

Back to Birdum 2005 - The Never-Never Line

Celebrating 76 years since the first train arrived in Birdum – 2-4 September 2005

Birdum is situated about nine kilometres from Larrimah via a bush track or the railway line which is back in operation due to the great work of the Friends of the North Australian Railway.

In 1925, the Darwin - Pine Creek railway line was extended to Daly Waters and in 1928 to Birdum. The first train arrived at Birdum on 5 September 1929. A small community developed at the Birdum railhead which by 1930 consisted of O'Shea's Birdum Hotel, a dam, Schober's Store, a Shell Petrol Dump, Kirby's Motor Repair Business and Main's Boarding House. By 1934, the population was around 25 and there were six houses, hotel and various railway infrastructure. In 1939, it was regarded a busy little town as most people drove to Birdum, left their vehicles and caught the train to Darwin.

During the War period it was a focal point for the Army. Much evidence of this can still be seen with the nearby Army hospital and the BIPOD (a storage centre for goods trucked to and from Mt Isa and Alice Springs. There was a large American military contingency in the area and it has been remarked that "(the American involvement in the north Australian air war) was directed from The Porch Of The Birdum Hotel".¹

From 1942 onwards, buildings were gradually relocated to Larrimah. The last to go was the Birdum Hotel (now Larrimah Hotel) in 1952 which marked the demise of the town. The line to Birdum was abandoned by 1956 and it was officially closed in 1976.

Further information can be found in the *The Never-Never Line* by J.Y. Harvey, *The Line that led to Nowhere* by I.R. Stevenson and *Birdum: An Historic and Archaeological Review* by Peter and Sheila Forrest.

Our fabulous trip commenced from the Larrimah Hotel where we all met on Friday (2nd) night. Between 30-40 people consisting of locals, "up the track" to Darwin and some interstaters converged on Birdum. We were treated to a lovely BBQ by our publican hosts, Ann Kanters and Barry Sharp. On Saturday morning we drove into Birdum stopping to look at WW11 sites along the way.

Friends of the North Australian Railway headed by dynamo, Trevor Horman had previously cleared a substantial area of scrub near the Birdum railhead to enable camping. A flushing toilet and a large bough shelter had also been erected. An engineering feat however, was the restoration of the fettlers trolley and railway line from Birdum to Larrimah. We took great advantage of this by riding the trolley to and from the Larrimah Hotel purchasing cold beer.

Trevor Horman and Richard Luxton led a tour of the Birdum ruins which took in the airstrip and railway installations. A generator was brought in to enable a

¹ *Birdum: An Historic and Archaeological Review*, Peter and Sheila Forrest, The Larrimah Progress Association: Darwin, 1999, p. 13.

musical performance by duo Megan and John from Daly Waters and Peter Bate of the NT Folk Club. There was also a Who-Dunnit skit - Who murdered William Jacobsen in 1936 at the Main Boarding House? Regretfully, it all ended on Sunday when we all went our own way. I look forward to the 77th celebrations !



The End of the Never Never Line

Back from left: John Turner (Adelaide) Trevor Horman,
Peter Bate, Richard Luxton, Nigel Ridgway (Adelaide)
Front from left: Judy Richardson, Helen Bate, Bev Phelts



The restored fettlers trolley

From left: John Turner & Nigel Ridgway (Adelaide)
Mick Kent, Jared Archibald



Bev Phelts & Mick Kemp on the fettler trolley



Driving on the fettler's trolley from Birdum to the Larrimah Hotel



Nigel Ridgway and the ruins of the Birdum Hotel



Some of the group at Birdum



Larrimah Hotel



Bev Phelts at Birdum's stockyard ruins