

# Innamincka/Cooper Creek State Heritage Area

Innamincka/Cooper Creek was declared a State Heritage Area on 16 May 1985.

## HISTORY

Innamincka and Cooper Creek have a rich history.

The area has also been associated with many other facets of the state's history since colonial settlement. Names such as Charles Sturt, Sidney Kidman, Cordillo Downs, the Australian Inland Mission and the Reverend John Flynn are intrinsically woven into the stories of Innamincka and the Cooper Creek.

Its significance for Aboriginal people spans thousands of years as a trade route and a source of abundant food and fresh water. The area's Aboriginal history also includes significant contacts with explorers, pastoralists and settlers. Many sources believe that the name 'Innamincka' comes from two Aboriginal words meaning 'your shelter' or 'your home'.

European contact with the region came first with the explorers and later with the establishment of the pastoral industry, transport routes and service centres. Cooper Creek was named by Captain Charles Sturt on 13 October 1845, when he crossed the watercourse at a point approximately 24 kilometres west of the current Innamincka township. The water was very low at the time, hence his use of the term 'creek' rather than 'river' to describe what often becomes a deep torrent of water. Charles Cooper, after whom the waterway was named, was a South Australian judge - later Chief Justice Sir Charles Cooper. On the same expedition, Sturt also named the Strzelecki Desert after the eccentric Polish explorer, Paul Edmund de Strzelecki, who was the first European to climb and name Mount Kosciusko.

The area is well known for its associations with explorers Burke and Wills. It was in this region of the Cooper Creek that the bodies of the missing explorers were discovered, after their ill-fated south to north crossing of the continent in 1860-61. Despite being lavishly equipped, the Burke and Wills expedition foundered through bad luck and rash leadership. The expedition leaders, Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills, both died beside the Cooper Creek. 18 year old John King was the sole survivor of the party that had reached the Gulf of Carpentaria. He was supported by local Aboriginal people, who provided food and shelter. King was eventually discovered by the search party led by Alfred Howitt, who also found and buried the bodies of Burke and Wills.

The first settlers in the area were customs officers who, before Federation in 1901, collected taxes from the drovers crossing the Queensland border to travel down the Strzelecki Creek. The drovers naturally developed a thirst for something stronger than water while their stock was counted, and in 1871 a hotel was opened beside the Cooper.

Gradually the country was settled. In 1874 William Campbell formed the Innamincka Station, of 3540km<sup>2</sup>. This property included the chain of permanent waterholes where the bodies of Burke and Wills had been found.

In 1879 coaches started a fortnightly mail run from Beltana to Innamincka Station. Transport and communication to the area greatly improved during the 1880s when Afghan cameleers took over the mail run, and government wells were sunk along the Strzelecki Track.

The original inn became the nucleus of a small settlement that soon included a 'lean-to' police house, storehouse, cellar and meathouse, a blacksmith and a cemetery. The droving of stock, and the passage of camel trains carrying wool bales or supplies between the northern stations and southern railheads, led to a steady stream of customers at both the hotel and police station during the 1880s. A permanent police station, costing £1,500 and delayed by drought, was washed away by floods in 1885, before it was completed.

A succession of droughts put impossible pressures on the sparse vegetation, and pioneers moved off their selections as conditions worsened. In 1904 Sidney Kidman had the vision to buy out the pastoral stations in the channel country, uniting them into one large holding. The original Innamincka homestead was washed away by floods in 1908, and a new building of timber and galvanised iron was constructed the following year, on the present homestead site (following rebuilding in 1942, and again in 1963, nothing now remains of the earlier buildings). Initially both sheep and cattle were run on properties in the region, but the recurring droughts accounted for severe flock losses, and eventually sheep production was discontinued.



A description of life at Innamincka during the 1920s includes a reference to one of the town's well-known attractions of the time - a massive bottle dump. This heap, outside the Innamincka Hotel, grew to be 200m long and two metres high.

In 1929 Reverend John Flynn's Australian Inland Mission opened the Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home to provide medical and social services to the isolated population. This made Innamincka an important centre in the region, until shifting sand during a 1930s drought closed the Strzelecki Track, and an alternate route was developed from Birdsville to the Marree rail link (the Birdsville Track). A pedal radio, installed at the nursing home in the early 1930s, lessened Innamincka's isolation and provided its first instant link with the outside world. During its 22 year existence the Nursing Home became the venue for meetings, dances, a local library, a post office, church services and Sunday School. It closed in 1951, following the success of the new Flying Doctor Service. Shortly afterwards the police station, hotel and store also closed, and the town's demise was complete.

The Innamincka township was deserted until 1971, when a store and hotel were erected near the ruins of the nursing home. These modern businesses have expanded and continue to be the dominant features in the town, together with the restored A.I.M. building (1994), which is now the headquarters and interpretive centre of the area's National Parks Office. A number of additional dwellings have since been constructed in the new township. The area is now visited by an increasing number of tourists, who are attracted by the remote landscape, its Aboriginal associations and the historical links to Burke and Wills.

## FEATURES

The Innamincka/Cooper Creek state heritage area has a distinctive natural character exemplified by its isolated, tranquil waterway. It is within the Innamincka Regional Reserve, administered by DENR. The area is rich in Aboriginal associations and heritage places, and contains numerous sites of European historical significance. The state heritage area is on the Innamincka Pastoral Lease, and its boundaries include the site of the original Innamincka Station homestead complex, as well as the remains of early cattle yards.

### Natural Features

The Innamincka region is renowned for its diversity of arid and wetland habitats, plant communities and wildlife. Especially important is the Cooper Creek, which is part of the Cooper Channel system, draining a total area of 296000km<sup>2</sup> in Australia's inland. Conservationists consider this system to be of world environmental significance.

The state heritage area boundaries encompass the significant section of the Cooper Creek that retains permanent water even during severe drought. In this area the Cooper is effectively a series of waterholes, linked by the main channel. The Cullyamurra Waterhole, which has a maximum depth of 27m at the feed end, is one of the most magnificent waterholes in Central Australia. It has formed during great floods, when the Cooper is restricted by the Innamincka Choke, a very narrow passage at its eastern end. Other well-known waterholes within the precinct include Minkie and Policeman's Waterholes.

This wetland sustains a diversity of fauna, including many species of mammals, fish, reptiles and frogs. The most obvious animals though are the birds, many of which are waterbirds. In addition to the resident species and the nomadic breeders, this region is an important migratory stopover for large numbers of waders and shorebirds.

The dominant vegetation in the area is Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) and Coolibah (*Eucalyptus microtheca*). Many plant species are now locally extinct, and a number of habitats are under threat from rabbits, cattle and park visitors.

The state heritage area falls within the Innamincka Regional Reserve, which was established in 1988 to assure the integrity of the wetlands. This 14000km<sup>2</sup> reserve was the first of its type in Australia, facilitating both commercial use and (managed) recreational use of the area.

### Aboriginal Heritage Sites

For thousands of years the Cooper Creek was a major Aboriginal trade route and a source of abundant food and fresh water. Many sites and artefacts have been located along the waterholes, and on the floodplain and gibber plateau. These include engravings, quarries, middens and tool-making scatter, and are evidence of the long association of Aboriginal people with this region. Within the state heritage area, for example, rock engravings at the eastern end of the Cullyamurra Waterhole are thought to be 4,000 years old.

### Monuments and Markers

Within the Innamincka/Cooper Creek state heritage area boundaries are a number of historical markers relating to the renowned Burke and Wills expedition, and to the deaths of its two leaders in June 1861.



A memorial cairn, 20km west of the present town, indicates the approximate area in which William Wills' body was found and buried by the rescue party in September 1861. The same party found Robert O'Hara Burke's body under a Coolibah on the banks of the Cooper, further east. A memorial plaque and a fenced area, eight kilometres east of the town, indicate the site of his original grave. Both bodies were exhumed in January 1863 and taken to Melbourne for burial.

John King, who survived the ordeal, was cared for by local Aboriginal people. Approximately eight kilometres west of the town, in what is thought to be the area where he was found, is a stone cairn and a tree stump, emblazoned with the word 'king'.

The site of Howitt's depot, on the eastern bank of Cullyamurra Waterhole, has also been marked with a cairn. This was erected at what is thought to be the site of the rescue party's campsite, based on information from Howitt's journal.

### **Built Heritage**

The current Innamincka Station homestead is located within the boundaries of the state heritage area, as is the site of the original buildings. The earlier homestead was washed away by floods in 1908, and nothing now remains of these structures. Remains of stock yards beside the Cullyamurra Waterhole are the only physical evidence of early pastoral settlement in the area.

Innamincka's cemetery and the ruins of the pre-1950s hotel and police station buildings are within the state heritage area, near Cooper Creek Crossing, and are tangible reminders of the region's early history.

The present township of Innamincka is located on the edge of the state heritage area precinct. The most dominant structure in the town is the former Elizabeth Symon Nursing Home. This Australian Inland Mission building is a state heritage-listed place and is a significant feature of South Australia's cultural heritage. The nursing home, which had fallen into ruin following its closure in 1951, was restored in 1994 and is now the park headquarters of the Innamincka Regional Reserve, and an interpretive centre for the town.

## **VISITING**

The Innamincka/Cooper Creek region is a focal point for tourism in the state's remote northeast. It is a popular destination in its own right, or a service stopover for travellers heading to Coongie Lakes or further north. There are no public facilities available along the Strzelecki Track from Lyndhurst, so any trip to Innamincka must be well-planned with due consideration for the terrain and season.

The town of Innamincka lies within the state heritage area boundary, and both the town and the state heritage areas are within the Innamincka Regional Reserve. A desert parks pass is necessary for entry to this park.

Tourist accommodation is provided at both the Innamincka Hotel and Trading Post, although most visitors are attracted to the region specifically to camp at the spectacular waterholes. Camping facilities, including toilets and BBQs, are provided in the Regional Reserve. A public shower block is available in the town.

Visitor experiences include fishing, swimming, canoeing and nature walks. Brochures highlighting the numerous sites associated with the Burke and Wills expedition are available in the town, and the renowned 'Dig Tree' is approximately a 70km drive across the Queensland border.



### **Further Information**

For further information please contact the State Heritage Unit

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