

# Robert Brown – Albury Pioneer

*Greg Ryan*

Robert Brown is said to have been the first person of European origin to settle on the site of the Albury township.

Robert was born in Dublin, probably in 1813, the second child of Dublin blacksmith Edward Brown and his wife Bridget.

In 1822 Edward was sentenced to transportation for life for “administering an unlawful oath” as a member of a secretive society said to be opposed to British rule in Ireland. On July 30, 1823 Edward arrived in Sydney aboard the *Recovery* with five other co-convicted men. Shortly after, he was assigned as a blacksmith to William Mannix of Upper Minto.

In 1824 Edward applied for free passage for his family to come to New South Wales and his application was granted. On October 7, 1828, Bridget Brown, with her four children, including 15-year-old Robert Brown, arrived in Sydney from Cork, Ireland on the *Sir Joseph Banks*.

In 1833 Edward was granted a Ticket of Leave and in December 1836 he was granted a conditional pardon.

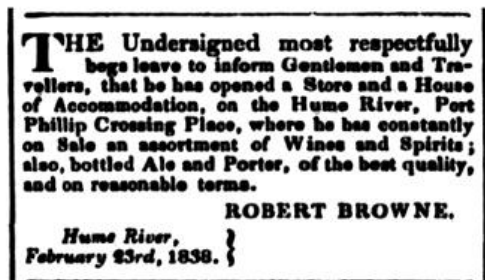
In 1835, Charles Ebdon selected land on both sides of the Hume River (later known as the Murray River), including the *Bonegilla Run* the *Mungabareena Run* and the whole of the land on which Albury now stands. William Wyse drove Ebdon’s cattle from Yass and became his stockman in charge. Soon afterwards he crossed the river to establish *Bonegilla* station for Ebdon.

*Mungabareena Run* was gazetted on February 7, 1837 in the name of Captain William Mitchell. He had married Elizabeth Huon in 1813. Captain Mitchell died in September 1837 and his son Thomas Mitchell (not the explorer) took over management, with ownership transferred to his mother, Elizabeth Mitchell. The homestead was established on a site which later became Albury waterworks pumphouse. Elizabeth’s brothers, Charles and Paul Huon squatted on the *Wodonga Run* in 1836 and John Dight took the *Bungowannah Run*.

Robert Brown arrived at the Hume River, ‘The Crossing Place,’ in 1836 after driving cattle from Sydney accompanied by his brother-in-law, and another brother of Elizabeth Mitchell, Aime Huon. Aime had married Robert’s sister Mary Brown in 1834 and in 1845 Aime’s brother, Charles Huon, married another of Robert’s sisters, Eleanor.

Brown quickly established a hut and store near the Hovell Tree. Then in February 1838 an advertisement appeared in *The Australian*:

THE Undersigned most respectfully begs leave to inform Gentlemen and Travellers, that he has opened a Store and a House of Accommodation, on the Hume River, Port Phillip Crossing Place, where he has constantly on Sale an assortment of Wines and Spirits; also, bottled Ale and Porter, of the best quality, and on reasonable terms.  
ROBERT BROWN. Hume River, February 23rd, 1838.



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Hume River, }  
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*The Australian* (Sydney)  
Tuesday, March 6, 1838

Three years later, on March 6, 1841, the following letter appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* headed “Overland Route to Port Phillip – Extract from a Bushman’s Letter”:

The next township is “Albury” situated at the crossing place of the Hume River, a more eligible spot than this could not have been selected for a township. It is beautifully situated in the heart of an extensive and fertile district. It is on the bank of a splendid river. It is surrounded by sheep and cattle

stations, in supplying the wants of which, a number of mechanics and tradesmen of all sorts will find constant employment, and there is no place within 45 miles of it, on which another town can be built. As yet there are only two or three houses here, a public house (kept by a very respectable man named Brown), besides a blacksmith's shop, there are also Police Barracks here, where a few policemen are always stationed. The wheat crops here this season were the finest I have ever seen in this Colony.

Further on in the same article, it was noted that:

Mr Brown, at the crossing place of the Hume River, is now building a splendid punt for the accommodation of the public.

The first punt proved inadequate and within a couple of years, Brown built a larger punt as described in the following extract from an article headed "The Southern Districts" that appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on January 30 1844:

Within the last two months, a splendid punt has been built in the vicinity of the crossing place on the Hume, at an outlay of between £300 and £400, by Mr Robert Brown, the spirited proprietor of the "Hume River Inn," and launched by him for the purpose of plying across the River, which cannot fail to be a great accommodation to the settlers sending produce to Sydney, as well as to those forwarding stores beyond the Hume, as before this punt began to ply, scarcely a flock or a herd could cross, or a dray load of stores pass the river without some of the former being drowned, or a portion of the stores damaged, but now, a dray with a team of eight or ten bullocks can be taken across from either side without even the draught cattle being unyoked. The charge for a loaded dray drawn by eight bullocks is about £1. Mr Brown has also lately built one of the finest houses on the Sydney and Goulburn road, at a cost of upwards of £2000, independent of the labour of all the men in his employ, and furnishing nearly all the materials from his own property.

Brown clearly did well as a businessman in Albury, very much a frontier town on the main road to what was then known as the New South Wales District of Port Phillip. In 1841 he took up the *Collendina Run* west of Corowa, opposite the junction of the Murray and Ovens Rivers. The name is said to mean "the junction of the waters" or "swirling waters."

On March 30, 1842 Robert Brown married Anne Crowe in Campbelltown. That same year, Brown established the *Hume Inn* (Albury's first hotel, near the corner of Hume St and Wodonga Place). Robert and Anne's first child, Frances Jane (known as Fanny) was born on July 24, 1843 – she was said to be the first European child to be born in Albury. The Browns moved to *Collendina* in 1845.

Brown still maintained his interest in Albury. In 1857 he convened the first meeting, attended by forty people, that resulted in the formation of the Albury and Murray River Agricultural & Horticultural Society.

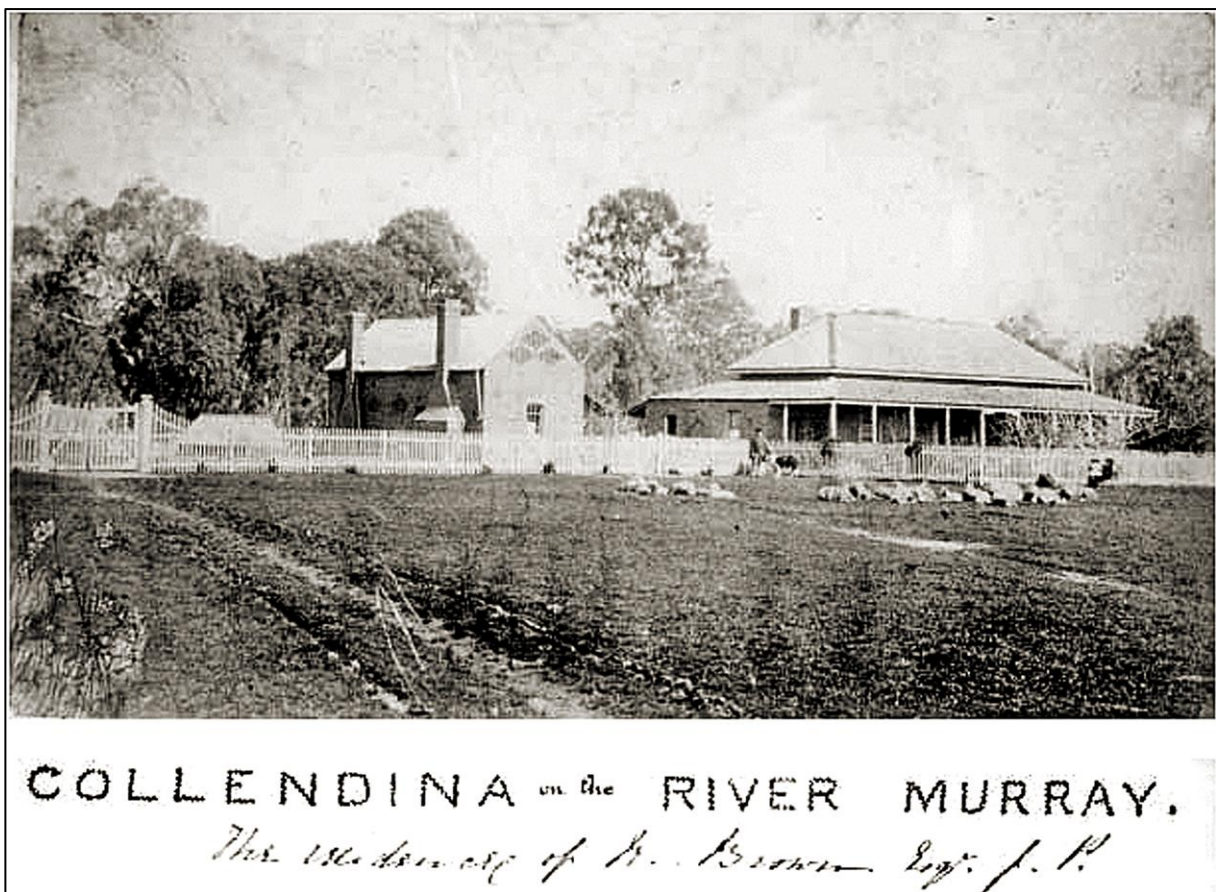
Albury historian of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Arthur Andrews, reported that Robert Brown:

was born in Dublin, and had previously lived at Campbelltown, was a blacksmith by trade ... The date of his settling is not precisely known, but by 1836 he had built a bark hut and forge on the bank of the river, near the trees marked by Hume and Hovell. He had also placed a 'dugout' canoe, attached to a rawhide rope stretched, across, to afford passage of the river, when high. This canoe was worked by an aboriginal, who went by the name of 'Merriman.' He was often the sole means of communication between the two sides of the river, when in flood.



Robert Brown

In 1837, a passing 'overlander' describes 'The Crossing Place,' as it was then called, as consisting of Brown's shanty, and about seven tents belonging to travellers. Even in these early days, the importance of the position must have been recognised, for Brown had improved his hut into a slab building, with accommodation for travellers, and a demand for residential sites was springing up. Robert Brown is described by those who remember him, as stoutly built, of medium height, sandy hair, active and determined, very independent, but of a genial and charitable disposition. His first residence is described as "a rude shanty of wattle trees and bark," and "consisted of one department, which was to serve every domestic purpose, except cooking, which, not a very elaborate process, was done in the open air. Near the door 'Bob' established a smithy, for the shoeing of horses, and repairing drays, etc. 'Bob' was middle aged, roughish in manner, but with a stock of good nature, which, in a real emergency, he would unstintingly apply." Brown is credited with being the first of Albury's inhabitants to entertain vice royalty. This was when Lady Franklin passed through in 1839 and stopped here three or four days ... The same year Sir John Hay speaks of Brown's house as a 'hotel,' but he is doubtful if any license was held at that time. Without, doubt, Brown was a good tradesman, and found a solid profit in his business, for a very few years after (1842) he took up the *Collendina* run, and having stocked it, went there to reside, in 1845 ... His widow gives the following details: "Mr Brown first settled in Albury in the latter part of 1835 having come overland from Sydney to his late brother-in-law, Mr A A Huon. Mr Huon returned to Campbelltown, and brought back with him his wife and Mr Brown's father and sister. The latter afterwards married Mr Charles Huon."



After Brown started farming *Collendina*, his parents moved to Albury and Edward took over a blacksmith business before they too moved to *Collendina*. Robert Brown died at *Collendina* on February 12, 1879. Robert and Anne and both Robert's parents are buried in the Mulwala cemetery.

Arthur Andrews had this to say:

He was the first settler on the site of Albury, and during its early years, amassed a considerable fortune. He took up *Collendina* run in the early 'forties.' It then covered a much greater area than now. However, he was unfortunate in his later years, and ultimately only retained a few hundred acres, on which he lived. He was survived by his wife and several children. When able, he was always one of the foremost in any movement, for the improvement of the district. His contributions to various funds were large, and cheerfully given, and it may be said, that several of Albury's most useful institutions owed their origin and early support to him. He was fond of sport, and a well known figure on more than one racecourse. A severe accident sustained on the Corowa course was the source of much suffering during his latter years.

The following is an extract from an article written in the *Border Post* by Robert Brown:

When I settled down nearly under the shadeless tree on which Mr Hume carved the name Hume River on November 17 1824, I could little imagine that so rapid a transformation would take place in a few short years, my only companions a few blacks, the kangaroo, the emu, the native dog. Now Albury can boast of its newspapers, fine buildings, steam mills, its churches, bank, court house etc.