

Highlights of History in FNO

Atherton a true pioneer

IN the early 1870s, Far North Queensland was in the grip of gold fever.

First the Palmer and then the Hodgkinson goldfields attracted prospectors from far and wide. Hundreds left their homes, families and businesses for Cooktown before making the trek to the Palmer River.

Many more deserted the newly established coastal towns and headed west from Cairns to seek their fortunes at Hodgkinson.

However, one man was not really interested in digging for gold, but he still followed the hordes, taking with him his cattle.

Ironically though, the cattleman was later responsible for giving those diggers new hope when both the goldfields were on the decline in the late 1870s.

He was John Atherton, one of the Far North's most astute pioneers whose name was given to the tableland on which he eventually settled.

Although not addicted to mining like the ma-

and jackaroo. The namings have been the basis of a local yarn, but it was a fact that Atherton started the tin rush in 1878.

And, once again, he was only interested in raising and selling cattle, leaving the mining to the hundreds who flocked to the diggings and bought his beef.

But Atherton was more than a clever cattleman — he was also an adventurer and pioneer.

Although he was born in Lancashire, England, in 1837, he could almost be called a true blue Aussie, because he was only seven years old when his parents left the mother country and arrived in Sydney to start a new life.

His father established a property near Armidale. John Atherton quickly adapted to the new country and by the time he was 20, he and his brother James decided to take a mob of sheep overland to Rockhampton.

James was keen to settle there, so the two brothers convinced the rest of the family to leave Armidale and



PASSAGES OF TIME by Alec Martin

went to the Hodgkinson diggings.

When he took his herd to Basalt Downs (Cashmere) to open a cattle station, his two sons, aged 12 and 10, travelled with him. But, he quickly realised that this new venture would not be profitable.

Determined to find a more suitable site to raise cattle, Atherton and his family left the Burdekin and headed further north.

On reaching the scrub-like tableland which overshadowed Trinity Inlet,

FIFTY years ago, the majority of Cairns and district associated many of the familiar names and places with Far North Queensland's history. However, today it's a different story. This series is an uncomplicated historical record, as interpreted by ALEC MARTIN, of some aspects of the early pioneers who helped to forge the future of this region.

was packed and taken down the track — which Atherton had helped cut to the inlet.

Even though Atherton had taken out tin mining leases and was later offered a partnership in a tin mining company, he only wanted to firmly establish his cattle station at Emerald End.

Unlike many other pastoralists settling in FNO at the time, Ather-

ing the first five years at Emerald End he lost a bullock a day to the Aborigines and had spears thrown at him.

In fact, after an axe attack, he carried a scar on his face for life.

Several of his neighbours moved further north on to Cape York Peninsula, but others started to cultivate the tableland on the Atherton Tableland during the 1880s.



AN astute pioneer — John Atherton.

After each raid, they would disappear in the dense forests which covered the land between the tableland at the coast.

However, by the middle 1880s the cattle thefts, the occasional killing of a prospector and general hostility between whites and Aborigines became less.

Meanwhile, John Atherton saw the future of the tableland region and even built a hotel, the Bush Inn at the then growing town of Mareeba, to cater for the traffic, which was starting to build up.

In 1876, plans were drawn up to build a railway line from Cairns to the Tableland. The now world-famous Kuranda Railway was to be

He ventured into the desolate, rough country 160 km west of the then growing town of Mareeba to establish his own station.

Today, the area he settled is called Chillagoe and, as folklore has it, he got the name from a sea shanty, following the Atherton trait of coming up with unusual names.

WHEREAS his father discovered tin on his property nine years earlier, miners found copper on the son's land. William encouraged the mining, and even pinpointed potential diggings to the miners.

Like father, like son, he was more concerned about marketing the Atherton beef to the miners

