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Mount Surprise



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Cover: Buildings in Mount Surprise, 1929 ([State Library of Queensland](#); [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Bush band performing at Mount Surprise, ca. 1905 ([State Library of Queensland](#); [Wikimedia Commons](#))



Located in the Shire of Etheridge Shire, 285 kilometres southwest of Cairns near the eastern end of the Gulf Development Road, Mount Surprise is the eastern gateway to the Gulf Savannah.

Yorkshireman Ezra Firth arrived in the area with his family in 1864. His station at Fossilbrook originally ran sheep, but relations with the local Ewemian people were hostile, and the country was not suited for sheep, thanks in large part to black speargrass (*Heteropogon contortus*).¹

In the station's early days, low wool prices meant a barefooted Firth accompanied the bullock wagon taking his wool clip on the three-hundred-kilometre trip to Townsville "more than once.

The proceeds from the previous year's clip did not permit replacements for worn-out boots.²

¹ A perennial tussock grass that grows to 1.5 metres in height and handles frequent burning. The plants develop dark seeds with a long bristle that becomes twisted when dry and straightens when moisture hits it. They get caught up in wool, and when the sheep get wet, the spike bores into the skin, devaluing the fleece and causing a severe infection that may kill the animal. See [here](#) for further details.

² G. C. Bolton, **A Thousand Miles Away**, p. 41.

Firth's Mount Surprise and Fossilbrook remained the "furthest outposts" through the 1860s and into the following decade.

The Palmer River gold rush allowed Firth to sell his sheep to the miners and convert his holding to cattle.

He did well enough out of selling supplies to the miners to retire to a substantial property at Morningside in Brisbane.³

Extending the railway line from Almaden to Forsayth in the twentieth century's first decade prompted the Queensland Government to resume a section of the Firth property for Mount Surprise Township.

Junction Creek telegraph office, built in 1871, was relocated to the new township, and Mount Surprise Post Office opened in July 1908.

Mount Surprise State School dates back to 1917.

Developed as a telegraph centre and cattle siding after the Etheridge railway reached the area in 1908, Mount Surprise declined as railway traffic from the mining and cattle industries dropped off in the 1930s.

After World War Two, reconditioning the railway helped Mount Surprise survive until the all-weather Gulf Development Road in the 1960s revitalized the town as a livestock trucking centre.

More recently, it has become a tourist destination thanks to interest in the nearby Undara Lava Tubes, formed by lava flows on the McBride Plateau.

While Undara offers its own tourist facilities, the [Bedrock Village Caravan Park](#) operates day tours from Mount Surprise.

Thirty-seven kilometres northwest of the township, O'Brien's Creek is a significant fossicking area.

While the town's population remains below two hundred,⁴ Mount Surprise maintains a hotel, two caravan parks and two service stations, along with a store, gem shop and police station.

³ After Ezra and Eliza Firth made a brief return to England, where the climate no longer suited them. "Travellers to any of the stations beyond Morningside on the Cleveland line will, no doubt, have often noticed a villa on a knoll within sight of Morningside railway station. It is one of the most conspicuous residences in that picturesque suburb." (*A Pioneer Squatter*, **Northern Miner** Thursday 7 January 1909.

⁴ Most recent Australian Census figures: 162 (2006); 306 (2011); 169 (2016) ([Wikipedia](#)); 138 (2021) ([Australian Bureau of Statistics](#))

The weekly Savannahlander train service between Cairns and Forsyth stops in Mount Surprise for lunch on Wednesdays (outbound leg) and overnight on Thursdays (return journey) between March and December.

The town is near the Undara Volcanic National Park and Forty Mile Scrub National Park. Other activities in the area include gem fossicking.

Sources:

Bolton, G.C. **A Thousand Miles Away**

North Queensland Register, 6 February 1905 ([Trove](#))

Northern Miner Thursday 7 January 1909 ([Trove](#))

Wikipedia