



Convict Trail Project

November 2024 Newsletter

The CTP 2024 Annual General Meeting [Contributed by CTP Chair, Mari Metzke]

The AGM will be held at Hornsby Shire Historical Society Museum at 10am on Wednesday 20 November 2024. Hornsby Shire Historical Society Museum is in Kenley Park, Normanhurst and parking is available in Kenley Road. If you are coming by train to Normanhurst Railway Station, there is a pathway between Huddart Avenue and Kenley Road – check Google Maps.

Whether you are an individual member of CTP or a representative of one of the supporting groups, we welcome your attendance at the meeting. The CTP Board which is elected at the AGM oversees the work of the CTP and guides our on-going protection of the Great North Road. To refresh memories as to the composition of the CTP Board of Management Clause 14 in our Constitution follows:

14. Composition & membership of the Board

14.1 The Board of Management of the CTP will comprise

- 4 positions to represent Community Organisations
- 4 positions to represent Strategic Members
- 2 positions to represent Individual Members
- 1 position to represent Business Members
- 1 position for Executive Partnerships

each of whom is to be elected at the annual general meeting of the association

14.2 The Board of Management will, as soon as practicable after the Annual General Meeting meet to elect an Executive Team which will oversee the affairs of the CTP on a day-to-day basis.

14.3 The office-bearers of the Board of Management will be as follows:

- (a) the Chairman,
- (b) the Vice-Chairman,
- (c) the Treasurer,
- (d) the Secretary.

These office-bearers constitute the Executive Team.

To refresh your memories I have included the following explanations:

“Community Organisations” are historical societies and other not-for-profit organisations with an interest in the GNR.

“Strategic Members” are Local Government Councils, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Roads and Maritime Services and similar groups.

“Business Members” are businesses along the GNR who support the work of the CTP.

“Executive Partnerships” could be groups like Yancoal who are partnering with the CTP in projects that benefit the GNR.

I encourage all groups associated with the CTP to send a representative to our AGM. The strength of the CTP has always been in its members whether they represent the various community groups, the Councils along the length of the road or the Government Departments with assets along the road. If you are sending representatives to the AGM, please email me at mari@max.net.au so I can register them.

CTP Membership Renewals: [Contributed by CTP Treasurer, Michael Young]

It's time to renew your membership of the CTP so you can help us continue our important work to preserve the Great North Road.

Individual Membership of the CTP is \$30 or \$25 concessions per year [Includes a \$1.00 joining fee as a legal requirement of incorporation].

Business membership is \$100 per annum.

Local Government Councils will be invoiced individually by the Treasurer.

Membership Renewals can be paid in person at the AGM or you can contact our Treasurer at michaelyoung167@gmail.com to arrange payment.

A VIRTUAL WALK UP THE GNR: North from Murrays Run Culvert to Laguna Village [Contributed by Elizabeth Roberts]

In our virtual trip along the Great North Road today we will travel from Murrays Run Culvert to Laguna Village and venture out the Wattagan Creek road. The next site after leaving Murrays Run Culvert is Thompsons Bridge now an abandoned wooden bridge with a stone wing wall on the northern side. This wing wall has been built in two segments and it appears that the end nearest the bridge has been rebuilt at a different angle to connect to the bridge. It is possible that originally there was a culvert here like the previous two and it at some time in the past it collapsed and was replaced with this bridge, and the angle of part of the wing wall supporting the road was adjusted. In about 2010 the Cessnock Council rebuilt this section of road abandoning the bridge which they left so it could continue to be viewed with the old stone pavement visible at the edges of the bitumen leading onto the bridge on the southern side, and provided a parking space travelling south. Approximately 3kms north of Thompsons bridge you round a corner and pass between old barn buildings on the eastern side of the road and sandstone house surrounded by trees on the western side of the road. This is Laguna House and sheds and was originally Finches Depot. Heneage Finch received a 1000 acre grant for surveying the route of the Great North Road. It was here he lived while supervising the building of the Great North Road north from Bucketty. The house is an elegant Georgian style house with replaced hip roof and veranda across the front with a detached (now connected) kitchen wing at the rear. The house was built in the early 1830s either for Heneage Finch or Richard Wiseman who purchased the property in 1834. Much later the property was subdivided and the buildings on the eastern side that form the original out building for Laguna Station sit on where the 1830 road depot with a blacksmith shop; store and hospital and tent accommodation for the men building the road was situated. This site is of considerable archaeological significance. Closest to the road is a very old barn thought to date from the 1840s that was conserved in the late 1990s by a prison crew from St Heliers correctional centre. When last viewed it needed more conservation work. Amongst these building is a 1920-30s brick dairy that has been converted into a house. Laguna house (circa 1831) directly relates to the building of the Great North Road and is one of the earliest

buildings in the valley. The complex can best be viewed in winter from the north looking back across a dam.



Laguna House c.2016

Laguna House Barn, taken in 2016. It now has a lean and some of the slabs are coming away



About 1 kms north as you approach the church on the Southern end of Laguna Village there is a road off to the east known as Wattagan Creek Road. Wattagan Creek Road used to run from Laguna in the Wollombi Valley to Cooranbong and Lake Macquarie. But now due to a collapsed bridge part way up the mountain it only runs to the head of Wattagan Creek valley some 18+ kms from the Great North Road. This section of the road that is managed by Cessnock City Council has an interesting history. In 1865 the first notice of intention to open the road from the Great North Road near Laguna to the Upper Wattagan Creek was given, but the road had been in use from 1829.

The road was first known to have been opened as a foot and bridle track by the Surveyor General Thomas Mitchell in the winter of 1829 when he came to carry out a triangulation survey from Mt Warrawolong to Mt Jellore (near Mittagong) and Mt Hay (in the Blue Mountains). This triangulation survey was essential to carry out for his mapping of the Colony.

Mitchell and his men were not the first Europeans in the Wattagans as when he was exploring with the local Aborigines he came across some European blazed trees.

Mitchell, Assistant Surveyor Stapleton and a party of 6 men with 5 pack horses to carry supplies left Sydney to look at the progress of construction along the Great North Road (GNR) and to survey from the top of Mt Warrawolong. Before leaving the GNR for Mt Warrawolong he visited Richard Wiseman who had land adjacent to the GNR near Mt Warrawolong. Wiseman took him up the Wattagan Creek valley to about where James Milson later took up 50 acres the closest point along the Wattagan Creek to Mt Warrawolong. Once Mitchell had established camp there he sent to the GNR Road Gangs for the loan of 20 men, with axes and provisions for ten days, to clear the top of Mt Warrawolong of all trees except one.

It is likely that the men sent were the Road Gangs clearing party and timber-getters as although anyone can swing an axe it takes skill to effectively cut down trees with an axe. As the Road Gang timber getters were used to going into the bush to cut down trees for use in bridge building etc. it is likely the men took note of the good quality timber around where they were camped. Although there is no known evidence to show it, it is likely the convict timber getters returned when they needed timber for their bridges, as it soon became known amongst the local settlers that there was good timber to be had at the head of Wattagan Creek including some cedar. This is shown by the number of large landholders whose main land was elsewhere but who took up 50 acres blocks of rain forest land at the head of the Wattagan Creek valley, notably James Milson, B.C. Rodd and William Thurlow. When Assistant Survey G.B. White was sent to survey their blocks in 1837 they were already occupied.

A small inscription on the survey of James Milsons block explains why he had taken it up *"N.B. these portions are mostly heavily timbered and do not contain more than 10 or 12 acres each fit for cultivation even when both sides of the creek are included. Water plentiful, Timber, Iron bark; Stringy Bark and Blue Gum. Cedar is sometimes found in the vicinity"*. It appears Milson had selected this land as a source of timber for his new stone house that he was building on his main grant. It is unlikely that the Wattagan Creek would have carried enough water to float the logs downstream to Laguna so they would been taken by bullocks with a timber jinker or on a wagon requiring a reasonable road at least the width of the wagon.

It would appear that by 1837 the 1829 bridle track had been converted into an access road for timber jinkers or log wagons, and probably bridges and culverts had been constructed to take wheeled vehicles but who was responsible for their construction is not known.

The best description for this road is vernacular, a variety of structures carry water under this road that runs for the most part between the mountain ranges and the creek. The

most unusual structure is the hollow pressure chamber from a steam engine boiler made of ½ inch plate, the vessel is 7 foot, 6 inches or 2.3 meters in diameter. There is also an iron pipe used as a culvert probably from the same source and installed by the same locals to keep the road open for their business. They were hauling timber from here to their mill in Cessnock. This boiler was possibly lowered into a broken large bridge culvert as it still has a well-built stone entry head walls that are connected over the top of the boiler. There is one stone of the entry head wall missing at the water line. Another vernacular road repair is the low level crossing at the base of the mountain that is concrete with an iron pipe with a silted up entry that is a replacement of a low level bridge. Currently other structures range from sandstone only, sandstone and timber through a variety of pottery and concrete pipe culverts to the large modern dual box culvert and include a timber bridge culvert partially collapsed, large modern rectangular concrete double culvert and a variety of timber bridges and a large 7 foot 6 inches or 2.3meter diameter iron steam engine boiler. For many years after it was surveyed the road was managed by local trustees. It is one of the most remote of Cessnock Councils roads. For much of length of the valley the road follows a level course only climbing round the base of foot hills in a few places.

John Lynch was promised land on Wattagan Creek on 14 March 1831 and possession was given on April 1833 in exchange for possession of another block given 6 June 1831. Before moving to the headwaters of Wattagan Creek John Lynch lived in the area that became Millfield. In 1837 G. B. White was sent to survey the land already occupied by John Lynch, B.C.Rodd, James Milson, John Burnes(Peter Byrne)and Willian Thurlow as well as 6 portions of land applied for by John Richie whose name does not appear on the parish maps.

When the Wattagan Road was first surveyed from Laguna to Upper Wattagan in 1865, what was surveyed was the existing road with few modifications.

On 14 Jan 1845 the Sydney Morning Herald carried a report of persons setting out from Wollombi to climb Mt Warrawolong and the author wrote after passing Lynches farm one comes across "*a wood of gigantic gum...from one hundred and fifty to eighty feet before they branch, with barrels some fourteen or sixteen feet through*" further up the valley they came to "*fine stockyards*".

In 1857 land was advertised for sale on Sugar Loaf or Wattagan Creek exclusive of road 50 links wide. In 2018 in the upper valley the road still narrows to a 50 link wide road.

On the 15 March 1860 Thomas Crawford of "Brown Muir" Ellalong inserted a notice in Maitland Mercury cautioning against trespass '*by crossing the mountain to the Wattagan Creek, on foot, horseback ,or driving stock; and any one so offending after this notice will be prosecuted.*' The existence of this lost track shown to exist on the 1885 resurvey of the road explains in part why John Lynch of Millfield took up land on Wattagan Creek in 1831. Modern fire trails from Wattagan Creek and Ellalong do not connect but one set nearly does. This track would have formed a short cut for Thomas Crawford in his trips from Ellalong to Prospect. Initially he travelled via Simpsons track, a track "found" by one of his brother's convicts, John McDonald.

On 21 June 1865 the Government Gazette carried a notice of intention of opening a road from Laguna to Upper Wattagan Creek. After Wattagan Creek Road was proclaimed a public road funds were voted for its repair and contracts let for repairs appear in the local papers and it can to certain extent be tracked.

The mapping of the survey showed it basically along the original line first laid out unintentionally by Thomas Mitchel when he led his survey party to his camp in 1829. The fact the road already existed is reinforced by the amount of fencing along the road edge shown on the settled blocks in the 1865 map and there being no allocation of funds for its construction.

A full referenced history of this road will appear in the Pick Volume 11.

Recent Council Elections: Congratulations and welcome to all the new Councillors and returning Councillors. For those who don't already know you receive this newsletter as your LGA is one connected to the Great North Road, the convict-built road, built between 1826 and 1832 to connect Sydney with Newcastle via Wollombi and 1832 to 1836 from Wollombi to Warkworth in the Upper Hunter Valley. Part of this road is World Heritage Listed. About half the men who built this road were working in leg irons.

Road works at Bucketty. These road works including the road widening are nearly completed.

Thomas James Bridge: Work continues in building up the concrete foundations under the replacement road. Hawkesbury City Council are to be congratulated on the excellent way this work is being carried out. The anticipated completion date is now June 2025. Central Coast organized stabilization works on the slippages above the road between the Bridge and the Ferry are nearing completion and again an excellent job is being done. Both works are being carried out by the same contractor Delaney Civic. The bridge project is costing \$17.5 million project is being funding from Federal and State Government infrastructure recovery programs.

Again for those new to this newsletter, part of the long wall carrying the road leading to the bridge collapsed in the 2022 floods. These stones were collected and the remaining hand-cut sandstone block retaining wall – erected by convict labour in the 1830s – has been carefully disassembled with each block numbered, original position recorded and placed into storage.

Thomas James Bridge is the oldest in-use road bridge on the Australian mainland and is part of the world heritage listed Old Great North Road. The Great North Road is historically significant for its role in connecting the Hunter Valley to Sydney, and as the first road to be constructed north of the Hawkesbury River. All work at the site is taking place under the supervision of an archaeologist.

Wisemans Ferry Ferry Service: Currently the tall poles to which the second ferry is fastened during floods are being replaced and so only one ferry is in operation at the weekends.

And in closing This newsletter is a combined October and November Newsletter. In late August, Elizabeth Roberts who supplies the main story for our newsletter fell while on the Great North Road and broke her left wrist, slowing down her computer work!!

I also apologise that this newsletter is "late" but as I compile it, I am lying in a bed in the post-surgical ward at Hornsby Kuring-gai Hospital following a fall when I broke my left ankle in two places and badly sprained my right ankle. Hopefully I will be out of hospital tomorrow with plates and screws in my ankle but wheel-chair bound for some time. Is this a reminder that we need more younger members as members of the CTP. – Mari Metzke