

SIR SIDNEY KIDMAN

THE CATTLE KING

*A drover who left home at 13 with five shillings and a one-eyed horse,
and built a pastoral empire spanning up to 3.7% of the Australian mainland*

1857 – 1935 | His impact on Australia

The Man Behind the Empire

Born 9 May 1857 near Adelaide, Sidney Kidman left home at age 13 with five shillings and a one-eyed horse named Cyclops, making for the Barrier Range to work alongside drovers and bushmen.

He worked as a rouseabout, bullock-driver and stockman, then traded for himself — carting supplies, droving stock, and supplying meat and horses to the mining towns of Cobar, Broken Hill and beyond.

From his first station in 1886 he assembled, over forty years, one of the largest landholdings the world has known — knighted in 1921, retired in 1927.

1857

Born at Athelstone, near Adelaide, SA

Age 13

Left home with five shillings and a one-eyed horse, Cyclops

1886

First station: Owen Springs, NT (per the Australian Dictionary of Biography)

1921

Knighted for his First World War support

“

**I have always taken care of the little things,
and don't think one can go far wrong who
does. If the small things are let go amiss, so
will the big things.**

— Sir Sidney Kidman, his favourite saying

Building the Empire

Land owned or part-owned, growing relentlessly across four decades

1903

38,000 sq mi · 98,000 km²

Carlton Hill (WA) to Victoria River Downs (NT) to Macumba (SA)

1908

50,000 sq mi · 129,500 km²

Diamantina Lakes, Mount Poole and Channel Country added

1935

107,000 sq mi · 277,000 km²

At his death — equal to 3.7% of mainland Australia

By the First World War his holdings exceeded England or Tasmania in area, and were nearly as large as Victoria (ADB).

The Scale of It

At Sir Sidney Kidman's death in 1935

68

separate cattle & sheep stations

176,000

head of cattle

215,000

head of sheep

107,000 sq mi

277,000 km² of country

3.7%

of mainland Australia

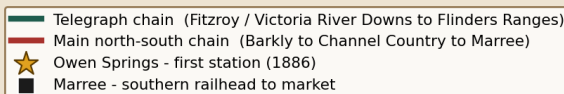
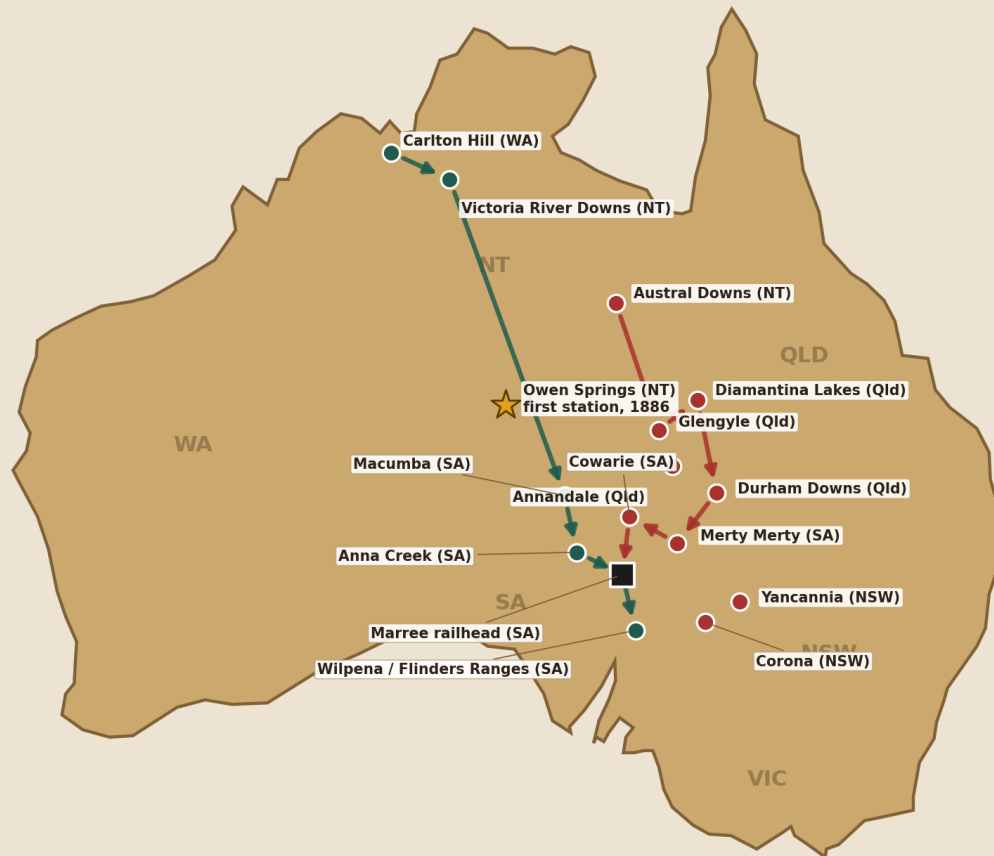
150+

stations used over his lifetime

Source: 1935 obituary figures (The Northern Miner); Australian Dictionary of Biography.

A Chain Across a Continent

Kidman's Drought-Proof Chains of Stations



Cattle bred in the well-watered tropical north were walked south along linked stations on the inland river systems, always within reach of feed and water, to reach southern railheads and markets in prime condition.

STATIONS IN THE CHAIN

- Owen Springs (NT) — first, 1886
- Carlton Hill (WA)
- Victoria River Downs (NT)
- Austral Downs (NT)
- Glengyle (Qld)
- Diamantina Lakes (Qld)
- Durham Downs (Qld)
- Macumba (SA)
- Anna Creek (SA)
- Cowarie (SA)
- Merty Merty (SA)
- Yancannia (NSW)

...and over 150 more across five states & territories

Drought-Proofing a Continent

Kidman linked his stations into two great chains — one down the inland rivers, one along the Overland Telegraph line. Cattle bred in the well-watered tropical north were walked south, always near feed and water, arriving at southern railheads in prime condition, so that drought in any one region could never break the whole.

“He made life a fascinating game of chess. The board was Australia; the pieces were station managers, drovers, stock routes, water, grass, cattle... His opponent was drought.”

— Ion Idriess, biographer, *The Cattle King* (1936)

Beyond Cattle: The Dealer

His strength was as a trader, not a breeder — cattle were one move in a far wider business

Carrier & butcher

Bought a bullock team to cart supplies between the diggings, then opened a butcher's shop in the Cobar copper rush — buying and butchering cattle, with profits that 'flowed with spectacular success'.

Coaching lines

Built coaching businesses across western NSW and WA, running them on his own horses.

Army remounts

Supplied the British Army in India with horses, and sold cattle to his brother Sackville's butchery at Broken Hill.

A web of companies

By the 1920s 'Kidman' meant interlocking companies, partnerships and agencies in every mainland capital — S. Kidman & Co (1899), run from Adelaide.

£400 seed capital

A £400 legacy from his grandfather in 1878 was ploughed straight back into stock and transport — and multiplied.

The Biggest Horse Sale in the World

From October 1900, Kidman ran an annual horse sale behind the North Kapunda Hotel. It became a fixture for thirty years, sometimes ran for a fortnight, and was said to be the largest horse sale on earth. He charged admission at the gate — and gave the takings to local charities.

1900

first sale held — 350 horses

Up to 3,000

horses sold in a single year

~2 weeks

the sale could run a
fortnight

30 years

an annual fixture until 1935

Gate takings

all donated to charity

Source: SA History Hub (History Trust of South Australia); Adelaideia.

The War Effort — and the Tax Man

He gave lavishly to the nation at war, then fought the Commonwealth hard over tax

GAVE TO THE NATION

Gave fighter aircraft to the armed forces — reported as two aeroplanes, plus 200 horses and 100 frozen bullocks.

His Kidman & Mayoh shipyard at Putney, Sydney, built wooden ships for the Commonwealth war effort.

A long-time supplier of remount horses to the British Army in India.

By the war's end he was 'a national institution'; knighted in 1921.

FOUGHT THE TAX OFFICE

1924 — Treasurer Earle Page issued a writ to recover £166,067 in unpaid land tax.

Fined just £10 plus costs for failing to furnish land-tax returns.

1927 — after High Court litigation, the government settled for £25,132.

His reputation for meanness, the ADB notes, sprang from a hatred of waste — not stinginess.

The Man, Up Close

The details that made the legend

Learned the bush from ‘Billy’

As a boy he shared a creek-bank dugout with an Aboriginal man he treated as a friend and equal, learning tracking and bushcraft. He rarely travelled the inland again without an Aboriginal guide.

Never drank, smoked or swore

A lifelong teetotaller — his harshest curse for a baulking bullock team was ‘jolly tinkers’.

Could sleep anywhere

Like Churchill or Napoleon, he could drop off in almost any position, then wake and ride on.

Six foot, easy smile

183 cm and well-built, affable and a shrewd judge of people — equally at home at a campfire or with civic leaders.

Frugal, not mean

His reputation for meanness came from hating waste; in fact he was a generous employer and benefactor.

The Tree of Knowledge

He reputedly planned his Queensland empire under a coolibah at Glengyle Station — heritage-listed in 1992.

In His Own Words — and Others'

Verified Kidman quotations are scarce; these are the best-attributed

“I have always taken care of the little things... If the small things are let go amiss, so will the big things.”

— Sir Sidney Kidman — his favourite saying

“A man who never falls down on a deal... as good as his word.”

— How drovers and bushmen described him, recorded by Ion Idriess

He never touched alcohol or tobacco, was never profane — even his bullock teams were abused only as ‘jolly tinkers’.

— Australian Dictionary of Biography

His Impact on Australia

Still the largest private landholder

S. Kidman & Co remains Australia's largest private landholder. In 2016 it sold for A\$365 million to Hancock Prospecting (67%) and Shanghai CRED (33%).

He proved the arid inland could pay

His chain strategy showed Australia's harshest country could be run profitably by managing water, distance and movement — a template for outback pastoralism.

The world's largest cattle station

Flagship Anna Creek (23,876 km² / 9,219 sq mi) is the world's largest working cattle station. In 2016 it was sold separately to an Australian family, as it sits inside the Woomera defence zone.

A name written on the map

The Kidman Way, Kidman Park and stock routes across NSW carry his name; his life became Ion Idriess's 1936 bestseller, *The Cattle King*.