



## Convict Trail Project

## January 2024 Newsletter

This newsletter is a combined December and January issue. Part was written for December and part has been added in January. So this is a holiday special as we re-visit the section of road heading up Devines Hill, then cover the last bit of the road through the national park and include some research on how the Convicts would have celebrated Christmas.

### **A VIRTUAL WALK UP THE GNR: North up Devines Hill [again].**

[Contributed by Elizabeth Roberts] In our trip along the Great North Road as a holiday special we will return as I did earlier this month with my husband and 18 year old grandson to Wisemans Ferry and Devine Hill. Although you cannot see it, the descent downhill to Wisemans Ferry is held up by drystone wall built by convicts in late 1820s very early 1830s. At the bottom of the hill the large building on the right is the Wisemans Ferry Hotel. Part of it is the two-storey house Solomon Wiseman had built for himself in 1826. As you look at the pub from the road the house is on the left-hand or river side and the bar is a section built on later. The dining area out the back is a much newer extension. Last chance to fill up with petrol station is at the IGA tucked in behind the "Ferry Artists", a co-operative art and craft shop.

Continue straight ahead, past the Bowling Club and the new Hornsby Shire Council car park. On your left is the Hills Shire park with covered picnic pavilions and toilets as well as with lots of open picnic area at the far end. At the end of the road is the Ferry which is free and takes foot passengers as well as cars but you cannot get out of your car while on the ferry. Once across the River turn left. At the base of Devines Hill there are 5 parking spaces, but during the week these are taken by restoration workers on Thomas James Bridge. I was there mid to late afternoon on a Saturday before that work recommenced and there were spaces. We walked part way up Devines Hill and spent time looking at the interpretive signage that was in part installed when the area received World Heritage Listing as part of the eleven Convict sites listed.



Four of these sites are in Sydney - Hyde Park Barracks, Cockatoo Island, Old Government House at Parramatta and the Great North Road at Devines Hill. There was already some signage installed before the Road's World Heritage listing and the new signage complemented what was already there. Various cut-out figures were installed representing the First Nations People, Thomas Mitchell the Surveyor General and convict workers.





A short way up the hill from Thomas Mitchell, is another free stand installation that outlines in date order all the sites that make up the heritage listing. These sites together tell the complete and changing story of convictism that was not unique to Australia. What is unique to Australia, or rather NSW, is convicts were sent here to form the Colony whilst other nations used prisoners (convicts) as labourers in established or establishing colonies. None of the other nations have the depth of records of physical remains we have in Australia.



Adults and children of all ages enjoy trying on the leg irons modelled on those worn by about half of the convicts building this section of the road. After you pass the leg irons start looking for the layers of drill marks that show how much stone had to be cut away from the hill above the road to form the road.

The hill side was cut back about the half the width of the road and walling was built up on the outside and back filled against the wall to form the other side of the road. The road surface sloped inward so the water drained in large drains against the cliff face and exited

through large culverts under the road. This design was to keep water from getting into the fill behind the wall. Many of the stories about various convicts on different sandstone blocks were taken from articles the CTP had researched and published in "The Pick". For small children there is a finding game attached to the side of some of the sandstone bases of the signs.

In part there are at least 6 to 7 layers of drill marks one above the other. Look for a round half circle (about 4cms in diameter) forming a long straight vertical channel in the rock face. These were all drilled by hand in a lift twist and drop action or lift twist and hammer action. Look up at how far they have cut down then carefully look over the outside edge to see how far it is to the bottom and try to imagine what it must have been like for the men working these cliff faces, especially if they were in leg irons.

We only went a short way up as grandson was worried that Grandad was going back to the car. The best bits were further up but I will leave them for you to find for yourself.

For those happy to drive on a 'dirt' road continue along the road from Devines Hill north along the Macdonald River to St Albans past the old St Albans General Cemetery. At St Albans is the small purpose built 1836 pub. The 2022 flood came into the bar. Across the road from the Pub is a park that runs down to river with a great children's play area and public toilets. There are also stone sculptures and a CTP pillar that the locals look after and keep the plaques polished. When I was there, there were families camped in the park. The pub has a lot of outdoor tables and two resident peacocks. After a stop here one can cross the 1890s truss bridge and return to Wisemans Ferry via the Webbs Creek Ferry on a bitumen road.

For an exciting but economical outing fill the petrol tank at your local cheap petrol stop and pack a picnic and plenty of water. Carry water when walking up Devines Hill.

Depending on you level of fitness and how many plaques you stop to read it takes about an hour to see the best bits and about 35 minutes to walk back down.

One does not have to walk the whole way to the top to appreciate the work it took to construct the road and how inspirational Percy Simpson Assistant Surveyor and his convict overseers must have been to have to have got a basically unwilling unpaid work force (many of whom were in irons) to do such quality work.

## **A VIRTUAL WALK UP THE GNR: North from Circuit Flat Bridge.**

[Contributed by Elizabeth Roberts] Back to where we left off on our virtual journey along the Great North Road, in November we were at Circuit Flat Bridge the next section of road from Circuit Flat Bridge to Mt Manning ran basically straight over rock platforms and sandy soils crossing the headwaters of Mogo Creek twice. No evidence remains, or if it does it is well buried, of how these creeks were crossed, they could have been left as sandy bottomed mostly dry creek crossings or they could have been corduroyed – paved with logs parallel to the flow of the creek or paved with cut stone. These days this section of Mogo Creek only flows intermittently after rain; it is just over the divide from the headwaters of the Mangrove Dam and is affected by the dam's rain shadow. But heavy rain in the last 190 years have at least twice, diverted the creek down the road (no undergrowth to impede the flow of water) severely washing it out several feet deep causing the road to be diverted in this section. The second of these known incidents happened in 2007. Sometime in the past, well over 30 years ago the top end, the connection with the road to St Albans, was diverted cutting out the 1<sup>st</sup> creek crossing and coming in from what is known as the Mt Manning parking area. The original road exited where the Yengo National Park sign is, driving west from Bucketty before you get to the Mt Manning car park. This section of road is dangerous. Someone drove me in there many years ago and we nearly tipped onto our side.



As this section was initially written in December I thought we should look at how the road gangs and iron gangs did or did not celebrate Christmas. This proved to be much more difficult than anticipated. In Britain in the 1820s and 1830s Christmas was a very low-key celebration; in fact in Scotland Christmas celebrations were banned from the 1640s to the 1950s. In England under puritan influence, Christmas was banned from 1647 to 1660. The early Christians had appropriated the Roman Saturnalia festival, which involved holidays, feasting and gift giving. After Henry VIII and the reformation in Britain Christmas celebrations were looked on as popish and catholic. It was Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, who introduced the European customs of celebrating Christmas with a decorated fir or pine trees.

Back to the convicts working on the road. The two foods traditional in Britain for Christmas by the 1820s – plum pudding and mince tarts – could not be made on a convict ration. Evidence of the supply of an additional ration of raisins has so far not been found. From the Trove references found, it appears the convicts had the day off work on Christmas Day and possibly New Year's Day. To the convicts brought up in Britain and Ireland, Christmas in the heat of summer would have felt strange but they would have welcomed a day off the relentless work of road building.

What could the convicts do with their day off? If they had been in Sydney or elsewhere close to a church, they would have had to attend a church service in the morning. For the road builders out in the bush there were certainly no churches or ministers and it is unlikely anyone read them a church service. They may have attended to the vegetables they were trying to grow in the sandy soil – their only source of vitamin C. Only convicts in hospital, in asylums and working on-board ships were supplied with vegetables, others were expected to grow theirs. If someone had cards they would have played cards. Quaker missionary Backhouse complained that some convicts given bibles had converted them into playing cards. Or they could have spent the day just relaxing.

### **CTP NEWS: Thomas James Bridge:**

On Monday 4 December the temporary replacement for Thomas James Bridge was opened to general traffic. Attached is a photo taken early January before the contractors restarted taking the wall down. We have been told the shotcrete is only temporary, certainly hope so it is hideous.



## **Sydney's Wire-Drawn Ferries:**

Commuters are facing long waits at wire-drawn ferry crossings in Sydney as boat operators commence daily strikes.

### Key points:

- One-hour shutdowns will hit specific wire-drawn ferry services across Greater Sydney this week
- The maritime union says workers are being paid 50 per cent less than traffic controllers.
- Alternative routes add as much as 50 minutes to driving commutes
- Maritime Union of Australia said the one-hour stoppages would affect services at Berowra Waters, Wisemans Ferry, Webbs Creek, Sackville and Mortlake.
- On Monday, the Berowra Waters ferry in northern Sydney was closed from 11am due to the industrial action.
- A shutdown of the Webbs Creek service in Sydney's north-west is expected from 11am until midday on Tuesday.

The ferries' private operator Birdon and the union have been in pay negotiations for six months. In that time, Birdon has not made the union a pay offer, union organiser Shane Reside told ABC Radio Sydney.

"These operators are being paid the absolute legal minimum that the company can get away with," Mr Reside said. Wisemans Ferry is one of a number services due to be impacted by this week's industrial action. (ABC Radio Sydney: Declan Bowring)

"These ferry operators, in addition to being responsible for directing traffic on and off the ferry, need to operate these very large punts across the river unassisted."

Mr Reside says the union wants the approximately 50 workers now being paid \$29 an hour to be paid the same as road traffic controllers, who earn about \$46 an hour.

Mr Reside says the low pay means the company is struggling to attract new operators and is using traffic controllers to assist operations.

"If you're on a union EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement] in Sydney, and you're a traffic controller — you stand there holding the lollipop — you're on about 50 per cent more than what these ferry operators are on," Mr Reside said.

"We're not asking for any more than what a traffic controller gets, just simply equal pay for equal work."

ABC Radio Sydney has contacted Birdon for comment.

Transport for NSW said they would issue traffic alerts and propose alternative routes. Closure of the Webbs Creek ferry on Tuesday would add 50 minutes to southbound journey times, Transport for NSW said. Emergency services will not be affected by the disruption, according to Transport for NSW. A shutdown of the Berowra Waters ferry would force commuters to drive 20 kilometres south to the Galston Gorge bridge crossing. Mr Reside said the industrial action may escalate into peak hour stoppages if the dispute continues.

"If they don't come to the table, then we're going to have to escalate and that might mean that we end up in peak hour stoppages," Mr Reside said.

"I really hope that's not what happens."

[Posted on Tuesday 16 January 2024]

## **Painting of second Mrs Solomon Wiseman (Sophia)**

The State Library in its December newsletter announced:

*The State Library has recently acquired an 1833 miniature painted on ivory by Australian artist Charles Rodius (1802-1860), depicting Sophie (or Sophia) Wiseman.*

*The Library is currently hosting the first ever retrospective of 19th century Australia's best unknown artist, in the Charles Rodius exhibition. Plans are underway to add the new acquisition to the exhibition where it will join over 90 other original watercolours, drawings and prints by Rodius. The sheet of ivory her portrait is painted on is 6 by 5.5 cms in size.*

### **Powerhouse Museum:**

It has recently been announced that the Powerhouse Museum will be temporally closing in February for a three year upgrade. This follows an earlier announcement that it would remain in Harris Street Sydney.

### **Hunter Valley Novel:**

A novel published in 2021 recently came to my attention, Called the "Daughter of the Hunter Valley" by Paula J. Beavan. This novel published by Mira is set on a property on the Hunter River from December 1831 to August 1832, whilst the main protagonists are all fictitious they are very true to the residents in the Valley at that time; the background figures and properties mentioned in passing are all actual residents. This novel is the results of 10 years research and as a historian I found it a great depiction of how I had imagined life in the Hunter Valley at the time the author wrote about. She has based her farming information on a transcription of George Wyndhams farming journal. According to a google search this book is still available. I found it in Hornsby Library.

### **CTP website**

After being inactive for a little while the CTP website is back up and functioning. Please use it to find out more about the CTP.

### **The Pick - Volume 11:**

Most articles for this issue are now in and hopefully it will be released within the next few months. Thanks to all who have submitted articles for this issue.

**And in closing ....** Hopefully 2024 will be a good year for you all and for the world in general. Please encourage all your friends to visit the Great North Road when possible. We still have lots of the free Cartoscope maps of the Great North Road available for collection by arrangement from Hornsby / Normanhurst area. If you have a visitor information centre nearby, ask them if they would like a couple of boxes of maps. The wider the distribution of this information - the more people will learn about our Road.