

YANTABULLA SPRINGS

Status: Inactive

Location: -29.33979°S, 145.00333°E (990.1); -29.33884°S, 145.00291°E (990.2); -29.34168°S, 145.00533°E (990.3-990.8); -29.34353°S, 145.00768°E (990.9)

Property: Yantabulla

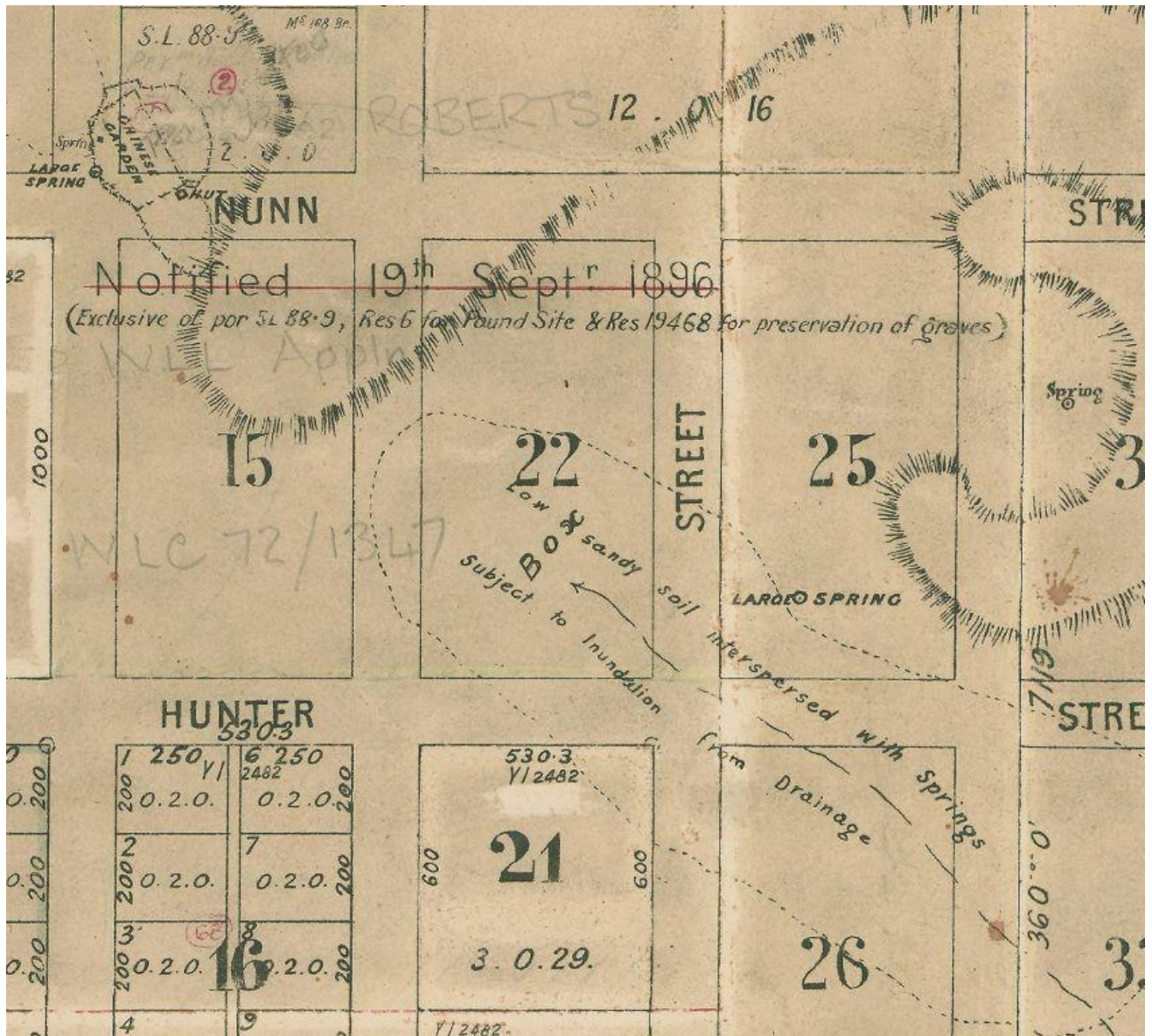
Preliminary site #: N/A

Site #: 990.1, 990.2 (Chinese garden springs), 990.3 (“Large spring”), 990.4-990.8 (sandy line), 990.9 (eastern spring)

Field survey date: Pickard (1992); 30 November 2012; May 2013; 10 December 2014

Informant: John Stephenson; Moc Parker

Inspected plans: Maranoa Pastoral Run no. 62, NSW Pastoral Index (1888), Yantabulla Town Plan (1887), County of Irrara (1903), County of Irrara, (1964)



Yantabulla Town Plan (1887), Land and Properties Information, NSW Government, depicting numerous vents spread across the town

The water reserve but not the individual springs are marked on both county plans. The Western Land Commission's plan of the Village of Yantabulla (1887) shows numerous springs, including two 'large' vents. There is a line of springs marked on sandy soil along a small drainage depression which bisects Hunter Street.

One Aboriginal narrative records that the 'Yanta' spirits saw people dying during drought and sought to protect mankind by excavating springs across the landscape (Langloh 1905). The spirits began at Yantabulla springs which are purportedly named after them. The 'Yanta' then went out to the "Kingle" Plain to create a permanent lake, however gradually died of exhaustion. "Kingle" is an obscure, unknown place name which does not appear on any maps. According to Langloh (1905), Aboriginal people would no longer cross this plain for fear of disturbing their graves 'resting above the springs'.

The name Yantabulla is also recorded as being derived from an Aboriginal word meaning 'stones around a spring' (Geographic Names Board of NSW 2012, www.gnb.nsw.gov.au). However Evelyn Crawford, an Aboriginal woman who grew up at Yantabulla, states that it meant 'plenty to eat' in the *Burunji* language (1993:23), and this is also the meaning printed on the town sign. The claypans on the eastern outskirts of the village have high densities of stone cores and flakes, indicating that the area was a major Aboriginal occupation site.

H.A. Gilliat described the springs along the Bourke-Hundgerford Road in his evidence to the Royal Commission on Water of 1885. He indicated that the Yantabulla group had numerous vents, and the 'Whip Spring', with a wetland of 2023m² was probably the most important source of water. He provided an interesting account of the spring supplying the local Chinese garden, which yielded an estimated 600-700 buckets per day. According to Gilliat, 400 cubic yards had been excavated from it in which the blue mud issuing forth had forced the 'old Chinaman' out several times until he carted in a load of stones. After interviewing the local publican, Gilliat learnt that nine or ten shafts had been put down in the area, all of which yielded salt water with the exception of a well sunk 40 feet on another old spring vent (NSW Royal Commission 1885).

Pioneer squatter Vincent Dowling established Fort Bourke station in 1859, before moving further west and establishing Yantabulla Station on the springs. He used this as a base for his explorations into the Paroo and Bulloo River country in Queensland. Dowling's homestead later became the site of the Yantabulla Hotel, and was apparently 100m from the most westerly spring. In December 1862, Dowling conducted 'springs work', opening out the springs from Yantabulla to Coonbilly. He began at Yantabulla on 4 December, writing:

Left Jacombe at 6 & stopped at Yantabulla-bulla for half an hour and opened a hole for the horses to water at, water running forth. Made Baupo [??] by 8 o'clock. Stopped and opened several holes which filled rapidly..

Baupo is not a name that is known today, but must be close to Yantabulla if Dowling made it by 8am, having spent half-an-hour at Yantabulla, and is probably part of the Yantabulla group.

Yantabulla was once a centre of commerce with telegraph, post office, Cobb & Co change station, hotels and a lemonade factory. The town has been abandoned since the last residents, Keith and Nora Roberts, left around 2010. Their house burnt down in mid-2014. A few

dilapidated buildings, rusting car bodies, three tennis courts, a cemetery and ubiquitous diffuse piles of European artefacts (much of which could be described as rubbish, including thousands of glass bottles) remain.

The springs have not flowed since at least the 1930s (Keith Roberts, quoted in Pickard 1992), and all water for the town was supplied by the bore since at least the 1920s. In her memoir *Over My Tracks* (Penguin Books, 1993), Evelyn Crawford provides an evocative account of growing up in the Yantabulla Aboriginal community in the sandhills around town in the 1930s, including learning both in the sweltering one-room classroom and in the bush from her elders. She does not mention the springs, and recalls how water was fetched in petrol tin buckets from the bore.

In his 2010 self-published memoirs *What More Could A Bloke Want?*, Peter Dunk of Warroo Station describes this community, comprised of houses made from petrol tins with the top and bottom cut out and split down one corner, opened and flattened out into a sheet which was then nailed to bush timber posts. During the 1920s and 30s, there was a police station, store and primary school, and regular tennis tournaments and ‘claypan dances’. The latter were held by the Aboriginal people, who would buy new dresses for the occasion and play music and dance all night. The claypans were turned to dust by the end of the dance. All this activity is difficult to imagine in the Yantabulla of today.



Remnants of a once-thriving commercial centre, clockwise from top left: scald on the outskirts of town scattered with Aboriginal and European artefacts and junk; cemetery in the mulga scrub, where people were laid to rest between 1880 and 1947; Keith and Nora Robert’s house, the last occupied building in Yantabulla, which burnt down in 2014 (pictured in 2012); typical scene in the streets of Yantabulla in 2014

The now-inactive springs which fed the old Chinese garden were located just north of town (Site 990). They are situated on a scalded swampy open coolibah area dotted with depressions to 2m deep with scalded rims and pebbly mounds, which probably represent old springs. Species present are typical of claypans and swamps in the area, including *Myoporum acuminatum*, *Juncus subsecundus*, *Cynodon dactylon*, *Schenkia australis*, *Glinus lotoides*, *Polygonum plebeium*, *Centipeda minima*, *Salvia verbenacea*, *Pratia darlingensis*, *Pseudognaphalium luteo-album*, *Marsilea drummondii*, *Epaltes australis*, *Spergularia rubra*, *Minuria integerrima*, *Chenopodium melanocarpum*, *Pluchea dentex*, *Stemodia florulenta*, *Atriplex eardleyae* and *Leptochloa fusca*. The ‘large spring’ on the town plan is placed as site 990.1 (-29.33979°S, 145.00333°E), while the spring marked to the north is site 990.2 (-29.33884°S, 145.00291°E).



Extinct springs which once supported a Chinese garden on the coolibah swamp just north of town: vent on western edge of swamp, probably the ‘large spring’ on 1887 town plan (top left); scalded mound (top right), and scalded depression on the same swamp (bottom), both probably representing extinct spring vents.

There are no obvious signs of springs in the sandy soil along the depression running north-west/south-east and crossing Hunter Street. However, coolibah-lined depressions containing

some huge trees probably represent old springs. The ‘large spring’ marked on the town plan in this area is placed at -29.34168°S, 145.00533°E (site 990.3). It is marked by a huge coolibah and two hollows, now filled with rubbish; this was the site apparently pointed out to John Pickard by Keith Roberts. The line of springs in low sandy soil runs just to the east of this – no old springs are obvious, and sites 990.4-990.8 are placed at the large spring.



Likely site of ‘large spring’ on 1887 town plan, in a coolibah hollow now filled with bottles

The eastern spring marked at the base of a sandridge on the 1887 town plan is placed at -29.34353°S, 145.00768°E (site 990.9). It is a sinkhole on the edge of a claypan at the base of a dune, surrounded by *Corymbia terminalis*, *Myoporum montanum* and *Lycium ferocissimum*.



Likely site of eastern spring (site 990.9) from 1887 town plan

Shallow wells are dotted throughout town, including at Keith and Nora's house (-29.34174°S, 145.00329°E), near the best-preserved hut (-29.34093°S, 145.00356°E) and at the tennis courts (-29.34529°S, 145.00350°E). All of these contain water about 10m from the surface and were equipped with old windmills. There are also shallow abandoned dry wells on the sandy rises east of town, including at -29.34150°S, 145.00594°E and -29.34360°S, 145.00805°E. These may have been sunk on old springs, and at least indicate the presence of formerly shallow groundwater. The Yantbulla Bore is west of the road at -29.34685°S, 144.99841°E, and pumps into a trough. Its sinking probably sounded the death knell for the springs.



Two silted-up abandoned wells on sandy rise behind Yantabulla town

References

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Dowling, V. 1861, Vincent J. Dowling Papers, 1859-1861: exploration and rough survey of the Paroo River in 1861. Manuscript 1643, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Dunk, P.E. 2005, *What More Could A Bloke Want? Memoirs of Peter Ernest Dunk*, self-published.

Gilliat, H.A. 1885, Royal Commission of Water: Notes on the mud springs and some shafts and borings of underground supply on the road between Ford's Bridge (on the Warrego River) and Hungerford (on the Paroo River). *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council* 6:827-8.

Langloh, K. 1905, *The Euahlayi Tribe: A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia*, Constable, London.