



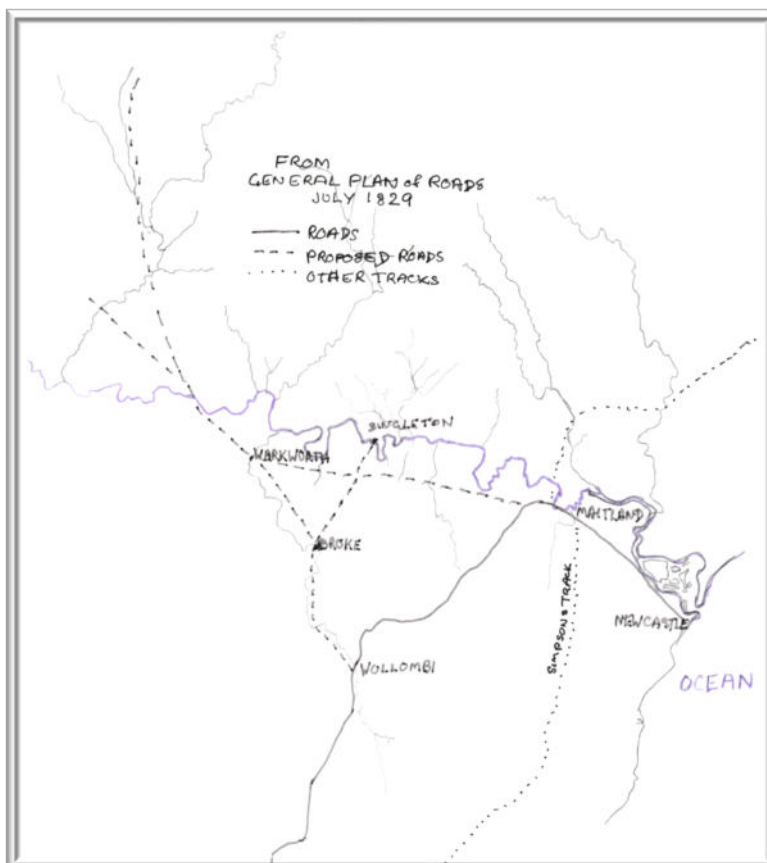
Convict Trail Project

June 2025 Newsletter

A VIRTUAL WALK UP THE GNR: At the Northern End at Warkworth.

[Contributed by Elizabeth Roberts]

Today in our virtual trip along the Great North Road we arrive at the northern end of the Road at Warkworth previously known as Cockfighters Creek. The Road was constructed to this point with a bridge built over the river when work ceased in late 1836. With a different Governor there were different priorities and the construction was stopped with the road presumably unfinished.



The Great North Road to the Upper Hunter Valley was planned by Mitchell with three major Branches, separating first at Wollombi, (this branch to Newcastle we will explore next) then again at Broke. The construction of these branches after 1832 is not as well documented as the earlier construction further south was. The remaining branch from Broke to Warkworth which crossed the Bulga Track, now Putty Road, 14 kilometres north of Broke was constructed from late 1834 to 1836 under the supervision of Assistant Surveyor Peter Ogilvie. The Bulga Track was a rough track through the bush mainly used for driving stock along.

It was so steep in places that pack horses had to be unloaded to enable them to get up and down the slope. It was many years later that it became a road capable of carrying wheeled vehicles. Ogilvie was also responsible for a linking road from Warkworth to Cobbs Station (Whittingham). This branch saw a brief experiment whereby contract labour was

also used to clear the line of road before the convict built the actual road. It is in this correspondence we learn that tree stumps in the line of road had to be burnt down 9 inches (23cm) below ground level. The branch to Warkworth demonstrates Thomas Mitchell's passion for straight lines between two points, and how Mitchell was following the theory of road building as espoused in J.C. Loudon's Encyclopaedia of Agriculture Book 2, Chapter "Formation of Roads" explaining that horses pulled better uphill when travelling at a slight greater angle than 90 degrees to the gradient. This section of the road was built over gently undulating land with little construction necessary other than necessary clearing. All evidence of the 1835 bridge has long disappeared in floods. The third branch was from Broke to Patricks Plains (Singleton) and if ever built, crossed land now mined or under the Army Reserve.

Late 1833 or early 1834 the headquarters of the GNR construction moved from Wollombi to Warkworth where slab huts were built for the Bridge Gang stationed there and a slab house (probably a two roomed hut) was built to house the Assistant Surveyor in charge of the works in this section. On the first of July 1836 the Quaker Missionaries James Backhouse and George Washington Walker walked to:

"Cock-fighters-bridge, on the Wollombi Riverlet; where we were hospitably entertained, at the house of a person belonging to the Survey Department, under whose charge, a party of convicts were employed in the erection of a bridge."

The following day he wrote:

"The bridge party here, were lodged in huts of split timber. The numerous fissures in the walls of which admitted much air; but fires were allowed, to keep out the frost. The men had only one blanket each, in which they slept, on large sheets of bark, put up like berths in a ship."

The huts had been built of green slabs that over time had dried out and shrunk leaving the cracks that let in the wind. The men were supposed to be issued two blankets in winter but there had been problems with supplies hence only one blanket each. This was the winter snow fell in Sydney. An early map showed the site of the road party camp, a comparison with modern maps shows it was behind the school site and under the current road where the approach to bridge is.

In August we will return to Wollombi and commence following the branch from Wollombi to Newcastle. When we reach Newcastle we will start looking at the people associated with the road.

CTP NEWS:

Bedlam Point

As mentioned in the last newsletter, the Coral tree at Bedlam Point was cut down and removed from the site. Last week Fiorella and three older volunteers [Eric and Mari Metzke and Elizabeth Roberts] worked over three days to remove the purple Morning Glory creeper from the cliff face that was cut to allow the road to reach the water. Also removed were a rapidly multiplying South African bulb known as Pregnant Onion and Fishbone Fern that was populating in a cracked drill mark in the rock face. Fishbone Fern is a native of north Queensland, but a rampant weed in Sydney.

Many thanks to Hunters Hill Council for organizing a Council truck to remove the bundled vegetation that was of a much greater volume than the volunteers could cope with - about 8 green bins full.

With the cliff face clear one can see the drill marks from when the convicts cut away the rock to form the road. It is likely some of the split-out rock was used to build the wharf surround.



Above: Before we started clearing the Morning Glory.



Above: After an hour on the job.



Above: About lunchtime – and we were not resting and sitting down on the job but sitting down using secateurs to cut the long tendrils of Morning Glory into shorter lengths so we could bag them for disposal.

When removing the Morning Glory we found there had been a post and rail fence along the cliff top, with rectangles cut into the stone to hold the wooden posts, one post is still standing and two are lying on the ground, this was in front of a flat rock sheet where the Punt Keepers Hut was situated.

On the Saturday when Fiorella was working by herself at Bedlam Point, the Mayor Trenton Brown of Ryde City Council and the Council's Bushland Manager arrived on a trip inspecting the Shire's bushland areas.



Ryde Council mow this area as part of their parks maintenance program. Hopefully they can gradually increase the area they mow and remove the Morning Glory that is starting to invade their side of the Road as well. The GNR is the boundary between these two Council areas.

In April 2019 when the Convict Trail Project held a heritage festival event here and at that time the road, and its vista, was open to the water and the wharf.

The photos show what was achieved on the first day of the clean-up.

Thomas James Bridge. As show in the photographs from Delaney Civic via Hawkesbury City Council work has progressed. The original timber decking is being replaced with concrete decking. It was announced this was to happen sometime back. Despite the recent rains Delaney Civil are still in line to have the work completed by the end of August, one month short of 200 years from when Heneage Finch completed the initial survey of road. The Hawkesbury City Council Report for the weeks ending 6 June 2025 reads:-

"The following works are being carried out this week at the Thomas James Bridge Restoration Project:

- *Deck Pour and wet curing*
- *Removal of formwork*
- *Installation of heritage stones*
- *Preparation for the pouring of the culverts scheduled for next week*

These works will continue to take place between the hours of 6:30 am to 6 pm Monday to Friday, and from 6:30 am to 2 pm on Saturdays. Please expect continuous truck movements during these hours.

Please note that Central Coast Council has engaged Delaney Civil to carry out landslide remediation works to the West of the Wisemans Ferry. These works are continuing, please expect additional truck movements. Traffic control will be in place and any disruptions to traffic during this time will be minimal."

Our thanks go to Sadat Rahman, Senior Project Manager with Hawkesbury City Council, who forwarded these Thomas James Bridge photos to the CTP.





The CTP and Geotourism. In recent years Geotourism has emerged as an adjunct to Ecotourism. Fiorella Julca with a second degree in Geology could see a connection with the GNR and has been working with the proposed Broke – Bulga Discovery Trail that in part follows the GNR. Some interesting sites can be found close to the GNR including the unique critically endangered Warkworth Sands Woodlands the top end of the road (as Wallaby Scrub Road) crossed. These woodlands grow on a deep sand substrate that is believed to have been formed some 15,000 to 18,000 years ago during the Pleistocene epoch from flood deposits from the Wollombi Brook. There is also a micro sized diatrema at Mt Manning. Much of the Sydney end of the road is cut through Hawkesbury Sandstone and close to areas of Wianamatta Shale.

Great North Road Bicentenary Reminder: Now is the time to start planning for events next year. Please let us know so we can advertise your event.

And in closing..... as we look for our winter woollies and extra bedding think of those convicts at Warkworth with only one blanket and fire on the floor with no chimney.

The Convict Trail Project Incorporated

ABN 25 853 768 228

Postal: 7 Coolabah Close Thornleigh 2120 www.convicttrail.com.au

director@convicttrail.com.au