

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

OF FOWLERS GAP STATION

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Patterns of exploration and early pastoral settlement in this area, as elsewhere in the Australian arid zone, were determined by the availability of natural waters, specifically the Darling River and the smaller and often ephemeral supplies along local drainage in the Barrier Range. These provided permanent bases from which activities could temporarily be extended into the adjacent plains after rains. The first European explorer in the area, Charles Sturt who experienced drought conditions on his journey in 1844-5 followed the Darling River to the point that gave the shortest plains crossing to the southern end of the Barrier Range. He then moved northwards along the west side of the Range to Floods Creek, named after one of his party, where he camped for three weeks on a waterhole about 25 km WNW of Fowlers Gap.

From this point Sturt made a short journey across the plains to the east of the Barrier Range between December 13th and 16th 1844, and gave the first report on the condition of the country near Fowlers Gap. He wrote (Sturt, 1849) "immediately on the other side of the range, there was a plain of great width, and beyond, at a distance of between 50 and 60 miles, was a range of hills running parallel to those near the camp. The first portions of the plains were open, and we could trace several creeks winding along them, but the distant parts were apparently covered with dense and black scrub. Descending to the eastward towards the plain we rode down a little valley in which we found a small pool of water; at this we stopped for a short time, but as the valley turned too much to the north I left it". This may well have been Fowlers Creek. His general direction was ENE and at 12 miles out into the plains he "crossed the dry beds of several lagoons"; at 16 miles he "entered dense brush of pine trees, acacia and other shrubs in pure sand". This is consistent with a traverse from Fowlers Creek, across the line of claypans that includes Nucha Lake, and through the sand dunes in the east of the plains to the north end of the Bynguano Range, identified by Sturt with Mt. Lyell. The description of the plains country on the map that accompanies Sturt's journal is appropriate to the floodout of Fowlers Creek on The Selection across the northeastern boundary of Fowlers Gap Station, ".... plains lower than those W fall of Wr to N - plains swampy in winter with pools of water, now dry - grass on the plains tho' barren soil". Periodically he referred to "barren" areas, or to areas with "some grass".

Sturt traversed the area at the onset of drought, and the sparseness of vegetation in the area before European settlement is confirmed by the fact that when Sturt returned a year later, when conditions were excessively dry, he found that all bird and animal life had gone, and his horses and bullocks could barely find enough fodder to sustain their emaciated bodies. It can

be concluded that even before any pastoral occupation took place, the lower pasture layers were scanty on the hills, that on the plains there were grassy areas interspersed with claypans, and that herbage of value persisted close to natural waters during dry periods. The tree cover was probably much denser than now.

In the interval between Sturt's return in 1845 and the departure of Burke and Wills from Menindee in 1860, a line of pastoral stations was established along the Darling River frontage, a pattern to be strengthened by the advent of river on the Darling after 1859. Under the Waste Lands Occupation Act of 1846, the West Darling area formed part of the Unsettled Districts beyond the Nineteen Counties, in which squatting licences could be granted for "runs" capable of supporting 4000 sheep at an assessed stocking rate, but in 1851 the new land district of Albert was formed, comprising all of New South Wales beyond the Darling River north to the 30th parallel. Systematic surveys and allocation of runs began here in 1854 and grazing licences were apparently already being issued by 1850, but settlement continued to outrun the extension of administration in this remote area, and many of the early settlers who took up land west of the Darling did so without licences. The pastoral leases under the 1846 Act were mainly of 32,000 acres for up to 14 years, and there was no limit to the area that could be held by one man provided he held the land in runs of standard size and paid his assessment on the number of stock held on each. In the absence of proper surveys, this led to a good deal of land speculation by middlemen, and a tendency to occupy strategic sites such as waterholes and pockets of better-quality grazing land. Behind the river frontages, back blocks were taken up for temporary occupation after rains; for instance Kinchega Station near the present-day Menindee extended back towards the Barrier Range along Yancowinna Creek and its soakages.

It was in the decade after 1860 that the main movement west of the Darling took place. By this time most of the frontage country had been secured, there was the additional attraction of good reports of pastoral potential from the parties which followed Burke and Wills in 1861-2, and also the stimulus given by the threat of selection in areas further east under the 1861 Crown Lands Occupation Act, which allowed the taking up of pre-emptive leases and small freeholds on land held on pastoral runs. Already before 1860, pastoralists had been exploring the country west to the Barrier Range, which was itself an avenue for travel northwards. For instance Tw 12 0 0 12 7154

area and move to water at Bancannia or Cobham Lakes, or even further afield. It was not until 1871 that a homestead was built at Sturts Meadows, by which time a flock of 18,000 sheep occupied the run. To the west and north Corona was also occupied in 1863-4 on behalf of Clough and Co., with Robert Gow as manager. It can be assumed that all the easily-watered country in the area of Fowlers Gap had been taken up by 1870, even if not effectively occupied. At this time there were no man-made waters and sheep were shepherded as protection against the dingo. There are many reports of attacks by aborigines on the first stations including one on Corona in 1867.

II. EARLY PASTORAL DEVELOPMENT

The philosophy behind the 1861 Crown Lands Occupation Act and its subsequent amendments was that the "natural" carrying capacity of the land - already held over-optimistically as one sheep to between 9 and 10 acres - could be raised further through the provision of improvements such as fencing and watering points, and by "judicious stocking" and consequent trampling of the ground. The enormous areas of pastoral runs west of the Darling, large parts of them only temporarily occupied, represented a challenge to this view and its aim of establishing closer settlement by resident graziers on medium-sized holdings. Faced with the threat of selection, the pastoralists were also being pressed to introduce improvements - in expectation of increased returns - through increased rentals which were raised from 0.15d per acre in 1861 to 0.37d per acre in 1880. In the event, few Homestead Leases were taken up in the arid area west of the Darling River by *bona fide* selectors. However the burden of higher rentals and the high costs of providing water and fencing for permanent occupation put the individual squatter without capital at a considerable disadvantage. Many of them left the newly-occupied areas in the dry years after 1865, particularly during the period of depressed wool prices in 1868-70, among them Wallace from Sturts Meadows. Their place was taken by the extension of large company holdings such as that of Corona Station, which early in the 1870's incorporated runs to the north and east to take in parts of Sturts Meadows and Cobham, and brought what is now Fowlers Gap Station within its area of more than one million acres.

The Fowlers Gap area was affected only indirectly by the wave of mineral prospecting and mining activity that followed in the region after 1870. In 1869-70 a gold strike occurred at Mt. Browne and subsequently one at Tibooburra. Traffic northwards increased as a result, and the bullock track from Umberumberka through Euriowie and Fowlers Gap to Bancannia and Packsaddle developed into a mail route. The mi

special needs of the more arid western part which was now constituted as the Western Division. The Act attempted to provide security of tenure for the squatter appropriate to his investment in improvements, whilst yet furthering the cause of closer settlement. The large agglomerations of pastoral runs were now legally consolidated and divided into two approximately equal parts known as Leasehold Areas and Resumed Areas. The holder was granted a Pastoral Lease of the Leasehold Area for 15 years with an option of further extension of five years; he was entitled to an Occupation Licence of the Resumed Area, which was renewable annually, but this area and any vacant Crown Land were available for the selection of Homestead Leases with terms similar to those of Pastoral Leases. Subsequent amending Acts extended the terms of Pastoral Leases to 1918 and of Homestead Leases to 1930. The rent on both Pastoral and Homestead Leases was to be appraised for the first five years by a Local Land Board, the rents to be increased automatically by one-fourth for the second five-year period, and by one half for the remainder of the term, in the expectation of increasing returns following development.

Corona Pastoral Holding No. 195 was gazetted in July 1885, with a Leasehold Area of 828,820 acres in the south and a Resumed Area of 824,100 acres extending to the north. The holder was Dalgety and Co. Most of what is now Fowlers Gap Station was included in the northeast corner of the Leasehold Area, of which the eastern boundary is to be seen in the present eastern limit of Fowlers Gap Station: the old northern boundary survives in the present northern fences of North Mandleman and Sandstone Paddocks.

The improvement of pastoral leases proceeded during the 1870's and 1880's. Natural soakages had already been replaced by wells and earth tanks along stream courses, but after 1879 the mechanical drilling rig appeared. Bores could now be put down at a cost of about 11s. per foot compared with £4 per foot for well-sinking and the increased range of depths allowed a more rational siting of waters. Sandy Creek No. 1 Bore near the stock route in the north of Fowlers Gap Station dates from 1893. The practice of shepherding disappeared, and the sheepfolds which had given rise to severe erosion and dust blowing were replaced by fenced enclosures. With the development of light-weight fencing costing as little as £5 per mile, the grid of five-mile paddocks began to extend across the country, and some of the oldest fences along the eastern and northern boundaries of Fowlers Gap probably date from the late 1880's. There was a general depletion of tree cover in the area to provide fence posts, both in the hills and along river frontages.

These investments were encouraged by an optimistic view of the carrying capacity of the country and by an official faith, expressed in sliding scales of increased rentals, that its potential could be more fully realized by station improvements. Fostered by high sheep prices during the early 1880s, and afterwards by good seasons, flocks of considerable size were built up. From less than 2 millions in 1880, sheep numbers west of the Darling rose to a peak of almost 8 millions in 1894. No figures are available for Corona Station at that period, but in 1877 Mt. Gipps carried 71,000 sheep on 540,000 acres, and Wonaminta Station, to the northeast of Fowlers Gap, sheared 92,000 sheep in 1892.

III. PASTORAL CRISIS OF THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The last 11, years of the 19th century brought increasing difficulties for the Pastoral Industry in the far west of New South Wales. The increase in sheep had continued through

and had in fact been provoked by a period of declining wool prices after 1884 and by the financial recession and further fall in wool revenues after 1890. This phenomenon of growing stock numbers combined with declining returns whether from natural or economic causes, is so characteristic of the history of the pastoral industry in the Australian arid zone as to invalidate the use of stocking rates as an index either of grazing potential or of prosperity (Duncan, 1972).

The long drought that followed 1895 found the area severely overstocked at a time when there were few opportunities to transport sheep. Stock prices fell and a thriving boiling-down works was established at Menindee in 1891. Sheep numbers decreased sharply in the drought years after 1895, to less than 3 millions by 1901, but it is generally held that at this period much of the saltbush country and other perennial pastures underwent a deterioration from which they have not since recovered, particularly in holding paddocks, along stock routes, and near watering points. The southern part of Fowlers Gap Station, the frontages of Fowlers Creek, and much of the plains and foothill country to the east and north still reflect this degradation. Considerable soil erosion ensued, sand drifting was widespread, and dust storms were noted to be more common.

To this was added the problem of rabbit infestation from 1890 onwards. The rabbit had spread across the Darling River in 1884 and by 1886 had reached the Queensland and South Australian borders. Rabbits reached plague numbers several times in the following decades, and during drought they caused severe depletion of pasture grasses and widespread ringbarking of edible trees and shrubs. Damage was particularly extensive in the Resumem

poor condition of the country between the hills and Fowlers Creek which formed part of the stock route was noted, it being badly wind-eroded and containing only sparse annual saltbush and grass. Signs of degradation were also apparent in the absence of perennial saltbush f

They continued to fluctuate about this figure, for the decade 1910-20 was also one of drought, but although they exceeded 5 millions in 1925 they never again attained the peak of the early 1890's. This is generally attributed to the deterioration of carrying capacity of the natural pastures following the heavy stocking which continued into the drought years after 1895, and it has been claimed that such stability as has been achieved has been the result of man-made improvements, particularly the provision of additional watering points which have brought more land within the reach of stock (Perry, 1970).

Wool prices slumped badly during the depression years 1928-32, yet sheep numbers were generally maintained until late in the long drought period of 1940-45, again demonstrating that the high stocking rates encouraged by good seasons and favourable prices are maintained with falling prices, as a counter to diminishing revenue.

The records of Corona Station during the 1920's and 1930's reflect the state of the pastoral industry in the region generally, with periods of drought and occasional better seasons, rabbit plagues, stock losses and strongly fluctuating sheep numbers and repeated requests for relief from rentals on the basis of diminished carrying capacity.

Apart from lower or deferred rentals, another form of relief requested was extension of tenure to give greater financial manoeuvre. In 1930 existing pastoral leases were offered an extension of up to 25 years, but in return for withdrawals of up to half their Leasehold Areas for further subdivision. Under the Western Lands Amendment Acts of 1932 and 1934 this was redefined as "one quarter of their land immediately, an eighth in 1943, and an eighth in 1948" (King, 1957). These areas were to be used to establish new Western Lands Leases and to build up smaller holdings to economic size. However the Corona Pastoral Company did not fully exercise this option, and the lease as gazetted in June 1932 was to continue only until October 1947.

The Amendment Acts were in response to strong pressure for land in conditions of high unemployment. They emphasised the concept of the home maintenance area - a rural equivalent of the basic wage - capable of supporting 3-5000 sheep in the more accessible parts of the Western Division and up to a maximum of 10,000 in the more remote and arid areas. They introduced the right to extend existing leases to perpetuity and to grant new leases, subject to a restriction to a home maintenance area in both cases. The majority of the large land-holders accepted the offer of extended leasehold in return for giving up part of their area, but there was some resistance west of the Darling, notably from the Kidman group of companies, which preferred to retain interim control over its entire areas with the intention of eventually transferring its interests to Queensland and South Australia. The Corona holding was thus to remain intact until the termination of the lease in 1947, when it would become due for complete subdivision.

The Act of 1934 also established the Western Lands Commission under the direction of a single Commissioner. The closer supervision of land use which now characterises Western Lease Holdings was instituted; Local Land Boards were set up to decide on lease allocations, and such allocations included for the first time a restriction on the numbers of stock that could be carried. The process of land subdivision, which had previously been relatively slow west of the Darling, began to speed up after the 1934 legislation, but it was to be significantly advanced by a wartime Labor Government which in 1943 directed the simultaneous withdrawal from pastoral leases of areas which under the 1934 Act were to be ceded separately in 1943 and 1948. Complete enforcement of subdivision followed with the

1949 Amendment Act, which in the face of new demands for land from returned ex-servicemen fixed the maximum holding of further leases in the Western Division at two living areas. Heathcote (1964) records that 96 per cent of the Western Division had been divided into living areas by 1956, and that all the large old pastoral leases had been broken

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role of stone in stabilising surface soil.

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VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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