

# Balbinia



Balbinia is a small homestead located in an area that is still very isolated today. It was settled by a widowed mother, Mrs Emily Brooks, and her two adult children, John Paul and Sarah Brooks.

Emily and her husband, Henry Ferby Brooks, originally came to Australia from Ireland in 1850, along with Emily's sister, Mary Donovan. John Paul was two years old at this time, and Sarah was born on the ship just before they set sail for their new home. They settled in Geelong, but soon after, Henry contracted typhoid and died. Mary married a wealthy pastoralist, and Emily opened up a small, exclusive school to support herself and her children.

## Albany

Albany was the site of the first colony in Western Australia. The British established a garrison there in 1826, as they were worried that the French were planning to claim it first.

Albany has been the home of the Menang Noongar people for many thousands of years. They call the area Kinjarling, which means 'place of rain.'



When John Paul left school, he worked for his wealthy uncle, Mary's husband Thomas Edols, for a while. Then he leased a property and tried his hand at dairy farming. It was not a successful venture. A year later, in 1874, Mrs. Emily Brooks, Sarah and John Paul all sailed to Albany, determined to take up land to the east of Esperance Bay, where the Western Australian government was advertising generous leases in the area, hoping to attract new settlers. At that time, there were very few Europeans in the Esperance area, which was home to the traditional owners, the Wudjari Nyungar people.

The Brooks family bought a horse, cart, and a tent, and set out from Albany to their new home. They had with them two pet dogs, two pigs in a crate, and a cockatoo in a cage. The cart was loaded with all of their possessions and supplies, so the family had to walk alongside, camping in their tent at night, and sometimes staying at homesteads that they came across. There were only a handful of settlements to the East of Albany at the time, including the Moirs at Fanny's Cove, The Dempsters at Esperance Bay, and Campbell Taylor at Thomas River. They travelled through rough terrain, in uncleared bush without any roads, all the way to Thomas River, where they stayed Lynburn Station with Campbell Taylor.

John Paul made a journey to Eucla, to see if he could find suitable land there. It was an incredibly difficult journey, and he only survived thanks to the help of an Aboriginal tribe. At Eucla, all the best land had been taken, so the family decided to stay in the Israelite Bay area.

The small family applied for a lease of 10,000 acres, bought 400 sheep, and built a very simple house at Marlburnup rock hole, near Israelite Bay.

The Brooks found it hard to make a living at Marlburnup, and when the telegraph line went through in 1876, John Paul took a job as a telegraph linesman. The family built a stone cottage called Waratah, near the Telegraph Station, and joined the small community at Israelite Bay. Sarah was well educated, and could play the piano as well as speaking several languages and painting well. The family had their piano sent from Geelong – it was unloaded onto the beach at Israelite Bay, where it sat for days until the family was able to find a way to transport it to their house. From then on, Sarah frequently played the piano for social gatherings.

In 1883, the family took up a lease of 20,000 acres, 100 kilometres inland from Israelite Bay. They built a stone cottage there, and called their new homestead Balbinia. Emily and John Paul moved to Balbinia, but Sarah stayed on at Waratah. Also in 1883, Victoria's chief botanist, Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, placed an advertisement in the *West Australian* newspaper, asking for settlers in different areas of Western Australia to send him botanical samples. While many people, mostly women, sent von Mueller botanical samples, Sarah was one of the most prolific collectors. She sent more than 900 samples to von Mueller, many of which are still preserved in the Australian National Herbarium. Sarah and John Paul also wrote some newspaper and journal articles about the landscape and geology of the region, which have contributed to our understanding of this place.

## KEEPING YOURSELF ENTERTAINED

Imagine life in a remote location like Israelite Bay in the late 1800s. What would you do for fun? Sarah Brooks painted and played the piano. Think of the hobbies that you have now. Which of them would you have been able to do back then, and which would be impossible?

### Baron Ferdinand von Mueller

Baron Ferdinand von Mueller was a German – Australian botanist, who was appointed as the government botanist of Victoria in 1853, and later ran the Royal Botanic Gardens. He named and classified many hundreds of species of plants from all over Australia, with the help of collectors such as Sarah Brooks.



### Sarah's Legacy

In recognition of Sarah's contribution to classifying the plants of Israelite Bay and surrounding regions, Baron von Mueller named two species of plants after Sarah, *Scaevola Brookeana* and *Hakea Brooksiana*. This was a



significant honour, as Mueller rarely named more than one plant for a collector. Since that time, *Hakea Brooksiana* has been renamed, but *Scaevola Brookeana*, or the Heart Leafed Fan Flower, is still named for Sarah Brooks.



In 1897, Sarah's cottage, Waratah, burned down. She managed to save most of her possessions, including the piano. After this, she moved to Balbinia, and lived there with her mother and brother. The family had a flock of sheep, and planted a large vegetable garden. Mrs. Emily Brooks fell from a horse in 1907, and broke her hip. From that time onwards, she was bedridden. She died in 1911, just before her 79<sup>th</sup> birthday. Sarah and John Paul buried her at Balbinia.

In 1927, Sarah travelled to Perth, at the age of 77. She commented that 'the chief thing that surprised me was the noise in Perth.' She did a few things that were not possible at Balbinia, such as getting her hair permed, getting a studio portrait taken, and going to the movies. In 1928, the neighbours found Sarah semi paralysed after she had suffered a stroke

at Balbinia. They took her to Norseman, but Sarah died there in the hospital, and is buried in the Norseman cemetery.



In 1930, the same neighbours, the Dimers, found John Paul, lying injured in a paddock. He had been lying out in the open for two days, and he died later from exposure. He is buried with his mother at Balbinia.

After the roof was taken off the stone cottage and storage shed at Balbinia, they deteriorated badly, leaving the cottage just a pile of stones. They were restored in 1993, under the guidance of stonemason Roger Robertson.

## HOW DO WE KNOW?

Most of the letters, diaries, and papers that the Brooks family left behind have been lost over the years, and there is no one alive today who knew them. So how do we know the details of their lives when there was very little written about them at the time?

**Our Pioneers Gallery**  
Fifty-three Years on the Frontier—Mr. J. P. Brooks, of Balbinia  
By Canberra

An isolated in previous articles the discovery, early settlement and subsequent development of the country lying between Israelite Bay and the present transcontinental railway, with Balladonia as the approximate centre, provide an apt explanation and further planning which will surely find a fitting place in the remarkable history of this great State.

Foremost among the men who played their part on this frontier of settlement for over 50 years is Mr. J. P. Brooks, still hale and hearty in spite of his "wild" years, and still in love with the far-flung district in which he has left his mark. Hardly ships and disappointments he has experienced in his life, but the hardy stock which that man has so far ahead continued to carry him on until to-day he is the proud possessor of broad acres and a comfortable retirement in the shade of his wife and family. But the most of his life and years he spent in the land of setting and recently he modestly described his "wild" life as "a hard and honest life, and moderately too, he recalls the reminiscences of the early days, given in his paper, which reads of "The Sunday Times" will doubtless prove with much interest.

**Decision to Come West.**  
I heard about Balladonia while in Victoria, from a sailor who stated it was unoccupied, and that it was a beautiful grassy country. I was living in Victoria, and finding "Lara Cruise" from Mr. Harrie at the time,

stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction, at least 10 miles with grass and "wild" wheat about. I thought I had found a good country north of Mr. Harold Messers Poston and I went to look for a place across there from which they eventually found Balladonia. Later I went up Balladonia, and some of the run I still hold. In those days the hill the plough was covered with its dunes and ferns which are now all level water. The dunes are then and I got along well in the rabbit case with which I had obtained the better kind of grasses and returned home with twelve kids. On certain country which formerly could run up to 150 sheep in fact. We had a healthy and delightful life, but the seasons are not reliable that in you cannot count on getting much in winter. In December we had a good rain in March and have the country looking every day to have a all day and purchased in June.

I am thinking some particulars of Mr. Henry Chase, who holds a good paddock area of land in the Balladonia district, where he has been some time, pointing out that among other things, out a track through to the transcontinental railway. The same area which he travels his fat sheep and lambs by rail to the Balladonia area.

incurred to waste their rights to see Perth, the first passenger in 14 years. We were warned too, that the country was poor and that the sheep would not carry 1,000 sheep and that would give us a start. But for the determination of the "Pioneer" who naturally found it more easier to kill and waste a fat hoglet without opportunity though not as good as the "leg of a man," we would have had good luck.

Then when the Gold Rush drew the nation away we got the rabbits in three million and we had a hard struggle and even during the war there we had a great and steady war of our own with the sheep which were the best breed and helped us.

**MISS BROOKS**

We can gather some of the details about the family from newspaper articles that were written about them during the time that they were alive. One of these articles, written in 1874, tells us that when the Brooks family left Albany, they had all their goods on a cart, including two pigs, and a cockatoo in a cage. This article also tells us that the two women carried white parasols with

them, which would have been unusual for people setting out on such a difficult journey.

Another series of articles, written in the 1920s, interviewed Sarah and John Paul, and from that we learn about Sarah's visit to Perth, and her experiences there, as well as some details of their lives at Balbinia.

There are also stories that have been passed down through the years by people who knew the Brooks family. These 'local legends' tell us details of their lives such as the story that Sarah had several suitors during her life, but according to those who knew her, Emily would only allow her to marry someone who had an income of £10,000 per year, a huge amount for those times!

While it is impossible to know if stories like this, passed down through the years, are entirely true, or perhaps somewhat exaggerated, they still provide fascinating insight into what their lives would have been like.

**Our Pioneers Gallery**  
A Wonder Woman of the West  
Miss Brooks of Balbinia  
By Canberra

There recently came for a trip to Perth, the first passenger in 14 years. We were warned too, that the country was poor and that the sheep would not carry 1,000 sheep and that would give us a start. But for the determination of the "Pioneer" who naturally found it more easier to kill and waste a fat hoglet without opportunity though not as good as the "leg of a man," we would have had good luck.

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**MISS BROOKS**

## Activities and Research

1. The Brooks family travelled on foot from Albany to Thomas River. Can you find these places on a map, and find the distance between them? Later on, John Paul travelled from Thomas River to Eucla and then back again. What distance did he travel?
2. We know a lot about the Brooks' departure from Albany thanks to a newspaper article published in The Herald, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, 1874, entitled 'A Dangerous Trip'. Can you find this article on Trove? What does it tell you about the family?
3. John Paul was a linesman on the Telegraph Line. Can you find out what the role of telegraph linesman would have been like? What other workers were needed to operate a Telegraph Station? Can you find out some more about what their jobs would have been like?
4. Sarah Brooks helped Baron von Mueller classify the plants of the region where she lived. Why is this important? Look up the two plants that were named after Sarah Brooks. What families do these plants belong to? How are they described? Find a plant that grows near your home and see if you can find its scientific classification.
5. Find Balbinia on a map. Where are the nearest towns to Balbinia? Where are the nearest stations? Can you find out when those towns and stations were established? How far would the Brooks family have had to travel to go to the hospital? To buy food? To post a letter?
6. Imagine that it is 100 years from now. How would people know the details of your life? What details would you want them to know? Write a journal entry or newspaper article about yourself that someone in the future might use to find out about your life.

Watch this episode of the Esperance Historic Homesteads documentary series online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uxw1VxEltM> or scan the QR code →



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### References

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