


A photograph of a riverbank with tall, thin trees and dense green foliage. The water in the foreground is dark and reflects the trees and sky. The text 'RETURN TO Millstream' is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.

RETURN TO *Millstream*



The aged hands of the white woman grasp the broad hands of the Aboriginal man at her side. “Thank you so much for seeing us,” the 91-year-old woman murmurs, her voice thick with emotion. My grandmother Mildred Gordon is sitting on the verandah at the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation office in Roebourne in Western Australia’s Pilbara Region. She and her husband Doug are chatting to Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation chief executive Michael Woodley recalling tales of pastoral life on Millstream Station. Michael is the grandson of the late Woodley ‘Old Woodley’ King, a station hand who worked alongside Doug and Mildred at Millstream about 100km south of here. Old Woodley was a Yindjibarndi man whose people originated from this part of the country. For the Gordons, Woodley was more than just a member of the Millstream staff, he was someone to rely on to help run the station when Doug was away, someone respected for his quiet and gentle nature and someone revered for his knowledge of this mystical land. Woodley’s wife Shirley helped run the household, his children were schooled alongside Doug and Mildred’s kids in the back room of the Millstream homestead. It was a relationship based on mutual respect. And one that lasted generations.

MEMORY LANE

Doug, Mildred and two younger generations of their family met Michael on their return to the Pilbara last year. It had been 20 years since Doug and Mildred had last set foot in the Pilbara. And it had been 50 years since they moved from Doug’s childhood home to seek new opportunity in the south. Their return to what is now Millstream Chichester National Park was

Main Millstream is revered for its freshwater pools.

Inset Mildred and Doug Gordon with Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation chief executive Michael Woodley recalling tales of pastoral life on Millstream Station.

Photos – Samille Mitchell



A couple in their 90s return to Millstream Chichester National Park in Western Australia’s Pilbara to visit their former pastoral home. Joined by their granddaughter, Samille Mitchell, on their return they discovered that, while times change, a connection to a place can endure.

by Samille Mitchell

“Woodley was more than just a member of the Millstream staff, he was someone to rely on to help run the station when Doug was away, someone respected for his quiet and gentle nature and someone revered for his knowledge of this mystical land.”



Left The late Woodley King.

Above Millstream’s freshwater pools were a recreational playground for the Gordons and their friends, including Nell Gordon and Cecil Roberts pictured in 1916.

Photos – Courtesy Doug Gordon

about rekindling memories of their time here and realising that, while buildings crumble and life moves on, connections to places can endure.

Millstream Station was established in 1865 when Alexander McRae took up 100,000 acres of land. The station was later bought by the Cookson brothers, who in 1914 employed Doug’s grandparents Claude and Ella Irvine to manage the property. Aboriginal people had inhabited the area long before it became a pastoral station, with evidence of their occupation in the Pilbara stretching back 25,000 years. The people who lived at Millstream revered the area, which they call Nhanggangunha, meaning ‘home to the creation spirits’. These spirits rose from the earth here at Millstream, lifted the sky and the world from the sea and, together with the sky god and first men, moulded the landscape.

For countless years the Yindjibarndi camped by Millstream’s clear waters feasting on the area’s bounty, meeting for corroborees, and sharing Dreamtime tales. They’d tell stories of the mythological serpent, or Warlu, called ‘Barrimirndi’ who travelled across the land during the

Dreamtime adorning it with the many freshwater pools that characterise the region today. These people were Old Woodley’s forefathers and Old Woodley himself was born here – one of the many ‘Millstream boys’.

Doug says Aboriginal people of his time, spoke nothing to him of the Barrimirndi serpent, but he believes his grandfather Claude Irvine got on well with the Aboriginal people he employed.

Michael says the respect between the Gordons and their Aboriginal staff was mutual.

“My grandfather always spoke highly of the Gordons. I remember hearing the story of how (Les Gordon) died. Some of the Aboriginal ladies were there when he died and even much later, when one told me of the death, she still got really emotional,” he said

Like their father and grandfather before, and all the Pilbara pastoralists, Doug and his brother Stuart came to rely on the Yindjibarndi people for unveiling the secrets of the land, and for their labour. They paid their Aboriginal staff in food, tobacco, medical care and perhaps

some cash if they planned a trip to town. Michael says while this is unacceptable by today’s standards, his grandparents accepted those times without ill feelings. “That was the way the system worked then,” Michael says. “Most of them said, although it was hard, they were happy to still be on country.”

REVISITING AN ANCIENT LANDSCAPE

Such an era is fresh in my grandparent’s memory as they leave Michael *en route* to Millstream. The drive is an opportunity to sit back and admire the beauty of this countryside. They travel amid the flat-topped plateaus of the Chichester Range – enormous jumbles of rust-red rock adorned in a cloak of golden spinifex that snakes towards the horizon. Inside Millstream Chichester National Park they visit Python Pool, a site grasped in the clutches of this harsh and ancient land. Here a towering red cliff face embraces the dark-green waters of a deep and permanent pool. Gums crowd the creek line and a breeze whispers through the leaves.



Left Mildred Gordon, in her younger days.

Below left Brothers Stuart and Doug Gordon as kids.

Photos – Courtesy Doug Gordon

Below Doug Gordon on his return to Millstream.

Photo – Samille Mitchell

homestead. The homestead was built in 1919 and was once the pride of the district. It was constructed by Doug’s grandparents Claude and Ella Irvine, who retired from Millstream in 1924, leaving their daughter and son-in-law Nellie and Les Gordon to take on as managers. The duo bought the property in 1950 and left it to their sons Stuart and Doug after Les died in 1954. Stuart and his family were based at the Millstream homestead while Doug and his family were at an outcamp called Kangiangi.

As they approach the Millstream homestead Doug and Mildred realise things are not as they were. Where today there is a green lawn and overgrown fields, they remember gardens brimming with blooming oleanders and palm, cotton, banana, fig and mulberry trees. Where today stands an aging homestead with visitor information they reminisce about a dining room with a long timber table adorned with silverware where family dinners were held. And where today grows unkempt bush they recall a tennis court fashioned from the dirt of termite mounds. Doug says it was a first-class court with “playing speed about midway between grass and clay”. And oh the gatherings they would have! People from across the district would descend on Millstream for these welcomed social outings. Fellow pastoralists and their

Doug and Mildred can’t manage the walk to the pool’s edge but the image of the still waters remains fresh in their memory. They remember a time when people from across the district would meet here for Road Board meetings. They point out where a blacksmith shop once stood, located here to service the horse-drawn wagons, the drovers and the

flocks of sheep that would trundle the stony trail through the ranges *en route* to market on the coast. No trace of those buildings remain, but you can still see the path through the stones that the sheep and stockmen once travelled. Visitors can hike 16km of this trail, today called the Chichester Range Camel Trail – a title that bemuses Doug as he claims camels never travelled it.

Revived by a cuppa at Python Pool, Doug and Mildred venture to Millstream





“These pools are what set Millstream apart – a fairytale world of clear waters adorned with ferns and lily pads and shaded by paperbarks, introduced date palms and Millstream palms, which occur nowhere else in the world.”

Above left An Aboriginal camp at Millstream in 1920. Doug’s grandfather Claude Irvine is pictured in the middle.

Above The bathhouse constructed of bull rushes at Millstream.
Photos – Courtesy Doug Gordon

families would stay in the nearby shearing quarters, play tennis, dine together and bathe in the natural freshwater pools near the homestead. “Around 10 or 12 people would come and stay for the weekend,” Mildred says. “They were great parties.”

The station was abuzz with activity in those days. Aboriginal staff and their families lived on the grounds and worked as stockmen, gardeners, horse breakers, cooks, cleaners, childminders, fencers, builders, windmill fixers, well diggers and more. A governess lived at the homestead to school the Gordon children and some of the Aboriginal children. Tourists would visit to admire the station’s oasis-like nature. The gardens here were once lauded for their beauty. The Minister for the North West visited Millstream in 1920 and declared it “the garden of the north; it is a terrestrial paradise...” He wrote:

“Bananas are in abundance, and in the Garden – which has been cultivated summer and winter for the past 38 years – all descriptions of vegetables flourish amazingly. In the pool and the streams are water lilies of many colours and great beauty. The streams Lose Themselves in

the Earth, about twelve miles from the homestead, and all along their course is this rich soil, thousands of acres of it – capable of growing almost anything.”

This “terrestrial paradise” is also home to Doug’s parents’ grave stones, which they visit on a hill behind the homestead. Doug’s dad Les was buried in 1954 after dying of a heart attack aged 63 and his mother Nellie’s ashes were buried alongside him after she died in 1983 aged 86. Some of Doug’s brother Stuart’s ashes also lay here now, buried alongside his parents’ gravestones in 2012 with the words “part of his heart never left Millstream...” etched on the gravestone. Mildred and her great grandchildren lay flowers on the gravestones before they head back to the homestead to set up camp for the night.

It’s here at the camp, among the staff, caretakers and researchers at Millstream, that Doug and Mildred learn more about modern-day Millstream. Under the hospitable care of caretakers James and Maureen Lindsay, who have whipped up the first of many cuppas, they launch into discussion. They also meet a PhD

student and her mother researching tiny marsupials called kalutas. They share a chat with members of a moth research team who think they’ve found about 1000 species of moth at Millstream during their field trip here, many new to science. They’ll know more when they send samples from their work here to Canada for DNA analysis. And they meet another of Old Woodley’s grandsons – Kingsley Woodley.

Kingsley strides up to introduce himself, offering his hand to shake and flashing a warming smile. He is one of 11 Aboriginal people from the Ngurrawaana Aboriginal Community who works as a ranger under a joint program run by Natural Resource Management’s Rangelands, Parks and Wildlife and Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation. The rangers’ work on country is a critical element of park operations at Millstream.

Later, back near the homestead, Doug visits the freshwater pools alongside the homestead. These pools are what set Millstream apart – a fairytale world of clear waters adorned with ferns and lily pads and shaded by paperbarks, introduced date palms and Millstream palms. Signs from the



Top Python Pool, Millstream Chichester National Park.

Above Doug Gordon remembers both his parents and brother at Millstream.
Photos – Samille Mitchell

homestead to the pool carry the words of Doug as a 12-year-old boy and give visitors an insight into what the area was like in the 1930s. They tell stories about life at Millstream – like dive-bombing into the clear pools on a summer afternoon (the pool is no longer used for swimming) and describe the tennis courts, the bathhouse and the old kitchen.

The bathhouse was particularly popular with residents and visitors. It stood over the shallow rushing waters with walls of dried bull rushes, a gable roof thatched with cane grass, concrete floors on each side, cattle troughs lining the sides of the stream and coloured slabs lining the stream floor. On his 1920 visit, the Minister for the North West described the bathhouse:

“A glorious stream of water some twelve inches in depth, passes through the room, and the water is always at the same temperature, summer and winter. One can indulge in a bath at any time”.

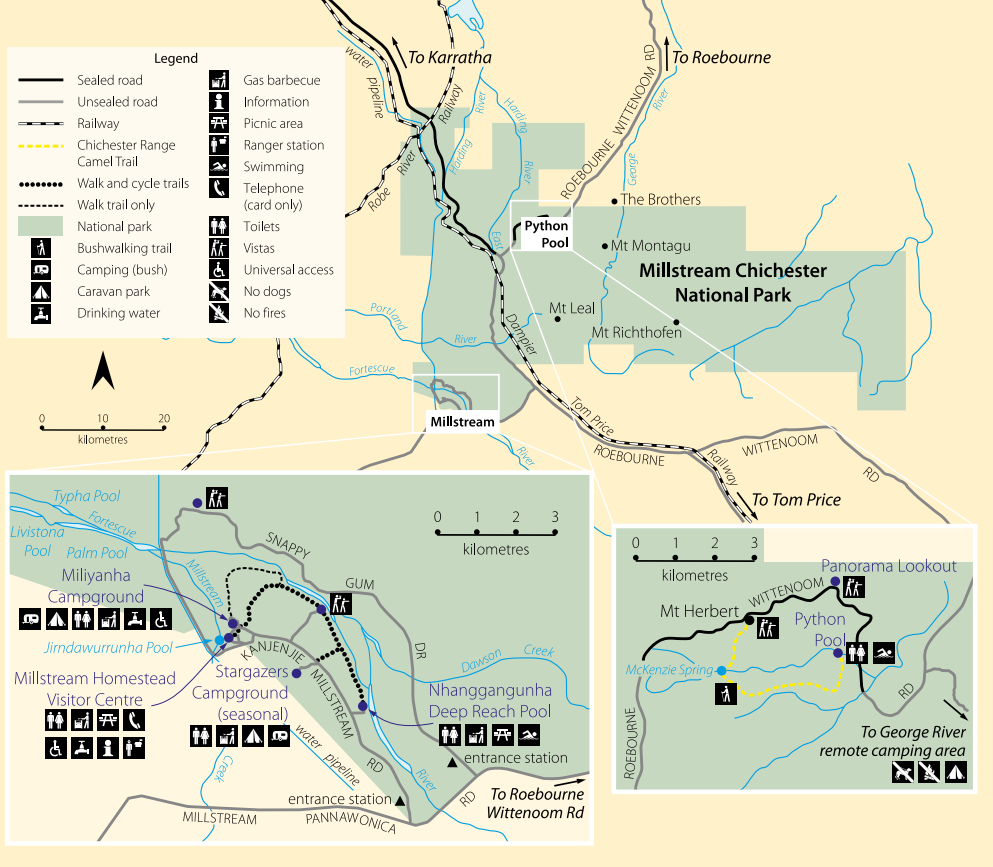
Doug’s eldest child Sue remembers galloping amid the paperbarks and date palms on her pony, the trampling hooves of her steed and the footsteps of the

children keeping the overgrowth down so the pools were like an extension of the garden. She remembers diving into the cooling pools, delighting in the fish you could see clearly through the water.

Doug also visits Deep Reach, a day-visit site along the mighty Fortescue River and is impressed with the work done there – the handrails and steps into the river waters, the lookout, the shaded picnic areas. Interpretive signage on the way tells the story of the sea serpent Barrimirndi who the Yindjibarndi people believe lurks here. Doug is unaware of this story.

He says, in his day the Aboriginal people avoided Deep Reach because once, long ago, it was site of a corroboree in which people’s frenzied stamping broke the crust of the river banks sending the revellers tumbling into the river. The steep broken banks meant they were unable to escape and they drowned in the dark waters.

Further downstream Doug visits the cliff-side lookout over Crossing Pool. He takes a seat on a picnic bench, his walking stick by his side and his great granddaughters racing along a walk trail kicking up red dust that shimmers in the



Do it yourself

Where is it? Millstream Chichester National Park is 150km from Karratha.

Total area: 238,497ha.

What to do: Hiking, birdwatching, photography, nature observation, swimming.

Facilities: Visitor centre, campgrounds, toilets, camp kitchens, picnic tables, gas barbecues, walk trails.

Camping: Camping is available at Miliyanha (suitable for all vehicles) and Stargazers campgrounds. Campground Host volunteers are stationed in both campgrounds for most of the tourist season, between mid-April and early October, and can provide a wealth of information about the park and what you can do there, as well as collect your camping fees.

Entry fees apply.

Nearest Parks and Wildlife office: Pilbara Regional Office, Lot 3 Mardie and Anderson roads, Karratha, phone (08) 9182 2000.

Visit parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au.



Left View across the plain with iconic royal mulla mulla.

Photo – Rob Davies

Below Four generations enjoy the sunset in Millstream Chichester National Park – Samille Mitchell with her daughter Charlie Harrison, grandparents Mildred and Doug Gordon and mother Sue Mitchell.

Photo – Samille Mitchell



Samille Mitchell is a freelance journalist and former *LANDSCOPE* editor. She can be contacted on 0407 998 721, by email (samille@wn.com.au) or by visiting her website www.samillemitchell.com.au.

late afternoon sunlight. From here he can look out over the still waters, admire the gums crowding the river banks and reflect on the changes at Millstream. He left here to seek new opportunities for his four children, never imagining the fortune the next owners would make selling a licence to use the area's water to supply Karratha. He never envisaged they'd turn the homestead into a tavern, that the State Government would one day acquire the homestead and use it as a visitor centre in a national park. But Doug is not one for

regrets. He realises that things change, life goes on. And by the end of their trip he and Mildred had an appreciation of the work that goes on here. Reflecting on the trip after returning to their home in Northampton Mildred declares: "I thought it was excellent the work they are doing. They are bringing it up to modern times. It's such an environmentally significant spot – quite different to anything else in the area". They, like Old Woodley and his people, realise that while time marches on, the magic of Millstream endures.