

# BEADELL'S

**The remote Sandy Blight Junction Road is a most spectacular drive, taking you through 435 kms of remote ranges, bluffs, vast groves of desert oak and mulga; with rock holes, white gum flats and vast spinifex plains. Join Phil as he tells us about the track and some of the exploits of Len Beadell.**

**Y**ou've never heard of the Sandy Blight Junction Road? Well it's out near the WANT border, north of Warakurna and south of Kintore. Why the name SBJR you may ask? That famous surveyor/4W driver Len Beadell and his Gunbarrel Road Construction Party built the road between March and July 1960. It was at this time that Beadell had a painful eye disease known as Sandy Blight (Ophthalmia), hence the name.

On our 4 week trip through the Pilbara and the Western Deserts, we decided to return to Perth the long way via the SBJR. We left Well 33 on the CSR and headed east along the Gary Junction Road, to Kiwirrkurra. Leaving Kiwirrkurra, the scenery changed dramatically with many ranges and bluffs making a most pleasant change from the ongoing monotony of spinifex and sand dune corridors. We stopped at the WANT border for morning tea and to acclimatise to a change in time zone; we didn't want to suffer from jet lag. Heading further

east, Mounts Leisler and Strickland loomed large on the horizon. We found the community of Kintore nestled in a most picturesque setting, guarded by both mountains as its backdrop. Arriving at Kintore after midday we found the store closed for lunch, it wasn't reopening until 2.00pm. Bugger, if we hadn't stayed so long at the border worrying about jet lag we wouldn't have been held up!



# BLIGHT

**Words & Pics by Phil Bianchi**



Surprisingly diesel was only \$1.69 per litre, yet at Kiwirrkurra 174 kms away to the west it was \$2.80 per litre.

Once everyone had refueled tanks and tummies, our first stop was the SBJR turn off with its Len Beadell's marker post and plaque. Len Beadell and his team were responsible for opening up much of the Western Deserts with a network of roads that enabled a series of atomic

bomb blasts and Woomera Rocket Range testing to be monitored.

Without doubt Beadell is largely responsible for and has been 'blamed' for kindling the interest of many of today's 4W drivers in desert travel. I also blame him. For many years permits to drive the SBJR had been extremely difficult to obtain. Thankfully in recent times access is readily given via the standard permit



application system. Fortunately the SBJR is now part of the Northern Territory's 4x4 tourism trails network, hopefully this will ensure continued access.

Heading south we were greeted by spectacular ranges both sides of the track. Our next stop was at the remains of Tietken's blazed tree, a bloodwood on which in 1889 he blazed T over 5.89.

Nowadays the blaze is almost indecipherable and the tree has died and fallen over. The trunk, however, has been rescued and placed up on large concrete bricks in an endeavour to keep the termities at bay. It was 4.30 pm local time; by now we had given up on trying to avoid jet lag, so we set up camp in a tranquil

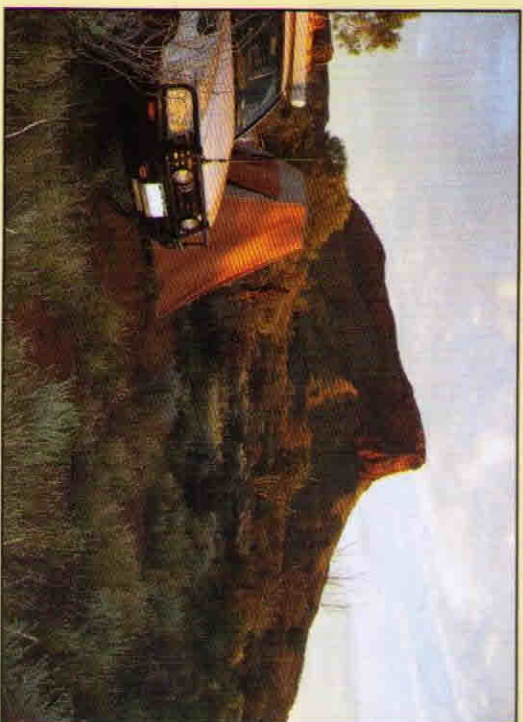
**"This would have to be one of the most picturesque camps of my desert travels over the years".**

gum lined creek with Mt Leisler as our backdrop. This would have to be one of the most picturesque camps of my desert travels over the years, it was just superb. Dragging ourselves away from this magic camp site in the morning, our first stop was another Beadell marker as we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn. Soon after that we stopped at another, 200 mile rock. It's a very large rock that marked the point that was exactly 200 miles by road from the Gunbarrel Hwy to the south.

It even had a flat surface on which 200 miles was painted. Most odd when you consider that there aren't any other rocks in the vicinity, let alone finding one with a flat surface facing the road.

What people don't realise is that Beadell and his crew, practical jokers at heart, found the rock elsewhere, chained it to the bulldozer blade and carted it miles to this spot. It was then carefully positioned with the flat spot facing the track. They wanted people to think the position of the 200 mile rock marker was a fluke – buggers. Soon another tree plaque had us stopping, then another and then another.

Beadell had a field day along the SBJR with his hammer and punches; he must have kept them in an ice bucket because they would have been red hot from overuse. He often said the SBJR was the prettiest road his team ever made; his enthusiasm was certainly reflected in the number of plaques he installed along the route. Few people would argue with Beadell's sentiments. We found ourselves stopping regularly to take it all in and to take photos of the majestic stands of desert oak and numerous ranges and peaks guarding us on our journey southward. The SBJR has enough bends, dips, twists and turns to compensate for the lack of them on all of Beadell's other roads. Len usually liked all of his roads straight; "to keep the countryside tidy" he would say. Beadell and his men would have



▲ A terrific camp with Mt Leisler as a backdrop.

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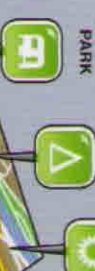
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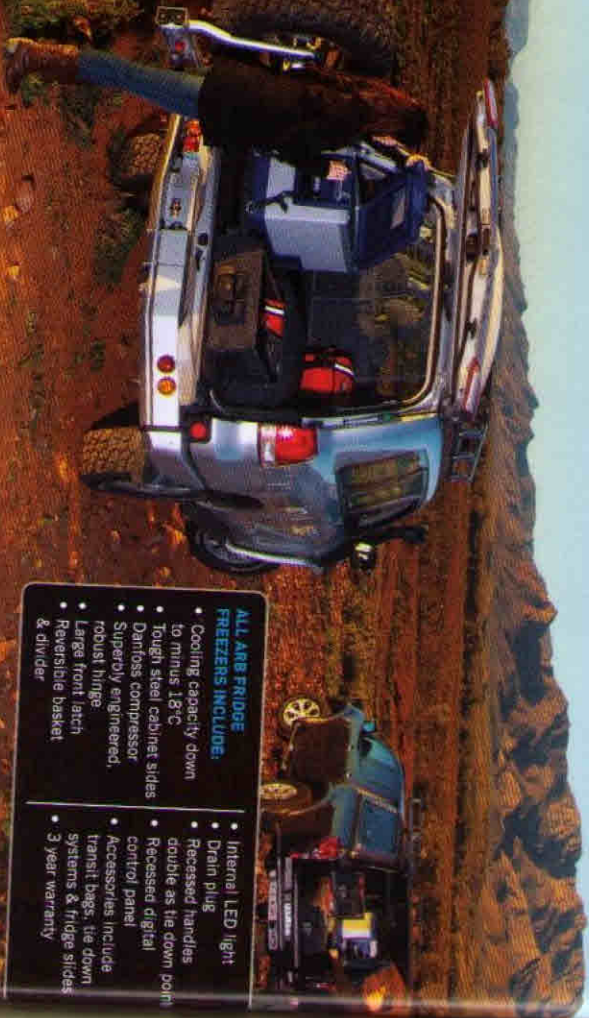




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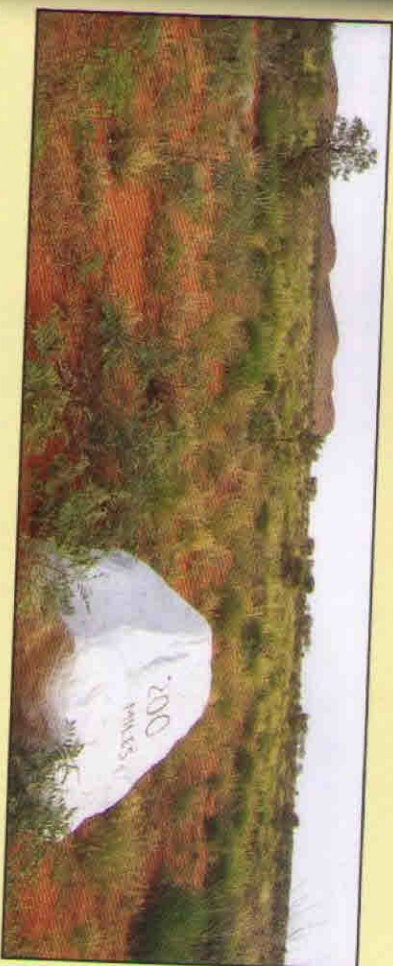
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▶ **Beadell's relocated 200 mile rock.**

known every inch of the SBJR, every turn, tree, spinifex clump and grain of sand. Why?

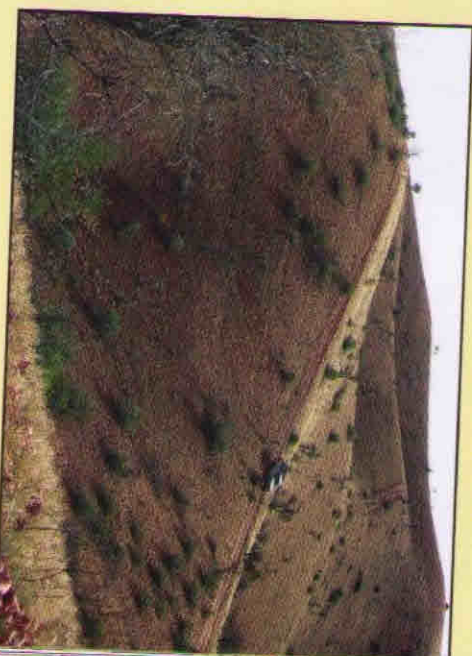
Back in November 1960 they had pushed a new road west as far as the Jupiter Well area, when the grader suffered major mechanical failure. Soon after that the ration truck caught fire, leaving them without fresh food and nothing to tow the fridge trailer. Because it was almost time to shut down and return to base before the severe summer temperatures made working out there impossible, they decided on using the dozer to tow the grader back to Giles.

**"The procession proceeded at the alarming rate of 3kph (and) it took them a month to cover the 800kms to Giles."**

Behind the grader they had the fridge van and then the water tanker trailer. The procession proceeded at the alarming speed of 3 kph and it took them a month to cover the 800 kms to Giles. Because the dozer wasn't meant to be walked, they needed to grease the rollers every two hours of the whole trip. Now that's a lot of grease! I'm sure no one could argue that this towing

operation would have to have been one of the most unusual in history. Anyway back to our trip. Once we entered a vast section of gravelly country, the road deteriorated to a horrible corrugated mess. We tried various methods to counter the constant corros; speeding up, slowing down, reducing tyre pressures or taking side tracks, all to no avail. Upon entering the sand ridge country, track conditions improved and we were again being serenaded by vast desert oak groves, mulga and black gidgee flats. The views at almost every turn were just sensational. Because of our ongoing problems handling the jet lag we had two

A slow drive down the Sir Frederick Range.





morning tea breaks, both in picturesque desert oak groves. One desert oak was huge. It was a massive tree that had escaped the ravages of time and provided Beadell with a place to fix another of his plaques and us with a superb morning tea spot.

Approaching the Sir Frederick Range, the country opened up somewhat. The turn off to the range is marked by yet another Beadell marker. Thankfully Len and his men decided that the range would provide travellers with superb views so they pushed a 3 km track along the ridge



▲ Brimfull Bungabiddy Rock Hole - a hidden desert gem.

One of the many desert oak groves and another Beadell marker.

lines all the way to the top. The track was very rocky, although the boulders were round and smooth; they got larger the closer we got to the top. We drove up slowly in 2nd low and admired the view over the treeless range. You could readily pick out animal trails on the sides of the sparsely vegetated hill sides. Once at the top we had 360° views to the horizon. Adjectives failed me here; it was just bloody fantastic. There is a huge cairn made of boulders at the top and a small metal box that houses a visitor's book. One thing about these tin

box visitors' books, they thankfully give the 'I was here' brigade a chance to say that in a non graffiti way. Incidentally the Sir Frederick Range was named by that most intrepid of explorers, Frank Hann, in August 1904 after Sir Frederick George Denham Bedford, the then Governor of WA. Fortunately for us it was lunch time for our WA stomachs, so out with the tucker and just sit back, admire the views and take it all in. What a fantastic place to have lunch!

On our way down we used 1st low, in 2nd low the vehicle ran away from us. Although it was a difficult climb up and back down, it's straight forward if you use the right gears and don't rush it.

Our round trip took 90 mins including a lunch break. Without doubt this side trip is a must do for anyone driving the SBR. When Beadell suggested to his team that a track to the top of Sir Frederick Range would be a worthy exercise, his dozer



driver Doug Stoneham and grader driver Scotty Boord both reckoned the other's machine wouldn't make it to the top. So the challenge was on. The result; the dozer made it up easily and the grader, because its rubber tyres couldn't get any traction, had to turn back half way up. Once back on the main track and heading south, we were now being spoilt yet again when the groves of desert oaks



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and vistas of distant ranges continued for kilometre after kilometre; real picture postcard stuff. Turkey Bore is located in a picturesque flat surrounded by desert oaks. The hand pump enabled us to top up our water supply; we then set up camp a few kms away. After another magic night serenaded by a light breeze through the desert oaks, we reluctantly headed off in the morning. Our next goal was the Bungabiddy (also known as Pangkupirri) Rockholes. Taking an easy to negotiate side track, we drove to the rockholes in the picturesque Walter James Range, another Hann named feature. Walter Hartwell James was WA's Premier. It's a picturesque walk up the valley to the rockholes; at the main rockhole some faint aboriginal art was spotted nearby. Judging by the water weed growing in them the three pools seen permanent. Back at the parking spot, our intrepid bunch decided to celebrate the occasion by percolating some espresso. I'm a firm believer in not forgoing all luxuries in the bush. A fire was quickly lit in one of the old campfire spots; the percolator set up and soon the aroma of freshly brewed espresso filled the area. Just fantastic; I can still smell that brew. Once we saw Giles' Schwerin Mural Crescent on the horizon, we knew we had almost finished our drive down the SBJR. This drive would have to be the prettiest track I have



Excerpt from HEMA WA State map. Copyright HEMA proprietary Ltd 2010.

ever had the privilege to travel in all my years of 4W driving. It was just superb, you never knew what was going to show up around the next corner and best of all we had it all to ourselves.

## INFORMATION BAY

This is a very isolated track, be well prepared and totally self sufficient. Ensure your vehicle has been serviced with a special emphasis on tyres, shocks, springs, radiator, alternator, batteries and starter motor. Few people travel in the area and it may be days, even weeks before someone comes along. Access permits are required. Contact the Dept of Indigenous Affairs

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