

Fact sheet: The Darling Downs and Drayton

In April 1827, the explorer Allan Cunningham set off from the Hunter Valley in New South Wales with six convicts, 11 horses and plenty of equipment. They headed north and within two weeks were in territory that no white man had ever seen. On 5 June, they reached a point above the Dumaresq River and looked out over a great grassy plain. This is how Cunningham described what he saw:

'The lower grounds ... furnish an almost inexhaustible range of cattle pasture at all seasons of the year - the grasses and herbage generally exhibiting, in the depth of winter, an extraordinary luxuriance of growth. From these central grounds, rise downs of a rich, black, and dry soil, and very ample surface; and as they furnish an abundance of grass, and are conveniently watered, yet perfectly beyond the reach of those floods, which take place on the flats in a season of rains, they constitute a valuable and sound sheep pasture.'



Allan Cunningham



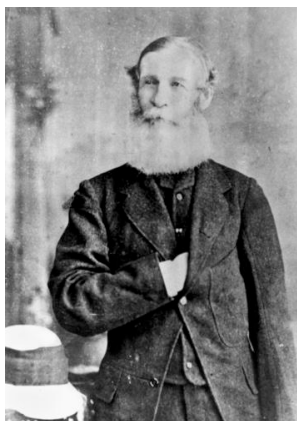
Cunningham's Gap

This rich agricultural land was later named the Darling Downs, after Sir Ralph Darling, the Governor of New South Wales. The following year, 1828, Cunningham discovered a gap in the Great Dividing Range which would allow access from Brisbane and Moreton Bay to the Darling Downs. This was named Cunningham's Gap.

Despite Allan Cunningham's exciting discovery, no-one came to live on the Darling Downs until twelve years later.

This is because Moreton Bay was a **penal colony** and no-one was allowed within fifty miles of Brisbane without special permission. This made things difficult for farmers because they were unable to send their produce to Brisbane, or bring in the supplies they needed.

A penal colony is a place where convicts were sent to carry out their punishments.



Patrick Leslie (John Oxley Library)

In 1839 the penal colony was closed and in 1840 a Scottish settler named Patrick Leslie arrived in the Darling Downs where he established a sheep run named Toolburra. His brothers George and Walter soon joined him and together they established Canning Downs station. They brought with them 6000 sheep and 22 men, most of whom were **ticket-of-leave convicts**.

More settlers followed and established their own sheep runs and farms. These men were known as squatters, because they claimed

Convicts who did not commit further crimes were rewarded with a 'ticket of leave' enabling them to undertake paid work.

land that had not been officially allocated to them by the government. One of these squatters, Arthur Hodgson, soon had to take his wool clip to market in Ipswich. He found that Cunningham's Gap was a very steep and dangerous to navigate and eventually a new route was found, near the site of the present Warrego Highway.

By now, people living in the Darling Downs and those travelling in the area needed goods and services. In 1842, a man named Thomas Alford built a general store on some land near the junction of two major roads. Aboriginal people knew the place as *chinkerry*, meaning 'water springs up' and European people knew it as 'The Springs'. Later, the settlement became known as Drayton, after Thomas Alford's birthplace in Somerset, England.

The store became very popular and soon other businesses developed around it, including a blacksmith, a bootmaker, a post office and other useful trades. An inn, known as the Downs Hotel, was also established, and in 1847 a second inn was built, called the Bull's Head. Drayton continued to grow, and soon there were two butchers, a tailor, a court house, a school, a police barracks and six policemen to look after the settlement. A newspaper, the Darling Downs Gazette, commenced in 1858. By 1861, Drayton had a population of 321.



This sketch of Drayton, by Conrad Martens, shows how the settlement looked in 1852.

By the middle of the 1860s, Drayton had been overtaken in size by Toowoomba, which had developed on an area of land known as The Swamp, about 6 kilometres from Drayton. Toowoomba had a better water supply (the natural springs at Drayton were no longer adequate for all the people and animals that used them) and was located nearer to the track down the Range to Brisbane, with more passing traffic. Thomas Alford moved to Toowoomba in 1852 and by 1861 Toowoomba had a population of 1183, about four times more than Drayton.