

## *LIGHTNING RIDGE*

2020 and Coronavirus will be forever linked in our memories. As well as various restrictions on group day rides, a planned “Romania to Istanbul “ tour with Adriatic Moto Tours had to be postponed to 2021, a possible USA/Canada tour didn’t get past the concept stage, and a substitute “local ride” to Coober Pedy was modified when Victoria became a basket case, then cancelled altogether when South Australia closed its borders. Eventually a trip to Lightning Ridge became Plan E, but still proved an enjoyable ride.

David from Canberra (Triumph Rocket 111), Dennis from Sydney (BMW R1200 GS) and myself (Triumph Tiger Sport) had ridden Tasmania in February, before coronavirus really took hold. I’d also ridden with Dennis on the 2018 West Coast USA tour, and with Archer from Sydney (BMW R1200 GS) on the 2016 Balkans tour and 2018 West Coast USA tour, so we knew each other’s riding style, drinking habits and eccentricities when it came to travelling together. First day’s ride included the Goulburn-Oberon and Tarana-Bathurst roads, with lunch at Tarana Hotel (where I learned to pronounce the name correctly) and an overnight stay in Bathurst.

Unfortunately rain suits got an early start after meeting up at Trappers Goulburn Bakery, and conditions only deteriorated from there. I feared for a flock of sheep in a paddock before Oberon, thinking their black faces were frostbitten, but apparently they were simply a hardier breed. Heavy rain, strong gusty winds and bitter cold escorted us into Bathurst, temperatures dropped to 2°C overnight, and next morning patrons in the breakfast café reported seeing snow outside town.



*a front row lock-out at Mount Panorama*

Before leaving Bathurst next morning we visited the National Motor Racing Museum followed by an obligatory lap of Mount Panorama, where I set a lap time 3 weeks and 2 days ahead of Shane van Gisbergen and his Bathurst winning Holden. I was tempted to return to the Museum to negotiate where my now famous bike, helmet and underwear should be displayed, but modesty prevailed.

The cold persisted during visits to the historic gold mining towns of Sofala and Hill End, and intermittent rain meant a walk through the Hill End Historic Site didn't happen, although we did warm up with a gourmet pie at Hill End Estate Café before visiting the interesting and under cover History Hill Museum.

This ride would be as much about the places visited as the roads ridden. Place names often come up in news and weather reports etc, and this would be an opportunity to put a place to a name, so to speak.



*Sofala Royal Hotel*

A late afternoon coffee break at Mudgee was thwarted when we couldn't find a venue open, so we continued on to our overnight stop at Gulgong, my maternal grandmother's home town. Revered Australian writer, poet and alcoholic Henry Lawson also spent time in Gulgong, so we honoured his memory with a few local Young Henry's beers in the Prince of Wales Hotel, followed by a few more Robert Stein cab-savs. Unfortunately we had been running too late to visit the Robert Stein Winery and Motorcycle Museum outside Mudgee.

Overnight temperatures had again hovered around 2°C but no snow had been reported. The Henry Lawson Centre was worth the short visit, and I'm sure a dedicated fan could spend several hours there. Instead we set off to Dunedoo and a coffee break, appreciating the silo art featuring racehorse Winx, and also appreciating the fact a proposed "Big Dunny" tourist attraction had never materialised. By this time the clouds were clearing further and temperatures were warming to around 14°C.



*a spot of culture at the Henry Lawson Centre, Gulgong*



*saluting Winx at Dunedoo*

On our Tasmania trip we'd enjoyed a stop in Sheffield, a town with over 100 colourful murals, so I planned to stop for lunch at Mendooran, another proclaimed "Town of Murals". Coronavirus was obviously having an impact on tourism as both cafes in town appeared closed, and the Royal Hotel carpark suggested social distance limits were already at capacity.



*too scared to visit the Royal Hotel, Mendooran*

Next town was Gilgandra, home of the famous 1915 Coo-ee March where 26 local men started a march to Sydney to enlist in World War 1. By the time they reached Sydney their number had swelled to 263, and set off a series of recruitment marches from several other country towns. These days they would probably be met by a greater number of protesters, and an even greater number of riot police!



*commemorating the 1915 Coo-ee March from Gilgandra*

Fortunately we found a café open and enjoyed a light lunch. We later stopped in Warren for a coffee break but despite a brief walk around found no cafes open so again continued on. Weariness was setting in as we passed Nevertire, eventually arriving in Nyngan around 5:00pm. Although virtually straight, the last stretch of road was demanding, riding into a setting sun and conscious of the many 'roo warning signs and a similar number of dead 'roos by the side of the road.

The roads we travelled were undoubtedly better than those encountered by the Gilgandra marchers, but I was surprised some were posted at 110KPH. In deference to the 'roos and other wildlife I felt more comfortable riding a bit below this limit. I was also pleasantly surprised that the countryside appeared greener than I'd expected. Recent rains were obviously having a good impact on struggling farms, and there were many fields of wheat and canola as well as sheep and cattle.



*the Big Bogan in Nyngan*

Nyngan is infamous for the 1990 flood, when the Bogan River burst its banks and the town had to be evacuated by Air Force helicopters. A de-commissioned chopper in the centre of town is a monument to the role they played, and the breakfast café had a mark half way up the wall indicating the flood depth. The Railway Station is now a museum highlighting the flood, but was closed for renovations. The 1500kg steel Big Bogan statue was erected in 2015 and is yet to have his swimming credentials tested.

Beyond Nyngan the roads were again very straight, providing a glimpse of the 250 hectare solar panel farm outside town, the largest in the southern hemisphere. The road also had many floodways, not as long or as deep as those encountered further north and west but still testimony to the vagaries of weather on a flattish landscape. Cruise control was well suited to these conditions, allowing me to concentrate on the road and appreciate the scenery instead of regularly checking the speedo.

We called into Fort Bourke Lookout above Cobar to view the spectacular open cut mine, a massive site yet only a fraction of the underground workings around Cobar sourcing gold and copper.



*open cut mining the Cobar way*

We also stopped at the majestic 1910 Great Cobar Heritage Centre , originally the administration building for the Great Cobar Copper Mine. Founded in 1870, the mine was one of the largest mining and processing operations in the world at the time. Unfortunately this museum was also closed for renovation, perhaps taking advantage of the lull in tourism.



*the Great Cobar Heritage Centre*

There were more long straight sections on the way to Bourke, and more dead 'roos. The only live animals were several herds of goats until I spotted a single emu running off into the scrub. Traffic was relatively light with some caravans and campers but predominately mining trucks and contractor utes.



*kangaroos obediently taking a rest*

We reached Bourke around 4:00pm. I'd never thought of Bourke as a river port, but that didn't stop us enjoying the hospitality of the "Port of Bourke Hotel" for drinks and dinner. Bourke had been a major inland trading hub and the Darling River supported several paddle steamer companies until improved road and rail services took over. A single paddle steamer now conducts short cruises for tourists.



*Back O'Bourke Exhibition Centre*



*historic North Bridge, Bourke*

The Back O' Bourke Exhibition Centre was worth the visit next morning, as was a slight detour to see the classic 1883 North Bridge, now superceded by a modern concrete structure but still the oldest moveable span bridge in Australia. Brewarrina and the delightful Muddy Waters Café was lunch stop and an opportunity to see the ancient aboriginal fish traps, some reports estimating them to be over 40,000 years old and possibly one of the oldest man-made structures on earth.



*ancient aboriginal fish traps near Brewarrina Weir*

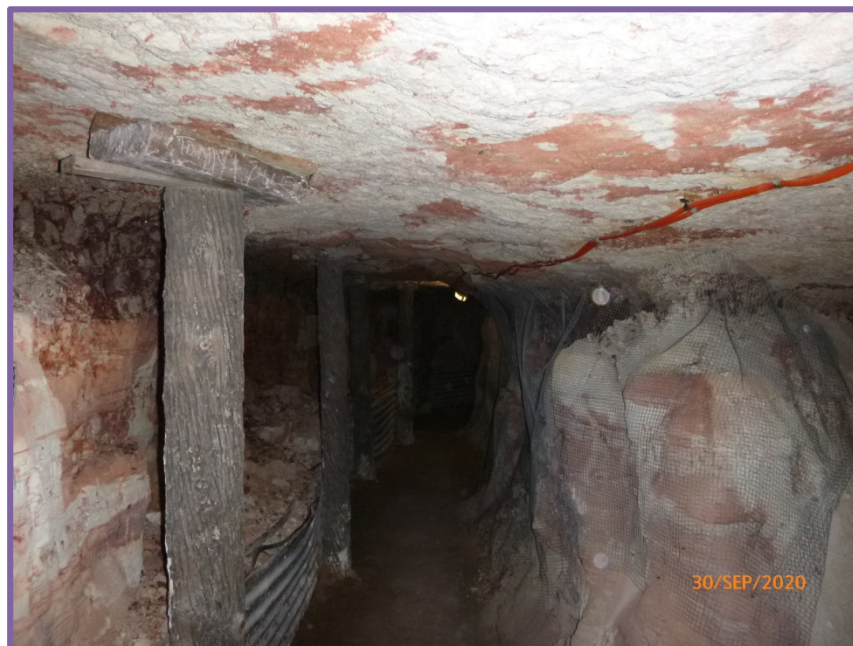


The countryside was still flat with some trees but mainly scrub. I did see one herd of cattle, and later stopped to point out a lone emu as the others had missed the emu the previous day. A road train obviously didn't appreciate us taking up a small area on the side of the road, and let us know with his air-horn. I presume the emu has landed by now and is still running.



*Welcome to Lightning Ridge*

After that it was on to Walgett for a cool drink and refuel, then on to Lightning Ridge via Cumborah.



*underground tourist mine at Lightning Ridge*



*Amigo's Castle, the Ridge*

We had arranged a 3 hour mini-bus tour of the Ridge and driver Peter gave interesting commentary throughout the tour. Repetition is key to memory retention, so I doubt I'll forget that Lightning Ridge is the "home" of black opals (which aren't really black but have vibrant colours on a dark body tone).

Unfortunately intermittent rain and multiple muddy puddles meant we didn't get out of the bus as often as expected, and the foggy windows of the bus didn't help with photos. Still we probably heard and saw enough to get an impression of the town and the "can-do" spirit of its inhabitants.



*all sorts of accommodation available at the Ridge*

Murphy's Law meant the rain stopped as the bus tour ended so we were able to walk around for the remainder of our rest day, have lunch at the only pub in town, and buy some souvenirs. Peter had told stories of the many fortunes made from opals and I wasn't surprised when I saw the price of some gems on display, but I have a feeling the winners are far outnumbered by the losers.



*the "Big Bird" Stanley and friends, Lightning Ridge*

Archer left us early next morning to head home and move house, while we continued towards Inverell via Collarenebri, Moree and Warialda. The countryside was initially flat with some wheat and cotton, and more floodways. I looked for a turn-off to visit the aboriginal carved trees at Collymogle and I'm still looking for it.

This wasn't the first time I've identified a local attraction from Google Maps or other source but failed to see a sign on the road. I'll do more homework next time. (I've subsequently checked on Google Maps street view and there is a sign! Perhaps I should invest in a GPS, but then I'd have to learn how to use it).

I did find three emus which didn't feature on Google Maps, and slowed for a photo. Two ran across my path barely 5m in front of me before I could stop, and quickly disappeared into scrub on the other side of the road. The third obviously realised discretion was the better part of valour and disappeared into scrub on the original side of the road. Once again no emu photo eventuated.

Further on a herd of slow moving cattle grazing on both sides of the road did provide a photo opportunity, but somehow it wasn't as exciting.



*fake news – Donald has not declared war on Australia*



*🐾 that's the way it's gonna be little darlin' 🐾*

Some mean souls might rate Collarenebri a one-horse town, but the sign at the bridge over the Barwon River told a very different story. We refueled there, had a chat with the drivers of a vintage jeep parade while they also refueled at the single cantankerous bowser, then had a cold drink at a pleasant café.

David's Rocket 111 was the only concern re tank range so we refueled at regular intervals. Octane rating varied from town to town, so we'd top up with 98RON if the previous stop had only 91, and vice versa. The math may not have been exact, but the bikes never complained.



*127 horse power vanquished by 20 something cow power*

Moree is a nice town and we found an equally nice café for lunch. The country started to feature some hills and bends in the road, and I was glad to have the setting sun behind us as we arrived in Inverell, another nice town and well worth a visit and overnight stop.



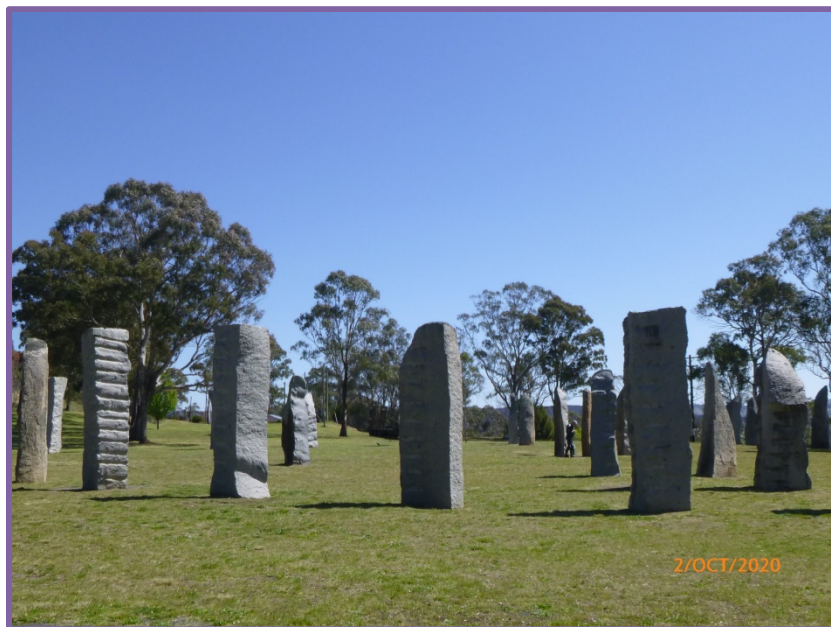
*on the way to Inverell, the Sapphire City*

If you do stay in Inverell, ask the restaurateur at the Union Espresso Bar if he's got his BMW running yet, try their excellent 2006 Berand Shiraz, and expect a dour reaction if you ask for your steak well done.



*National Transport Museum at Inverell*

We called into the National Transport Museum on the way out of Inverell and spent well over an hour having a look at their extensive display of cars, bikes and motoring paraphenalia.



*Australian Standing Stones at Glen Innes*

Glen Innes was the lunch stop, followed by a visit to the Australian Standing Stones monument to Australia's Celtic pioneers. Our visit fell midway between winter and summer solstice, so we never witnessed any satanic rituals.

I have visited Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plains in England, and copies near Esperence, Western Australia and near Maryhill, Washington State, so was disappointed to find Stonehenge near Glen Innes merely referred to an accumulation of tumbled boulders. I did catch sight of the “Balancing Rock” from the road but didn’t bother to turn back for a photo.



*Captain Thunderbolt gallery at McCrossin's Mill Museum, Uralla*

In Uralla we stopped at McCrossin's Mill Museum and saw a series of paintings by artist Phillip Pomroy depicting the final day of bushranger Frederick Ward (Captain Thunderbolt), as well as other interesting displays of the Mill's history, Chinese gold diggers and the surrounding region.

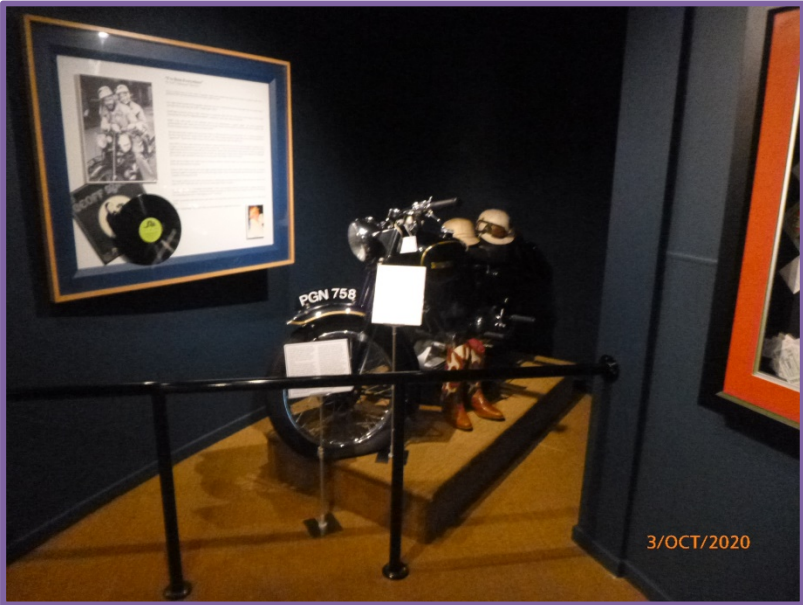


*the Big Golden Guitar at Tamworth, no strings attached*

Tamworth was another planned rest day. We rode to the Visitor's Centre in the morning to see the Big Golden Guitar and Guitar Museum before parking the bikes back at our motel and walking to the nearby Country Music Hall of Fame and the Powerhouse Motorcycle Museum in the afternoon. Tamworth has obviously made the big time because the usual fast-food outlets had displaced our preferred cafes in this vicinity. We settled for a Sub-Way lunch.



*Smokey Dawson and his good mate Flash*



*Geoff Mack's Panther 600*





*Powerhouse Motorcycle Museum, Tamworth*

Probably the most interesting bike we saw was the late Geoff Mack's Panther 600 in the Country Music Hall of Fame. Albert Geoffrey McElhinney had travelled extensively while entertaining troops during and after World War 2, before he and wife Tabbi rode the bike with sidecar overland from London to Australia in 1954, providing the inspiration for his iconic 1959 song "I've Been Everywhere, Man".



*First Fleet Memorial Gardens*

The First Fleet didn't exactly sail into Wallabadah, which is over 200km inland from Port Macquarie, but the region boasts several descendants so the good folk there put their hands up to accept the Memorial Gardens, and the tourism generated. Good luck to them.



*and yet another Royal Hotel, at Murrurundi*

Temperatures had been gradually increasing over the past few days, but exceeding 30°C on the ride to Pokolbin wasn't expected. It was comfortable enough when we stopped at the First Fleet Memorial Gardens at Wallabadah, for a coffee at Willow Tree and to refuel at Murrurundi, but Dennis wisely chose the air-conditioned Singleton Diggers Club for lunch. Even that nourishment didn't give us the strength to adjust Singleton's sundial for the morning's daylight saving.



*try wearing this on your wrist*

We arrived at Pokolbin around 2:00pm, checked in and changed out of our bike gear, swapping 2 wheels for a different set of 2 wheels on a one hour Segway Experience. After a brief but comprehensive introduction, we were on our way through an old droving route, creek crossing and working vineyard. Certainly a fun diversion, and the Asians in our group became even more excited (but didn't fall off) when several kangaroos were spotted in the bush.



*swapping 2 wheels for 2 wheels*

This was my first attempt at riding a Segway, and I was surprised how quickly we all adapted to the technique. More likely an endorsement of the Segway design than any talent on our part.

Next day was another planned rest day, enjoying a hop-on hop-off bus tour through the Hunter Valley wineries. Initially I expected this would be a day of spontaneous experiences ad-libbing from venue to venue. Instead the need to pre-book winery visits due to coronavirus seating restrictions made the day a challenge to stay on schedule. Most bookings included a modest up-front fee for the tasting, another good reason to keep an eye on the time.

Bus driver Tim went out of his way to keep us punctual, and Andrew Thomas Wines, Piggs Peake Winery, Hungerford Hill, Hope Estate, Tempus Two and Oakvale Wines all had their own style of presentation and provided a wide variety of wines for tasting. We didn't succumb to any purchases, partly because of our limited carrying capacity but also because of the prices.



*another kangaroo and joey at Hope Estate Winery*

Last day's ride home was overcast and cool, and the Putty Road was an ideal route to finish the trip. The Grey Gum Café had a good patronage of bikes, cars and caravans, and it was encouraging to see the bush around Colo Heights recovering well from fires earlier in the year.



*Grey Gum Café on the Putty Road – close to home now*

After lunch at Wallacia Hotel, Dennis headed towards Sydney and home, and David headed towards Canberra at the Wilton interchange. Total distance travelled on my bike after 12 days of diversions, distractions and only a couple of wrong turns was 2,784km.

If the ride had been part of a reality TV show, I could entertain you in high-tension drama-packed detail how we resourcefully used bottle-brush flowers to clean bull dust from clogged air filters, tearfully rebuilt a gearbox by the side of the road in pouring rain using decaying kangaroo hide to replace shattered synchromesh rings, and repaired broken spokes on Den's bike with denso tape and wire strands borrowed from a rusting boundary fence.

Back in the real world, the bikes had performed faultlessly all trip. The only technical intervention was adjusting the clocks for daylight saving, and the occasions I lubed my drive chain. The latter chore was done discreetly to avoid derision from the shaft drive devotees.

And so ends another enjoyable and interesting trip, enabling me to put a mental image to many previously unvisited country towns, and hopefully we made a welcome contribution to some of the country businesses hit initially by drought and more recently by coronavirus.

10/9/2020

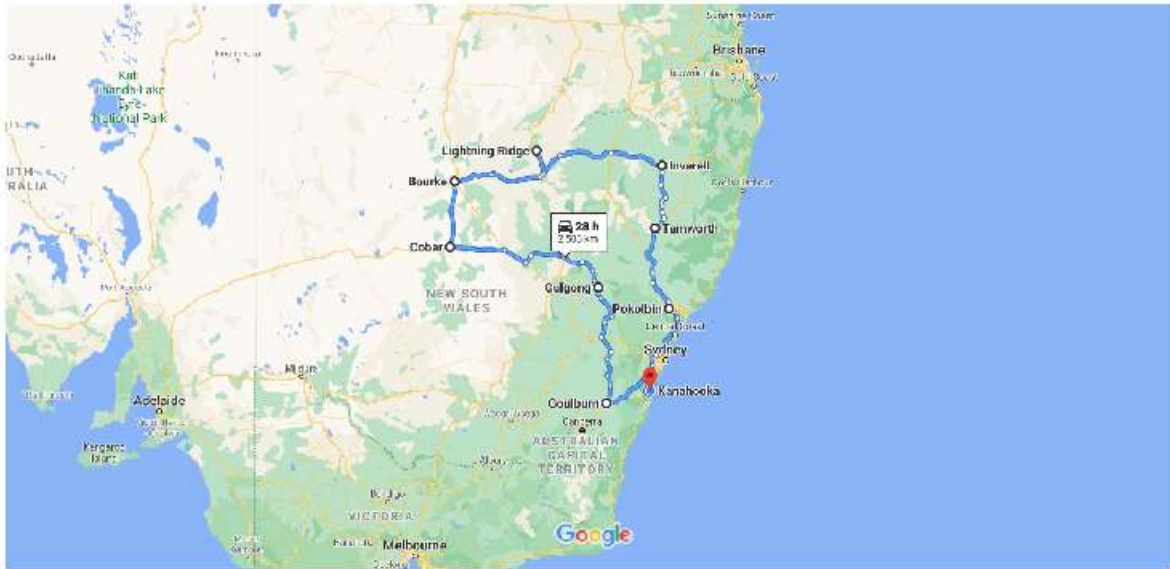
Kanahooka NSW to Kanahooka NSW - Google Maps

Google Maps

Kanahooka NSW to Kanahooka NSW

Drive 2,503 km, 28 h

2020.Lightning Ridge.itinerary



Map data ©2020 Google 200 km

<https://www.google.com.au/maps/dir/Kanahooka+NSW/Goulburn/Gungahlin/Cobarr/Bourke/Lightning+Ridge/Inverell/Tamworth/Pokolbin/Kanahooka+NSW/@-32.3517063,149.3191119,6z/data=!4m6!74m...> 1/1