

# Stories from Australia's history

The story of modern Australia starts on 26 January 1788. On that day, Captain Arthur Phillip arrived in Sydney Cove from England with the **convict** ships of the First Fleet. The new **settlement** brought disaster to Australia's **Indigenous peoples** because the newcomers took their land. This event marks the beginning of Australia as we know it today.

**A**fter 1788, more European settlers arrived and found good farmland around Australia's coasts. By the 1830s, settlements had been established at Albany in Western Australia and Adelaide in South Australia. Albany had good **grazing land**, but very little **livestock**. Sheep and cattle had to be brought in from South Australia, but the only way they could be transported was by ship. South Australia and Western Australia were separated by a vast, treeless **plain** called the Nullarbor, which no European had managed to cross.

A group of South Australian **graziers** decided to fund an **expedition** to find an **overland stock route** from Adelaide to King George's Sound near Albany. In 1840, a young **explorer** named Edward John Eyre, who was just 24 years old, was chosen to lead the expedition.

Eyre did not find a stock route, but he did become the first European to ever cross the harsh desert of the Nullarbor. Eyre's epic journey is one of the great stories in Australia's history.

## What does it mean?

The dry plain that stretches 1200 kilometres around the Great Australian **Bight** is called the Nullarbor, which means 'no trees' in Latin.

**grazing land:** land that is covered with grass for cattle and sheep to eat, or graze on

# Eyre's expedition across the Nullarbor

Near midnight on 29 April 1841, Edward Eyre stood among the ruins of his camp in the Australian desert. His food **stores** had been raided, his guns and bullets stolen, and at his feet lay the body of his friend, Baxter. Eyre was halfway through a 1700-kilometre trek across the **barren**, unmapped Nullarbor Plain, just north of the Great Australian Bight.

**W**ith Baxter dead, Eyre was left alone with just one Indigenous servant, Wylie, to finish the journey. Ahead of them lay hundreds of kilometres of waterless desert, where no European had been before. The two men had a hard journey ahead of them.

This is the story of the people, the ideas and the events relating to Eyre's expedition across the Nullarbor, and how it changed Australia forever.

This engraving by Samuel Calvert shows Eyre and Wylie trekking across the Nullarbor.





# The big picture

By the 1830s, the coast of Australia had been **mapped**, but most of the **inland** was a mystery. Tiny **settlements** were dotted around the coast, separated by long stretches of unexplored country. The colonies in Western Australia were cut off from the eastern colonies by thousands of kilometres of unknown wilderness. The only way to get from Adelaide to Albany was to sail across the Great Australian Bight.

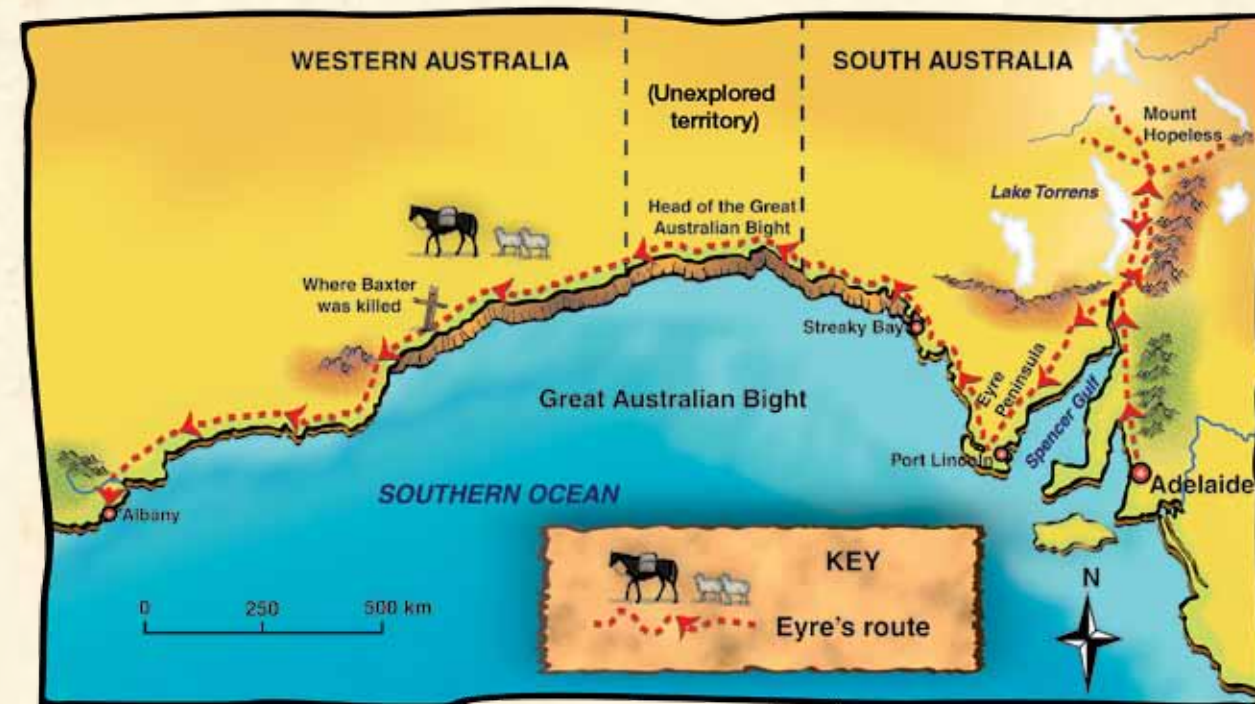
## Barriers to the inland

In 1802, the **explorer** Matthew Flinders had sailed right around Australia. Between South Australia and Western Australia he saw steep, high cliffs running all along the coast of the Great Australian Bight, but he could not see what lay beyond. There were no bays where ships could anchor safely, so no European had ever set foot on the land. Some people believed that there might be good farmland there, or an inland sea, but explorers who tried to cross the Nullarbor met with dry, **barren** desert and had to turn back.

The cliffs of the Great Australian Bight are steep and dangerous – no ocean explorer could get their ship close enough to see what lay beyond.

### What does it mean?

**inland:** the area of land in the middle of the country, far away from the coast



This map shows the routes taken by Eyre on his expedition across the Nullarbor between 1840 and 1841.

## Edward John Eyre

Edward Eyre was an experienced explorer. He had seen enough of Australia's **outback** to know how difficult and dangerous it could be. When he heard that a group of South Australian **graziers** were organising an **expedition** to find a **stock route** across the Nullarbor, he knew it was impossible. The country was too hot and dry for **livestock**. However, he was keen to make his name as an explorer, so he offered to lead the expedition **overland** to Western Australia. Eyre thought he would try going north of the Nullarbor where he hoped to find better country. If that failed, he would go straight across it. One way or another, he would trek overland to the west or die in the attempt.

## Eyewitness words

“... it will be ... interesting to know the character of the ... country between this colony (South Australia) and theirs (Western Australia), and to unfold the secrets hidden by those lofty ... cliffs at the head of the Great [Australian] Bight ... (the) vast extent of desert country ... the scarcity (lack) of grass – the denseness of the scrub – and the ... [almost] total absence (lack) of water ...”

Edward Eyre, 23 May 1840



# Key people

Three people played key roles in Eyre's **expedition** across the Nullarbor.

## Edward John Eyre

**Born:** 1815 in Bedfordshire, England

**Role:** Leader of the expedition to cross the Nullarbor

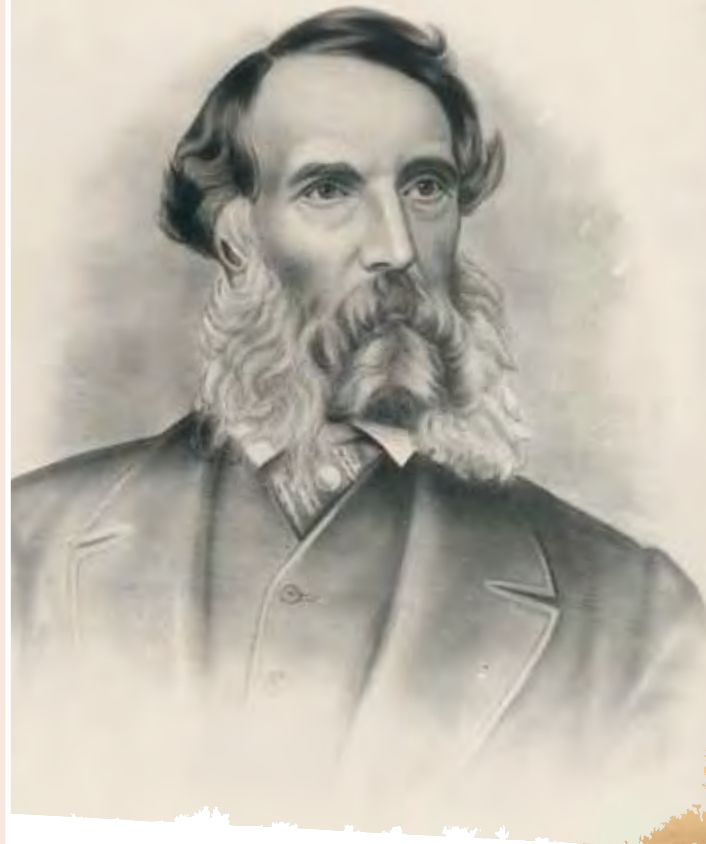
**Age at the time of the expedition (1840):** 24

**Died:** 1901 in England

**Appearance:** Tall, very thin, long narrow face, high forehead, large brown eyes, strong nose, dark wavy hair, thick moustache and beard

**Character:** Calm, quiet, clever, organised and determined. Eyre was not a bold character, but he was eager to please and sensitive to criticism. He was steady, slow to anger, and kind and understanding to others, but also driven and rather distant.

**Comments:** Eyre arrived alone in Australia in 1833, aged 17, determined to prove himself. By 1840 he was an experienced **outback explorer**, having driven cattle **overland** from Sydney to Adelaide. Eyre respected and liked Australia's **Indigenous people** and used their knowledge of the country to find food and water. A brilliant bushman and explorer, Eyre simply refused to give up. He pushed himself and his men beyond their limits.



## John Baxter

**Born:** Date unknown

**Role:** Overseer on Eyre's expedition

**Died:** 29 April 1841

**Appearance:** Unknown

**Character:** Calm, tough, capable, a steady man who could handle workmen but snapped if pushed too far

**Comments:** Very little is known about Baxter, but he was a **loyal** companion to Eyre. He refused to leave when Eyre reduced the size of the expedition and stuck by his leader even though he wanted to turn back. Baxter died trying to save the party's **stores**.



There are no pictures of John Baxter, but this plaque commemorates the place where he died.

## Wylie

**Born:** Date unknown

**Role:** Servant on the expedition

**Age at the time of the expedition:** around 18

**Died:** Date unknown

**Appearance:** Lean, fit, energetic, average height, dark wavy hair and dark eyes

**Character:** Easygoing, clever, loyal, a skilled bushman and a good shot

**Comments:** Wylie was a Menang man from King George's Sound, Western Australia. Wylie first met Eyre when they explored together in Western Australia and they shared a warm and friendly master-servant relationship. Wylie handled the horses and found bush food for the expedition. He spoke English and several Indigenous languages and won respect from the Europeans. Although he was at times difficult, Wylie stayed loyal to Eyre in the end and proved a faithful companion on the expedition.

