

# THALLON HISTORY TRAILS Roads of Yesterday

*Since the very early days of European settlement of this district, the site now occupied by Thallon has been on a major north-south route. As one of few sources of water, the Moonie River would also have been followed closely by Aboriginal people travelling through this area. This short tour is focussed on the European history of early roads and stock routes along the Moonie and includes other points of interest close to Thallon.*

**NOTE: PART OR ALL OF THIS ROUTE MAY BE IMPASSABLE AFTER RAIN. CHECK CONDITIONS BEFORE STARTING.**

## **Site 1: Old coach road (crosses Old Bullamon Road)**

*This site is marked by a post and plaque beside Old Bullamon Road.*

Drive down Pine Street (with the hotel on your left) and continue out of town as it becomes Old Bullamon Road. That name commemorates Bullamon Station, which once occupied a vast area of land in what is now the Balonne Shire, including the land on which Thallon now stands. (The Heritage Listed Old Bullamon Station Homestead still stands, on private property, next to the river not far from Thallon.)

The location of an early road from St George to Bullamon homestead is still visible as a depression crossing the Old Bullamon Road. Cobb & Co coaches travelled along this track when Bullamon was an official mail-coach stop on the St George-Mungindi route. This continued to be the case until a short time after Thallon was established in 1911.

*Continue along Old Bullamon Road to the cross-roads, turn right and proceed to the railway line, where you can park and walk down the track to the river.*

## **Site 2: Scar Tree, Railway Bridges and Portraits**

Beside the track to the river is a tree with a scar where bark was removed, probably for a coolamon. It is a reminder of the Gomeroi (Gamilaroi/Kamilaroi) people, the original residents of this district, and is incorporated into the Silo Mural at Site 7.

The wooden bridge was built in 1911-12 during construction of the railway line to Dirranbandi. It was replaced in 1960 by the bridge beside it. Portraits of local men “Collie” Lasserre and “Pom” Petrie were painted on pylons of the newer bridge in 2019 and 2021, by the same artists who painted the Silo Mural.

***WARNING: THE OLD BRIDGE IS UNSAFE. STAY WELL CLEAR.***

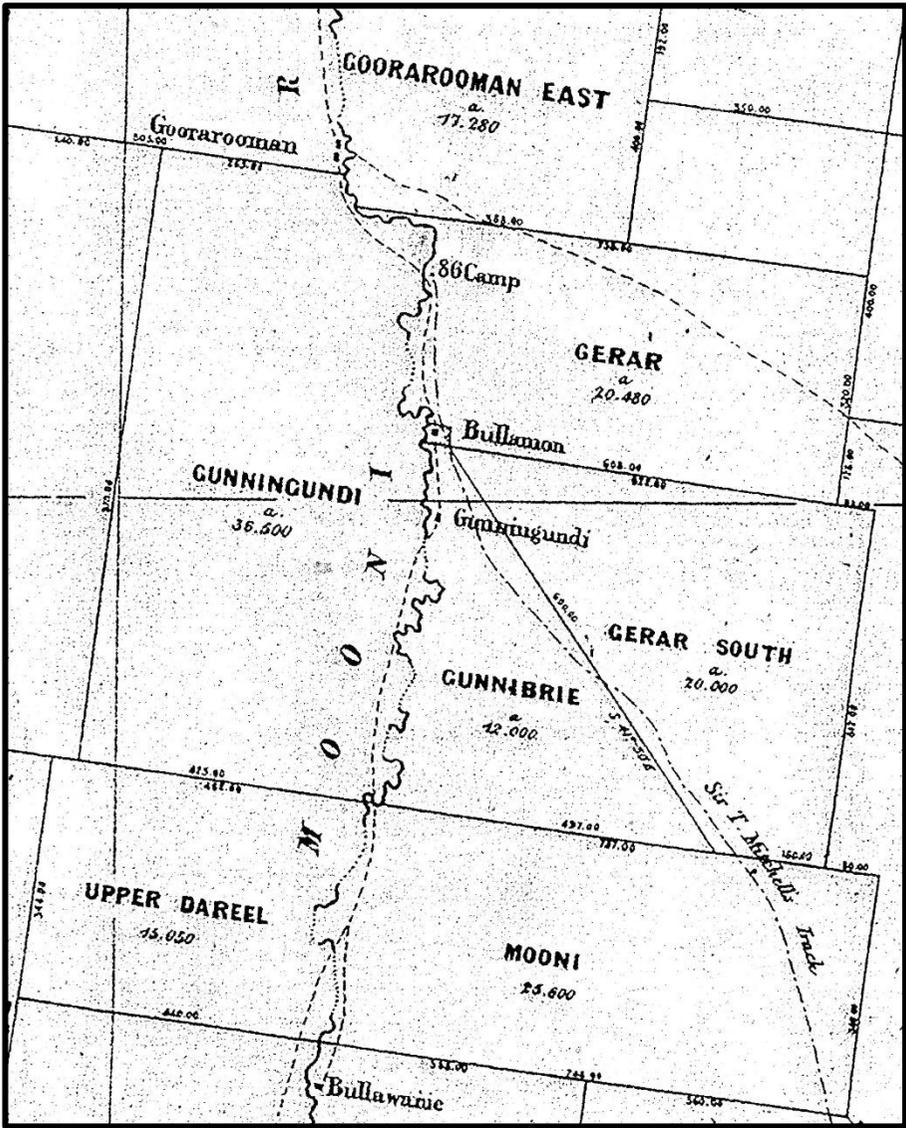


***Steam train crossing the wooden bridge during a flood.***

*Continue along the road next to the river. You will pass a gravel-washing plant from the 1960s.*

## **Site 3: Historic North-South Route**

The river road follows the approximate route of what was an important north-south road from the early days of European settlement until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, it was used by mailmen with their pack horses or buggies, carriers with wagons drawn by bullock or horse teams bringing supplies to the stations and taking away wool, coaches carrying mail and passengers and by general travellers. A track along the river in this area was marked on a map drawn by surveyor PH Henderson in 1854. This was also the approximate route followed by explorers Mitchell (1846) and Kennedy (1847).



**Map of the Thallon district in 1863, showing the track along the Moonie River, the existing station homesteads and the approximate location of Sir Thomas Mitchell's 1846 route. Thallon is just above and to the right of Bullamon homestead. (Part of a map of the Maranoa published in 1864: Queensland State Archives (QSA) Series 1694, Item 619051, Sheet 1.)**

## **Explorers**

Sir Thomas Mitchell travelled along this part of the Moonie River in November-December 1846. His party was trapped by floodwaters for 17 days at his 86th Camp, on a sand hill near the Moonie River a few kilometres north of Thallon. On 7 December, when the ground was dry enough for them to travel, the party followed the river downstream for about five miles until they reached Johnston's station. After crossing two swamps with some difficulty, they left the Moonie and travelled across country to the Barwon, reaching it above what is now Mungindi. Edmund Kennedy, a member of Mitchell's party, returned by the same route in 1847. Kennedy's party camped from 8 to 10 May at Johnston's station (Gunningundi, a few kilometres south of Thallon) then travelled along the Moonie for 8 miles (about 13km) to "where a Mr Mackay was forming a new station". That would have become the original Goorarooman.

Mitchell's track from the Barwon to the Moonie and then to St George's Bridge on the Balonne became a recognised route for travellers but the Moonie-Barwon section was soon replaced by a track along the Moonie to Dareel Station, which reduced the distance between rivers and thus provided a more reliable water supply.

## **Mailmen**

A fortnightly packhorse mail service from Surat to Yarawa (also spelt Yarrowa and Yarouah), a station south of Mungindi, was established in 1861. The mail route followed the Moonie from a short distance above Nindigully down to Dareel and included Bullamon and Gunningundi homesteads. When that mail service started, St George and Mungindi did not yet exist. Post offices were established at both places in the mid-1860s. By the 1880s, a mail service between Mungindi and St George was running twice-weekly and mail was carried by coach or buggy.

## **Coaches**

Nowlands of Gunnedah began running coaches between St George and Mungindi in the late 1870s. They changed horses at Bandy Andy (Minimi), Nindigully, Bullamon and Dareel. In late 1895, Cobb & Co was awarded the St George-Mungindi mail contract, which they then held, though not continuously, for around 30 years.

When Thallon was established in 1911, this was still the main road between St George and Mungindi. Cobb & Co coaches carried the mail between St George and Mungindi, twice a week in each direction.

Bullamon was the local coach stop, where mail was unloaded and horses changed. Other stops were Minimi, Nindigully, Dareel and Gnoolooma.

In 1913, the local stop was moved from Bullamon to Thallon and the mail route split into two segments: St George-Thallon, with stops at Boombah, Nindigully, Ballangarry and (new) Goorarooman; and Thallon-Mungindi, with a stop at Dareel. Cobb & Co held the Thallon-Mungindi mail contract until 1924 and the Thallon-St George contract until 1927. Cars were introduced onto both mail routes soon after 1913, but coaches and horses were kept as backup for wet weather. Cobb & Co also ran passenger cars on these routes.

The original roads between St George and Mungindi were just tracks through the bush. Clay soil that quickly turns to mud after rain often caused long delays with transport of mail, goods and people due to coaches, wagons and motor vehicles becoming bogged. "Corduroy", consisting of logs laid across the road in gullies and small boggy areas, helped to keep the roads open, but in very wet conditions, they were impassable. Transport that depended on horses or bullocks was also halted by severe droughts, due to lack of feed and water. The drought in the early 1900s disrupted Cobb & Co services, including on this route.

(Dareel is now a historic site on the Mungindi-Noondoo Road.)

#### ***Site 4: Road Bridges and Flood Gauge***

Road access to Thallon from the west was subject to interruption by relatively small rises in the river until the Old Bullamon Bridge was built in 1985. That bridge was replaced and demolished in 2020.

The gauge near the low-level crossing has been the recording site for the Moonie River at Thallon since 2011. The highest reading so far on this gauge was 5.4 metres in 2012: 5 metres and above is a major flood.

Flooding is a regular event in this area and usually does more good than harm, but the occasional major to extreme floods, such as those of 1864, 1890, 1974 and 2010, cause serious loss of property, crops, stock and wildlife. The 2010 flood, believed to be the highest since the great flood of 1890, reached 5.5 metres on the former gauge and inundated much of the town. During the 1890 flood, the Hill family of Bullamon, along with station employees and the local Aboriginal people, had to seek refuge on the sand hill on which Thallon now stands. In 2010, as in 1890, the sand hill remained above flood height but the lower-lying parts of the town, particularly north of the railway line, were immersed.

The Moonie, in its natural state, mostly consists of semi-permanent waterholes a few kilometres apart with dry riverbed between. To provide a reliable water supply for steam trains, the Railway Department built a concrete dam across the river a short distance north of the low-level crossing. Until about 1960, water was pumped from behind the dam to a holding tank in the railway yard.

The body of water created by the dam became a popular recreational site for the people of Thallon. Another site in that general area is still referred to by locals as “Barney’s Beach”: it was named after Barney Butler, who carted sand to make a beach while he was employed at the grain depot during the early 1980s. Those sites are no longer open to the public.



**Swimmers at the Railway Dam.**

*Turn onto the bitumen (Noondoo-Thallon Road) and head towards Thallon. Just before the road curves right, turn left onto a dirt track.*

### **Site 5: Old Thallon-St George Road**

Before the official opening of the railway line, tracks were cleared through the dense timber and prickly pear to provide vehicle access to each side of the town from the existing St George-Mungindi Road. The early road between Thallon and St George, which remained in use for many years, passed through this area. Corduroy (see above) was placed on the road where it crossed the gully.

## Site 6: Stock Route

A major north-south stock route also passes through this area. It leaves the Carnarvon Highway at a camping and watering reserve just north of Thallon and passes between the town and the river then continues, via the former location of Dareel, to the NSW border at Mungindi.

A stock route along the Moonie, through Bullamon, has existed officially since at least 1869 but stock for new stations, or for sale in southern markets, were travelling along the Moonie much earlier than that. William Telfer, in his *Wallabadah Manuscript*, told of passing through Dareel, Gunningundi and Bullamon in 1859 while taking sheep north for a Mr Christian, who was establishing a station near what became Roma.

Extension of the railways in NSW and Queensland made it possible to move stock by rail, decreasing the distances they needed to be driven. When the railway line reached Thallon, trucking yards for sheep and cattle were built next to a spur line on the north-western outskirts (now at the eastern edge of the grain depot). Rail transport of stock from Thallon ceased years ago. Stock movement now is mostly by road but drovers can still be seen on local stock routes, particularly during dry seasons when stock are put onto “the long paddock” in search of grass.

A remarkable droving trip started near here in 1881. CB Fisher, a brother of Hurtle Fisher who owned Bullamon in partnership with James and Edward Hill, had just bought Noondoo (between Thallon and Dirranbandi), Dareel (north-west of Mungindi) and several stations adjoining them. With a partner named Lyons, he had also acquired several stations in the Northern Territory. To stock those stations, Fisher and Lyons brought 20,000 cattle from Queensland – around 16,000 of them from Fisher’s stations in what is now the Balonne Shire and the rest from north Queensland. The entire operation was managed by legendary bushman Nat (“Bluey”) Buchanan, who put his brother-in-law Willie Gordon in charge of the southern cattle. During the spring of 1881 and winter of 1882, cattle from Noondoo, Currawildi, Dareel and Woolamit, mostly in mobs of one to two thousand, passed St George on their way to the Top End. Those from Dareel and Woolamit probably followed the stock route up the Moonie to Nindigully. The trip took nearly a year, the first mobs reaching their destination in October 1882. In 2013, the district witnessed another epic cattle drive when pastoralist Tom Brinkworth decided to have 18,000 Northern Territory cattle walked from near

Winton in north-west Queensland to his Uardry Station near Hay in the Riverina. Several mobs of those cattle passed along this stock route.

*Retrace your route to the bitumen road and turn left towards Thallon.*

## **Site 7: GrainCorp Depot**

From a small beginning in the 1960s, when the main industries in this district were wool and beef, the Thallon grain receival and storage depot has become one of the largest in Australia. The silo mural, “The Watering Hole”, was completed in 2017 and immediately became a major tourist attraction. To view the Mural, follow signage to the viewing platform on the levee bank. **ENTRY TO THE GRAINCORP SITE IS PROHIBITED.**

The grain storage facility north of the road (on the left, heading towards Thallon) covers the former home of the Pearson and Schielt families.

South of the road is the site of a sawmill that operated from about 1947 to 1978, under various names and owners. During that time, it progressed from steam to electricity as a power source. It was the last of several sawmills that existed in the district since before the town was established, mainly processing cypress pine that grew in dense stands on the sand ridges. Between the sawmill and river was a small property called Orange Grove, where the Thurlow family grew citrus fruit and kept bees. The road to Dirranbandi used to run from Henry Street, past the sheep trucking yards, the sawmill and Orange Grove, to the river.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a Main Roads Department camp was situated between the sawmill and the railway line, near Orange Grove. It accommodated post-war migrants from Eastern Europe who were employed on roadwork in the district. Most were single men, but there was at least one family, living in canvas tents made as comfortable as possible with timber floors and household items brought from Europe.

Thallon’s first grain grower was Mr WH McGeever. He grew wheat, barley, corn and cotton on land across the Carnarvon Highway from the GrainCorp storage. Read more about him and his family on the sign at the McGeever Recreation Grounds.

## **Acknowledgments**

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The map was sourced from the Queensland State Archives and the photographs from current and former residents.