



Convict Trail Project

February 2025 Newsletter

A belated welcome to 2025.

A VIRTUAL WALK UP THE GNR: Pausing in Wollombi

[Contributed by Elizabeth Roberts]

In our virtual trip along the Great North Road we pause at Wollombi where the GNR splits with one branch built first goes to Newcastle via Maitland. The other branch – not commenced till after the road was opened to Newcastle, went north through Broke to Warkworth. As discussed in December, when the road to Newcastle was opened in 1832 Wollombi was just a couple of government huts at what was to be the road junction.

Wollombi was proclaimed a village in October 1833 and was surveyed and laid out by surveyor G. B. White in May 1834. Just two months later in July 1834, Pyke had already built an inn of stringy bark. The early maps of the Village of Wollombi list the first Europeans to purchase the town allotments from the NSW government. Of the 57 allotments surveyed by G.B. White. Of these, 37 were listed as owned by John McDougall. Who was John McDougall and where did his money come from?

Fortunately for us, this question was asked by the Cessnock Historical Society many years ago and researched by Ken Marheine who wrote about John McDougall in the first volume of the Pick.

Convict John McDougall arrived in 1820 on the Agamemnon with a life sentence. After some time in a clearing gang then at Grose Farm, he misbehaved and ended up in 1827 in an Iron Gang on the western road, obviously capable in early 1828 he was transferred to Walls Plains to be an overseer of Iron Gang 28. 1829 was big year for McDougall as it started with a pay rise, followed by application for a Ticket of Leave which was received in July. He then applied and received permission to marry in November, a free settler named Euphemia Clarke, the step-daughter of the local publican Patrick Doolan who owned the Rising Sun Inn at Millfield. As a child Euphemia had accompanied her convict mother to NSW.

Overseers were allotted their own huts and could have their wives with them. With a Ticket of Leave, McDougall could choose where he worked. He chose to continue working as the Iron Gang overseer for another 5 years, till September 1834, when he resigned. This was four months after the land in Wollombi was offered for sale. Initially he purchased 15 lots of land in Wollombi of which he had sold 9 lots by 1842. At this time he held 3 acres (6 lots) on which he had built a public house, the George Gipps Inn, and 2 houses, as well he owned six working bullocks and a dray as well as a few head of other cattle. Although sued for unpaid bills in 1842, McDougall was able to pay what he owed and was not declared insolvent and sold up like so many were in 1842.

It appears that, after his initial purchase of 15 lots, he continued to purchase or hold the mortgage on the extra 22 lots that appear in his name on the town map.

After resigning as overseer, McDougall took various government jobs, first as a constable in Wollombi in 1835, then 10 years later as the pound keeper for two years. With a dray and bullock team he was available for carting jobs. As the step-daughter of a publican, his wife was capable of running the inn in his absence, between bearing 12 children 9 of whom were still living in 1870. In 1845 McDougall purchased a farm called "Rose Hill" at Millfield but continued running his high class inn in Wollombi till 1849 which he then leased as he took up the licence again 1851. His wife may have inherited the Rising Sun Inn in Millfield from her mother as John McDougall held the licence for a short time after Pat Doolan died and before he opened the Governor Gipps in Wollombi.

John McDougall shows that a convict, even one who spent time in an Iron Gang, could if he was careful and canny, save money, then make money and rise in social status way beyond what they could have achieved if they had remained in Britain. [NOTE: For further reading, copies of The Pick containing this article were sent to all the council Libraries associated with the Great North Road].

CTP NEWS:



Thomas James Bridge

After a break over Christmas, work has recommenced, and the workman's huts have been moved to the St Albans side of the bridge taking up most of the Devines Hill car park. On the Ferry side, work continues on backfilling and compression of the back fill between the concrete foundation and the cut back cliff face. The top left photo was taken in early January before work commenced.



The bottom left photo was taken in in late January

The photo on the following page was taken on 8 February and shows the progression of the works.



This week Hawkesbury Council announced:

Hawkesbury City Council has submitted a funding variation request for the reconstruction of the Thomas James Bridge, incorporating a more resilient foundation to meet modern design standards and traffic needs.

The bridge, originally built in 1830, was constructed on rocks and floating boulders. Over time, both the bridge design and specifications have evolved considerably. Council is now proposing a new concrete bridge with a 100-year lifespan, while maintaining the iconic timber aesthetic of the original structure. The new design will feature timber elements, supported by a reinforced foundation system that complies with current design guidelines and meets modern loading requirements.

This upgrade will enhance the bridge's resilience against natural disasters, ensure it remains free of load restrictions, and ensure it can accommodate current traffic demands.

The following works are being carried out this week:

- Corbell pours to the St Albans side Retaining Wall.
- Continuation of backfill on the Wisemans Ferry side of the bridge.
- Installation of scaffolding to provide access for the construction of the second lift of the Wisemans Ferry side retaining wall.

Pick Volume 11

It is planned that by the time you receive the next CTP newsletter, The Pick volume 11 will be published and ready for distribution. If you are an individual member or community organization or library and have not yet received your copy of The Pick volume 10 "Why Build the Great North Road" [with writing all over the cover and a drawing of a hut on the

front and a Map on the back] please let us know so that Volumes 10 & 11 can be bundled together for distribution.

Our Hawkesbury 2045 Future Forum St Albans.

On Saturday 8 February the CTP was represented at this forum held by Hawkesbury City Council at St Albans School of Arts was part of an exercise in getting community input into the councils forward planning. It was a very small meeting of 4 locals, the school principal the CTP rep and the Mayor and the Corporate planned who was running the meeting. The locals were all focused on roads ferries mobile coverage and better internet. No one mentioned how people in 20 years time would be supporting themselves living in the valley. The CTP Representative raised the issue of again applying for national listing of all of the road that was on the national estate register (Devines Hill to Mt Manning) and not just the bit that is World Heritage Listed. This is an issue that should be of interest to both Hawkesbury City Council and Central Coast City Council as they are both responsible for minimum maintenance of the road north from Ten Mile Hollow. But neither has the funds to get this section into a state where it can be maintained.

And in closing This year CTP Newsletters will be coming out in February, April, June, August, October and December so this is the first for 2025.

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