnmcdouallstuart.org.au>