

Travelling the Tracks of Canberra*

The early years

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In the early years of rural settlement, a transportation network of what could only be referred to nowadays as tracks developed across the Canberra district. These tracks were later to develop into the fast and efficient roadwork system we enjoy today, but in the formative years of rural settlement, travelling the roads was quite a different experience.

By 1835, the Canberra area had developed into a major source of grazing land and food supplies for the colony of New South Wales. The haulage of produce out of the district placed enormous pressures on the tracks that criss-crossed the landscape.¹ Like many other establishing rural districts of the time, Canberra was suffering from development problems. The community was scattered throughout the Canberra, Belconnen, Gungahlin, Woden and Tuggeranong valley areas, with some settlements more isolated to the west of the Murrumbidgee River. Communications between the homesteads and settlements depended on a transportation system that lacked surveyed and constructed roads.

The transportation links across the rural areas were no more than tracks, often following the ruts of local bullock drays. While these drays were capable of travelling over rough country and could withstand tough treatment, they were clumsy and heavy, especially when fully laden, and could cut up a surface quickly. Particularly after wet weather, these drays could reduce a vital track between properties to a boggy morass, impassable for horse-drawn vehicles and, in many cases, for the bullock drays themselves. Broken axles were common.² To compensate, road routes would often deviate to find firmer ground, and horses and vehicles would follow the new course until it, too, became overused and impassable.

¹ Andrews, W. C. Roads and Bridges in *Canberra's Engineering Heritage*, Institution of Engineers, Canberra Division, Canberra, 1990. p5.

² See, John Gale, *Canberra. History and Legends Relating to the Federal Capital Territory of the Commonwealth of Australia*, A.M. Fallick & Sons, Queanbeyan, 1927, pp. 109-110.



The Old Coach Road, Mulligans Flat, one of the surviving early coach routes (photo: P.Dowling)

Although some improvements were made by the 1840s, wet weather still caused great consternation, particularly amongst the mail coach drivers, as late as the 1870s. The Yass Road, as it traversed the Molonglo River flood plain from Duntroon to Queanbeyan, was not uncommonly as much as a half mile in width, and new tracks were taken every few days to avoid the mud.³ This was particularly common around creek crossings, where old and current track ways extended many metres along each bank.

The hazards of travelling the tracks

Travelling along these tracks was frequently hazardous. Most of the people living in the Canberra region at one time or another had to cross the rivers and creeks which cut across the various valley floors. In most cases when the water level was low, crossing could be done safely, albeit in a steady and cautious manner. When the river or creek levels were high, making a crossing either very hazardous or impossible, travellers often had to wait it out until the water levels dropped or find an alternative route, which could involve a great deal of extra travel and time.

³ Andrews, 1990, p5.

In many cases, impatience led to poor judgement, and crossings were attempted with fatal results. In 1885, two sisters, Martha and Mary Ponsey, were drowned while trying to cross the Murrumbidgee River at Tharwa when the level was just moderately high.⁴ Despite this tragic accident, it was to be another ten years before the construction of a high level bridge afforded a safe crossing of the Murrumbidgee. The normally placid Ginninderra Creek was also capable of claiming lives. In 1892, Edward Kendall Crace, a wealthy land owner in the Ginninderra area, along with his coachman, George Kemp, attempted to cross the creek while it was in flood. Crace had been visiting his Ginninderra property, and late in the afternoon he was determined to return home. He had been warned not to attempt to cross the creek while the water was high and flowing swiftly but Crace, a single-minded and often dogged man, insisted on crossing. The buggy they were travelling in became bogged in the creek and slewed sideways, taking the force of the current. Crace, still trapped in the buggy, 'coo-ee'd' for help. George Harcourt, who had earlier warned him not to cross, and Henry Oldfield, a resident in the area, attempted to help the two men but they were not successful. Crace and Kemp were swept away by the torrent and drowned. Crace's body was found early the next morning, downstream of the crossing, and Kemp's sometime after. Even after the death of Crace, a prominent and well-known figure in the area, a bridge was not constructed over the crossing until some 40 years later.⁵

There were other hazards with travelling the district. Hold-ups of travellers were not uncommon on Canberra's early roads. In 1844, an employee of William Klensedorlffe was bringing a wagon of supplies from Queanbeyan to the Limestone Plains, when he was bailed up by William Westwood (better known in the region as Jacky Jacky). Westwood took what he wanted and released the hapless victim, who returned to his employer with the news. When Klensedorlffe heard of the incident, he immediately armed himself and made off after Westwood on his favourite mare. He caught up with the bushranger on the Yass Queanbeyan track a short time later. Instead of apprehending the offender and retrieving his property, the unfortunate Klensedorlffe acted too hastily and became Westwood's second victim. At gunpoint, Klensedorlffe was relieved of his valuable horse, a brace of pistols, shirt and trousers and, no doubt, his dignity.⁶

⁴ Gillespie, *Canberra 1820-1913*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991, p. 122.

⁵ Lyall Gillespie, *Ginninderra, Forerunner to Canberra*, The Wizard, Canberra Local History Series, Canberra, 1992, pp.124-125.

⁶ Samuel Shumack, *An Autobiography or Tales and legends of Canberra pioneers*, Australian National University Press, 1967, pp. 74-75.

The gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s placed even further strain on the existing road network, as well as causing a shortage of labour for road maintenance (if any were to be had at all). But, as a sideline, the increased traffic to and from the goldfields between Kiandra and Goulburn did provide rich pickings for a new breed of bushranger.⁷ Most notorious of these times were the Clarkes who, with the Connells and associates, formed a gang known as the Jingera Mob.⁸ They prowled the tracks and trails around Bungendore, Braidwood, Gundaroo, Michelago, Araluen, and Goulburn. Bailing up the gold coaches and travellers was their mainstay, although they also resorted to raiding stores, post offices and private properties. By 1867, most had been captured or killed, but not before causing great concern to the more honest people of the district.

Ben Hall and his gang were also active during these turbulent times of the 1860s. In 1865, Hall - together with John Gilbert (Flash Johnny Gilbert), John O'Meally, and the young Johnny Dunn - frequented the roads and tracks in the Canberra-Goulburn region. One well-publicised robbery concerned Ben Hall and William Davis of Ginninderra. Davis, a prominent figure in local society, was returning from Sydney by coach. When the steep climb from Lake George to Gearys Gap was reached, he and other males alighted and walked behind the coach to lighten the load. At this point, Hall and his gang bailed up Davis and the rest of the passengers. Davis was relieved of his watch, belt, money, pistol and a new Trantor repeating rifle, which he had purchased in Sydney. Davis vowed publicly to get his revenge on Hall who, hearing of this threat, was rumoured to have vowed to rob Davis again by raiding his homestead at Ginninderra. Certain that an attack was imminent, Davis took the elaborate precautions of arming the men on his estate and establishing a twenty-four hour watch on the property. A wall surrounding part of the homestead establishment was fortified with broken bottles set in cement to prevent an avenging bushranger from scaling it in the dark.⁹ The expected attack did not eventuate, but the precautions Davis took were indicative of the wide-spread fear of bushrangers among the rural population.

During the first 40 years of settlement, travelling from place to place within the region took time. The residents had to plan their travel carefully. It could take two days to get from the outlying stations along the Murrumbidgee to Ginninderra, following the main routes. Even by 1860, there was still no clearly-

⁷ Andrews, 1990, p5.

⁸ Gillespie, 1992, p. 134.

⁹ Gale, 1927, p103-105; Gillespie,1992, p.30.

defined road linking Queanbeyan to Yass through the Canberra area.¹⁰ Rather, a haphazard network of tracks and trails crossed into, through, and out of the valley areas. The travellers had to know in advance which route to take or enquire along the way.

In many cases, the quickest form of transport was on foot or on horseback. The eldest son of Thomas Southwell, of 'Parkwood' on Ginninderra Creek, also named Thomas, developed a unique form of transport. By bouncing along on two sticks resembling crutches, he was able to move quickly over rough terrain, avoiding stones and other obstacles more efficiently than horses and buggies. It was said that he could easily travel over 40 miles in a day. He acquired the name 'Tommy Two Sticks'.¹¹ School children and their teachers were also significant users of the early tracks and roads. They, too, struggled to walk or ride to schools established along the major tracks. It was not unusual for a child or a teacher to travel three to four miles to school and back again in one day. In wet weather, flooded creeks and watercourses made such a journey dangerous and sometimes dreaded. In 1869, a reduced attendance at schools was reported 'due to heavy rains... which rendered roads and creeks unpassable'.¹²

The politics and pedantry of roads

Three decades of hazardous road travel began to take its toll on the patience of the local citizens. In 1861, the residents of the Canberra area signed a petition to the colonial government's Department of Lands asking for the proclamation of a permanent road between Queanbeyan and Yass. The department's reply was that a route had been surveyed but had not yet been reclaimed (let alone commenced). Surveyor James Bamford Thomson was instructed to investigate the matter and report back with a view to proclaiming a route between the two centres. The wheels of government turned slowly, and no immediate action was taken in constructing a road. Nor, would it appear, had there been a serious attempt to survey a route. Four years after the pleas of the Canberra and Queanbeyan people were heard, surveying began. In 1865, a report entitled the 'State of the Roads in the Colony of New South Wales' was tabled in Parliament. In this report, the Engineer-in-Chief for Roads made several recommendations to address the problems, which included removing of obstacles on the roadways, bridging rivers and creeks and, of greatest importance, determining the actual

¹⁰ Gillespie 1991, p. 107.

¹¹ Gillespie, Lyall, *The Southwell Family: Pioneers of the Canberra District 1838-1988*, Southwell Reunion Committee, 1988, pp82-3.

¹² Gillespie, 1992, p59.

routes among the jumble of tracks.¹³ But the wheels of government and the wheels of the drays still ground on their respective ways.

Passable and safe public roadways were to be highly valued by the members of the local community. Being able to communicate, trade, and journey freely through their districts helped to improve their quality of life and financial status, made it possible for them to enjoy social interactions with extended family and friends, and enabled them to maintain contact with the world beyond their locality. When larger landowners began fencing tracks that had previously been regarded as public thoroughfares, confrontations developed.

One such case involved John Southwell and Frederick Campbell. A route used by many ran through land held by Frederick Campbell. Campbell became annoyed at the amount of public use of the road and the deviations made to avoid bad sections. To remedy this he decided to erect a fence on his property prohibiting all public access. John Southwell and a group of local people approached Campbell at the new fence and demanded that the road be reopened. Campbell rejected their pleas. This angered Southwell and his companions, who proceeded to destroy the fence. Taking the case to the Supreme Court, Campbell won a claim for damages but was awarded only £50 instead of the £1000 sought. Southwell, moreover, had the support of the local community and received contributions to help him cover his court costs.

This was not the only incident of this nature. Land access was an intense issue between the wealthy landholding families of the district and the free selectors. In February 1884, a well-attended meeting of the Free Selectors Association was held at the Cricketers Arms hotel in Hall. The meeting was called to decide what steps the community could take to secure public right and unobstructed use of the track leading from the Yass and Queanbeyan road through the Gungahlin Estate, linking Gundaroo Road and the properties to the north with Ginninderra (this track is now Gundaroo Road which follows the same route and now divides the suburbs of Nicholls and Crace). At that time, Edward Crace owned Gungahlin Estate. The problem of public access along this track had arisen when Crace erected fences and barriers along the route to prevent public thoroughfare. John Gale, in his capacity as secretary to the Queanbeyan Land and Road Association, attended the meeting and was elected chair. According to Gale, locals had used this track unhindered for at least 30 years. Also at issue was the track leading from the junction to Ginninderra Creek at Emu Bank reserve (this is

¹³ Andrews, 1990, p5.

now William Slim Drive). Locals used this track regularly to gain access to water from the creek and to cross to the southern side. Gale recommended to the meeting that they proceed with prosecuting Crace under clause 44 of the Crown Lands Act (1875), which stated that a person in unlawful possession of Crown Lands, or obstructing dedicated reserves or roads, by cultivating, fencing or constructing buildings, should be prosecuted by the Crown Lands Bailiff under instructions from the Minister.¹⁴

As a result of these protestations and actions, it was eventually acknowledged that many of the tracks and roadways had been closed off illegally by the larger landholders and the right of unhindered thoroughfare should not be curtailed.¹⁵

The 'tyranny of distance'

If travel to Sydney were contemplated, then up to six week's travel between Canberra/Queanbeyan and the city would not be unusual. The road the people took was to the east of Lake George to Lake Bathurst and then north to Sydney. This was the Main Southern Road, the route the early exploration parties had taken when first entering the region. In the mid-nineteenth century, the road surface was tolerably good between Sydney and Berrima, although broken cart axles were not uncommon. Beyond Berrima, to Canberra and Queanbeyan, it was 'nothing but bush track, with no bridges over the water courses',¹⁶ often unsafe for wheeled vehicles other than the heavy bullock drays. Movement along the track was laborious, often at less than a walking pace. Nonetheless, this corridor of rutted, deviating tracks was the link to the settlements north of Canberra, to Sydney and to the outside world. Along it, the people travelled in a noisy, constant procession on horseback, dray or on foot:

It was quite lively... what with the whole of the travelling public, including such a large number of carriers, with hundreds of horses and working bullocks, and bells by hundreds tinkling, from the deep note of the bull-frog to the little sheep tinkle [not to mention the gruff cursing of the bullock drivers].¹⁷

The problems faced on the Main Southern Road to Canberra and Queanbeyan are typified by one coach traveller:

¹⁴ *Queanbeyan Age*, 5 February 1884.

¹⁵ Gillespie, 1988, p77.

¹⁶ Errol Lea-Scarlett, *Queanbeyan District and People*, Queanbeyan Municipal Council, 1968, p.81.

¹⁷ 'The Old Main Southern Road', *Queanbeyan Observer*, 14 February, 1896; Lea-Scarlett, 1968, pp.81-82.

During the first few miles the wheels on three occasions sank up to the axles, and I was obliged more than once to jump from the box seat and catch my wife in my arms to prevent her from falling. Within four miles of Queanbeyan another flooded river [the Molonglo River] had to be crossed – no easy task with horses that had come [*sic*] a severe stage of about thirty miles. The driver was disinclined to make the attempt, but, having once descended the steep bank, it was found impossible to turn back; so, after giving the tired horses a brief respite, he gathered up the reins and whipped them into the stream. When half-way over we came to a standstill, and I had to jump off the coach and up to my shoulders in water in order to coax the leaders to move.

The bedraggled passenger along with his fellow passengers finally succeeded in reaching the opposite bank but not before all the men had to disembark, put their shoulders to the rear of the coach then push. When the coach reached the opposite side the men then carried their wives across on their backs.¹⁸

Such difficulties and the time spent in travel caused isolation, which in turn was a barrier to material and economic progress. Much of the rural equipment and household provisions, building materials, tools, newspapers, clothing, and furniture, in fact most of the material items which the people took for granted in the cities, had to be transported to the rural communities by road. The provision by government of efficient roads and transport vehicles was long in coming to the Canberra area. It was not until the mid 1880s that the New South Wales government began a serious programme of surveying and building all-weather roads in the region, so greatly relieving the isolation.

So the next time you sit in your comfortable car and drive to your chosen destinations within the city or away from the city, look out of the window at the smooth and well-functioning roads and take some time to contemplate those early settlers who had to endure the daily hardships of travelling the roads of Canberra. Their experiences are a world apart from ours.

* This article is an edited extract from a recent research project written by the authors. This project was assisted by funding made available by the ACT Government under the ACT Heritage Grants Program.

¹⁸ T.A. Dibbs, 'Fifty Years of Finance', cited in Lea-Scarlett, 1968, p.84.

