

## TRAVELLING HOPEFULLY THROUGH KIMBERLEY HISTORY

On 4 February 2015, **Hamish McGlashan** and **Chris Oakeley** spoke to the Kimberley Society about their recent bushwalking adventure in the Prince Regent River area. An accompanying PowerPoint presentation contained lots of maps and photos. Also on display was a 118-page book – *Kimberley Diary July 2014* – produced by Chris Oakeley and including photographs from the other participants: Lee Fontanini, Roz Hart, Peter Knight, Hamish and Rosemary McGlashan, Margaret Oakeley, Chris Olney, and Peter and Ann Wesley.

The expedition had two major aims. The first was to retrieve a chain believed to have been left behind by [George Grey](#). The second was to find an Aboriginal site that [Ion Idriess](#) discussed in *Over the Range: Sunshine and Shadow in the Kimberleys* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1937).

Hamish, with a longstanding interest in Grey's activities, has previously spoken to the Society about the explorer's [Kimberley expedition](#). One of those talks is now a chapter ('George Grey's expedition 1837-1838; first European penetration of the Kimberley interior') in the Kimberley Society's book [Kimberley History: People, Exploration and Development](#).

When Grey arrived in the Prince Regent River area, he faced three immediate problems: where to land his stores and livestock; where to establish a base camp; and how to ascend the rocky cliffs with his various animals so that he could start his journey from the plateau above. He decided on a small beach at Hanover Bay—too small to accommodate his livestock and stores, and hemmed in by cliffs. Over the next few weeks, while one of his boats went to Timor to buy ponies, a track was made and stores carried to Walker Valley.

Then a track had to be made up Walker Valley and up a creek 87 degrees to the main creek to ascend to the "tableland", where the stores were once more moved. Eventually, some two months after arriving, he was ready to proceed. The first day he got about half a mile, and had to discard a lot of equipment and repack. That place became one of the focal points of the 2014 adventure.

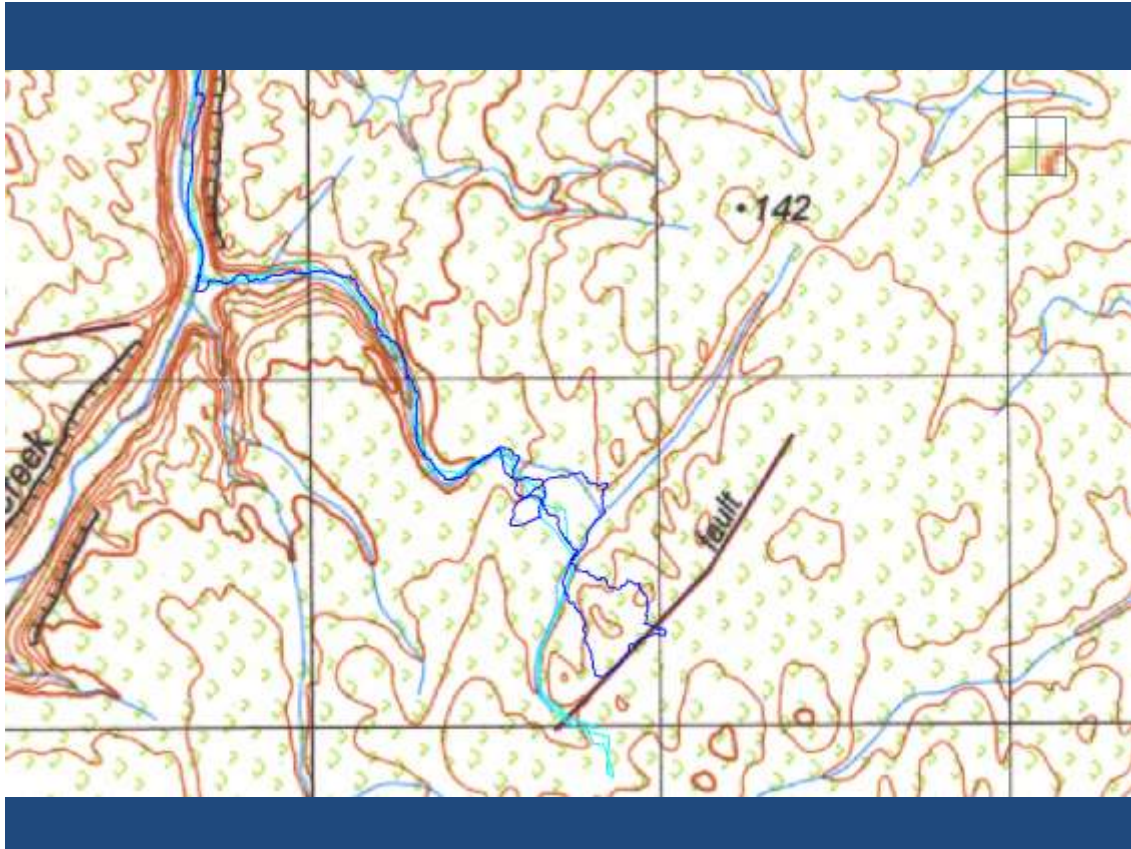
We had heard from Hamish about [previous expeditions](#) to retrace Grey's route. On one of those, in 1988, Kevin Coate took Hamish and Rosemary, Lee Fontanini, Peter Knight and seven others over Grey's entire route from Hanover Bay. On the first day, they came across a piece of chain. Nobody wished to add it to their already overweight rucksacks so they placed it atop a small rock and resolved to return for it someday. It was just a few hundred metres past a rare *Grevillea adenotricha*.....

Hamish began the 2014 tale:

We chartered the *Kimberley Explorer* out of Derby to approach from the sea (as Grey had done). Our task was to find the chain again. No GPS in 1988, just our diaries and memories. Recollections varied. Those of us who had been there remembered abruptly arriving at the top of the creek, finding the *Grevillea*, proceeding at 150 degrees for a distance of between two and eight hundred meters. So it would be easy to find the chain.

There were some pros and some cons vis-à-vis our previous trip. Originally the entire area had been burned, which made the going much easier. On the other hand, this time we were carrying less on our backs as we only had food for one night rather than twelve. Twenty-six years ago we were middle-aged. Now our party was made up of mostly septuagenarians and included three grannies, none of whom had walked in the Kimberley wilderness before. Previously we did not land at high tide and had a tiresome struggle over mud and rocks and close to crocs. This time we landed at high tide, unfortunately a "low" high tide, and we had almost as bad a scramble over muddy rocks.

This time we had tracking GPS which was later downloaded onto Google Earth and maps.



The Chain Gang routes (superimposed in two shades of bright blue, with the parties diverging)

At that point, Rosemary McGlashan took over, enchanting the audience with a beautiful reading of Chris Olney's account of the search.

The Chain Gang: The untold story

I was seduced by those wonderful lines in George Grey's diary;

"The romantic scenery of this narrow glen could not be surpassed ... lofty paperbark trees grew here and there and down the middle ran a beautiful stream of clear cool water, which now gushed along, a murmuring mountain torrent."

I was assured it would be just a "leisurely stroll of about 1km" up the "narrow glen" then we would camp for the night and there would be a "short climb" to where the chain was sitting waiting for us on top of a rock. Easy.

As soon as we were turfed off the tinnie, with our heavy backpacks, on to muddy slippery boulders – and immediately started falling over I realised this may be a little more difficult than I had anticipated.

My first priority was to find a strong piece of wood to use as a walking stick to try and maintain my balance. After about half an hour of rock hopping we reached the start of the valley. But contrary to expectation there was to be no "leisurely stroll up the creek".

Yes, the lofty paperbarks were still there; but the "beautiful stream" was completely obscured by vegetation – spinifex, reeds, pandanus. We stumbled over rocks and fell in the water; I learnt very early on the pandanus were not for grabbing to keep balance; those sharp hooks tear holes in your skin and clothes.

Most of the time we had no idea where we were putting our feet and who knows what wildlife was lurking in that tall grass. And then there were the green ants, shaken from the trees above as we stumbled by. They fell down my neck, ran up my arms. "It's ok they don't sting, they just bite" was Lee's helpful advice – of limited comfort when they are swarming down your shirt. And of course it was hot, 35C+. It took us more than 3 hours to walk one kilometre.

The naked plunge in the billabong was a life-saver (24 hours ago I wouldn't have contemplated even putting a toe in this murky looking dark green pond). Night fell and with it came the sand flies and mozzies. Sleeping on a bit of sand between rocks was never my idea of fun.

The cliff climb the next day was just as gruelling “It will be easy without our heavy packs,” Hamish promised. Right.

It was much better at the top, thanks to a bushfire – which also exposed countless rocks which all look pretty much the same and none appeared to bear a chain.

The group scattered in different directions. I was lost for about 10 minutes, which seemed like 10 hours, cooeeing to no avail. Eventually I spotted Roz on the top of a rock. Hamish, Roz and I walked in circles (confirmed by the GPS) for half an hour or so. It became apparent the chain had eluded us. The journey down seemed much quicker – we were also spurred on by a rendezvous with our boat. If we missed it we would have to spend another night with the sand flies.

It is the hardest thing I have EVER done (this includes a 7-day horse trek through the Kimberley, hundreds of kilometres on the Cape to Cape and Milford tracks, the Inca trail to Machu Picchu ) but I wouldn't have missed it for quids.

Hamish, less lyrical, then told us how it all ended.

So we did not find the chain. The sudden summit at the top of the creek did not seem to exist any longer. We searched for an hour or so, but had not left ourselves enough time before we had to scramble down the creek and meet the dinghy at the outlet of Walker Valley.

However I had arranged for a commemorative plaque to be fixed to the rock where we found the chain and I was not going to carry it back. So it is now firmly glued to a rock somewhere close to where the chain must be.



At the end of the long search

Moving on to the adventurers' second objective—to find a site identified by Ion Idriess as the Ungoodju or Cha-nake stone—Chris took up the tale. He described how Idriess, who was out with a police patrol in the 1930s, visited a remote farm called Marie Springs where Bob Thompson was growing peanuts and bananas. Thompson told Idriess to have a look at a stone, which was evidently very special to the local Aborigines, and Idriess wrote:

A band of warriors in single file were coming towards their Mecca... Each warrior was in deadly earnest. When near the stone they halted and laid down their weapons. Then the leader, a stalwart savage, slowly approached, reverently raising his hand. Gently he touched the stone, stood with bowed head, and laid bare his heart as his forefathers had done since the dawn of time...

In planning their quest to find Marie Springs and the Cha-nake stone, Chris and Hamish had two other references to start from:

1. A name spelt 'Chanake' on the Ordinance Survey Map (OS), and
2. A latitude and longitude for Marie Springs given by various [websites](#) that purported to give daily weather forecasts for the (now long gone) farm.

The OS location of 'Chanake' is south of the Prince Regent River mangroves and east-south-east of [Mt Lyell](#). The coordinates given for Marie Springs weather station vary from one map to the next but are in the area between the OS 'Chanake' and the mangroves.

Using *Over the Range*, Chris plotted the presumed route that Idriess followed from the Glenelg to a possible site of Thompson's farm. As Idriess told it:

Towards sundown we gradually steered off the river [Glenelg] ... Presently we entered a hidden pass, its quartzite walls like ancient castles with shrubs growing in the cracks... Down the centre of this lovely glen ran a line of tall paper-barks above a whispering creek. This place might have been at the end of the world.

The sun went down. Hurrying in the sudden coolness we crossed the creek, climbed a rocky hillock and down into a little valley hemmed by low ridges. Soon, just visible, appeared the grey bark of a hut.

Chris and Hamish believed that the OS 'Chanake' map position and the weather station coordinates were suspect, as:

1. The locations were so at variance with Idriess's description that it was questionable that he could have covered the 7-18km distance to reach them between the sun going down and nightfall.
2. The land at OS 'Chanake' was rocky and looked unsuited for farming.
3. There was no Marie Springs weather station. The weather forecasts were extrapolated from the Koolan Island weather station.

A close examination of Google Earth, around what looked a likely spot for the farm according to Idriess's account, showed some markings south of OS 'Chanake' that were consistent with human habitation. To build on that finding, Chris and Hamish started a search for any land title that might give the coordinates of the farm.

After a lot of running around, they found a file (State Records Office of Western Australia) that held details of Thompson's original application for 30,000 acres and the final grant of 1000 acres of land (Lease 1335/41a on [Plan 144/300](#)) in 1933. This was very encouraging, but there were no coordinates recorded, and the position of the farm on the application was different from the position marked on the title. Instead of being anchored on a coordinate, the block was anchored to a little hill and FB58 (a tree blazed on 22 July 1901 during an [expedition](#) led by surveyor [Fred. S. Brockman](#)). They wondered if the Lands Department actually knew where FB58 was when they drew up this grant, the map being only marginally better in this area than the one produced after Grey's expedition.



Chris and Hamish pored through Brockman's records in the J S Battye Library of West Australian History. There are two diaries and an official report. The texts concerning FB58 are different in each version, and, extraordinarily, Brockman did not record the latitude of FB58 (FB57 and 59 but not FB58).

Their next step was to try to match [Brockman's route](#) to modern maps and satellite pictures in Google Earth. They knew the coordinates of FB57, FB59, and FB60 from Brockman's diary. There were two valleys he could have passed through – the northern one where 'Chanake' is marked on the map and a southern one by their favoured location for Thompson's farm. Each valley had a route to the little hill Brockman turned round in order to go South to FB59 (also one of Grey's routes). It was not at all clear where FB58 was, nor which valley Brockman had passed through to reach it.

The sticking point was what Brockman meant in his diary by 'South of East' from Mount Lyell. A 95 degree route would point to the northern valley but a 120 degrees direction would support the favoured site further to the south. Moreover, since Bob Thompson had built his hut before he had applied for the land, and was described as "the most isolated man in the Kimberleys" with a visit only by a police patrol or Fred Merry (from the Sale River) perhaps once a year, there was also the possibility that Marie Springs was not actually inside the land he had been granted.

So, unable to confirm the position of FB58 or Marie Springs, the bushwalkers decided to explore both of the valleys that might have been Brockman's route. Then, if they had time, to explore further south into the other valley through which they believed Idriess had travelled from the Glenelg.

Hamish told us what happened next.

In March 2014, on a boat trip from Darwin, Peter Knight and I searched for a suitable landing place to start our walk to look for the Cha-nake site. That exercise gave rise to a new minor objective for our planned trip because, when we stopped off at St Patrick's Island in the Prince Regent River estuary for a swim, I could not find my glasses after reboarding our boat. I thought that they might have fallen out of my pocket under a boab tree at the top of the beach. On returning in July to do our walk, we went for a look. Though they were heavily disguised amongst the pebbles, Lee spotted them. So that was one objective met!

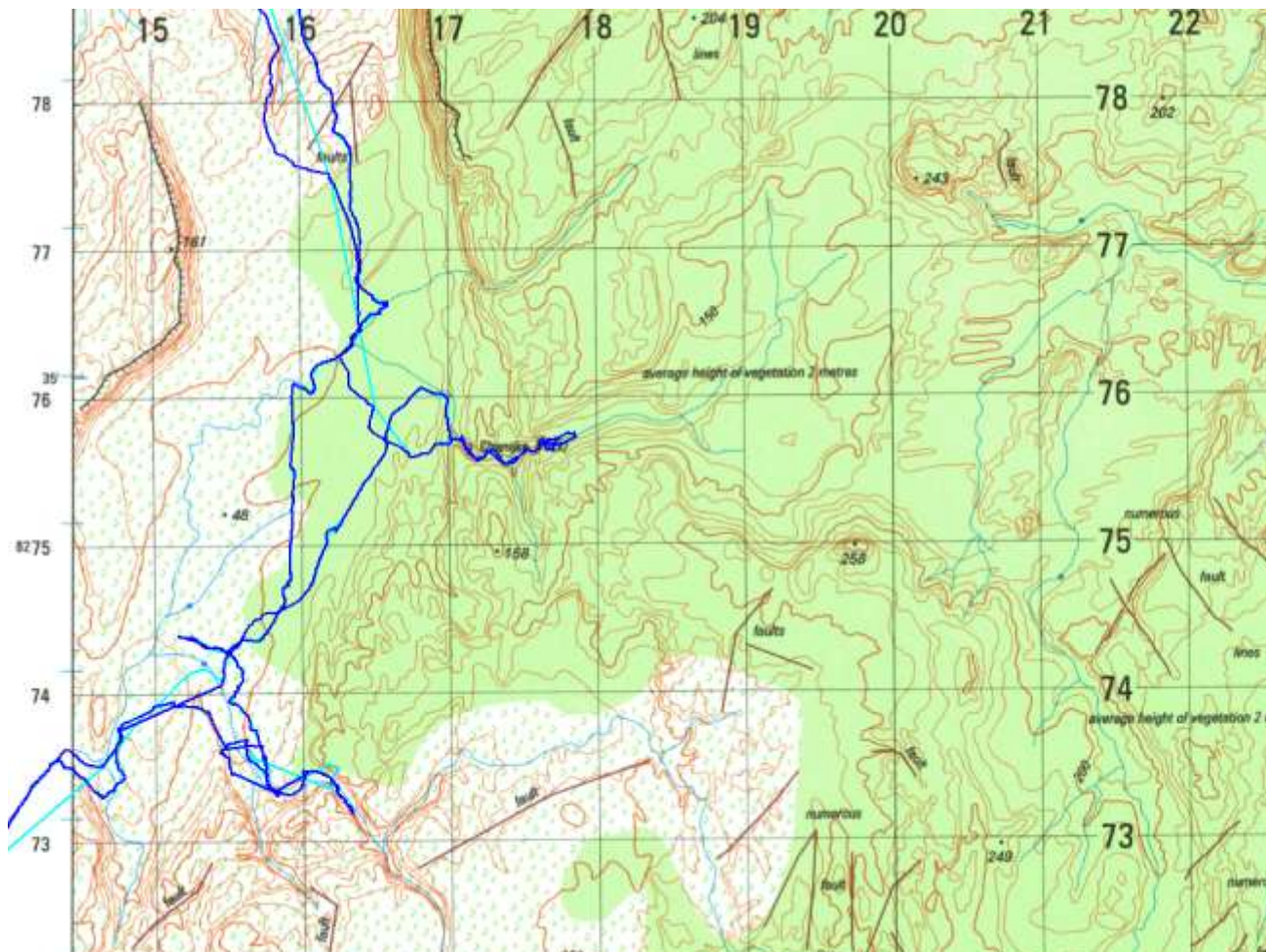
We left the *Kimberley Explorer* in St George Basin and took the dinghy with five of us up a mangrove lined creek near the mouth of the narrowing entrance to the Prince Regent River. We were able to penetrate much further than originally anticipated and only had to force our way over 30 metres of mangrove roots to reach solid rock.

Scrambling over a rocky range, across a plain and an awkward river crossing, we reached the mapped position of 'Chanake' after a five-hour walk. It was immediately obvious that no arable land for a peanut farm was in the vicinity. We spent the afternoon exploring the pretty but rugged glen, and Chris Oakeley thought he might have found Brockman's blazed tree. The rest were unconvinced. There was a lovely pool for swimming but no flat rocks to sleep on.

Next day, having initially looked around downstream from our campsite, we walked south for the rest of the morning to where I thought was a more likely site for the Marie Springs farm. We found a level area of soil (about 5 to 10 acres) covered with spindly wattle trees in full bloom, the only possible arable land close to water that we came across.

Again we camped by a pool at the entrance to an attractive but rocky gully. Alas, no sign of a homestead or farm implements and despite a fairly extensive search all around, no Chanake stone. The suspicious markings noted on the Google Earth map were inaccessible due to the higher than head height vegetation.

We were now close to what we were convinced was Idriess's beautiful valley, which we explored next morning, (what a spot that would be to camp for a few nights!) reaching close to a bend in the Glenelg before returning north and struggling through long grass, to camp overnight and walk back to the mangroves to meet Greg and the dinghy from the *Kimberley Explorer* in the morning.



Routes of search for the Cha-nake stone (superimposed in two shades of blue)

In his instructions from the Colonial Office in London before his departure, Grey was told 'to search for and record ... the natural productions of the country, ... and to collect specimens of its natural history'.

**Roz Hart**, President of the Natural History Club, commented on that aspect of the July 2014 bushwalking adventure (and on our talk):

On this trip both Lee Fontanini and I were very interested in Natural History, Lee especially in birds, and I in fungi, but basically both interested in everything we could see and keen to share and consult with each other.

A selection of some of the pictures of birds, plants, fungi, fruit and flowers that we observed was shown, some of which we knew what they were, some we didn't.

A soil sample was collected on St Patrick Island for Microblitz, a citizen science project at UWA.

It was a wonderful opportunity to walk and enjoy the environment, but not those biting green ants – ouch!

The tales told on the night kept the audience focused, evoking an occasional chuckle and a few sympathetic groans. The energy that goes into planning and executing these bushwalking excursions is impressive, and it is clear that failure to achieve the set objectives barely dents the participants' pleasure. Not many people have the opportunity to see the historic and scenic places in these remote localities, and it was great to hear about our adventurers' hopeful travels through Kimberley history.