

The Old Eyre Highway



The turn off to Yalata on the new mining road

Do you remember the famous Redex and Ampol round Australia car reliability trials of the 1950's and early 1960's? The names of some of the drivers, such as "Gelignite" Jack Murray, Ken Tubman, and Jack Davey (of radio quiz show fame), were household names. Absolutely spellbound, we would sit in cinemas and watch in awe the grainy, black and white newsreels of the cars as they bashed, belted, and battled their way along absolutely appalling roads including the Birdsville Track and across the Nullarbor. Huge stretches of bulldust and sand threatened to, and very often did, engulf the Peugeot's, Citroen's, Simca's, Jowett Javelin's, Holden's, Ford's, Buick's, Chevrolet's, and many other makes including Rolls Royce. Washaways, boulders, monster ruts, and the occasional huge stretch of mud wrought absolute havoc on the competitors. Aah, the good old days!

Did I mention Rolls Royce? Yes, I did! In the 1957 Ampol trial, a grandmother by the name of Blanche Brown entered her 1927 Rolls Royce and actually came in 5th overall.

Whilst many of you have no doubt travelled the Birdsville Track and have probably been a little amazed at just how good it is, the Old Eyre Highway, which is the original dirt road across the Nullarbor, which was used by the competitors in those Redex and Ampol trials still exists in many places to this day and can still be driven.

We expected a very rough and washed out track. The track actually turned out to be very smooth and an extremely easy trip. We didn't need 4WD at any time.

The Old Eyre Highway, or what's left of it, and as shown on the 1:250000 map "Nullarbor", actually starts at a bend on the Eyre Highway about half way between the long abandoned "Colona" homestead and the aboriginal community of Yalata. However, as that part of the Old Eyre Highway simply leads straight into Yalata, permits are not issued to travel that small section.

We had rung the Permits Officer at Yalata and had been given permission to use the Old Eyre Highway across their land. It passes very close to the back of the community, and we were given strict instructions that we were not to enter the community itself.

The track we used to access the Old Eyre Highway starts at a left turn, signposted to "Yalata", exactly 38 kilometres north on a brand new mining road which takes off from the (bitumen) Eyre Highway exactly 1.3 kilometres west of the old, abandoned "Colona" homestead. The mining road is new, and does not yet appear on maps. A track shown heading north from "Colona" itself on older maps is no longer accessible, having been subsumed in many places into the new mining road. The most easterly accessible part of the Old Eyre Highway as actually shown on the map starts at the back of the Yalata Community, just a few yards to the west of a Telstra tower. There are numerous tracks in that area so you need to make certain that you are on the right one. The 1:250000 map "Nullarbor" shows it very clearly, and most GPS units should also show it. It takes off northwest, almost beside the Telstra tower and then swings west after about twelve kilometres.

From the marked turn off on the new mining road, it is 34 km to another marked turn off into Yalata at the back of the community.

After confirming with the GPS and OziExplorer that we were definitely on the Old Eyre Highway, we set off along it and crossed the vermin proof fence after 39 km. There should have been a track off to our left a further 32 km along the track, but we couldn't see it, or we missed it, but we did find the ruins of Ivy Tank a further 5 km up the road.



The Old Eyre Highway near the vermin proof fence



Tanks and collector roof at Ivy Tank



The ruins at Ivy Tank



Two dingoes in beautiful condition

Ivy Tank was an old service station from the dirt road Eyre Highway days that was bypassed when the bitumen went in and the road was straightened a bit. After Ivy Tank, you re-cross the vermin proof fence and then head straight to the Nullarbor Roadhouse.

There is supposed to be a track off to the right at Ivy Tank going north to the old abandoned railway station of Watson. We did find a couple of sets of wheel tracks, but they were very, very, seriously overgrown.

We had really wanted to visit the train station at Watson. Len Beadell had built the short track from Watson to Maralinga, and Watson was where all the goods and people arrived by train to go out to Maralinga and Emu. But when we found the track so badly overgrown, and as we didn't have our second spare wheel, we erred on the side of caution and decided we wouldn't go.

As you get near to the Nullarbor Roadhouse, the Old Eyre Highway runs right beside the new Highway (just ten metres or so away) for quite some distance but it never actually touches it. So you have the traffic on the new Eyre Highway thundering along about ten metres away, and here you are travelling serenely along on this reasonably good dirt road about four feet below the level of the new Highway. It was quite a strange sensation.

As it was raining (again), we spent a very comfortable (and dry) night at the Nullarbor Roadhouse in a nice brick tent.

Leaving the Nullarbor Roadhouse next morning, it wasn't difficult to find the continuation of the Old Eyre Highway. It starts right at the edge of their concrete driveway and just slowly opens up the angle between the bitumen and itself.

We had seen quite a few dingoes whilst we were travelling, but as usual they were very elusive and disappeared before we could get a photo. However not long after leaving the Nullarbor Motel, we spotted a couple of beautiful, ginger coloured ones. Whilst they ran off immediately, they stopped a little distance away, and had a good look around and back at us. This gave us the opportunity to get a couple of reasonable photos. All the dingoes we saw were in extremely good condition.

After 23 km we found Mallabie Tank, which is actually three old ruined tanks together. Then a further 5 km later we found "No. 2 Tank", which the map shows on the wrong side of the track, but we didn't find the "sinkhole" marked on the map. 9 km after the "No. 2 Tank" we came to the intersection with a track that heads north to Cook.

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Mallabie Tank, Old Eyre Highway



No. 2 Tank on the Old Eyre Highway



The ruins of Gundalabbie Tank

Returning from Cook (which is part of another story) to the intersection with the Old Eyre Highway late in the afternoon of the next day, we turned west and drove for a few kilometres before finding somewhere to camp for the night. The spot we selected was really just a wider part of the track. There was nowhere else that looked reasonable, and of course there was no wood, so we weren't able to enjoy a campfire.

We had just finished setting up and were sitting having a quiet cuppa whilst enjoying the vast empty vista and the last of some sunshine when a vehicle approached from the west. And wouldn't you know it; they were two Rangers. That didn't bother us as we had our Entry and Camping Permits for the Nullarbor National Park which we were in, but up to that time we had only met one other vehicle on the tracks in the week or so we had been in the area, so it was a bit of a surprise, and especially that late in the afternoon. Anyway, they stopped and had a chat for a while before heading off for a stone hut somewhere south of the Eyre Highway where they would be spending the night.

Later on that night we felt a bit jealous of the two rangers as the rain absolutely bucketed down. Whilst we stayed snug and dry inside the tent, it was absolutely saturated. Next morning, we started west again on the Old Eyre Highway with a very, very wet tent packed away in the truck.

10 km from the Cook/Old Eyre Highway intersection, a track heads south. 10 km further from that track we found the ruins of Gundalabbie Tank. Then 31 km further along we found the ruins of Yangoonabie Tank. A further 5 km and we found the marked track heading south to the Eyre Highway that also services a Telstra tower. Then 7 km further on we came to the track heading north which takes you to the Denman railway station and also provides another access to Cook. The whole of that track however is very badly overgrown.

A further 7 km along the Old Eyre Highway, and we found the track which accesses the old "Koonalda" homestead and also gives access to Koonalda Cave. If you continue to follow that track past Koonalda Cave you will eventually end up at Hughes railway station.

"Koonalda" was South Australia's westernmost pastoral lease and was an operating homestead up until 1988. It was also a fuel and services stop on the Old Eyre Highway. The Gurney family operated it from 1938 till 1988. It was incorporated into Nullarbor National



The abandoned Koonalda homestead



Shearer's kitchen at Koonalda homestead



Petrol pump at the old Koonalda homestead

Camped in late afternoon sunshine beside the Old Eyre Highway



Koonalda Cave



Park in 1989. The Gurneys got their water from underground sources in Koonalda Cave, and had pumping gear set up in the cave; which is still there today. This also enabled them to water stock, which made the property a viable proposition. The homestead external walls and its fences are built from old sleepers gathered from along the railway line. Some of the windows and doors are recycled from the old telegraph station at Eucla.

It's a very interesting place to just wander around. One petrol pump is still there, although it is a reasonably modern one from perhaps the 1960's. No doubt the original pump would have been one of the old manual pump up, gravity feed design, with the big glass bowl on top. There are a couple of old car graveyards containing a wide variety of old and wrecked vehicles. The homestead is accessible, and in quite reasonable condition, as is the shearer's kitchen and the old shearing shed. And of course being an old shearing shed, there will always be a "Coopers" sheep dip or sheep care product lying around somewhere; and there was.

The shearer's kitchen has been given a new roof by the National Parks plus a nice new tank to hold the rainwater off the roof, so there was an overflowing tank with beautiful fresh water available to top up our supplies.

About 7 km north of the homestead is Koonalda Cave. It's a very big hole in the ground, with the cave running off underground. Access to the cave is not available without a special permit, and you need to be very careful wandering around the top of the huge hole.

On the return trip to the Old Eyre Highway we were entertained by a couple of emus who couldn't make up their minds which way to run. Regaining the Old Eyre Highway, we turned west again and drove for 26.6 km to what should have been the track to Koomooloobooka Cave, but after following the track in for 3.6 km, which we knew was way too far as we had not seen hide nor hair of the cave. We tried another track about 0.4 km further along, but again to no avail, so we gave up. However about 15 km further along the track we did find the ruins of Coompana Tank, and then the turn off to the north that is actually the start of what is known as the Old Coach Road.

A further 8 km along the Old Eyre Highway is Bunabie Tank and then a further 8 km is the Bunabie Blowhole, which was working extremely well. I could hold my cap by just two fingers on the brim, and the pressure of air coming out of the blowhole kept it horizontal. The blowhole is about ten feet in, off the right hand side of the Old Eyre Highway. A small, unmarked track takes off to the north right beside the Blowhole. 3.5 km further west and another track takes off to the left heading down to the Eyre Highway.

It was then just 22.5 km along the Old Eyre Highway to where it exited onto the bitumen right opposite the Border Village Motel at Eucla. We decided to grab a room for the night, and as the sun had finally decided to come out and there was a little bit of breeze, we spread the still very wet tent out over two verandah's and actually got it dry. Our decision to take the motel room was vindicated as the rain absolutely poured down again that night till early in the morning.

There is a quarantine checkpoint at Eucla for those heading west, with one at Ceduna operating for those heading east, but we knew we wouldn't need to worry as we were heading back to the start of the Old Coach Road and there is no checkpoint on it where it crosses the border. Not that we had anything we needed to worry about anyway.

So next morning, we crossed over the Eyre Highway and headed back east for 42 km to gain the start of the Old Coach Road, but that's another story.

John and Fran Greig

Bunabie Blowhole was working extremely well

