

Ian Hughes

# Einassleigh



© Ian Hughes

First published as part of **About The North: Highways and Byways** in February 2023.

All rights reserved.

Ian Hughes

[aboutthenorth.au](http://aboutthenorth.au)

## Version history:

1.0 February 2023.

## Image credits:

Cover: Elevated view of of Einasleigh showing mine in foreground and Newcastle Range in distance ([State Library of Queensland](#))

Einasleigh copper mine, Etheridge, c 1896 - 1925 (Geological Survey of Queensland, Queensland State Archives, [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Two hundred and twenty kilometres southwest of Innisfail on the eastern edge of the Newcastle Range, Einasleigh takes its name from the river named by Frank and Alexander Jardine in 1864.

However, the township is located on the Copperfield River, just upstream from its junction with the Einasleigh.

The Einasleigh then joins the Gilbert River to spill into an estuarine delta of tidal flats and mangrove swamps about one hundred kilometres wide.

The Copperfield Gorge, across the road from the Einasleigh Hotel, marks the southeastern boundary of the Undara lava field, where the river has cut down through a lava fissure.

Einasleigh was also the name of the area's first local-government division (1879). It subsequently became the Einasleigh Shire, and the name changed to Etheridge in 1919.

The township is in *Ewamin* country.



The Jardine brothers left Carpentaria Downs on 11 October 1864, bound for Somerset at the tip of Cape York Peninsula, where their father was the Government resident, with a herd of cattle. They had started their ten-month journey in Rockhampton.

At the time, Carpentaria Downs was colonial Queensland's northernmost outpost.

The brothers followed the stream across to Cape York Peninsula's west coast. As they made their way downstream, a group of around fifty Ewamin people "threatened the party . . . and dogged their steps persistently, but a conflict was avoided." <sup>1</sup>

When Queensland Government geologist **Richard Daintree** found copper ore bodies in 1866, he thought he was on the watercourse Leichhardt had named the Lynd.

It wasn't the Jardine brothers' Einasleigh either and ended up as the Copperfield.

Daintree started a small copper mine in partnership with William Hann and sent several tons of ore to Townsville.

*The low price of copper and the high cost of everything else, including carriage to the nearest port, soon brought about the inevitable consequence, although the ore was exceedingly rich.* <sup>2</sup>

The partners ceased work in 1867, sealed the mine entrance, and the ore body remained unexploited for the rest of the 19th century.

Demand for copper at the Chillagoe smelters around 1900 saw the Chillagoe Company rediscover the shaft and develop it through a subsidiary, the Einasleigh Copper Mines Company.

The company erected a small blast furnace for smelting in 1902. High transport costs meant it was unprofitable until the railway arrived in 1910.

When the mining warden arrived to lay out the township originally named Copperfield, he found opportunistic arrivals had already set up businesses near the Einasleigh Company's copper mine.

The fledgling township already had two hotels, a store, a billiard room, butcher and baker shops and a receiving office for postal items. A post office opened in 1909 and closed in 1993.

Funds were being collected for the school that opened on 29 October 1901.

Although the Provisional School closed in 1905, it reopened the following year and became Einasleigh State School in January 1909. The school finally closed in 1955.

A provisional school opened in nearby Wirra Wirra in 1914, became a State School at the end of the year, and closed around four years later.

The Chillagoe Company's private rail line from Almaden to Mount Surprise reached Einasleigh in 1909, extending to Forsayth in 1911. Railway construction workers swelled

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Logan Jack, *The Exploration of Cape York Peninsula, 1606-1915*

<sup>2</sup> Logan Jack **Northmost** Australia, p. 349.

the township's population enough to make Einasleigh the shire's largest population centre between 1907 and 1910

Queensland's Railways Department operated the line after the company handed its assets to the Queensland Government in 1919. The privately operated *Savannahlander* tourist train passes through the township on its way to and from Forsayth.

By 1910 there was a hospital, a public hall and some business premises.

Proximity to The Oaks goldfield, upstream from the township on the Copperfield River and a location on the railway line from Forsayth to Chillagoe helped. Still, when the Chillagoe smelters closed in 1914, the mine shut down.

After the Queensland government acquired the mine as part of the Chillagoe Company's assets in 1919, it returned to full production, supplying the reopened Chillagoe Smelters.

Depleted ore reserves and a post-war drop in the world copper price saw the Einasleigh State Mine close in 1922.

The township went into a long decline after the mine's closure of the mine. Still, its location on the railway saved it from disappearing altogether.

According to ***Pugh's Queensland Directory***, Einasleigh had three hotels, three stores, a butcher and a baker in 1924. By 1933 the population was less than one hundred, and by 1961 it had fallen below sixty.

A modest revival through the second half of the 20th century saw a figure rise beyond two hundred in 2006. Ten years later, it was back down to ninety-two.

Kidston mine reworked The Oaks goldfield, south of Einasleigh on the Copperfield River.

Gold was initially found there in the 1880s. However, the location remained a secret until an alluvial rush in 1907 yielded 822 kilograms of gold over the next three years.

After that, small holdings were amalgamated as the miners worked underground reefs. The ore went through a National Trust-listed 15-head battery that still stands on the site.

The mine changed to open cut in 1921 and continued operating until 1945.

There was some interest in the field's prospects through the sixties and seventies until Kidston Gold Mines applied to resume production in 1979.

After the mine reopened in 1985, it became Australia's largest gold producer, yielding between 200,000 and 300,000 ounces per year.

The operation proved so lucrative that the mine repaid the entire \$140 million capital outlay in less than three years. Kidston continued to operate until July 2001, producing close to three and a half million ounces over its working life.

Since it worked on a drive or fly-in and out basis, once it finished operations, everything went.

The buildings that housed the workers went to Bedrock Village Caravan Park in Mount Surprise. They now serve as budget traveller accommodation.

Bedrock Village also operates a tour that visits the Kidston site for those who choose to do the Savannahlander run from Mount Surprise to Einasleigh.

Einasleigh has several sites listed on Queensland's Heritage Register:

- the [Einasleigh Copper Mine and Smelter](#);
- the [Einasleigh Hotel](#);
- the [Einasleigh railway station](#) and [Station Master's Residence](#);
- the [Etheridge railway line](#):

Sources:

- Etheridge Shire Council, <https://www.etheridge.qld.gov.au/region/history-culture/einasleigh>
- Robert Logan Jack, *The Exploration of Cape York Peninsula, 1606-1915*, **Journal and Proceedings of the Australian Historical Society**, Vol. III, Part V, 1915.
- Robert Logan Jack, **Northmost Australia: Three Centuries Of Exploration, Discovery, And Adventure In And Around The Cape York Peninsula, Queensland**, London, Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1921
- **Queensland Places** <http://queenslandplaces.com.au/einasleigh>
- **Wikipedia**

FURTHER READING:

Jan Wegner, **The Etheridge**, Townsville, James Cook University, Department of History and Politics, 1990