



This 1886 map of WA shows the major waymarks on the current Albany Highway route, leaving Kelmscott near Perth, passing through Kojonup and Mount Barker before arriving in Albany. Unusually for its date, the map also includes many Nyoongar place names.  
 Royal Western Australian Historical Society



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## *Overland from Perth to Albany: a journey of botanical intrigue*

The journey from Perth to Albany—a pleasure to be enjoyed by delegates to the 2014 AGHS annual national conference—has long been a beguiling byway of botanical intrigue.

In the founding years of the Swan River Colony, an overland route between Perth and Albany became a preoccupation of the new government under Captain Stirling. A serviceable track between Swan River and King George Sound would be the basis of a vital economic and communications network linking the isolated settlements. Moreover, a continuous road would serve as a potent symbol of settler ambition in the harsh and unfamiliar Western Australian landscape.

For today's travellers along the Albany Highway, the journey reverberates with intriguing anecdotes from the historical record. On the one hand,

surveyors, explorers, convicts, homesteaders, and mail carriers endured thirst, starvation, isolation, and the elements as they crossed the unmapped hinterlands of the colony. On the other, early naturalists and botanical artists experienced a sense of euphoria in encountering profuse wildflowers carpeting the hills and valleys during spring months. And, on closer inspection, the plants themselves still seem to confound the botanical norms of the other hemisphere.

The 410-kilometre trip now takes approximately five hours by car. Southbound travellers leave the Perth suburbs of Kelmscott and Armadale, ascend the Darling Scarp, cross the Hotham and Williams rivers and, in time, gain a sudden glimpse of the mountainous Stirling Range and Porongorups to the east before arriving in Albany and the Great Southern region. Not limited to the automobile, twenty-first century sojourners can still traverse the landscape by coach, train, horseback, or foot.

Duncan Cooper's watercolour painting of Albany's Princess Royal Harbour (c.1854), so named in the late eighteenth century by George Vancouver after Princess Charlotte Augusta Matilda. National Library of Australia (nla.pic-an 2686136)





The Grove of the Unforgotten within Araluen Botanic Park.  
Photo: John Ryan

*the journey reverberates with intriguing anecdotes from the historical record*

The pedestrian-only Bibbulmun Track parallels the Albany Highway from Jarrahdale State Forest and the Monadnocks Reserve, intersecting the bitumen at North Bannister, and then striking a southwesterly course through the karri country of Pemberton and Walpole. Bearing the name of the Nyoongar people of the South-West, the 963-kilometre ‘Bib’ track was proposed by bushwalker Geoff Schafer in 1972 and completed nearly twenty-five years later, including trackside shelters and water tanks. Look out for the yellow Dreamtime serpent route markers near the Bibbulmun’s terminus at the Albany Visitor Centre overlooking Princess Royal Harbour at journey’s end.

After Armadale, Bannister is the next waymark. In 1830, explorer and pastoralist Thomas Bannister led the first attempt by a European to forge an overland passage. The party paralleled

the course of the later highway until crossing the Williams River, followed the Hillman River south, and veered perilously off course towards Mount Roe and the Southern Ocean. On reaching Broke Inlet near present-day Walpole, exhausted, famished, and disoriented, Bannister and his party walked another nineteen days east through thickly forested country until arriving at the Albany outpost on King George Sound (which had been named in 1791 after the reigning monarch by British explorer George Vancouver).

Now only faintly detectable on maps, the towns of Bannister and North Bannister were once crucial resupply points for the fortnightly horse-drawn Royal Mail service. By 1840, mail carriers left Perth on the fifteenth of each month, taking twelve days to reach Albany. After three days recuperation, the team commenced the return trip on the first of the following month. The loss of freight to fires, floods, and bushrangers incited constant public complaints. The horse-drawn mail cycle continued until the advent of railway and road lines connecting the settlements.

A short diversion from the highway now takes you to Araluen Botanic Park. Sheltered from prevailing winds, the valley microclimate produces a unique botanical haven. The area is colder and wetter than Perth, offering ideal conditions for rhododendrons, azaleas, and species uncommon to the Mediterranean climate



Ellis Rowan’s c.1870 painting of Elegant Pronaya (*Billardiera fraseri*)— limited to an area around Perth, this climber produces purple flowers during the summer months.

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of the city. Businessman J.J. ‘Boss’ Simons envisioned a holiday camp where urban youth could return to nature by tending gardens, felling trees, and constructing dams—Araluen literally means ‘singing waters’ and ‘place of lilies’. Nowhere are these poetic nuances more apposite than at the Grove of the Unforgotten, designed as a memorial to eighty-nine boys killed in World War I. Pencil pines (*Cupressus* spp.) mixed with indigenous marri trees (*Corymbia calophylla*) enclose a series of terraces shaped like a lyre, a symbol of music. Waterfalls topple through the lyre’s centre to the Pool of Reflection, bestrewn with water lilies—all redolent of the 1930s. Expect magnolias, fuchsias, leschenaultias, and pimeleas in October and November; Araluen is also famous for its tulip season each September.

Leaving the Araluen oasis, some of the South-West plants that provoked the curiosity of early diarists, writers, and artists are to be found. Balga or grasstree (*Xanthorrhoea preissii*) is a primordial and profoundly slow-growing tree that can live for over five-hundred years. Indeed, there are unconfirmed rumours of a grove in Gosnells, at

the head of the Albany Highway, exceeding seven hundred years. In its distinct growth habit, the balga symbolises the adaptability of the biota here. The composer and traveller Thomas Wood wrote of his visit in the bestseller *Cobbers* (1934), personifying the tree as a ‘strange fascination’. ‘He stands, twisted and knobby, among the moss and feathery bracken’ he wrote, ‘wearing a mop of tousled grass overtopped by a spear’.

Although not as conspicuous as the balga, the western quandong (*Santalum acuminatum*), a relative of the aromatic sandalwood that was transported to Albany along this route, is another small tree populating the overland journey. Bannister characterised the quandong, using his powers of sight and taste, as about as large as an English plum tree. ‘It bears a nut, almost round, having a strong shell and as large as a pigeons [sic] egg, with small holes in it similar to the Almond, and an outer covering which it throws off apparently when ripe’ he observed. ‘The kernel we found nutritive, possessing a glutinous property and very easy of digestion’. Given the time of year of his overland journey, it is clear

Marianne North’s overland voyage resulted in the stunning, though slightly elm-like, rendering of *Nuytsia* in ‘Study of the West Australian Flame-tree or Fire-tree’ (c.1880).

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Marianne North Painting 764)





Left: Marianne North's painting of Candlestick Banksia (*Banksia attenuata*) in 'A West Australian Banksia' (c.1880) captures the vibrant colouration and expressive qualities of this species.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Marianne North Painting 775)

Right: Ellis Rowan's c.1885 painting of Hidden Featherflower (*Verticordia habrantha*)—occurring along the south coast of Western Australia, the spindly shrub exhibits pink and white flowers in late spring.

National Library of Australia (nla.pic-vn4363829)

that Bannister sampled the dregs of the season's quandong riches. The tangy, crimson-coloured drupes ripen earlier, in late spring or summer.

Beginning in early November, the luminous golden flower of the Christmas tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*) emblazons the stretch between the Williams and Arthur River districts. The peripatetic English botanical artist Marianne North passed through by carriage. North wrote in ecstatic terms about the hemi-parasitic tree: 'I shall never forget one plain we came to, entirely surrounded by the nuytsia or mistletoe trees, in a full blaze of bloom. It looked like a bush-fire without smoke. The trees are, many of them, as big as average oaks in our hedgerows at home, and the stems are mere pith, not wood'. Also in the late nineteenth century, Canadian novelist Gilbert Parker, travelling on the new railway, echoed North's appreciation of the pleasing composition of the bush during this time of year: 'the yellow cabbage-tree flower [Nuytsia] is gleaming near, flanked by the white-and-green banksia, and a blossoming gum-tree is full of a regal beauty'.



Between 1835 and 1837, surveyor Alfred Hillman had endured several trips between the settlements of the region. On the first of these, he found the fresh water spring at Kojonup; but on his next trip, he and party nearly perished of thirst near the Beaufort River. Nowadays, the Kojonup area is known for its orchid diversity, including white spider, darting spider, greenhood, rabbit, donkey, and jug orchids. The Kojonup Visitor Centre, including Kodja Place, is now a treasure trove for information on the cultural and natural aspects of the area.

*The peripatetic English botanical artist Marianne North wrote in ecstatic terms*

Views of the Stirling Range and its highest peak, Bluff Knoll, soon appear, as surveyor John Septimus Roe exclaimed in 1835, 'burst[ing] on our view in great magnificence as we rounded the crest'. Roe's contemporary, colonial botanist James Drummond, found plants everywhere he could look: 'I had scarcely time to make myself

acquainted with this fine *Banksia* when I found another exceedingly interesting and beautiful plant [*Darwinia macrostegia*], the bracts of which he compared to ‘the petals of the finest tulip and they are almost as large, hanging in a bell’. There are sixty species of *Darwinia* in Western Australia, including the success bell (*Darwinia nubigena*) and many others that only occur here. In fact Drummond established a garden near Perth where he cultivated plants obtained from his inland expeditions, sending seeds and specimens from this stock to London’s Kew Gardens.

The ‘fine *Banksia*’ on Mount Mongerup was described by Drummond as ‘a splendid new *Banksia* [*Banksia solandri*] with leaves more than nine inches long and about five inches wide, irregularly jagged and serrated like an English Oak’. Similarly, on her overland passage, artist Marianne North was enamoured of banksias ‘covered with their young leaves and shoots of rich yellow, brown, or white ... the native wigwams of bark or leaves looked picturesque under them’. The modern-day fascination for the genus is palpable at *Banksia Farm* in Mount Barker, about thirty minutes from Albany. The farm is known for its collection of banksias from around Australia.

*As you pause to reflect you might still feel the euphoria of botanical artists who revelled in the unparalleled botanical richness of the region*

Albany had been established in 1826 when three British ships travelled from Sydney to stake claim to the region and discourage French settlement. Naturalists and artists soon followed. In 1854, the renowned phycologist W.H. Harvey arrived there before departing overland for Fremantle. Botanical illustrator Ellis Rowan painted ‘*Verticordia habrantha*’ in 1885 around the time she befriended Marianne North. It was North who described Albany as ‘a natural flower-garden’, observing that ‘in one place I sat down, and without moving could pick twenty-five different flowers within reach of my hand’. In particular, she extolled the scallop hakea (*Hakea cucullata*) as ‘one of the remarkable plants of the world’ and noted ‘strange plants known as “kangaroo’s feet” [*Anigozanthos* spp.]’.

The chortling cascades of Araluen, the orchids of Kojonup, and the alpine wildflowers of the Stirling Range are a few of the many beguiling features of botanical intrigue from Perth to Albany. As you

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pause to reflect during the overland journey, you might still feel the exhaustion of surveyors, the exasperation of homesteaders, the exhilaration of naturalists, and the euphoria of botanical artists who revelled in the unparalleled botanical richness of the region.

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