



Crossing Cultures
An Anglo-Australian Working in
Aboriginal Communities
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Ownership of Victoria River Downs Station

Ownership of Victoria River Downs cattle station and historical events from the initial purchase of VRD in 1879 until Yarralin Community in the Northern Territory gained land rights in 2016.

Year	Notes	VRD Owner
1879	First lease of VRD to Fisher & Lyons – 15,890 square miles or 41,000 square kilometres ¹	Fisher & Lyons. Fisher was one of the wealthiest men in Australia. ²
1883	VRD stocked with 20,000 head of cattle overlanded by Nat Buchanan ³	As above
1889	Change of Ownership: VRD taken over by auctioneering and brokerage business Goldsbrough Mort & Co which dominated the early wool trade. ⁴	Goldsbrough Mort & Co. ⁵
1894	Constable Willshire was stationed at Gordon Creek (VRD) to maintain law and order over the Aboriginal population of around 4,000. ⁶	As above
Late 1890's	Aborigines on VRD reported as being 'excessively troublesome' ⁷	As above
1900	Change of Ownership: VRD sold to Kidman Syndicate	Sydney Kidman, Isadore Emanuel and Alex Forrest
1900	Wickham Blacks' camp established on VRD providing pool of unpaid labour ⁸	As above
1909	Change of Ownership: Bovril registered in England in 1909 to acquire pastoral properties in the Northern Territory and Western Australia	Bovril Australian Estates
1914	Bovril northern estates were the largest in the Empire, if not the world, with an area of 37,500 square kilometres ⁹	As above
1917-1919	Failure of Vestey's Darwin meatworks ¹⁰	As above
1920's	VRD cattle sold for slaughter to Wyndham meatworks ¹¹	As above
1930's	The Great Depression	As above
1939 - 1945	World War II	As above
1932 - 1950	Bovril management recorded information about Aboriginal workers in a 'Natives' ledgers. Information included the names of a worker's spouse and parents, their camp, the nature of their employment, their Indigenous name and the group of which they were a part. ¹²	As above



1943	Patrol Officer Sweeney reported that ‘cattle stations are generally unable or unwilling to bear the full responsibility for the dependant women and children and old people on their stations’. ¹³	
1952	Sweeney reported development of native welfare was slow on VRD. However, the manager had finally ‘agreed to erect four pit type lavatories to serve the native camp area’. ¹⁴	
1955	Change of Ownership: One of Melbourne’s most secretive and enigmatic millionaires purchased VRD ¹⁵	W.L. Buckland
1960	Change of Ownership: Buckland’s sale to Hooker reputed to be the biggest land deal ever transacted in rural Australia ¹⁶	Hooker Corporation
1966	Wave Hill walk-off: In August 1966, 200 Gurindji stockmen, domestic workers and their families initiated strike action at Wave Hill station in the Northern Territory. The strike protested the poor conditions Aboriginal workers had experienced on the station for more than 40 years. ¹⁷	As above
1967	Referendum – Australian Constitution amended to allow the Commonwealth to make laws for Aboriginal people and include them in the census.	As above
April 1972	VRD and Humbert River walk-off. The strikers joined the Gurindji at Wattie Creek. ¹⁸	As above
1973	VRD manager bulldozed Aboriginal living area ¹⁹	
October 1973	VRD agreed to excision of 240 square kilometres for Yarralin. (2% VRD land) ²⁰	
February 1975	VRD withdrew agreement ²¹	
September 1975	VRD re-agreed to claim of 240 square kilometres ²²	
September 1975	Justice Ward, Interim Land Commissioner, declared land claim was ‘effectively and mutually settled’ ²³	
1977	Yarralin wrote to Northern Territory Government stating 240 square kilometres was beginning of larger claim over 2,100 square kilometres north of Yarralin block ²⁴	
1983	Wickham River Land Claim - surveying oversight had left 3,100 hectare slice of unalienated land. Land claim lodged by NLC ²⁵	
1984	Northern Territory Government gave one block of 149 square kilometres to Ngarinman Yarralin Community Incorporated. The other block of 355 square kilometres was held by the Northern Territory Land Corporation - a body used to thwart Aboriginal land claims. ²⁶	
1984	Hooker sold VRD to Peter Sherwin for \$12 million. By 1986 Sherwin had become Australia’s largest cattle breeder. ²⁷	Peter Sherwin



1985	Yarralin land title held by a Katherine bank in lieu of unpaid debts 'from what appeared at best to be mismanagement of funds' ²⁸	
1989	Peter Sherwin's European staff locked gates on access roads to Pigeon Hole to thwart the Bilinara Land Rights claim. ²⁹ Justice Nader, a Northern Territory Supreme Court judge described the treatment of Indigenous Australians by a company owned by the cattle baron, Mr Peter Sherwin, as 'extraordinary and savage'. ³⁰	
1989	Robert Holmes a Court purchased VRD through his Heytesbury Pastoral Company. After his death in 1990, his wife Janet, took over. ³¹	Heytesbury Pty. Ltd
Mid 1990s	Ngarinman Yarralin Community Inc dissolved. Title seized by Northern Territory Commission for Consumer Affairs. ³²	
2009	Wickham Land Claim brought before the Aboriginal Land Commission – Northern Territory Government conceded there were Traditional Owners ³³	
2009	The Northern Territory Government and the Northern Land Council that the three blocks of the Wickham River claim, Yarralin block (owned by Commission of Consumer Affairs), and Land Corporation block be scheduled as Aboriginal Freehold Land.	
2015	Following land surveys, the three claimed blocks were scheduled as Aboriginal land under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976.	
2016	Yarralin Land handed back - 50,310 hectares of land officially held as freehold land by Traditional Owners under the Ngalkarrang-Wulgann Aboriginal Land Trust. ³⁴	

Source: Crossing Cultures, An Anglo-Australian working in Aboriginal Communities by Barbara Jackson, 2023
VRD ownership table is compiled from references below

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4 Makin, J., 1999. The Big Run, JB Books, South Australia, p. 69

5 Dictionary of Sydney, NSW State Library, https://dictionaryofsydney.org/organisation/goldsbrough_mort_&_co

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29 Clarke, J., 1989. Change of Hands, and Heart, over NT "Soweto", Aboriginal Law Bulletin, <http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AboriginalLawB/1989/37.html>

30 Rose, 1992. p. 258

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32 Wickham River Land Claim Title Deed Handover, 2016. Land Rights News July 2016. https://www.nlc.org.au/uploads/pdfs/LRN_July-2016_Web.pdf

33 Ibid

34 Gosford, B., 2015.