WESTERN 4W DRIVER SPOTLIGHT:

IAN ELLIOT

BY GRANT & LINDA HANAN

In this issue, we feature Ian Elliot, a familiar name to *Western 4W Driver* readers. With over 20 years of contributions, from writing columns and special features to a stint as editor, Ian has been closely associated with the magazine for decades. His list of accomplishments is extensive and impressive. As a seasoned author, Ian has several books to his name, including eight travel guidebooks published by *Western 4W Driver*. If you've used any of those guides, then you more than likely have followed in his wheel tracks at some stage.

Ian's also discovered and documented numerous landmarks, explorer inscriptions, and rockholes around the place. He also helped establish both Track Care and the Kimberley Society, plus he's contributed to the WA Explorers' Diaries Project—a group dedicated to transcribing the journeys of European explorers, with their work published by Hesperian Press.

If you've been lucky enough to have shared a campfire with Ian or followed his wheel tracks on one of the bush trips he's led, then you'll also know he's generous with sharing his knowledge as well. During a couple of recent trips, we sat down with Ian, where he shared stories about his passion for adventure and remote travel, plus intrepid explorer Frank Hann.

Exploration and remote travel have played a large part in Ian's life.

EARLY DAYS

Ian, when did your passion for exploring and remote off-track travel begin?

Ian: *As a baby, I once got my playpen into the 'escape position'. Standing up at the corner of the playpen, I managed to drag it out and over the steps when I slipped out and tumbled down onto the front lawn. I would have kept going, but I hadn't learnt to walk yet (laughing). Once I was old enough to ride a bike, I was gone… I liked nothing more than turning down a track to try and find where it went and why it was there. Then, once I got a licence to drive, well, I just took off every chance I could. Later, I was very fortunate to have landed the perfect job at the WA Lands Department. Things don't get much better when your job becomes your hobby, then your passion* (smiling).

Ian, what role did you have at the Lands Department?

Ian: *Up until the systematic aerial photography of the 1950s-60s, there were no contour maps like we have today. Errors became larger the further you went from surveyed terrain. The confusion that ensued related to the positioning of names that had been bestowed by the explorers. Due to the urgency to have new maps made, cartographers simply applied the name to the nearest likely feature. This led to numerous errors on four-mile*

Ian's latest rediscovery in 2025 – Hann's Bartlett Bluff soak.

Regular tyre repairs are needed when going cross-country.

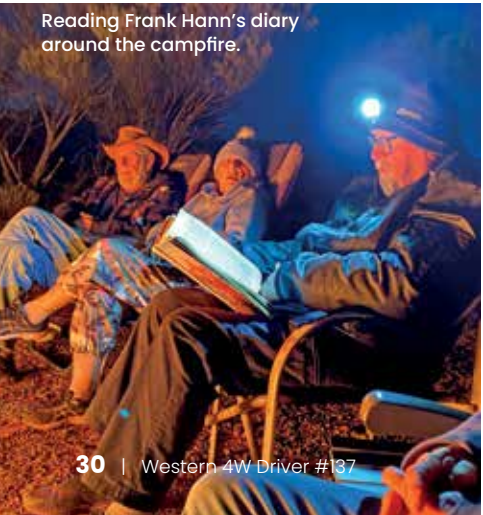
Rediscovering John Forrest's Gun Bucket Hole with Terry Bentley and Mike Donaldson.

Leading a Wildtrax convoy cross-country.

Some of the Wildtrax crew out in the Great Victoria Desert.

Things don't always go to plan.

Ian's current Troopie.



Reading Frank Hann's diary around the campfire.

Ian and his early-model Hilux.

and 1:250,000 maps. I was one of the 1980s drafting assistants who copped the job of replotting explorers' routes from their diaries onto the new maps and correcting their often-approximate estimates of bearings and distances from the new data.

That explains your connection and passion for explorers, but how did Frank Hann appear on the scene?

Ian: *I had access to Frank Hann's field notes, given he has named so much throughout WA. Well, it was sitting on my desk when a gentleman visiting me, an old-time prospector, Bob Collard, saw it and said, "You know that Frank Hann left his mark out there with his FH inscription on trees and rock faces." This was all I needed to say to myself: 'I've got to see that firsthand.'*

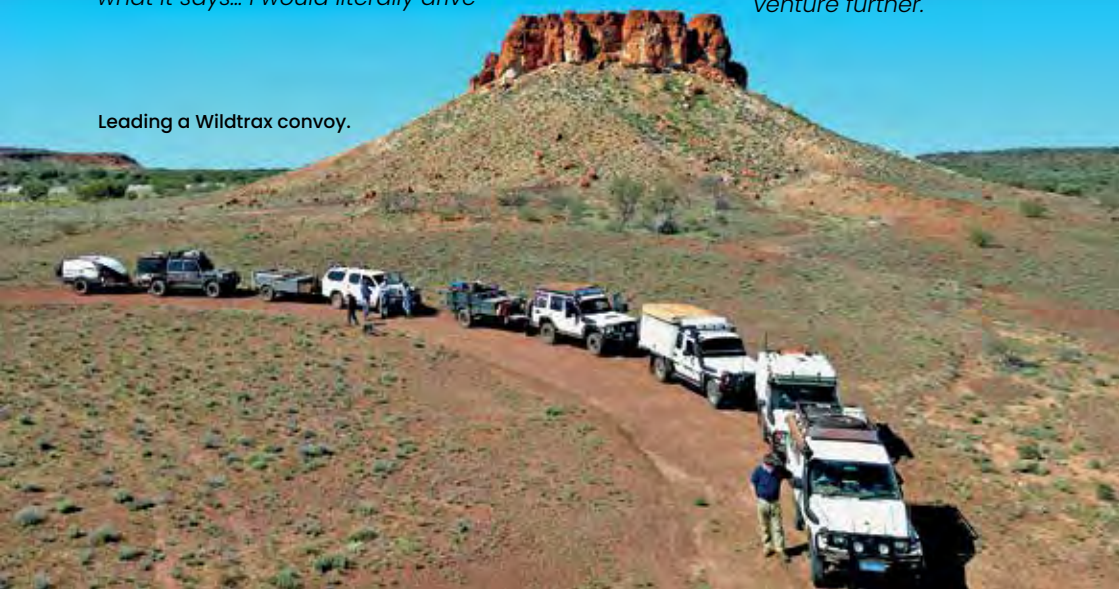
VEHICLES & EXPLORATION

We'll come back to Frank, but tell us a bit about your early trips to the outback and desert country…and you use the term 'cross-country' a bit. What does that mean in your context?

Ian: *When I say cross-country, it is what it says… I would literally drive cross-country—no roads, no two-wheel tracks, maybe an animal track now and then, but otherwise I was making tracks myself. You have to remember… I'm retracing explorers' footsteps who were on camels, horses and foot, the best I can.*

My first trips were solo. I had an XB Falcon ute… I carried jerry cans in the back, chucked in a swag and an Engel fridge, and took off into the wild blue yonder. I had these crude maps with me and diary notes. This was all before GPS. So, at times, I would be in dune country, but it wasn't on the map. Then I would run up a gorge, only to find a river that wasn't listed. I would mark up the maps and take them back to work to report my findings. This was throughout WA.

On another trip, here I am in a petrol two-wheel drive ute in the Kimberley on the Gibb River Road as far as Mount Barnett station. In 1983, the Gibb had the reputation of being very rough and corrugated. This Falcon later got me to Hanns Camp, Lang Rock, and Uhr Soak quite safely. Eventually I realised I'd need a four-wheel drive to venture further.



Leading a Wildtrax convoy.

Ian, after upgrading the Falcon, what came next?

Ian: *It was back in 1983 when I bought what a mate called a puddle jumper. It was the first Hilux—a 1981 model with a 1.5-litre motor. I would strap a 44-gallon fuel drum on the back, along with 100 litres or so of water. Man, it struggled* (laughing). *I remember one time trying to cross this dune, and the map indicated we'd be in flat open country once over it. I had a mate with me, and I said, "Let's launch it." So, we took this run-up from way back, foot flat to the floor, and up and over we went, only to realise the bloody map was wrong! We were stuck in what they call a bowl, and there was another dune to cross. I thought this was it…we're done for. I reckon it took us nearly all day to get out; lots of digging, unloading, and some mechanical work, as we somehow picked up water in the petrol. Eventually that little Hilux crested the dune, and we got out. From that day on, I never ever trusted a map and took precautions before just launching into an unknown landscape.*

You're not driving a Hilux these days, so what other vehicles have you owned?

Ian: *For a while, I upgraded to a Hilux 1.8-litre diesel dual cab with a tray. It had a lot more torque, which is what you need, in my opinion. From there, I saved up and bought a Landcruiser troopie. It was a great step up, and I pushed this thing everywhere. I'm sorry I sold it, as I believe it's still going today. Then there's my troopie I still own today. It's had no harder life than the first, but this one is a bit of a lemon: three gearboxes, two radiators, two starter motors, and both diffs replaced. The big ends went at 35,000 km, and I had to get the motor rebuilt at my cost. Toyota Australia refused to help, even though it was a manufacturing fault with insufficient oil flow clearances in the bearings. It wears some battle scars, but hey, they're badges of honour. They all have a story to tell* (laughing). *It's not that I thrash my vehicles, but I am out front, so I take the brunt of what Mother Nature likes to challenge us with.*

Ian, with many exploration-style trips under your belt, is there one trip that stands out from the rest?

Ian: *Gee, that's a tough one, as they're all great. I guess as a youngster, I have fond memories of heading to my uncle's farm at South Walgoolan for holidays. I used to enjoy travelling there with my older brother, David, in his Ford Prefect. He said to me on one of our trips, "Retracing the Rabbit-Proof Fence some 1,800 kilometres long would be an awesome adventure." While he never got around to doing it, I decided in later years to do it in his honour. I got a group of friends together, and somehow word got out I was planning it. Anyway, this crew from Channel 10 asked if they could join but said, "We need you to lead it, and we'll have a crew along to collect the content."*

Naturally, I said yes. So, I led this trip around 10 days from Starvation Harbour to Cape Keraudren, and to my knowledge, it hadn't been done to the extent I had planned it back then. I obtained the appropriate permits and approvals, and it was tough going at times. In many places, we had to make our own tracks, as the terrain was just rough. The track, or lack of, I should say, took its toll. There was this one day up past Warrawagine station where the four vehicles did 28km in eight hours and had seven punctures to fix in camp that night.

We've seen the Wildtrax number plate on your troopie. What can you tell us about it?

Ian: *Ah yes… Wildtrax is the name of a business I started… a sort of tagalong thing. It later became the name of a column I had in* Western 4W Driver. *At first, I was going bush and then sharing my stories upon my return. Mates soon wanted to join, and then this led to mates of mates, whilst here's me trip planning and leading the way. So I thought, why not lodge a business name? All I asked for was my fuel costs to be covered by those who were following. Good times. I would later write about many of those trips and our trip experiences.*

WESTERN 4W DRIVER MAGAZINE

We mentioned earlier Ian was a long-time contributor to the magazine, so we asked him how it all came about.

Ian: *I was on secondment to the Battye Library as a Heritage Council Research Officer undertaking history research for country shires. There was this fella by the name of Nick Underwood, who was advised to see me. At the time, I only knew he was a Kiwi interested in WA place names. After a series of get-togethers, he asked whether I'd be interested in writing about their origin for his magazine,* Western 4W Driver. *Well, one thing led to another. Before I knew it, I was writing several pieces, and Nick gave me licence to write about other things of interest and all things 4WD.*

I do recall helping Nick out at his stand at a 4WD show. I'd be chatting to people, and the common question and topic was, "Where can I go four-wheel driving?" Nick and I chatted, and

Ian still spends time researching and writing.

Some of the guide books Ian has written.

With *Western 4W Driver* founder, Nick Underwood.

it was suggested I should share my knowledge and experiences by putting some 4WD guidebooks together. So I did. In the end, we put eight guidebooks together in total: 4WD Days Out of Perth, Holland Track, 4WD Days on the South Coast of WA, *and* Hanns Track, *just to name a few.*

FRANK HANN

Ian, we think we can guess your favourite guidebook, so what can you tell us about it?

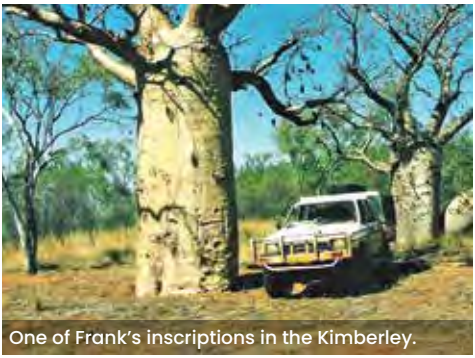
Ian: *Well, yes, it's Hanns Track. I've been reading and chasing down anything to do with Frank for the best part of 40 years…it's become a labour of love. Frank has roamed all throughout Australia, and I've tried my best to visit locations from his early days in Queensland to his meeting with government officials in Adelaide. Although some of the best times I've had have been through his desert wanderings in WA while looking for pasturelands, watercourses, and the vast extensive landmarks he's named.*

Over many years, there's one area I kept coming back to. I was looking for a place that had escaped us for a long time called Dinner Gnamma Hole. While we kept revisiting the area and found many other wonderful places, our wheel tracks became more prominent from our constant driving in the area. Anyway, others suggested the diverse country would make a great guidebook…and that's how the Hanns Track *guidebook was born. Oh, by the way, I did eventually find Dinner Gnamma Hole, and you can too, as it's in the guidebook* (laughing). *I have*

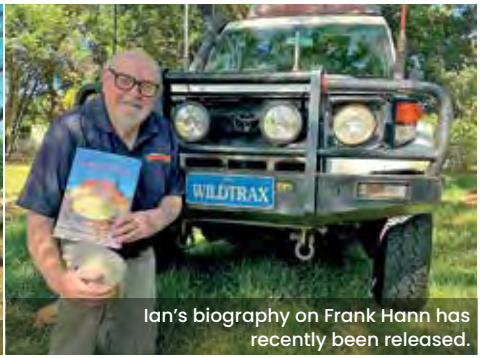
The day Ian finally relocated Dinner Gnamma Hole.

Ian and Mike Donaldson transcribed Frank Hann's diaries in a book, *Do Not Yield To Despair.*

Frank Hann's camp outside of Laverton.



One of Frank's inscriptions in the Kimberley.



Ian's biography on Frank Hann has recently been released.

a couple of guidebooks I'm happy to sign and sell at a discounted price for a short while, in partnership with Western 4W Driver.

There's more to Frank Hann than the guidebook…what other things have you been part of relating to Frank?

Ian: *A mutual friend informed me of Mike Donaldson's interest in Hann, and we soon began corresponding. We agreed to divide up and share the task of transcribing Hann's diaries for publication. It was a fascinating time in my life, and I enjoyed the research, particularly the field verification side. Frank was a very interesting and genuine type of guy…a little set in his ways, and he certainly had his fair share of misfortune and problems. In many of his diaries, he scribbled a phrase in the front pages, which I feel reflects his character the most. We used that phrase and called the book we produced* "Do Not Yield To Despair". *Very fitting, we thought.*

Ian, as Frank Hann followers ourselves, we know there's something new to look forward to, right?

Ian: *Yes…after 40 years of enjoyment that Frank has given me, I felt I owed him, and we should write his biography. Initially, a fellow Frank Hann enthusiast and follower, Rod Beaumont, had made a start on it, but after some discussions, it was agreed I should take it over. It's now finished and very recently published through Hesperian Press. It's taken the best part of three years for research, cross-referencing, and looking through extracts to pull it together, but it's done. It's a little over 400 pages with lots of illustrations and photos. I decided to call it* "The Wanderer", *as that's how Frank spent his life wandering around this great land.*

Ian, we understand you've contributed and volunteered your time to projects like Track Care, the Kimberley Society, and the Explorer Diary Projects. Tell us more about them.

Ian: *I've been very fortunate to have been associated with many great projects and some outstanding fellow enthusiastic modern-day explorer types. Track Care came about from many a trip I had done a long time ago on the Canning Stock Route. Basically, I was chatting with surveyors who had come to me knowing I had done several trips, and we talked about how we need to try and preserve the historical significance of the CSR.*

At first, we went to CALM, but later decided we should encourage 4WD

Grant and Linda were fortunate to travel with Ian along Hanns Track.

clubs to assist with the maintenance and integrity of the track. A group of us got together, and we were, if you like, the founding members. We kicked a few names around, but I threw out the words "TrackCare", and from that it was born. In later years, the name evolved into as it reads today, Track Care.

The Kimberley Society was another one of those research-type projects, and a group of friends got together and formed the Kimberley Society. The Explorers' Diaries project was again a volunteering-type project. I went to school with the owner of Hesperian Press, Peter Bridge. He wanted to ensure we preserved our history so future generations would have resources as to how WA was founded and how it grew to what it is today. Many of us offered our services to be part of the project by researching and transcribing explorers' diaries. The Frank Hann biography will be added to this.

SUMMING UP

Ian has been a significant contributor for exploring Australia throughout his career, along with sharing his adventures and stories in *Western 4W Driver*, through his guidebooks, and other books he continues to produce. He tells us he's retired and just clocked over 82 years. He still has his troopie with many memories, loves nothing more than sharing a yarn or two and listening to others who share the same passion and enthusiasm for adventure.

We wish Ian success with the Frank Hann biography. If you'd like to get your hands on a signed autographed copy, head to the Hesperian Press website: ***hesperianpress.com***. Or to pick up one of Ian's guidebooks, visit the *Western 4W Driver* website for more info ***western4wdriver.com.au***