

The Last Voyages of Firefly and Captain Kirby

by Allan McInnes

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Colonial Secretary's Office
Brisbane 21 August, 1861

Serious apprehensions having been entertained relative to the safety of the Victorian Exploring party Commanded by Mr. Burke who started from Coopers Creek in December last with the intention of traversing the Interior of the Continent to the Northern Coast, but of whom no tidings have since been received, it has been decided to dispatch an Expedition to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the hope that it may afford assistance in the event of Mr. Burke's party having reached its shores but have been unable to retrace their steps through the desert interior.

So commenced the instructions to William Landsborough from the Queensland authorities. Four expeditions were launched to search for the missing Burke & Wills. A.W. Howitt was leader of the Victorian Contingent Exploration party which set out from Menindee. J. McKinlay led the Burke Relief Expedition fitted out by the Government of South Australia which set out from Adelaide. Frederick Walker led the party despatched through the offices of Captain Mayne, Auditor General for New South Wales, which set out from Rockhampton. The Queensland Burke Relief Expedition which set out from the Albert River in the Gulf of Carpentaria was led by Landsborough.

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The Albert, surveyed in 1841 by Stokes, was selected as the starting point as it was considered that Burke would have attempted to make a straight course from Eyres Creek to the Albert. It was also selected as the rendezvous for Walker and Landsborough.

The Melbourne owned 250 ton brig *Firefly* was chartered for £660. Her crew consisted of Captain T. Kirby, two mates, a carpenter, a cook and six able seamen. Mr. Martin, a son of one of the owners, was a supernumerary. The *Firefly* was to be escorted from Brisbane by Her Majesty's Colonial Sloop *Victoria* in charge of Commander W.H. Norman and to convey Landsborough's party, their 30 horses and six months' forage and stores for both Landsborough and Walker. Landsborough's party consisted of Bourne (2i.c.), Campbell, Allison and Leeson (cook), two native troopers and two aborigines.

Kirby's instructions were to land Landsborough in the Albert and then to proceed to Sourabaya with her remaining general cargo which included spirits wine and beer. Little is known of Kirby. He was born in Cork, Ireland in about 1829; he was about 6 feet tall, and a bachelor. Bourne, described *Firefly* as a sorry old tub of 17 years' standing with dirty cabins and with "a rich, indescribable, and purely nautical stench pervading the atmosphere of that marine elysium".

Whilst Landsborough and Walker were searching by land, Norman was to comb the coasts and rivers. Norman and Landsborough were instructed to establish a manned fortified depot on the Albert for the resting of the horses and to be conveniently accessible to both the boat and the land parties.

Landsborough, born in Scotland in 1825 arrived in Australia in 1841 and by 1850 had earned a reputation of being an experienced bushman. In the next decade he explored new areas such as Mt. Nebo, Broadsound, Comet and Nogoia Rivers, Bonar River, Torrens Creek, Aramac Creek and Thompson River.

The written instructions to Landsborough from the Victorian Committee prescribed:

Your party has been especially organized for the purposes of searching the Northern Interior of Australia for Mr Burke's missing party . . . you should clearly understand your relations with Commander Norman and . . . you should recognise Commander Norman as your Official Superior . . . and when landed that you will seek his concurrence in all your arrangements for the search of Mr Burke's party . . .

The instructions suggested he should first search in the south west direction from the head of the Albert River and then added:

On your return to the Albert River if you have been unsuccessful in gaining any intelligence of Mr Burke's party the Committee

fear that any further efforts on the North Coast will be fruitless and unavailing and as stores have been provided for six months only then arrangements should at once be made to return to Brisbane and for this purpose Commander Norman will receive instructions to convey your party in the *Victoria*.

When Governor Bowen, sent the first message to the Queensland Legislative Assembly advising of a request he had received from the Governor of Victoria to assist in a search expedition, Queensland responded with a vote for £500. A further £2000 was granted by the Victorian Government for the Landsborough expedition. In a further message to the Legislative Assembly, Bowen advised “their primary object will be to rescue, if possible, Mr Burke and his companions; but important contributions to geographical and scientific knowledge cannot fail, it is hoped, to be derived from this exploration”.

Queensland had much to gain from the expedition from the Albert River for most of the lands to be traversed had not been explored. The sole thrust of the instructions from Victoria was to search for Burke & Wills but the statements from Queensland clearly indicted an interest in land. This was later to contribute to tension between Norman and Landsborough.

NORTHWARD VOYAGE

Firefly sailed from Melbourne on 29th July, 1861 to Brisbane where she arrived twelve days later. *Victoria* of eight guns sailed from Melbourne on 4th August. Baron Von Mueller arranged for one of his assistants Diedrich Henne, a 26-year-old native of Hanover, Germany, to travel on it as the expedition's botanical collector.

Kirby, described events in Brisbane:

Here we took in thirty horses, which were for the most part (so far as my judgement goes) wretched, half starved animals utterly unsuited for the labours they were about to encounter, some six months forage for these horses, provisions for the parties of Landsborough and Walker, and various stores required for the Expedition, as well as the explorers themselves and some native blacks engaged as guides.

On 24th August, 1861 *Victoria* sailed in company with the *Firefly* for the Gulf via the outer route. Within two days Bourne recorded:

Ships cook very drunk and dirty. Fare anything but good; sailors complaining of want of food . . .; The nags seemed to be doing pretty well, but the lucerne hay is very bad; part of it thrown out in consequence. Water for horses, five gallons daily, a very insufficient allowance when confined to the heated hold of a ship and fed on dry hay.

On 29th August Bourne entered in his journal:

Horses a good deal cut up with thirst, and very impatient when being watered, the horses on each side of the one that is drinking having to be held to prevent them fighting, hay so bad as to be uneatable.

For the first week the voyage was uneventful and both ships kept in sight of each other. By 1st September the weather had deteriorated, the winds grew to gale strength then to a hurricane. Kirby was instructed to keep close to *Victoria* during the night, but before dark *Victoria* was miles ahead and out of sight. Kirby hove to and burnt flash lamps every hour to attract attention but to no effect. By midnight with pumps continually working *Firefly* was in a most critical position, only 15 miles from the outer reef and drifting towards it at 2½ knots per hour. According to Kirby “. . . We all felt our danger and the complaints of the explorers of the absence of the *Victoria* at this critical juncture were loud and continuous”.

The atrocious weather continued next day and Kirby wrote:

During this time it was evident that we were in great danger, but my officers and crew did their duty well and showed no fear; the explorers were, however, completely upset, and bewailed their fate to such an extent that I really pitied them, and endeavoured to keep up their spirits as far as possible, as I feared their terrors might affect the crew. At midnight, as a last resource, the gale being still most furious, we set the main trisail and foretopmast staysail, and by burning brilliant lights made a last but ineffectual attempt to attract the “*Victoria*”. On Tuesday, September, 3rd I told Mr Landsborough that they were in much peril, and explained to him that, as a last resource, I thought it adviseable to run for Reine Island Beacon. I did so, and at half-past 9 a.m. sighted it, the distance from the ship being about three miles, the explorers losing heart more and more, and wishing that they were back in Brisbane. The weather was still very bad, and the current very strong; we were running almost with bare poles, and could carry but little canvas. At half-past nine entered Reine Island Beacon, topsail and foresail close reefed, weathered the White Patches and made Ashmore Banks; made more sail, wishing to weather Middle Bank, and as the weather was still thick, with heavy rains, steered for Sir Charles Hardy’s Islands”.

MAROONED SPIRITS

As *Firefly* entered smooth waters those on board were thankful. Only one horse, unable to stand during the gale, had been lost through being trampled. An hour before dark *Firefly* was between the two largest Sir Charles Hardy’s Islands with strong winds blowing. An

anchor was dropped but its cable parted and the anchor lost. Another was dropped which finally held. Their refuge was a delusion for next morning that anchor cable snapped. All hands were roused by Kirby shouting that the brig was going on shore. *Firefly* grounded broadside on a reef 500 yards from the nearest Island. As waves broke over her, two masts were cut away in order to ease her. Her smaller boat was launched, but immediately smashed to pieces. The remaining larger boat was cautiously lowered and Landsborough and his party were landed on the nearest island. By 5 p.m. the tide had fallen and the island could be reached by wading through waist deep water. The masts of a ship were seen on the other side of the island and Landsborough and Martin walked across seeking assistance. The ship was an abandoned wreck – the *Lady Kinnaird*.

Adversity brings out the best and worst in men. Laurie the Editor of Landsborough's Log Book translated events in the following way:

Riot and drunkenness became the order of the day; and not only did the officers not attempt to control the crew, but they actually encouraged insubordination by such expressions as that "Jack was as good as his master" that "the cargo of a wreck belonged to anyone who chose to take it"; or by direct instigation as, for example, "There are twenty-two pairs of expedition boots; help yourselves. That will be a pair each for all hands, and a pair to spare". In short, I soon saw that if I did not bestir myself and my staff to rescue the horses, the work which I had undertaken would there and then end ingloriously.

Accordingly, on the afternoon of Thursday, the 5th, I hired the carpenter and Muller, for the sum of five pounds, to cut a hole in the ship's side close to the water's edge, in order to release the horses at low water. And after having found a good place on the island for watering the horses, I joined them with Messrs Campbell and Martin, and my three native assistants. The only tools at our command were two adzes and two small tomahawks; but my black-fellows plied the latter with so much dexterity, that we were not long in accomplishing our task. The following day was occupied in landing twenty-five of the horses; and this we found to be a task of no ordinary difficulty.

Bourne described the scene:

Sailors drunk. Law and order set at defiance; every-one helping himself to what he chooses.

Kirby's version is vastly different:

Found the explorers who seemed to know nothing about rigging tents or lighting fires, although driftwood was abundant, in a most deplorable and comfortless condition, but, with the assistance of the sailors, soon got things in shape. During the night one



ALBERT RIVER, GULF OF CARPENTARIA. THE VICTORIAN NAVAL DEPOT. THE HULK "PHIPELY,"—SEE PAGE 2.
From an Original Drawing by Lieut. G. A. Woods, V.N.

of the seamen swam on board the vessel to obtain liquor; he came on shore very drunk, and whatever may have been said to the contrary, I can conscientiously declare that this was, during all these trying scenes, the only case of drunkenness among the crew of the *Firefly* . . . During all these events the officers and crew, on the whole, behaved well. It is true that a case of boots was opened after the wreck took place, but they were urgently required by the men, who were barefooted, and whose feet were lacerated. They were however, returned to Mr Landsborough in good condition; some slops, too, which had been left in the cabin tied up in a canvas bag, after Mr Landsborough had made an issue to his men; were used by the sailors; but although much stress has been laid upon this, they could hardly be blamed, and to my knowledge, the slops were returned.

Victoria searched for *Firefly* and found her on Saturday 7th September, with her ensign-union down, on a coral bank, with five feet of water in her hold. Norman found:

Decks were covered with cases of spirits, wine, beer and wreck; her masts, yards, cables and anchors gone, in fact, a complete wreck; and the crew on the island, very much the worse for having access to the liquor.

Kirby maintained that:

the sailors of the *Victoria* . . . broke into the hold of the *Firefly*, got spirits, and were drunk for days, and while in that condition plundered the ship's stores to a considerable extent.

After sailors from the *Victoria* boarded, Bourne wrote: “. . . From what I observed, I lean to the opinion that her crew were not teatotallers”.

EMERGENCY REPAIRS

Whilst Landsborough thought the prospects of their expedition hopeless, Norman formed the view that *Firefly* could be salvaged, refloated and refitted as a transport capable of being towed to the Albert River with the Landsborough party their horses and stores. If this was not feasible Norman offered to make several trips transporting Landsborough's party to the Albert River.

Norman recorded for 7th September:

Returned on board, and decided upon using every means in my power to get the hull afloat, if it were possible, however, much it might be damaged. There being one sad thing to contend against; the wreck having a large quantity of wines and spirits on board, they were loose all over the ship; and while it was so I knew it would be impossible to do anything.

Next day all the grog was destroyed – some £600 worth. For more than a week herculean efforts were made by Norman and his crew to

salvage the *Firefly*. Whilst the salvage attempts were proceeding, Landsborough and his party were busy cutting grass for fodder – hot, difficult work with knives as their only implements.

For days they struggled to lighten her and when they had achieved this *Victoria* attempted to pull *Firefly* off the reef. After several futile attempts she came off. Work then started on building stalls and sufficiently repairing the wreck to take the horses and stores to the Albert. At 6 a.m. on Sunday, 22nd September *Victoria* steamed off at 7 knots with the leaky cranky and battered *Firefly* in tow. Landsborough was on *Victoria* but the rest of his party was on *Firefly* which was then in charge of Mr Hanfield mate of the *Victoria*.

Whilst at Sir Charles Hardy's Islands Kirby had formally advised Norman by letter that he had abandoned *Firefly* as a total wreck. He placed his crew as shipwrecked mariners under command of Commander Norman and asked for passage for himself and his crew as distressed British subjects.

Leaving Sir Charles Hardy's Islands they sailed on with emerging tensions. *Firefly* required pumping every four hours, was a wretched sailer and the horrid filthy stench continued. In Torres Strait, in accordance with maritime practice they called at the Post Office at Booby Island, checked the mail and anchored for the night. When morning dawned "Firefly" was nowhere to be seen. Taking advantage of a loosened tow rope she had broken away and made for the open sea in the dead of night. *Victoria* gave chase and brought her back covered with more dishonour.

On Friday 27th September both ships anchored at Bountiful Island to catch turtles to make up for the provisions lost in the shipwreck. Eight were put on board in less than three hours and twelve more were turned over on their backs on shore. That night the grass was set alight to assist in catching turtles. In two days 126 turtles were caught weighing between 150 and 200 lbs. On Sunday, 29th September, they anchored in Investigator Road, off Sweers Island. There they found the brig *Gratia* and the schooner *Native Lass* waiting with cargoes of stores and coals for the parties, having been chartered by the Victorian Government for the purpose. A land base for *Victoria* was formed on Sweers Island – a shed for stores and tents for one officer and three men. As coals and stores were landed a party was employed cutting grass for the horses and another employed on building a turtle pond. It consisted of a stone wall 20 feet below low water mark to high water mark; many turtles died before the pond was completed.

NAVIGATING THE ALBERT



On 30th September, Norman instructed his Lieutenant, G.A. Woods to probe the Albert River. Provisioned for 7 days, he was to

travel in the *Victoria's* barge with Landsborough and two native troopers. On their return to Sweers' Island on 7th October, they gave a very favourable report – plenty of good landing places; good grass, good water and every appearance of the *Firefly* being able to go well up the river. That night Woods returned in the barge to mark a course over the bar, through the mouth and into the Albert River.

Two days later *Firefly* was taken alongside *Victoria*, her tank filled with fresh water and stores loaded. Next day, with the hulk in tow, *Victoria* steered for the Albert River. Hanfield, was again in charge of this her last voyage. She carried fodder for only three days which made it critical to get *Firefly* into the Albert and land the horses. The shallow waters of the Gulf meant that *Victoria* had to drop her some distance from the mouth. *Firefly* had to depend on wind and tide in working her way to a suitable depot site and her final resting place. At 6.00a.m. on 11th October, under two jury or temporary masts and a fair wind, she steered for the mouth of the Albert. The long tug by *Victoria* was over and *Firefly* was on her own. The *Firefly* was unmanageable and in 3 hours, stuck on a sand bank. There she waited for the next high tide which occurs only once in 24 hours in these waters.

At next high water she started again and went for about 4 miles when she stuck again and had to wait another day for the high tide. On 14th October, after four days of hard work, everlasting pumping and the crew almost mutinous, *Firefly* entered the Albert, the first ship ever to do so. A favourable breeze and tide took the hulk some miles up the river where she stuck again. The horses had eaten all their fodder and the surrounding shores of mangroves and swamps looked uninviting. Three parties were sent out – two on land and one by boat. Henne was in a land party led by Landsborough which encountered an aboriginal camp occupied only by nude women and children to whom they gave presents to earn their confidence. The greatest wonder of the aboriginals was their clothing which they felt all over and took to be some kind of skin.

On 17th October, *Firefly* was taken alongside the western bank of the river, a stage erected and in two hours, 23 horses were walked ashore. Two weaker ones were left on board. Thus lightened, they hoped to make better progress but such was not to be. Attempts to take *Firefly* up to the head of the navigable portion of the Albert, suggested by the Victorian Committee was most suitable for the depot, were abandoned. On 9th November she reached as far as she could go. *Firefly* was midway between the mouth of the Albert River and the junction of the Barklay in a board reach of the river about 12 chains wide. There they made their depot. The horses were overlanded to a nearby pond and were soon thriving from the abundance of grass and fresh water.

<p>Note. from a 43. Tree marked  bears. 517.40 distant 130 lks.</p>  <p>- Mangrove - Open Country</p>	<p>Δ 18.00 11.00 Bg: 165.18</p>	<p>Mangroves 70 31 Clear Bank Albert 900 (43)</p>
<p>Open plains Clay Soil</p>	<p>Δ 27.00 23.50 11.00 Δ 4.1 Bg: 115.23</p>	<p>200 1200 Albert Mangroves Clear Bank (42)</p>
<p>Open plains Clay Soil</p>	<p>Δ 14.85 11.00 Δ 4.0 Bg: 89.26</p>	<p>115 121 300 900 Mangroves Clear Bank Sand Sp grove (41)</p>
<p>Open Country</p>	<p>Δ 20.00 11.00 Δ 3.9 Bg: 20.45</p>	<p>182 600 Albert (40)</p>

Orig. 20 ch = 1" Feature Survey of Burke Town. - G. Phillips 1866.

Norman, set up camp nearby to await the arrival of Walker. Tension grew between Norman and Landsborough as they waited and as Landsborough prepared to proceed to Central Mount Stuart – in the vicinity of Alice Springs. Norman entered in his journal:

At daylight, on boarding the hulk, found she had 3½ feet water in her hold; set them to work to pump her out. Found only seven horses shod; set the carpenter and two seaman to work to do the rest as fast as possible. Gave orders they were not to be taken off this job until it was done, as none belonging to the land party are willing to do the work, stating they did not come to do it. I am quite at a loss to make out what they did come for, expecting to get a knowledge of the country at the expense of the Government.

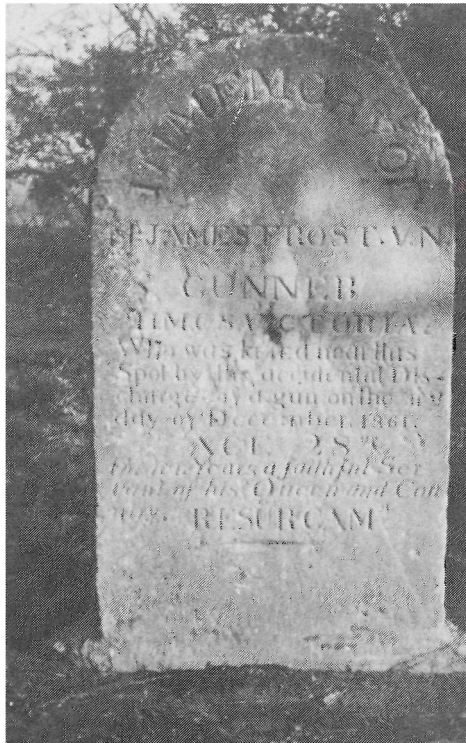
THE SEARCH FOR BURKE

Short expeditions were made searching for signs of Burke and Walker and blazing trees indicating the site of the depot. By 16th November the party consisting of Landsborough, Campbell, Allison and two aboriginals was ready to set out. Whilst Landsborough signed the paymaster's receipt for stores for 90 days, Bourne recorded their final preparations:

The pack and the other saddles were placed in a row on the ground, each load lying alongside its saddle, both marked with the same number, to prevent confusion, and to ensure the same being always together. To ensure perfect regularity, each horse with his load and saddle should be numbered or named in order that the same load and saddle may always go on the same horse, and their backs, which are the great difficulty, be properly and effectually taken care of. Our pack saddles are the ordinary ones, lightly made and fitted with breeching, breast plate and surcingle. For each saddle there are two strong canvas bags, to answer the part of panniers; they are square and with a lap, just in the shape of the old fashioned pockets which are found against the inside of the doors of stage coaches; the lap which is to keep the rain from the contents, being fastened down by a piece of rope, through an eyelet hole. This bag, edged with good half inch rope, is hung on hooks fastened below the pommel and cartle of the saddle, by means of a leather-covered eyelet hole in the rope at each of the upper corners of the bag. This operation is performed in a moment and the surcingle overall binds the load. Into these bags are put the stores sewn in several calico bags weighing about eighteen or twenty pounds each. In each of these flour bags was a bottle of rum or lime juice where it is pretty free from the risk of breakage. Medicine, sewing gear, tomahawks, spare horse shoes and nails, etc. were also packed in bags of this description, besides two horse-hide water bags each holding five

gallons. Round the neck of each horse is a strap, which is never taken off, to which his hobbles, are buckled immediately they are taken off his feet, a halter on each of the horse's heads, make his gear complete. The party were provisioned for ninety days at the rate of $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. flour, $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. jerked beef, $\frac{3}{4}$ oz. of tea and 6 ozs. sugar per day.

They left *Firefly* lying on a small sand bank in the centre of the river, rising to an even keel and falling on her side with the falling of the tide. It was terribly uncomfortable. *Firefly* was finally moved into a channel and by regular pumping kept upright. The channel was close to the west bank and a plank was laid ashore. Those sleeping on board included Bourne, Mr. Frost, cook, gunner and five men from the *Victoria* and Henne for a period. Life was monotonous. Mosquitoes and flies plagued them. To add to their boredom they were on restricted rations and there was constant pilfering by sailors from the *Victoria*. When one of Bourne's party complained, Norman responded by stopping the complainant's grog supply. Each evening, to accord with earlier advice given to Walker, a 12 lb. howitzer was fired at 8 p.m. followed half an hour later by a signal rocket and followed at 9 p.m. by a blue light.



Their monotony was broken on 17th December by the arrival of Walker who reported having seen tracks of Burke near the adjacent Flinders River. Three days later in his anxiety to follow up the tracks of Burke, Walker left. Meantime he fixed a rendezvous with Norman in the Flinders River. When Norman reached the rendezvous on 29th December he failed to find the bustling Walker. Before leaving for the Flinders, Norman left a letter for Landsborough, in case he returned during his absence, to the effect that he did not consider it necessary for Landsborough to go overland after Walker and that he ought to return to Brisbane by sea.

Bourne finally mastered the plague of mosquitoes by sleeping in a hammock on *Firefly* and getting the night watch to keep up smoke continuously. Christmas was celebrated with a dinner of local wild fowl. New Year's Day passed quietly and their short rations allowing no luxury other than an extra glass of grog. As Bourne recorded: "Everybody very dull and sleepy. I wish I were with one of the land parties. We have made a bowling alley on the deck of the brig, which, with a few books and a little shooting, helps to bear away the day. All hands wishing for Landsborough's return, when it is fully anticipated we shall all leave for Brisbane in the *Victoria*."

On 19th January Landsborough returned having penetrated only 250 miles. Meantime Norman having spent 18 days on the Flinders searching for Walker returned to Investigator Roads on 18th January. On 5th February Lt. Gascoigne arrived at *Firefly* with a letter from Norman advising Landsborough, that owing to shortage of provisions, he should return by the *Victoria*. Landsborough set off to confront the martinet Norman. Landsborough won the day. He was to return overland with a reconstructed party which included himself, Bourne, Leeson and 3 aboriginals.

In accordance with a recommendation from the Victorian Committee, Norman had stores buried in a tank in a conspicuous place near a tree – the depot tree – on which the word DIG was blazed. The *Victoria* crew men on *Firefly* left her abruptly on 8th February. Landsborough finally left the depot on 19th February for Melbourne "with the prospect of more fasting than feasting". All turned their backs on the *Firefly* and, in indecent haste, left her to rot in her grave.

KIRBY'S DEMISE

When *Gratia* finished unloading Kirby and his crew boarded her for Sourabaya, where she arrived on 20th December. There they purchased their passage to Sydney on the French ship *Reine des Anges* which sailed on 2nd January, 1862. For Kirby, 1862 was to be even more disastrous than 1861. *Reine des Anges* was under the command of a young and inexperienced Captain Gilliard whom

Kirby regarded as unfit for his duties. On 10th January, Kirby warned Gilliard there were indications of a cyclone. Gilliard ignored the warning. At midnight they encountered a fearful thunder storm and by 10.00 a.m. a hurricane struck her on her beams end. Little assistance could be obtained from the crew, most of whom were laid up with fever. At 3.00 p.m. the foretopgallant mast and royals broke and hung in the rigging, taking the flying boom with them. To make matters worse, a heavy sea struck the after part carrying the quarter boats and all on deck away with it, including all their live stock and fresh water. Kirby described events:

The hurricane still increased. During this time we were shipping fearful seas, and at 10.00 p.m. stove in the cabin bulkhead, and had several baskets of sugar washed out At daylight the appearance of the sea was awful in the extreme. The waves were mountains high, breaking fore and aft over the ship, which was running with bare poles . . . a heavy sea burst the cabin open, started the poop deck on the starboard side, washing away provisions, chronometres, and everything belonging to the passengers. The captain, mates, and some of the crew, were washed out of the cabin. My former chief officer, Mr. Scott, was at the wheel, and in order to save the captain from certain death, we lashed him to the mizen mast. At this time the captain (being utterly incompetent to manage the vessel) placed me in command.

Within 6 months of his humiliation when he ceded command of *Firefly*, Kirby's role had been reversed. Kirby sailed the vessel back to Sourabaya which they reached Sourabaya, starved, 48 days after the cyclone first struck. Kirby and his men were openly critical of the French sailors. At one stage Kirby remarked it was no wonder Nelson had licked them – a remark which was not well received. Kirby sought £1,000 for himself and his crew for their services rendered in saving the vessel, and for return of the money paid for the abortive passage on the French ship – but all to no avail.

Kirby embarked on the *Woodlark* of Aberdeen paying 200 rupees for his passage. Off Cape Liptrap she fell in with the *Norman* bound for Melbourne. Kirby boarded her and returned to Melbourne after an absence of nine months.

The first exploration of the lands surrounding the base of the Gulf had been made by Stokes. In a gig and whale boat he explored the Albert River which he named after Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert. He was so enthralled with the quality of the country that he called it the Plains of Promise. Its proximity to China, Singapore and India added to its attraction and inspired Trelawny Saunders in 1853 to publish his work – "The Asiatic Mediterranean, and its Australian Port; the Settlement of Port Flinders and the Province of Albert."

THE BIRTH OF BURKETOWN

The postobit reports of Landsborough, Walker and McKinlay all made glowing references to the quality of the pastoral country in the Gulf and there ensued a race for those virgin lands. Sir Roderick Murchison in his Presidential address to the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1863, stated:

We now clearly know that the territory at the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria was most correctly named the 'Plains of Promise' – a land not too hot, according to Landsborough, for British colonization . . . we may be assured that the region will soon be occupied by our settlers; for Landsborough has told us, and McKinlay has confirmed it, that the country south of the Gulf of Carpentaria is a land rich in herbage, and well fitted for the pasturing of horses, horned cattle and sheep – the plains being as fattening as any he had seen in Australia.

John Hall of Emerald Hill, Victoria, was quick off the mark. In 1862 he published a pamphlet which amounted to a prospectus. Its title was "The Colonisation of North Australia, Prince Albert Land; First Settlement Burke City, on the Albert River". He required 300 members to subscribe £80 each to be used;

In purchasing a ship and tender of sufficient tonnage to convey the colonists to their destination, with provisions for twelve months; also the necessary implements, horses, cattle and sheep for stock bullocks for fresh provisions, seeds etc., together with arms and ammunition to ensure the successful result of the undertaking.

All lands three miles from the centre of the proposed Burke City would be open for agricultural occupation. Each of the 300 subscribers would receive 320 acres of agricultural land and a half acre allotment in Burke City. In addition, each subscriber would have preemptive rights to neighbouring lands in the district for pastoral occupation. Hall's remarkable prospectus asserted that the district had the finest sheep and cattle pastures in Australia and its soil and climate were capable of producing unlimited supplies of cotton, indigo, tobacco, maize, wheat, potatoes, rice, millet, oils and gums. Big profits were expected from opium.

Hall's proposal does not appear to have got off the ground but a number of ventures by individuals did. By 1865, 109 runs had been applied for. That year Edward Palmer saw the *Firefly*, then in an upright position with the tide flowing in and out where the side had been cut open at Sir Charles Hardy's Islands. Some settlers had been there for two years without fresh supplies. Townsville, the nearest town, was 600 miles away by land. George Sutherland, an early settler recorded ". . . we had to live for weeks at a time on mutta, blue

bush and pig weed, not even a smoke of tobacco or a grain of salt". Men had to turn tailors and make clothes out of an old blanket.

Burketown's career as a commercial port commenced in June, 1865, with the arrival of the *Jacmel Packet* chartered and loaded by R. Towns & Co. from Sydney. The first vessel to enter the Albert since the *Firefly*, she carried a wide assortment of cargo including pigs, dogs, fowls, houses and stores, drays and rations of rum and other spirits. The early settlers, having not indulged in a spree for years, made up for lost time at the unpacking of the cargo. Palmer records they "... thoroughly enjoyed themselves in bush fashion, a fight every half hour, horse racing on the plains or in the street as it was called, strong rum for everyone".

Wool was shipped from Burketown to Sydney in 1866. It was shorn at Canobie near Cloncurry, and then overlanded 200 miles to Burketown. That year saw the arrival of a boiling down plant. It was erected near the *Firefly* and the depot tree.

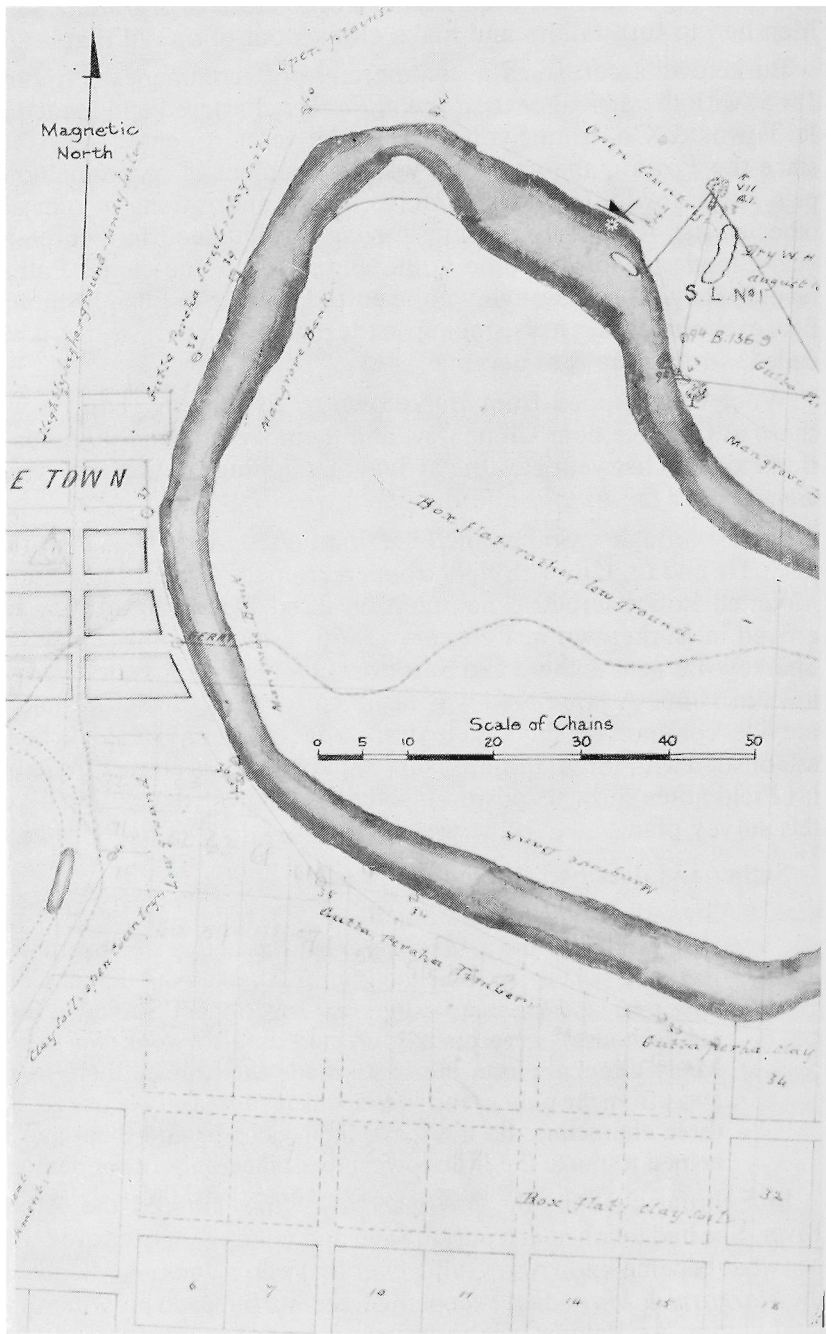
Landsborough was appointed the first Police Magistrate at Burketown. He and Lt. Uhr with eight troopers from the Queensland Native Mounted Police left Rockhampton on 22nd December, 1865, and arrived in Burketown in February, 1866. Land Commissioner J.P. Sharkey was sent to there and Surveyor George Phillips surveyed the town in 1866. A large area was reserved for travelling stock and to provide commonage in anticipation of a trade in livestock being established with India. Phillips' survey plan does not show *Firefly* but his Field notes show its position, some 27 chains from station 42 on this survey plan.

Sutherland decribed Burketown in early 1866:

Burketown was now an established township – of a sort – very rough and unhealthy. Landsborough was acting as Government Resident when we reached there, Sharkey as Land Commissioner and George Phillips as Government Surveyor. Two public houses were quickly erected as also were two stores. Many criminals from the south made their abode there to get away from the police, and so to speak made it a city of refuge. But these characters did not leave their vices behind them and so helped to make the little township a place only fit for demons.

In February, 1866, the *Margaret & Mary* entered the Albert River. She had touched at a port in Java and unknowingly carried with her what became known as Gulf Fever or Yellow Jack. All hands on the *Margaret & Mary* died except the Captain, but even his wife was a fatal victim. As Palmer was to write:

There is little doubt that the great mortality among the residents of Burketown during 1866 was traceable to the infection brought



*Feature Survey of Burke Town and its' vicinity.
G. Phillips 1866 – 2nd Class Surveyor*

by this vessel. It was the wet season at the time, and this, in conjunction with the reckless life led by most of the people, and the want of medical assistance, increased the danger of the disease, and scores of strong men succumbed to its malign influence. It would be difficult to say how many men fell victims to the epidemic, but there must have been at least a hundred, besides those who died on the surrounding stations. The disease, which ended in fever and delirium, was as fatal to the strong as to the weak, and the little cemetery soon looked like that of an old established town, so numerous were the graves. This outbreak gave Burketown an evil name. People began to leave it.

Landsborough led most of the surviving population back to Sweers Island as a sanitarium. About a year after his earlier visit, Sutherland was again in Burketown which he then described as follows:

In visiting Burketown this time, changes were few in that small hamlet. Progress was not visible. In fact the place, like the cow's tail, appeared to be growing downwards. There was very little trade, but still much sickness. To add to its decline a port was opened on the Norman River, which drew away many people from Burketown. Then the Norman was reckoned to be a much better seaport than the Albert. Landsborough had left Burketown, and Sharkey and George Phillips soon after. A short time only elapsed when the place was almost quite deserted".

The Plains of Promise, Burketown, and the Albert River district never rose to the heights to which Stokes, Trelawny Saunders, Hall, Landsborough, Walker and Murchison confidently predicted. The land had cruelly deceived her explorers and early settlers. For nearly 100 years the remains of *Firefly* were visible in the Albert. Today the depot tree still stands but *Firefly* can no longer be seen. In concluding his Narrative of the *Firefly* voyage, Kirby wrote, with prophetic accuracy:

The names of Burke and Wills will live in the grateful memories of the colonists, while those engaged in subordinate capacities in connection with the Exploration Expedition, however great their labours or endurance, will be forgotten and disregarded.

Captain W.C. Thomson, who had the salt waters of the Gulf and Torres Strait in his veins, and who contributed papers on those topics to the Queensland Royal Geographical Society acquired a copy of Kirby's Narrative. Thomson noted on his copy:

Poor Kirby. I met him on the beach at Thursday Is. He was walking towards Macnulty's Hotel. While standing at the Bar. Someone was showing a sword sheathed in a walking stick that he had brought from one of the China Boats. Kirby put his breast against the point, saying it was no good and staggered on to it when the point pierced his heart and he fell dead".

The evidence given at the inquest corroborates Thomson's succinct note. The Thursday Island Coroner's Certificate shows that Thomas Kirby, Master Mariner, of stout build and ruddy complexion, died at the Thursday Island Hotel on 10th March, 1888, from haemorrhage caused by a sword wound in the aorta. There were no suspicious circumstances.

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