

## THE HISTORY OF DERBY AND THE WEST KIMBERLEY

On the evening of 28 November 1994, President Cathie Clement spoke to the first regional meeting of the Kimberley Society (in Derby) whilst visiting the West Kimberley as a consultant in the compilation of the shire's built-environment heritage inventory.

Cathie provided a fascinating and lucid account of the early history of white settlement in the west Kimberley, with particular focus on the allocation of land, drawing on her many years of research in this domain. First successful white settlement began with Alexander Forrest's 1879 expedition along the Fitzroy valley (an earlier unsuccessful attempt had been made at Camden Harbour in the 1860s). On Forrest's return to Perth, a moratorium was put on the allocation of Kimberley land until February 1881, partially as a response to allegations that he and his brother John had derived financial advantage from knowledge gained during previous government expeditions. Ultimately, however, Alexander Forrest still managed to obtain an interest, directly or indirectly, in a significant portion of the land that was initially distributed.

The process by which the land was allocated made an interesting story. For a fee of 2/6 one could lodge an application for a lease, covering a million acres if desired, with no obligation to then pay rent for the land. These applications were submitted to a ballot. This was intended to be a fair means of dividing up the land, but various fiddles and loopholes mitigated against a fair distribution. Of the 448 applications, a third were submitted by a combine that included Fremantle politician William Edward Marmion and the Pearse brothers. They actually acquired a third of the lease approvals, coming out well ahead of other applicants who missed out altogether!

Cathie then moved on to the establishment of Derby, declared a townsite in November 1883. We learnt that the first area to be divided into town blocks was in the vicinity of the present Woolworths, and that it was not until 1885 that development at The Point end of Derby started. The Halls Creek gold rush of 1886 provided an impetus to the early development of Derby, but this was short-lived: by March 1887, 4 of the town's 7 hotels and 6 of the 8 stores had been closed.

One of the most interesting themes Cathie developed was that conflicts of various kinds characterised early European settlement in the West Kimberley. There were of course many violent conflicts between Aborigines and whites, beginning with blackbirding parties which scoured the Dampier Land peninsula during the 1870s, chaining Aborigines and taking them to such places as the Lacepede Islands, where they were held until they had been sufficiently subdued to serve as divers or shell cleaners on pearling luggers (which at that time operated from Cossack). For their

part, Aborigines sometimes killed whites, and frequently killed sheep for food - actions which quickly provoked retaliation from the whites.

There were also many conflicts within the white community itself, and tensions between Derby and Perth. There were arguments about the location of Derby; police and pastoralists were frequently engaged in acrimonious public debate; and conflicts between Thomas Henry Lovegrove, the first medical officer, and John Finnerty, first inspector of police.

Among the interesting snippets Cathie provided were that Nobby's Well was named after a horse that died at the well, and that Derby has always been recycling-conscious, re-using building materials from its earliest times. Cathie fielded a variety of questions, on topics as divergent as blackbirding and the naming of Point Torment, impressing the audience with her wide-ranging knowledge of Kimberley history.

Considerable interest was shown in early maps of Derby township and of the pastoral leases in the West Kimberley, which were on display. It was a most enjoyable evening, and provided an outsider such as myself with opportunity to renew acquaintances, and meet local residents. Derby lives up to its reputation as the most friendly town in the Kimberley - one of these days I'll move here.

*Bill McGregor*