

Lobster tales



writer *TERRY MULHERN*

Gould's Creek

Until a couple of summers ago, I'd never seen a wild platypus. Considering the time I've spent sloshing around in the creeks of northern Tasmania, it's quite absurd. But I guess the platypuses saw me coming.

Sometimes I'd see bubbles, or a splash, but it always turned out to be a fish or waterfowl. That was, until I camped by Saddle Creek between Legerwood and Branxholm in the hills east of Scottsdale. It wasn't platypus I was here to find. I was searching for traces of Charles Gould (1834-1893), the man honoured in the scientific name of the lobster, *Astacopsis gouldi*. According to the original survey map from 1864, this stream was once called Gould's Creek.

Mark McDougall is the manager of the massive potato farm through which Gould's Creek flows. When I got in contact, I was delighted by McDougall's enthusiasm for my lobster research and he readily agreed to let me visit Gould's Creek. When he stepped out of his mud-splattered ute,

took off his sweat-stained hat and extended a hand that felt like it had worked harder than I ever will, I thought he looked exactly as I had imagined.

McDougall drove us around the property. On his advice, we chose to camp in a grassy meadow next to one of the many dams dotted along the creek. We'd no sooner set up our tents when a platypus surfaced, flapped about for a moment, then dived. It did this several times. I was mesmerised. It was so nonchalant about humans that later on that hot afternoon, while cooling off in the dam, the platypus surfaced amongst us – wanting to join in the fun.

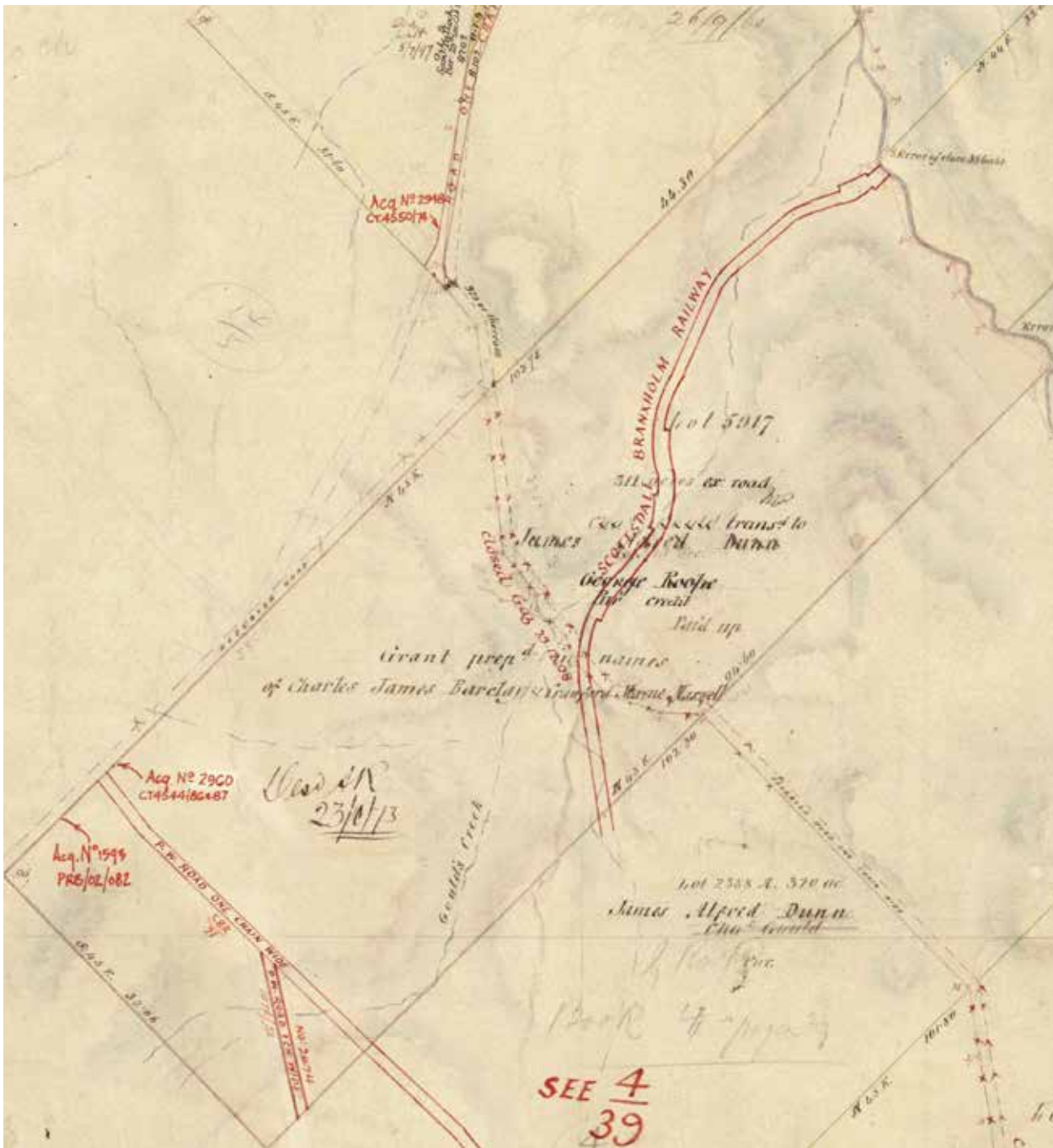
To observe an animal closely, you need to find the right habitat, preferably somewhere secluded. That's what Charles Gould was seeking when he bought this property in 1864. I believe he wanted it as a place to study the biology of the world's largest freshwater invertebrate and to get away from people.

*opposite Charles Gould photographed by Charles Alfred Wooley
Allport Album XII, reproduced with the permission of the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts*

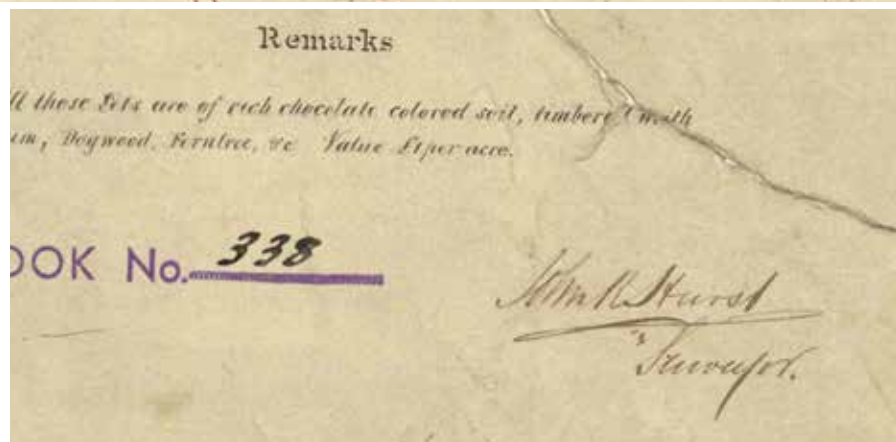


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Chal. York



Gould's Creek; from the original 1864 survey map, county of Dorset, parish of Kay, and John Robert Hurst's signature that appears on it. Both reproduced with permission of the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office.





Gould's Creek

Photo Terry Mulhern

In 1870, Gould read a paper to the Royal Society of Tasmania on “The habits of the large crayfish (*Astacus* sp.) of the northern rivers of Tasmania”. Back in the mid-1860s, Gould, the government geologist, and John Robert Hurst, the Launceston district surveyor, were tasked with opening up the north-east. They were seeking new areas that could be cleared for farming and mining.

Memorials to Charles Gould can be found across Tasmania. The imposing bluff of *Mt Gould* towers above the tranquil waters of Lake St Clair. Gould's Landing, near St John Falls on the Gordon River, marks the start of Gould's Track, which opened up the wilds of the south-west to the piners and prospectors. The fertile red paddocks of Goulds Country line either side of the George River. A second Gould's Track linked the goldfields at Fingal

and Waterhouse, part of which is now the road that runs past the McDougall's farm. Most importantly (for me anyway), in 1936, Australian freshwater crayfish expert Ellen Clark named the lobster after Gould.

On the other hand, memorials to John Robert Hurst are almost non-existent, but Gould owes a debt of gratitude to him. Hurst introduced Gould to the lobster. Beyond their professional activities, Gould and Hurst were both amateur naturalists and members of the Royal Society of Tasmania. Seven years before Gould published on the lobster, Hurst's paper entitled “Observations on the Cray Fish (commonly called the Lobster) of Tasmania” was presented by one of the society's leading Fellows, Morton Allport Esquire, at the society's August 1863 meeting in Hobart.



Dusk on Gould's Creek
Photo Terry Mulhern

Hurst's paper has not survived, but the minutes of the meeting note Hurst's observation that "the young [cray] fish when only able to crawl among the gravel were destroyed in great numbers by the Platypus". This caused great excitement among the assembled Fellows.

Allport was eagerly awaiting the arrival of live salmon from the northern hemisphere, which were to be released into the "Salmon Ponds" he'd established near New Norfolk. From these humble beginnings, the now controversial Tasmanian salmon industry was born. I don't believe Allport could ever have imagined the scale of aquaculture today. And I'd like to think he'd be appalled by the environmental degradation it's caused, especially in Macquarie Harbour.

Allport was alarmed by Hurst's observations about platypus feeding on the lobsters' eggs and young, "as it was, therefore, pretty certain that the ova and young of the salmon (when first introduced) would also be extensively destroyed by the same marauder, which already frequents our breeding ponds".

Gould and Hurst worked together. While Hurst surveyed Gould's selection, Gould investigated the geology of the district. In his 1864 report, Gould championed the richness of the basaltic soil and the quality of timber growing there as well as other delights. "The Ringarooma is a splendid stream, flowing over a clear gravelly bottom, and having abundance of fish — herring, mountain trout, black fish (often 8 or 9 lbs. weight) and lobster ... specimens I have received from Mr. Hurst of such



Swimming on Gould's Creek
Photo Terry Mulhern

a size that no cooking utensil in the bushman's equipment is capable of holding them," he wrote.

As the years passed, I think the isolation of Gould's Creek also suited Gould – well away from the hounding of politicians and journalists.

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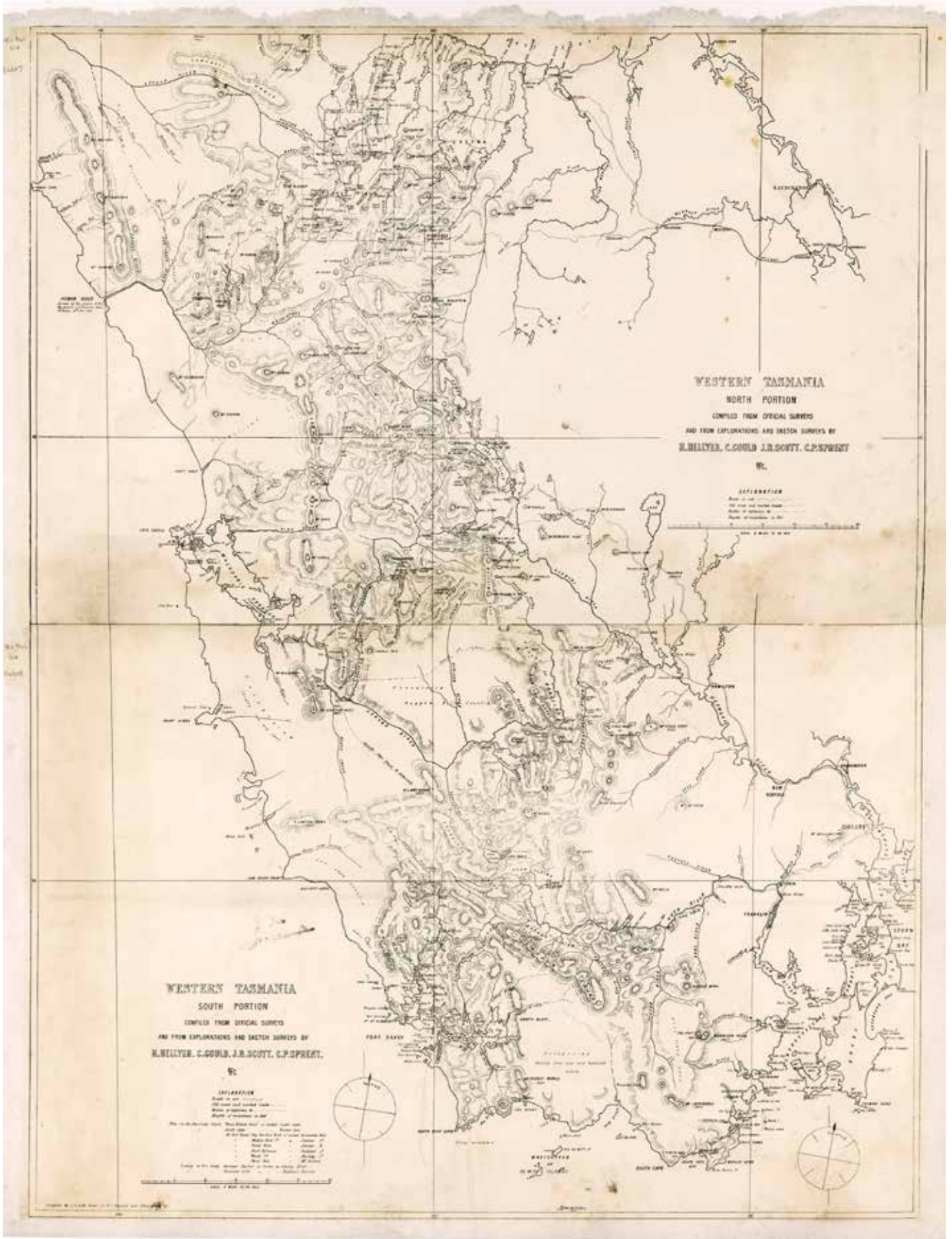
Gould was a highly credentialed young English geologist, son of the famous ornithologist John Gould. He'd been headhunted to be the first Tasmanian Government geologist. What this meant to Gould and the politicians and people of Tasmania couldn't have been more different.

When Gould arrived in 1859, he believed he'd been appointed to extensively map the geology of the island – categorising the different types of rocks and

to collect fossils from the strata to further support that mapping. This is what he'd done for the British Geological Survey. But to the Tasmanians, he was here for just one thing – to find gold.

Unfortunately for Tasmania, Gould wasn't a prospector. Prospectors were a breed apart. Single-minded men who scoured the wilderness, often fruitlessly for many years in search of minerals, prepared to live rough on the chance of one day striking it rich.

It wasn't until Tasmania's most famous prospector, James "Philosopher" Smith, discovered tin at Mt Bischoff in 1873, that Tasmania was unshackled from its obsession with gold. Tin, silver-lead and copper then drove Tasmania's economic development in the late 19th century.



To Gould's credit he quickly transformed from a raw "new chum" into a skilled bushman. In 1860-63, Gould led three famous expeditions into the western ranges, mapping the area and naming many of the peaks after eminent British scientists, including Murchison, Jukes, Owen, Darwin and Lyell. On his second expedition, Gould was ridiculed in the press for getting "lost" and search parties were sent out. This infuriated Gould. Bad weather had slowed his overland progress to Macquarie Harbour and from a nearby hill he watched frustratedly as the supply ship sailed away. But he'd planned meticulously for the possibility of being cut off by rising rivers and he and his men were well-provisioned and never in danger.

By 1865 there were rumblings in the press and parliament at the exorbitant cost of Gould and his grand geological survey; and his inability to find gold. When the House of Assembly debated "keeping of this gentleman another year at an expense of £1000", the chamber erupted in laughter when Mr Thomas Horne interjected that, for that amount, "I would find gold within ten miles of Hobart Town".

Gould was dismissed in 1867. Ironically, Gould and Allport then launched the "Tasmanian Mineral Exploration Company". But from the outset, it was mired in controversy over whether it was simply a vehicle for corrupt land speculation. Again, Gould could find no payable mineral deposits and the company failed.

During those difficult times, I imagine the man found solace camping next to Gould's Creek. Perhaps he also watched platypuses frolic while he conducted his studies on the diet and habits of the lobster.

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opposite Map of Western Tasmania

Compiled from official surveys and the explorations of H Hellyer, C Gould, JR Scott and CP Sprent

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Before I left Gould's Creek, I spent a wonderful evening with the McDougall family and their friends. As the sun set and the shadows lengthened in the big machinery shed, people arrived from all around the valley. Chairs were added to the ever-widening circle and each person took it in turn to relate their own lobster tale.

As the beer flowed, so did the stories. We heard of lobsters set loose indoors by cheeky kids to scare their grandmothers. There was a famous incident of a lobster that marched along the bar of the Ringarooma pub and latched onto an unwary drinker. I wasn't sure which was funnier, the story itself, or the argument over who let it loose and who got nipped. The best story was of a legendary lobster that so vigorously guarded the causeway across its creek that it spooked a herd of cattle and started a stampede.

Laughter rang out across the paddocks. As I wiped the tears from my eyes, I wondered how much was truth and how much was the craft of the story-tellers.

Hopefully, far into the future, Mark McDougall's grandchildren will tell their own kids new lobster tales. Because my crusade is not just about saving an animal and protecting natural places. It's also about preserving and celebrating our culture. For me, Tasmania without the lobster would not be Tasmania. Let's cherish and protect what we have here. We have lost enough already. ■

TERRY MULHERN is a writer and academic. He has lived in Victoria for more than 20 years but, like a swift parrot, he migrates every summer across Bass Strait to north-west Tasmania.