



**Roads and Traffic Authority  
Oral History Programme**

**N.S.W. Vehicular Ferries**

**Summary Report**

Researched and compiled by  
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October 1998



## *Some comments about Oral History...*

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Written history tells the official story, but often the human interest and real motivating factors are not included.

On the other hand, oral history reveals what you won't find in the files and the history books - the facts and the real reasons things happened. It is told by the people who were there, who were involved, who made it happen, who were affected - in the colour, passion and inflection of their own voices.

Oral history accounts also tell about relationships, perceptions, social and political climates, all of which are part of life and influence our actions and those of others. It often reveals the unsung heroes, the names of those actually responsible for innovations and important changes.

So, oral history provides a counterbalance to the formal written record by giving in addition the personal, intimate, human and social account of events and why they happened.

The RTA Environment and Community Policy Branch established an Oral History Programme in 1997 and the Vehicular Ferries project is the second undertaken. The major output of the study is no less than 43 hours of taped interviews with people involved in all aspects of the ferries - their administration, design, construction, maintenance and operation - as well as those for whom the ferry played an important part in their local community. This document is simply a summary of the key themes uncovered during the course of this work.

The study does not seek to present a definitive history of NSW ferries, rather a recounting of stories about life with the ferries, told by those who were actually there.

The materials referred to as "Appendices" in this report are bulky and difficult to include in a document such as this. They are available for perusal in the RTA Technology Library at Rosebery. The RTA strongly encourages members of the public to make use of the audio interview tapes, which are available from the State Library of NSW.

The opinions expressed in the oral history interview tapes and summarised in this report are those of the individuals concerned and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority.

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**Roads and Traffic Authority**  
**Vehicular Ferries Oral History**  
**Final report**

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **The Client**

The client for the oral history is the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority.

### **Liaison**

The Project Manager is Maria Whipp, Senior Environmental Planning and Heritage Officer, Environment and Community Policy Branch.

### **Study Area**

Roads and Traffic Authority Vehicular Ferries on the Parramatta, Hawkesbury, Hunter, Hastings, Clarence, Richmond and Murray Rivers in NSW.

### **Authorship and Acknowledgments**

This report has been researched and written by Mary Ann Hamilton and Sue Andersen.

We would like to thank the people we interviewed for their valuable contribution to this oral history;

**Phil Hyde**, Technical Support Manager, RTA Fleet Services

**John Clifford**, Ferry Maintenance Supervisor, RTA Fleet Services

**Jim Pittman**, Plant Superintendent, Hastings Shire Council

**Terry Doolan**, Bridge Maintenance Planner, RTA Grafton Regional Office

**Stewart Harding**, former Ferry Maintenance Foreman for the Richmond and Clarence River Vehicular ferries

**Lawry Duff**, tug boat operator

**Lyn McSwan**, Maclean resident and Maclean Historical Society member

**Ruth McAuley**, Maclean resident and Maclean Historical Society member

**Margaret Switzer**, Maclean resident and Maclean Historical Society member

**Edith Dobbin**, Maclean resident and Maclean Historical Society member

**Ray Blanch**, former vehicular ferry operator on the Clarence River

**Phil Hicks**, former vehicular ferry operator on the Clarence River

**Laurie Clifford**, former vehicular ferry operator on the Richmond River

**Marie Newman**, historian and resident of Coraki

**Martin Haley** , former Engineer, RTA Fleet Management Section

**Lalith Amaraweera**, Ferry Maintenance and Bitumen Sprayer Engineer

**Ray Wedgwood**, RTA Chief Engineer, Bridges

**Steve Ellul**, former Project Engineer, RTA Central Workshops, Granville

**Brian Pearson**, former DMR Chief Engineer, Bridges and RTA Heritage Committee member

**Neville Field**, former Leading Hand Bridge Carpenter, RTA Wagga Wagga Division

**Lorraine Wait**, Wymah vehicular ferry operator

**Tony Edwards**, former Wymah vehicular ferry operator

**Bill and Cheryl Brooks**, former Speewa vehicular ferry operators

**Dennis Mitchell**, Ferry Maintenance Officer, Hawkesbury City Council

**Volker Helms**, Ferry Maintenance Supervisor, Hawkesbury City Council

**Toby Watkins**, former ferry operator on the Richmond River

**Shad Wall**, contractor, Mortlake ferry

**Ross Craig**, Stockton resident and local historian

**Pat Conway and Keith Player**, former Stockton ferry employees

Additional thanks and acknowledgment is made to the following people for providing photographs and other documents included in the report;

**Dennis Mitchell** – historical photographs and documents relating to the Hawkesbury River Ferries

**Jim Pittman** – photographs, design plans for Hibbard ferry and historical notes regarding the Settlement Point and Hibbard ferries

**Cheryl and Bill Brooks** –photographs of the Speewah ferry and crossing

**Lorraine Wait** – photographs and newspaper clippings regarding the Wymah ferry

**Laurie Clifford** – photographs of the Burns Point ferry

**Ray Wedgwood** – file notes regarding a number of ferries

**Margaret Switzer** – documents relating to the Harwood ferry

**Ross Craig** – historical documents and photographs

**Neville Field** – Main Road Journals

**Shad Wall** – historical documents and photographs



## **2.0 ROADS AND TRAFFIC AUTHORITY VEHICULAR FERRIES ORAL HISTORY**

### **Aims**

The aim of the oral history was to record a series of oral history interviews with people having an association with the NSW Vehicular ferries. The interviews are intended to contribute to documenting the history of the NSW Vehicular ferries providing a rich social and historical context within which to view the ferries' role in the development of road transportation in NSW.

### **Methodology**

A period of preliminary research was undertaken which canvassed historical information available through the RTA Library as well as material available through the State Library of NSW and Historical Societies in towns associated with vehicular ferries. Preliminary interviews were undertaken with each interviewee, to assist in developing questions for the oral history interviews. Letters and an information package about the oral history was sent to each interviewee.

A series of oral history interviews were conducted with 31 people associated with vehicular ferries in NSW. A number of the interviews involved groups between two and four people. Several interviewees were RTA or local Council employees involved with the maintenance and administration of the ferries. Other interviewees were ferry contractors or community members who regularly used vehicular ferries.

While mindful of the necessity for oral history to be open to the direction of the interviewees, the interviews were structured around a series of themes and included;

- history of the ferry crossing
- history of the ferries
- maintenance of the ferries
- technical aspects of ferry design and construction
- administration of the ferry operation contract
- role of ferries in the NSW road network
- community use of and regard for the ferries
- operating the ferries
- replacement of ferries with bridges
- incidents -- floods, drownings etc

To retain the personalised focus of the interviews these themes were discussed in terms of the interviewees' personal experience.

The interview tapes were logged and bound in two volumes that accompany the interview tapes. A summary of the findings of the oral history has been developed and is contained in the main body of this report.

Material for this report has been gained primarily from the oral history interviews. As well as outlining the story of a number of ferries and crossings, the interviews provide a rich social context in which to understand the history of the vehicular ferries in NSW. The report also provides a broader historical background to the history and role of the ferries in the development of road transportation network in NSW. This information also has been derived from library and archival sources.

With the exception of the Port Macquarie ferries, the Lower Portland ferry, the Burns Point ferry and Broadwater ferry, the majority of the ferries targeted in the interviews are owned by the RTA.

It should also be remembered that the oral history interviews and report have not dealt with ferries operating on the South Coast during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Bombah Point ferry which is currently operated by National Parks and Wildlife Service or the Tweed River ferry at Tumbulgum.

### 3.0 OVERVIEW OF THE NSW VEHICULAR FERRIES

For many years vehicular ferries provided the only way to cross the rivers of NSW. In fact as one of our interviewees commented, where you see a bridge today chances are that a ferry crossed there or nearby at some stage

Many of the vehicular ferries in NSW were established and operated by enterprising people, often farmers, who charged a toll to travel on their ferry. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as the road system developed, some ferries on major roads came under the control of the NSW Public Works. This was the case with Wisemans ferry for example, where the crossing was essential to the passage of the Great North Road, at one time the most important route to areas north of Sydney. During 1925 the Department of Main Roads was established and took responsibility for many vehicular ferries and today the RTA still has ownership of fourteen ferry vessels.

Ferry administration and responsibility for managing the contract to operate the RTA owned ferries is in many cases carried out by local councils. The RTA directly administers the contract for operation of the Mortlake, Ulmarra, Speewa and Wymah ferries.

Ferries operated by RTA employees at one time or another have been the Harwood ferry, the Mororo ferry, Burns Point ferry, Coraki ferry, Woodburn ferry and the Mortlake ferry. The Harwood ferry ceased operation when the Harwood bridge opened in 1966, the Mororo ferry was replaced by a bridge in 1935 and the Mortlake ferry operation was tendered out to a private contractor in recent years. Both the Woodburn and the Coraki ferries have been replaced by bridges in the last two decades.

Councils also take responsibility for routine maintenance, repairs and regular servicing of the ferries. The RTA organises the three yearly overhaul which involves slipping the ferries so the hulls can be stripped and repaired and repainted. The ferry engines are also reconditioned and cables replaced as part of this overhaul.

The Sydney ferry maintenance team includes, John Clifford, Ferry Maintenance Supervisor, Ron Smith, Leading Hand Shipwright, Jeff Kelly, Carpenter, Gavin Jensen, Rigger, Michael O'Rourke, Labourer/Blaster and Wally Yudaeff, Painter.

The RTA operated several slipways over the past 80 years. The Mortlake slipway was built to service the Mortlake ferry and currently provides facilities for the three yearly overhaul of the Hawkesbury river ferries and the Mortlake ferry. Ashby Dry Dock was bought by the DMR from Public Works in the 1975. For many years it was an important facility where the ferries, dredges and many other government vessels were docked for maintenance and repair. Rileys Hill Dry Dock serviced vessels on the Richmond River for many years.

In recent years major overhauls are often carried out in privately owned dockyards and slipways or ferries are towed to the Mortlake slipway. Maintenance work is still carried out by the RTA ferry maintenance crew who also travel to the Murray River for the three yearly overhaul of the Speewa and Wymah ferries on the banks of the Murray River.

The first vehicular ferries were generally hand winched timber ferries, an example of which can be seen in the Swan Hill Pioneers Settlement. Gradually over the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century hand winched ferries were replaced by cable guided, steam driven ferries on many of the more major crossings. Late last century and early this century a number of ferries were constructed of steel panels riveted together and by the 1930s petrol and diesel powered ferries were common.

The steel riveted ferries, of which the RTA still own five, currently pose a major maintenance challenge for the RTA maintenance crew as the skills required for this method of construction are no longer taught. Vehicular ferries built more recently have welded steel hulls.

The RTA currently owns one timber ferry, Ferry No. 81 which is still in operation on the Hume Weir at Wymah. The Lower Portland ferry, owned and operated by the Hawkesbury and Baulkham Hills Councils, is also a timber ferry. Our interviewees noted the difficulties in obtaining timber of a satisfactory quality to properly maintain these ferries.

Currently all the vehicular ferries operating are cable driven vessels. The drive cable pulls the ferry and another cable guides the ferry across the river. The upkeep of cables is a constant and essential part of the ferry's maintenance routine.

In the past some powered ferries, such as the ones operating for many years on the Ashby to Maclean run, used only one guide cable. The Sydney Harbour, Peats Ferry Crossing and the Stockton ferries were all driven without cables. These vessels required a trained Maritime captain and two deckhands to drive the vessel. Being steam powered they also required two firemen.

Issues of safety for the operators, maintenance crew and general public have become an important consideration over the years. Ferries are now required to be chained when cars embark and disembark, the ferry gates must be closed securely when travelling and the approach gates must be similarly secured. Railings around the ferry engine and flaps have been installed and improved and life boats are required on ferries and are regularly inspected. All maintenance personnel undergo training to comply with 'Confined Spaces Entry Conditions' as they regularly work below deck in conditions where ventilation is difficult. Ferries are now all fitted with fume extractors, ventilation fans and gas meters.

An initiative to replace ferries with bridges was undertaken by the Public Works Department commencing after the second world war. Public Works received a block grant from the Federal Government and used part of these funds for this program. The replacement of ferries was investigated and prioritised but by 1986 the funds had been depleted.

## 4.0 THE SYDNEY REGION VEHICULAR FERRIES

For many years vehicular ferries were an essential part of the transport system in and around Sydney. They enabled travel southward across the Georges River, across the Parramatta River at several points, across Sydney Harbour and also the Hawkesbury River. While most of the ferries have been replaced with bridges there are still five ferries and a relief ferry operating on the Hawkesbury River and one on the Parramatta River at Mortlake.

Sydney region ferries are currently slipped every three years at the Mortlake slipway or privately owned slipways. For many years the slipway was primarily used to carry out major overhauls on the Mortlake ferry. However, during Martin Haley's time working as Ferry Maintenance Engineer, the Hawkesbury River vessels and occasionally some of the north coast ferries were towed from their crossings into Sydney Harbour to be serviced at Mortlake slipways.

Martin recalled that ferry flaps were maintained by the local Shire Council, while RTA personnel overhauled the engine, stripped the hull and inspected, repaired and repainted it at the Mortlake slipway. Since the introduction of environmental controls in the early 1980s, sandblasting of the hulls is not permitted at Mortlake. Hulls are now wet blasted and repainted at Mortlake.

Prior to the mid 1970s, the ferries being overhauled at Mortlake were winched onto the slipway using two winches housed on prime movers. This was a complex manoeuvre that required two weeks notice to the public, traffic control by police in the area and closure of streets leading to the ferry approaches. In the mid 1970s a permanently housed winching system was installed at Mortlake under Martin's guidance. Two former ANL ship winches were purchased and installed on foundations that required the drilling of four piers, thirty feet into the sandstone underlying the slipway. The new winching system made the slipping of the large vehicular ferries easier and far less disruptive to residents living in the vicinity of the slipway. Martin recalled the first time the new winches were used;

*so we started it up - it was smooth as glass, it was so beautiful....  
it'd just wind a bit and she (the ferry) came up. And all the local  
residents loved it because it used to be all trucks with engines  
bellowing for hours - everybody shouting and yelling - roaring  
engines and smoke. This was just a little whine..lovely...  
They worked perfectly.*

The Mortlake slipway approaches were also upgraded in the 1970s. Martin Haley recalled his involvement in extending the slipway ramps to the low water mark in order to improve the working conditions of the maintenance crews;

*...we were actually concreting a big apron on the seaward side of  
the Mortlake slipway in order to make better working conditions -  
because, you see, the big ferries overhung the ends of the slip - they  
were out over the mud at low tide... and we expected the men  
maintaining the vessels to work in this sort of condition. So they said*

*'why can't we have concrete – it's safer, it doesn't smell, easier to work on, no danger' so we said OK we'll concrete between the slipway wall and the low water mark ...*

## **The Georges River Ferries**

On the Georges River at least three ferries were operating at the turn of the century; one of these was situated at the site of Tom Uglys Bridge and provided an essential link in the Princes Highway between Sydney and the south coast of NSW. In 1929 this ferry was replaced by a bridge. Apparently, by that stage, there were delays of up to 5 hours in peak periods of traffic.<sup>1</sup> Originally the bridge was intended to cross the Georges River further inland between Bald Face Point and Sylvania but locals successfully argued that the location proposed by the Public Works planners would be inconvenient for the local community and have a detrimental affect on local business. The approaches to the ferry are still visible on the riverbanks near Tom Uglys Bridge.

The Taren Point ferry was located further downstream from Tom Uglys Ferry on Rocky Point Road and provided those living in suburbs such as Caringbah, Cronulla and Kurnell with convenient access to Sydney. The Taren Point ferry crossing was about 300 metres wide and the ferry was cable driven. In 1965 the Taren Point Bridge was constructed and the ferry service was discontinued. Ray Wedgwood, RTA Chief Engineer, Bridges, recalled supervising construction on the bridge in 1964 – 1965 and explained that the bridge at Taren Point was required to both alleviate traffic congestion on Tom Uglys Bridge and to form part of a planned freeway to the south coast.

The Lugarno Ferry operated up until the mid 1970s and provided a means of crossing the Georges river between Lugarno and Illawong. The pressure of growing populations in the Menai and Lucas Heights area led to the Alford's Point Bridge being constructed, opening in 1973. Ray noted that prior to the closure of the Lugarno ferry in 1974, he and his family would use the ferry once a year at Christmas time;

*We used to use it annually when we'd go on our great Christmas tree hunt. And we'd go out on the Lugarno Ferry and across up into the area around Lucas Heights and go into the scrub there - we'd fell our Christmas tree and head off home again.....One day we went down to do it and it just happened to be the week they were giving out some special certificate – to be the last person to ride on the Lugarno ferry.*

## **The Sydney Harbour Ferries**

While privately owned passenger vessels plied the harbour crossing from the early days of settlement, vehicle travel between the areas lying north and south of Sydney harbour was for many years a long and arduous journey via Parramatta, 40 kilometres from the Sydney settlement.

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Main Roads NSW. *The Roadmakers, A History of Main Roads in NSW*, DMR Sydney, 1987, p. 72.

In 1817 William Blue set up a service rowing produce across the harbour from Dawes Point to Blues Point, but it was not until much later that carts and wagons loaded with produce were serviced with a convenient passage across the harbour. In 1842 the Sydney Ferry Company began operating the first vehicle ferry on Sydney harbour. This cable guided, steam driven vessel used the crossing that William Blue had used in 1817, between Dawes Point and Blues Point.<sup>2</sup>

In 1860 the Sydney Ferry Company started a second vehicular ferry crossing between Fort Macquarie and Milsons Point. By 1901 the ferries servicing these crossings were all self propelled, steam driven vessels which continued to provide a link between the North Shore and Sydney until the Sydney Harbour Bridge opened in 1932.<sup>3</sup>

There were at least eleven steam ferries that carried increasing traffic on the harbour crossings between 1866 and 1932. While a number of these ferries were built locally at shipyards in Balmain and Berrys Bay, the Kooroongaba was built by the Newcastle shipyard in 1900, the Koondooloo was built in Scotland in 1924 and the Kara Kara and Kalang were built in Chester England. The British ferries travelled to Australia under their own steam.<sup>4</sup>

When the Sydney Harbour Bridge opened, the fleet of Sydney harbour vehicular ferries was decommissioned. A number of the older vessels were either put into service elsewhere or broken up. The Koondooloo and the Kalang spent the 1930s as showboats and along with the Killara were seconded by the Royal Australian Navy during World War Two.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the war, the Koondooloo resumed life as a vehicular ferry, on the Newcastle-Stockton crossing where it was joined by an old colleague the Kooroongaba. When the Stockton Bridge was completed in 1971 and the ferry service discontinued, these two old ships were sold and destined to become showboats in Manila Harbour. The other Stockton ferries, the Lurgurena and the Kalang, were sold for the same uses and it was intended that all four ferries would be towed to Manila Harbour. The Kooroongaba sank soon after leaving Newcastle and the three others ran aground at Trial Bay on the NSW coast.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the two crossings discussed above there was at least one other crossing of the harbour at Middle Harbour where the Spit Bridge is located. This crossing was established in the 1870s by Barney Kearnes who operated a hand drawn cable ferry across The Spit. In 1888 the government took over the ferry and replaced the existing punt with a steam ferry. The ferry ceased operation in 1924 when the original Spit Bridge was opened.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Department of Main Roads NSW 'Bridges and Vehicular Ferries Across Sydney Harbour' in *Main Roads* Dec.1954, p 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 36.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews Graeme, *Ferries of Sydney*, Trident Publishing, Willoughby NSW, 1969 p 79-88

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 79-88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 79-88.

<sup>7</sup>Department of Main Roads NSW, Dec.1954 Op Cit., p. 37.

## The Parramatta River Vehicular Ferries

### Bedlam Point Ferry

While the Sydney Harbour vehicle crossings were established as late as 1842, the pressing need for a shorter route between Sydney and the Northern regions was addressed 14 years earlier, further upstream on the Parramatta river. The first vehicular ferry crossing on the Parramatta River was established between Bedlam and Abbotsford Points in 1831. The Bedlam Point vehicular ferry crossing was at that stage seen as an essential link in the 'Great North Road' which was under construction and when completed would become the main northern route to Newcastle and the Hunter Valley. The Bedlam Point ferry also provided farmers and their foot stock from as far afield as Long Reef and Pittwater with a more convenient route to the city markets. The ferry also provided residents of Concord with access to a newly established church in Kissing Point and settlers in the Ryde area with a quicker journey to Sydney.<sup>8</sup>

The Bedlam Point ferry was a hand hauled punt owned by the NSW government and operated by a Mr Batman or Bateman. In 1839 the lease on the ferry was taken over by Michael Darcey and in 1849 by Charles Hickson. The service was reputedly unreliable due both to the habits of the ferrymen and the severing of cables by passing boats, and in 1853 the local community began a determined bid for the government to construct a bridge near the location of the ferry.<sup>9</sup> In 1881 the Bedlam Point ferry was replaced by the Gladesville Bridge.

In 1836 another vehicular ferry crossing of the Parramatta River was established at Kissing Point. This ferry continued to operate until 1935 when the Ryde Bridge was built.

### The Mortlake – Putney Ferry

The Mortlake-Putney vehicular ferry service began in 1928 and is the only remaining vehicular ferry on the Parramatta River. The current ferry at Mortlake is ferry No 28. It was built in 1960 and is a welded steel hull vessel with a 15 car capacity.

The Department of Main Roads, NSW provided the ferry service in 1928 so residents of suburbs on the southern bank of the river could access northern areas such as Ryde. The crossing also provided access for travellers from Ryde to the southern suburbs. For many years before the opening of the Ryde Bridge, workers at the Australian Gas Light Company and other industries in the Mortlake - Concord area depended on the direct and convenient route to places of work provided by the Mortlake ferry.

Up until about 1992 the Mortlake ferry's driver, gatekeeper and deckhand were all Roads and Traffic Authority employees. Each crew member was responsible for a defined set of duties and apparently would not take on other tasks even in emergencies. This led to several frustrating incidents such as when the ferry inexplicably stopped operating after

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<sup>8</sup> from an unreferenced draft of a document provided by Ray Wedgwood, possibly *Drummoyne* by Eric Russell. p. 49-53. Included in Appendix 1

<sup>9</sup> from an unreferenced draft of a document provided by Ray Wedgwood entitled *Bedlam Ferry* p. 6-7 included in Appendix 1



one particular crossing. The reason for the delay was that the gatekeeper had been left behind when the ferry crossed and so the gates were not opened for the waiting cars.

In 1992 the ferry operation was contracted out by the RTA and the contract was won by Shad Wall, the current contractor. Shad employs a couple of drivers to handle relief shifts but operates the ferry himself the majority of its working hours. The operator is now responsible for all the tasks involved in operating the ferry; driving, mooring, opening gates etc.

Since 1992, the new Rivercat ferry to Parramatta has begun to operate on the Parramatta River. Shad recalled that at first there were several occasions when the two vessels almost collided. Lights have been installed on the Putney ferry approach to ensure that the Rivercat is aware of the ferry when it is crossing.

Other hazards for the ferry are the rowing sculls that train on the river and make a practice of playing chicken with the ferry. Motorised leisure craft also pose problems for the ferry and there have been several occasions where the ferry cables have been severed by speed boats.

Floods on the Parramatta River at Mortlake are not as pronounced as on the Clarence or Richmond Rivers but Shad noted that the strong westerly winds of October and November make for a rough crossing and impede cars embarking and disembarking. Problems associated with the urban environment also impact on the ferry. Apparently stolen cars are regularly deposited at the ferry approaches and Shad noted that the ferry had experienced several collisions with these submerged cars.

Most crossings on the Mortlake ferry are event free but Shad recalled one notable experience when International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch was returning from a visit to the Olympic site on a Rivercat. Samaranch's craft was accompanied by two police launches, one travelling in front and one behind the Rivercat. Shad sighted the entourage mid ferry crossing and noted that one of the police boats was approaching fast and then stopped or slowed suddenly as the driver remembered the submerged ferry cables. The Rivercat almost collided with the police launch but steered swiftly toward the Putney side of the river. Passengers and crew lurched noticeably as the Rivercat performed this manoeuvre and avoided the police launch. It then headed off towards Circular Quay, leaving the police boats behind in disgust.

Since the opening of the Ryde Bridge in 1935 (at that time the bridge was known as Uhrs Point Bridge), there have been several attempts to close the Mortlake ferry crossing. To date the RTA has been persuaded by community protest to maintain the service. While the ferry no longer handles the volume of traffic it did at its peak (811 cars per day in 1948<sup>10</sup> to 310 per day in 1986<sup>11</sup> to 250 per day in 1990<sup>12</sup>), it is currently used by about 35 local school teachers each day, a number of bike riders who commute to work daily from Strathfield and Bondi to Epping and Ryde, by tourists and many 'one off' users who travel on the ferry as an alternative route from Ryde to Concord.

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<sup>10</sup>Department of Main Roads NSW, 'Main Road Ferries - Their Operation and Maintenance' in *Main Roads Vol XIV*, No 2, 1948

<sup>11</sup>1986 National Trust Listing included in Appendix 4.

<sup>12</sup>Newspaper clipping dated 20.6.1990 supplied by Shad Wall, included in Appendix 4

The ferry's value as a tourist attraction and as an item of cultural heritage significance has been voiced by many in the campaign to keep the ferry service. In the early 1980s, after one such threat to its existence, the ferry has attained a listing with the National Trust. The entry notes;

*For more than half a century the 'Putney Punt' has been a notable land mark on the Parramatta River. It is the sole remaining example of this relatively unusual means of river crossing in the metropolitan area. As well as being a significant element of the riverscape to generations of Australians, it also has considerable potential as a tourist attraction*

Shad Wall is enthusiastic about the ferry's potential as a tourist attraction and often arranges crossings for interested groups. Vintage car clubs and Harley Davidson motor bike enthusiasts regularly organise to cross *en masse* for a photo call. Shad has also seen the occasional wedding ceremony, Council Christmas party and film shoot on the ferry.

Such activities attest to the ferry's current popularity as does Shads' regular Christmas party. Initially organised for locals and regular ferry users, the annual event can no longer be held on the ferry for too many people attend. Nevertheless Shad has persisted with this regular community event and now holds the Christmas party in a nearby car park, providing fireworks, food and drinks for the local community and various guests.

## **Hawkesbury River Vehicular Ferries**

The Hawkesbury-Nepean River system posed a major impediment to a direct road transport route northwards. Until the mid nineteenth century the only reliable and reasonably maintained route from Sydney to Newcastle involved following the Great North Road, crossing the Hawkesbury River at Wisemans ferry and either proceeding through Cessnock and Maitland or through Gosford, Swansea and Hamilton.<sup>13</sup> Wisemans ferry crossing was established prior to the 1820s and a ferry was operating at the crossing by 1827.

In 1847 another privately operated ferry crossing of the Hawkesbury was established between Kangaroo Point and Mooney Mooney Point by George Peat. Access to this crossing was by Peats Ferry road, which was a precursor to the Pacific Highway. During the nineteenth century the road remained a local Parish road without much assistance with its upkeep from the government. In 1889, George Peat ceased operating his ferry and until well into this century the route through Wisemans ferry remained the only way northward to Newcastle.<sup>14</sup>

### **Peats Ferry**

It was not until 1930 that a vehicular ferry service was established by the NSW Government at the site of the original Peats ferry crossing. The two diesel driven, self propelled vessels that comprised the ferry service were able to handle 240 cars per hour.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Main Roads NSW, 1987 op cit., p. 116

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.32.

when operating in tandem.<sup>15</sup> Traffic at the crossing increased to the extent that by 1938 work began on a bridge spanning the Hawkesbury at this point. Due to the disruption of World War Two the vehicle ferries serviced the crossing until 1945 when the bridge was finally completed.<sup>16</sup>

The original ferries on this crossing were named the Frances and the George Peat. These ferries served on the crossing until 1942 when they were required for wartime duties. The Mildred was brought from the Stockton crossing in Newcastle and put on the Peats Ferry crossing and served there until the opening of the bridge.

### **Pitt Town Ferry**

Dennis Mitchell, Hawkesbury Council Ferry Maintenance Officer and Volker Helms, Hawkesbury Council Ferry Maintenance Supervisor, made mention of the Pitt Town ferry indicating that the ferry linked Pitt Town with Wilberforce and served a small farming community there. The ferry ceased to operate in 1926 as road access to Wilberforce and Windsor was improved.

There are currently five vehicular ferry crossings on the Hawkesbury River between the Windsor Bridge and Brooklyn Waters. These are the Sackville ferry, the Lower Portland ferry, the Webbs Creek ferry, the Wisemans ferry, and the Berowra Waters ferry.

### **Wisemans Ferry**

Wisemans Ferry crossing is reputedly the oldest in NSW being established as a crucial link in the Great North Road, the main thoroughfare from Sydney to Newcastle until the well into this century. The crossing was started by Solomon Wiseman, a local farmer early in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, possibly prior to the 1820s.

The original crossing was located two kilometres down stream from the present site. Passengers crossed the river by row boat and cattle swam the distance under the supervision of Wiseman and their owner. When work on the Great North Road began in the area, Solomon Wiseman was put in charge of the convict work gangs. It was probably at this stage that he moved the ferry crossing upstream to its present location.

In 1925, the crossing was made by a hand winched, cable ferry. This style of ferry was superseded by a "power driven vessel" in 1927. By this stage the six car ferry was owned and operated by the Department of Main Roads.<sup>17</sup>

In 1948 DMR documents indicate that Wisemans ferry was still a 6 car ferry and was diesel driven, carrying a weekly average of 334 vehicles over 328 trips.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 121-122

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 171

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 116

<sup>18</sup> Department of Main Roads NSW, 1948, Op Cit., p. 45

Shortly after the Harwood Bridge was opened in 1966, Ferry No. 8 was relocated from the Harwood crossing to Wisemans ferry and is still the main ferry at the crossing. This large 24 car vessel is assisted during times of peak traffic by Ferry No.55.

All these ferries are riveted steel hull ferries. The main Wisemans ferry, Ferry No.8, was built in 1926 and was originally a steam powered ferry. Volker Helms and Dennis Mitchell, pointed out that there is still evidence of the coal bunkers and steam boilers in the fabric of the ferry.

Since the installation of the bridge at Kangaroo Point - Mooney Mooney Point in 1944 and the more recent completion of the Sydney to Newcastle freeway, the crossing at Wisemans has lost its importance as a link in the major route northward. To demonstrate how well used the Wisemans Ferry crossing was before the Sydney-Newcastle freeway was completed, Volker recalled that there were long delays on the Pacific Highway at Hornsby, so people from Sydney's western suburbs used Wiseman's crossing as a route north out of Sydney;

*... At Wisemans ferry you had 5 kilometre of cars waiting –  
Some December - January periods we probably had  
22,000 cars per month ... these days there would be 12 or 14,000  
cars would be the highest. In the winter months  
when there is not much tourism it is much lower – between 10 and 12  
thousand cars per month.*

Despite losing its role as a part of a north bound road link, Wisemans Ferry remains important to local traffic. In addition, the ferry has become a popular, if unusual means of crossing the Hawkesbury on a well travelled tourist drive. The large ferry No 8 can easily accommodate the tourist buses that often travel this scenic route.

The ferry crossing is highly regarded for its heritage value. Many people we interviewed noted that the significance of the crossing derives from its history as part of the Great North Road as well as our convict history. There is a section of the Great North Road that is still intact and visible nearby the ferry crossing.

Ferry No. 8 may also be regarded as an important part of NSW history and heritage, being a well maintained example of a steel riveted hull vessel with traces of its original steam fittings still visible in its fabric. Its role as both a long serving ferry at the Harwood crossing and on the Wisemans crossing also contribute to its heritage and historical importance.

### **Webbs Creek Ferry**

The Webbs Creek Crossing is situated upstream from the Wisemans crossing and was established later than the Wisemans ferry. The Webbs Creek ferry was not a vital link in a major thoroughfare but it provided a convenient crossing of the Hawkesbury for a small local farming community situated in the immediate vicinity of the ferry.

The ferry servicing the crossing is RTA Ferry No 26, which is a welded steel hull vessel built in 1959. It has a 67 tonne, 15 car capacity. Ferry No 5 is a relief ferry for the

Hawkesbury and is moored at the Webbs Creek piles. It was built in 1926 and is a steel riveted hull craft. It is used to replace one or other of the Hawkesbury river ferries during their three yearly maintenance overhaul.

Steve Ellul recalled that in 1992 he was asked by the Wisemans Ferry Chamber of Commerce to modify the Webbs Creek ferry to carry tourist buses;

*... it just involved having to lengthen the ferry flaps quite considerably and also reinforcing the structure of the ferry so that it wasn't affected by the extra mass that was hanging off both ends of the ferry ... its greatly improved the crossing and I believe people in the area seem fairly satisfied with it ...*

In many ways, the modification of the ferry has given the ferry and crossing a new lease of life. As well as still serving local traffic, the Webbs Creek ferry crossing has become part of a tourist circuit with weekend drivers from Sydney making a point of crossing the Hawkesbury on both the Webbs Creek and the Wisemans ferry.

### **Lower Portland Ferry**

The Lower Portland ferry is located at the junction of the Colo and Hawkesbury Rivers. At one time there were two ferry crossings at this location, one at the present site, crossing the Hawkesbury River and another crossing the Colo River. The Colo river crossing was closed in 1974 and the ferry from that crossing is now located at the Australian Pioneer Village at Wilberforce.

The Lower Portland ferry is jointly owned and administered by the Baulkham Hills and Hawkesbury Shires and is one of the last timber ferries still in service in NSW, the other being the Wymah ferry on the Hume Weir.

The current Lower Portland ferry was originally part of the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority's vehicle ferry fleet, operating on the Berowra crossing prior to the 1930s. During the 1930s the ferry was moved to the Wisemans Ferry crossing and later to the Webbs Creek crossing. Prior to the amalgamation of the Colo and Hawkesbury councils the ferry was purchased by the Colo Shire Council and put into service at its present location.

### **Sackville Ferry**

Located upstream from Lower Portland the Sackville ferry began service in the early 1870s. At this stage the operation was privately owned and Dennis noted that;

*a ferry was put across there for the use of school children going to the local school – I think that's how it (the Sackville) ferry originally started.*

Also, around this time more settlers were establishing farms on the northern side of the Hawkesbury and stock and fruit and vegetable produce would have been transported on the ferry in the process of shipping it to the Sydney markets.

Dennis Mitchell noted that a relation of his, Emma Mitchell had the contract to operate the ferry in 1908 (see photographs at end of this section). At this stage the administration of the ferry was undertaken by Baulkham Hills Shire Council which let the tender to Emma for a sum of forty seven pounds and five shillings per month and an annual payment of twenty pounds.

In 1948 the Sackville ferry was a six car cable driven petrol powered ferry. At that time it completed an average of 323 trips per week carrying 315 vehicles.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike many of the other ferries on the Hawkesbury, traffic on the Sackville crossing has increased in recent years. This is because tracts of farmland on one side of the river have been subdivided for residential and "hobby" farm lots.

The crossing is currently served by Ferry No.40. This ferry was constructed in 1916 and is a riveted steel hull ferry. It can accommodate twelve cars and was at one time in service on the Harwood crossing as a relief ferry.<sup>20</sup>

### **Berowra Waters Ferry**

DMR records indicate that in 1948 the Berowra Waters ferry was a cable driven, petrol powered ferry able to carry three cars. At this time the ferry served an average of 269 cars per week.<sup>21</sup>

Currently Ferry No. 1 operates at the Berowra Crossing on Berowra Creek. It is an RTA owned ferry which is administered by the Hornsby Council. The ferry was built in 1961 and is a welded steel hull vessel with a carrying capacity of 15 cars.<sup>22</sup> We did not interview anyone directly involved in the operation or administration of the ferry but Steve Ellul described the charms of this particular ferry during his interview;

*...the ferries actually add a degree of atmosphere to the place.  
If you've ever been to the Berowra ferry crossing on a nice  
sunny Sunday – it really adds to the character of the place.  
... ferries are an interesting part of the history of NSW*

An interesting recent innovation at the Berowra crossing is the installation and use of a remote control boom gate.

### **Administration and Maintenance**

With the exception of the Lower Portland ferry, all the Hawkesbury River ferries are owned by the RTA. Responsibility for administering the operation contracts and minor maintenance and repairs lies with the Hawkesbury City Council.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 45

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 45

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 45

<sup>22</sup> Notes on currently operating RTA ferries provided by Lalith Amaraweera and included in Appendix 2.

Contracts for the operation of the ferries are usually of three years duration. Operators cover the cost of public liability and accident insurances, diesel, oil and wages from the sum received from Council. The ferry contractors are expected to provide a 24 hour service.

While the contractor is responsible for the regular upkeep and daily maintenance such as oiling and greasing cables and engine, the Council ensures the ongoing maintenance of the ferries and the RTA is responsible for the three yearly major overhaul. Volker being the maintenance supervisor of the Hawkesbury River vehicular ferries, regularly inspects the ferries to ensure their safety and upkeep and both he and Dennis carry out the three monthly service of the ferries. The most frequent maintenance tasks are replacing the end shield springs and gate hooks.

Dennis and Volker related that there have been problems with some contractors not fulfilling the requirements of the contract or simply behaving unacceptably;

*One fellow was constantly drunk and some of his drivers were too. So he got a couple of warnings – Council only warned him two or three times and then the contract was stopped ... another fellow had a problem with his staff where the driver, at 12 midnight - the other driver doesn't turn up and this one goes home - so there is no ferry service ... that reflects back on the contractor – Council is not satisfied with that - he gets a warning and that's the end of it.*

It is also common for contractors to use family members to operate the ferry in order to reduce costs. In some cases this works well but not always as Volker related;

*We had a contractor at Webbs Creek he had four daughters – and he thought his wife and four daughters would be enough labour... the girls in two months had had enough of it and then his wife ran out on him, so he had to hire labour and he didn't have enough money – and the whole lot fell apart.*

When a contractor fails to serve out the time of his contract the Hawkesbury City Council runs the ferry with its own employees until the contract is relet.

Dennis and Volker mentioned that up until the 1970s the Hawkesbury Council ran its own slipway at the mouth of the Macdonald River. Between the 1920s and the 1950s this slipway employed six men full time to maintain a fleet of ferries.

Maintaining the riveted steel hull ferries has become more and more difficult over the years as riveting skills are lost. Steel plates are now welded into the hull but this is not considered ideal practice as it weakens the overall structure of the hull.

The Lower Portland ferry, being the only Council owned timber ferry on the Hawkesbury River, poses particular maintenance problems. The internal structural timbers of the 70 year old vessel are apparently still in good condition but lack of regular maintenance such as the replacement of damaged exterior timbers, stripping and repainting the hull, has led to serious deterioration of the ferry.

Council expects this ferry to last at least another 10 years but Volker and Dennis estimate that it will need a serious overhaul if this is the case. One of the major difficulties in maintaining the timber ferry is obtaining Oregon for replacement timbers.

Over the past twenty years there have been a number of modifications to the Hawkesbury River ferries that help to ensure public safety. The ferry flaps are now hydraulic and the end guides have been modified, safety railings have been fitted or made higher. Modifications such as these are discussed and devised in collaboration with the RTA maintenance team. Many near accidents have been avoided through such modifications as Volker noted:

*We had a girl who drove an automatic car on the ferry and she must have confused the brake and the accelerator and she hit the gate full on. If the chain hadn't been there and the safety hook and everything in good order she would have gone straight through - into the river*

### Incidents

Volker recounted a more tragic episode that occurred on the Webbs Creek ferry in 1974 or 1975 where a car with grandparents and grand children drove onto the ferry;

*.. the grandfather got out to talk to the driver while the car was standing on the ferry - and - whether someone touched the hand brake - it has never been established - the car rolled forward and went through the gate - in those days the gates didn't have the same safety hooks that we've got now - the gate sprang open and the car went in front of the ferry. The grandfather went after it and they all drowned ...*

Other incidents that have occurred on the Hawkesbury River ferries include the inevitable low loader pushing an unsecured ferry away from the bank. Steve Ellul recalled that this event happened as recently as the early 1990s at Wisemans Ferry. The low loader and the excavator it was carrying both sank in the river and were salvaged at considerable expense. A similar drama occurred on the Lower Portland ferry in the 1950s where a truck loaded with an old tram over balanced the ferry and the truck and tram rolled off into the river.

Steve, Volker and Dennis all have memories of being called out to repair engines that have broken down on various Hawkesbury crossings. Steve remembered being called out to repair the engine of the Sackville ferry on the day of the Bridge to Bridge speedboat races in 1990;

*The repair took place under the deck where the engine was located - it was in the high 40s or even 50 degrees Celsius . So we were down there ... head room from the floor to the underside of the deck was about four feet and you had all the structural members to try and negotiate around - so it was very uncomfortable. - But we carried out the repair job - the frightening part about it was that - the Sackville ferry is located just around the corner from where the boats were turning around and all you could hear was the high powered boats approaching the*



*ferry...you were always wondering if that particular boat was going to miss ... it was a relief when you heard the engine going off in the distance*

Aside from the problems of maintaining the ferry cables in the salty water of the river, the cables are frequently damaged or severed by leisure craft. The passenger liner, "The Lady Hawkesbury" was responsible for quite a bit of cable damage when it first travelled on the river. The liner would not only sever the cables but pull the mooring posts out as well.

Flooding on the Hawkesbury-Nepean River poses one of the most severe difficulties for operating the ferries. At Sackville the river can rise 2 or 3 feet in an hour requiring some quick decisions as to when to take the ferry off the crossing. At Wisemans Ferry the waters usually rise at a slower rate. In times of flood the Sackville and Lower Portland ferries are usually taken off the crossing and secured before the Webbs Creek and finally the Wisemans Ferry vessels. The ferries are moored and the cables are loosened so that they lie at the bottom of the river, unable to catch debris that is carried on the flood waters.

The most notable flood related event, involving four of the Hawkesbury ferries, occurred over a three day period in March 1978. Volker and Dennis commented that flooding on the Hawkesbury is often unpredictable. This was the case with the 1978 floods when widespread rains over the whole Hawkesbury River catchment caused the river to rise suddenly and without warning. The resulting flood waters were fast moving and carried a huge amount of debris as Martin Haley recalled;

*there were fridges floating past – there were whole caravans coming down the river. You see the reason for that flood was that they had simultaneous cloudbursts in the Nepean, the Colo and the Macdonald rivers...all three rivers came up all at once and that was the reason for the suddenness of it. But at the upper reaches of the Colo River there is the Mandalay caravan park ... that was 15, 20 feet under water ... so there were caravans floating past, fridges, houses ..and it was moving quite quickly ...*

A series of unfortunate events, coupled with the pressure of the debris-filled floodwaters caused the Webbs Creek ferry (No. 26) to break its cables and travel down the river. At Wisemans Ferry it collided with ferries No. 55, 8 and a small timber relief ferry which were lashed together and tied to a tree on the river bank.

The impact of the collision caused the ferries at Wisemans to break away and all four ferries with three Council workers on board, began an epic journey down the flood swollen Hawkesbury River. Early in this journey the small timber ferry began to sink and was cut away from the other ferries.

Several attempts were made by Council workers to secure the three remaining runaway ferries to the bank but unfortunately these early attempts were not successful. Martin recounted such an attempt;

*By sheer chance they drifted around this big bend – and they happened to drift into the calm area ... the bloke on the Webbs Creek*

*ferry (Rus Mitchell) ... threw a rope around a tree and somehow managed to get off the ferry, round the tree and ties the thing up (the three ferries lashed together) - and he stopped them - and for a minute they were OK ... the Webbs Creek ferry was fine but somehow during the night the other two ferries got away ... the two big ones became disconnected from the Webbs Creek ferry and they took off down the river again.*

The Webbs Creek later broke its cables and was finally beached in the riverbank at Couranga Point.

It was not until the tug boat operated by Lawry Duff reached them that any progress was made in controlling the passage of the ferries. Lawry recalled a near successful attempt to push the two Wisemans ferries to the bank at Spencer and another at Berowra Creek where his tugs struggled to guide the two ferries into the calmer waters of Berowra Creek.

*... we couldn't do anything with them except steer them - and what our plans were, was to tow them down to the mouth of Berowra Waters there - and with enough momentum, pull them into the calmer waters. And as we towed the two car ferries into the mouth of Berowra Waters. ... a police boat came up and tangled the tow line 'round the propeller ...*

So, unfortunately the ferries broke away and continued down the river. As they approached the Peats Ferry Bridge they began to pose a real public danger. The two ferries and the retinue of debris was estimated to weigh 650 tonnes<sup>23</sup> and they were travelling at about 10 knots. It was feared that if they collided with the bridge, the bridge piers would not withstand the impact. It was at Peats Island, just before the ferries reached the bridge, that Lawry was successful in shepherding the ferries toward the shore and he finally ran them aground on Peats Island where the larger ferry was first secured.

The impact of the landing caused the smaller ferry to break away only to be recaptured almost under the piers of the Peats Ferry Bridge. Lawry recalled that he had been awake and operating the tug for 25 hours and it was only after the salvage had been completed that he felt the physical effects.

*... that tug at the time had rod and chain steering - big heavy chains running down each side and the steel rods - still had the original steering and it was heavy. You really had to put your shoulder to it to spin the wheel - and I don't know how many times I spun that wheel from one lock to another. I never felt it then - it wasn't until the next day - and my back and my shoulders just started to ache, for days and days ... I never experienced anything like it again.*

After the ferries were secured, Council workers had to prepare the ferries to travel back up the river where they were slipped and repaired. Despite their uncontrolled journey Dennis noted that there was not a huge amount of damage to the ferries, except for the

<sup>23</sup> Department of Main Roads NSW, 'Runaway Ferries' in *Main Roads, DMR Sydney, June 1978* p. 123

small timber ferry which sank. There were initially a couple of attempts to salvage it but it proved too costly and it is still on the river bed providing a haven for young prawns.

# SYDNEY REGION FERRIES



Until 1875, travellers to the Sutherland Shire, south of Sydney, had to detour west to Liverpool or cross the Georges River by punt at Lugarno. The first punt at Tom Ugly's Point was installed in 1879 and this was replaced by the iron steak ferry, pictured here, in 1898. Tom Ugly's Point is believed to be named after Tom Huxley, an early resident of the area. By the mid 1920s, there were sometimes delays of four or five hours while commuters waited for the punt. Today, traffic crosses the Georges River by Tom Ugly's Bridge which was officially known as the Georges River Bridge when it was built. The foundation stone was laid in 1924 but the bridge wasn't completed until 1929 at about double the original estimated cost. A toll was charged until 1952. Our picture is from the Tyrrell Collection of photographs.

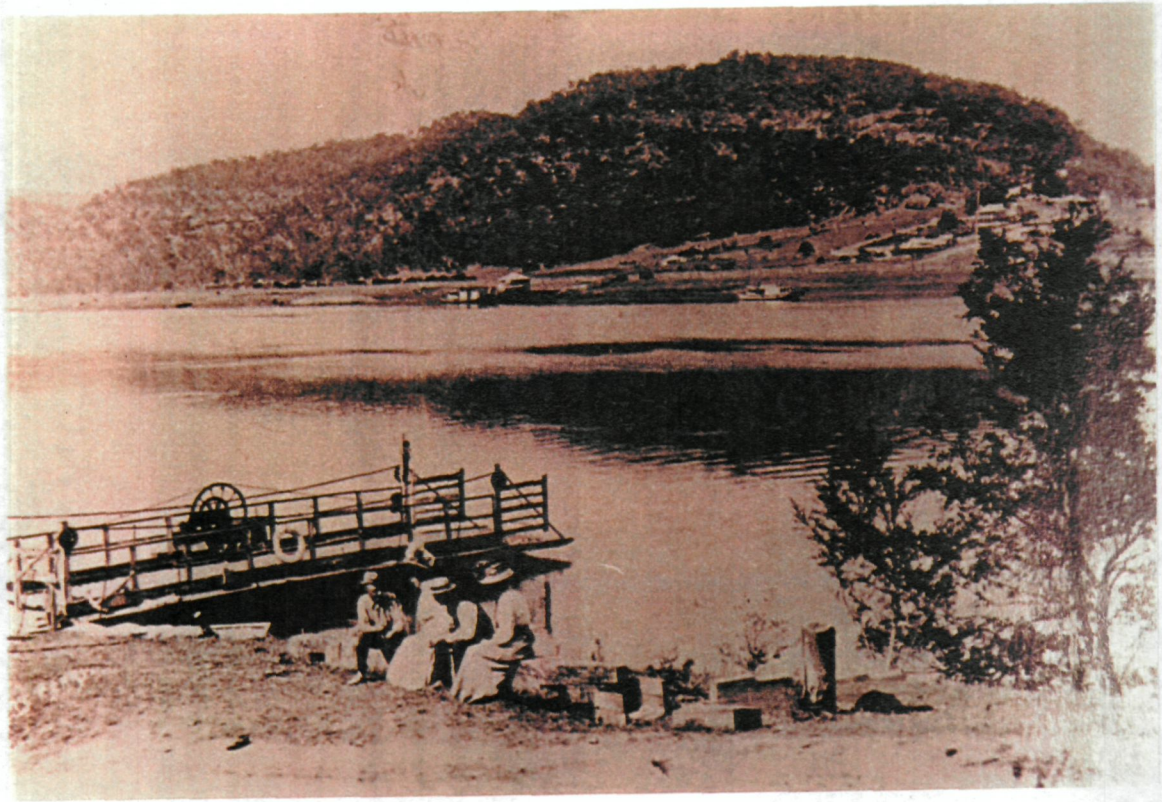
Tom Uglys Vehicular ferry, Georges River, 1898.

Photograph courtesy of Dennis Mitchell



**Mortlake ferry , Parramatta River - Putney side of crossing**

**Photograph courtesy of Shad Wall**

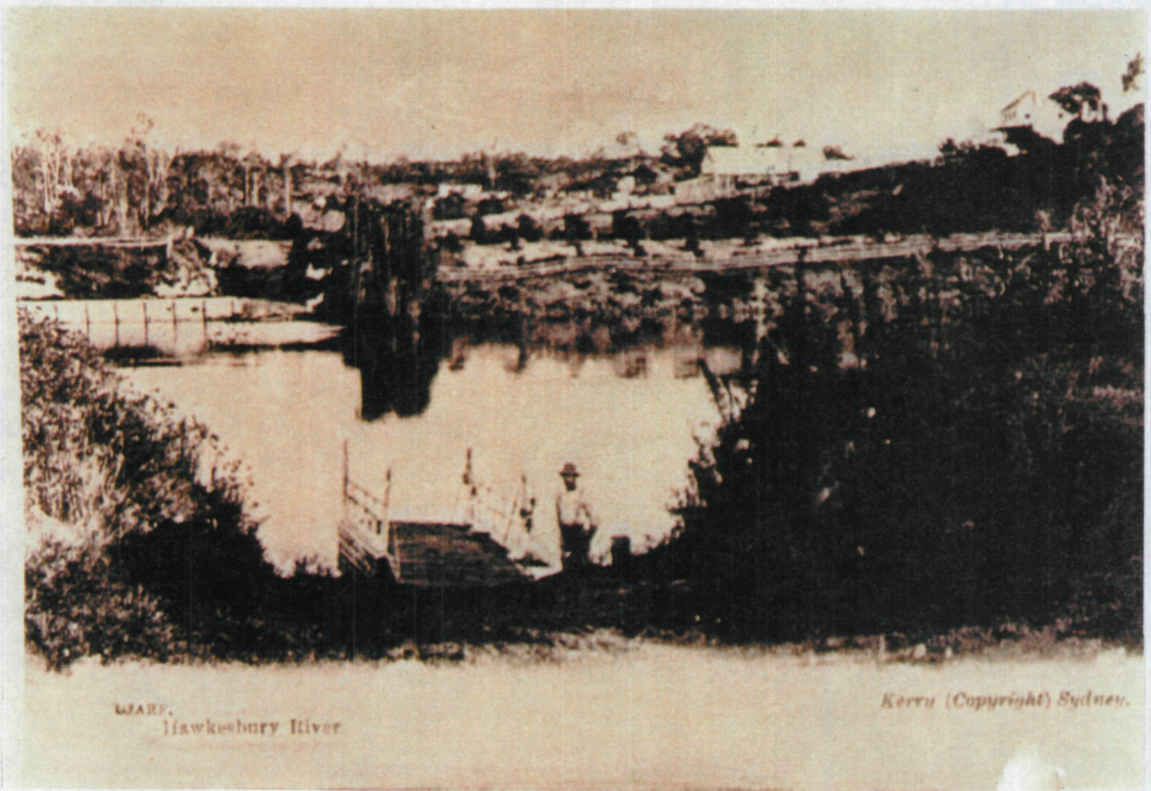


Wisemans ferry and crossing, Hawkesbury River



Colo and Lower Portland ferry crossings at the junction of the Colo and Hawkesbury Rivers

Photographs courtesy of Dennis Mitchell



Views of the Pitt Town crossing, Hawkesbury River

Photographs courtesy of Dennis Mitchell

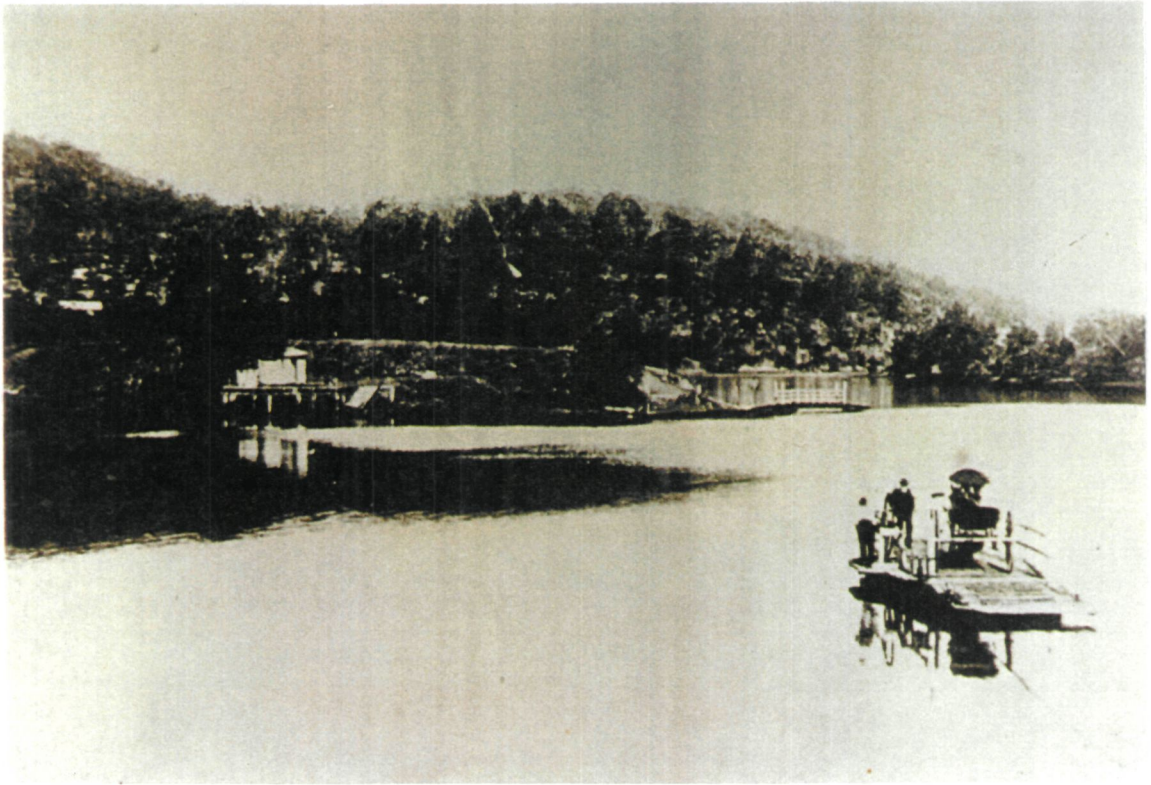


Hawkesbury River in flood during the 1980s

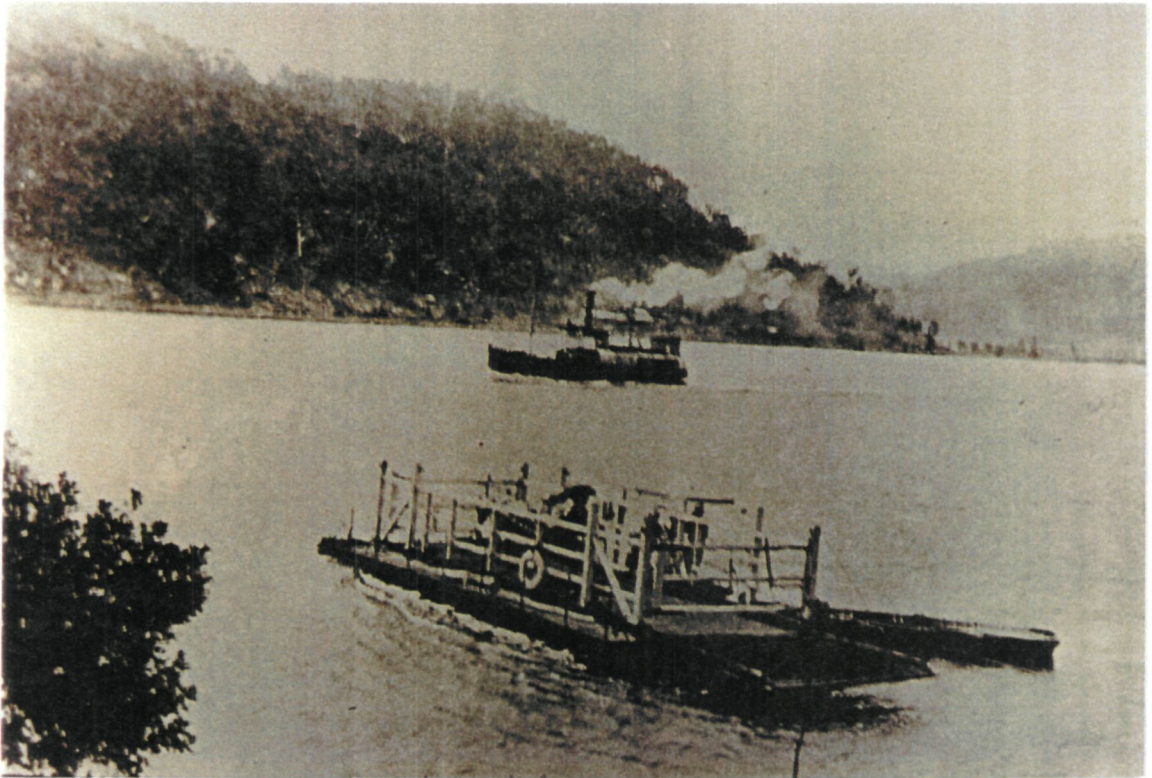


Photographs courtesy of Dennis Mitchell



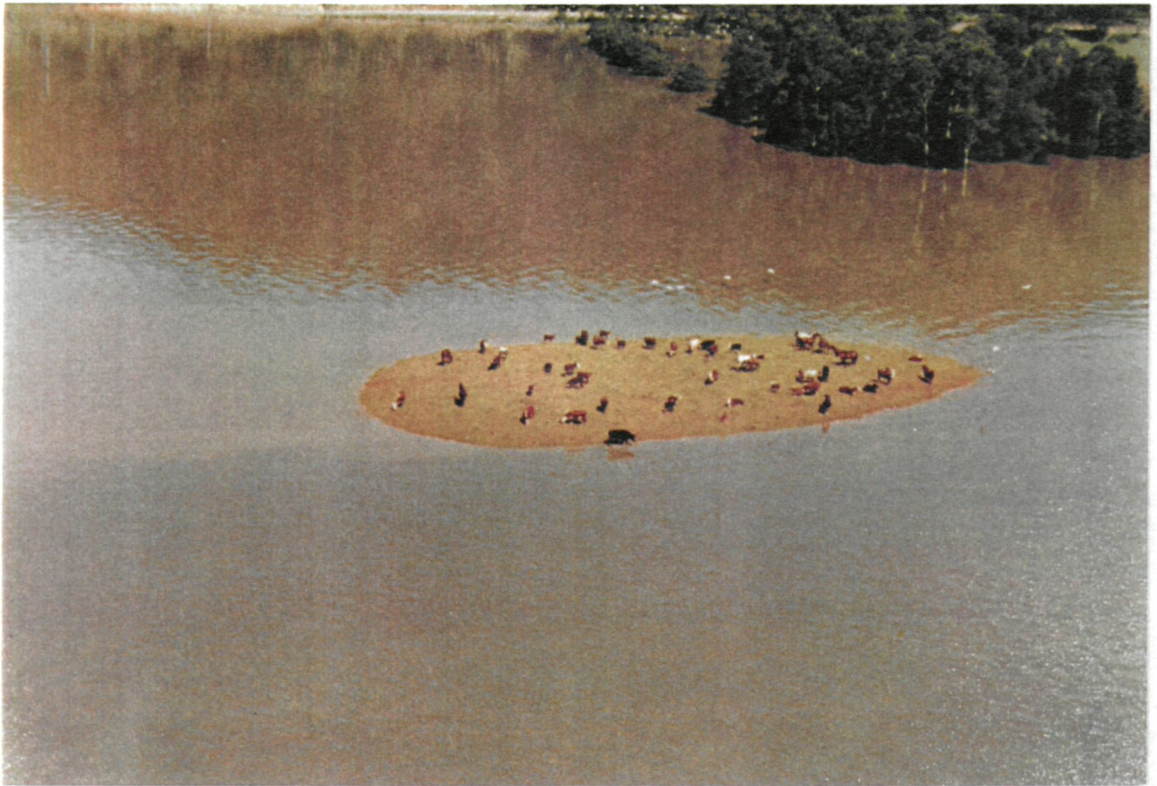


Lower Portland ferry, Hawkesbury River



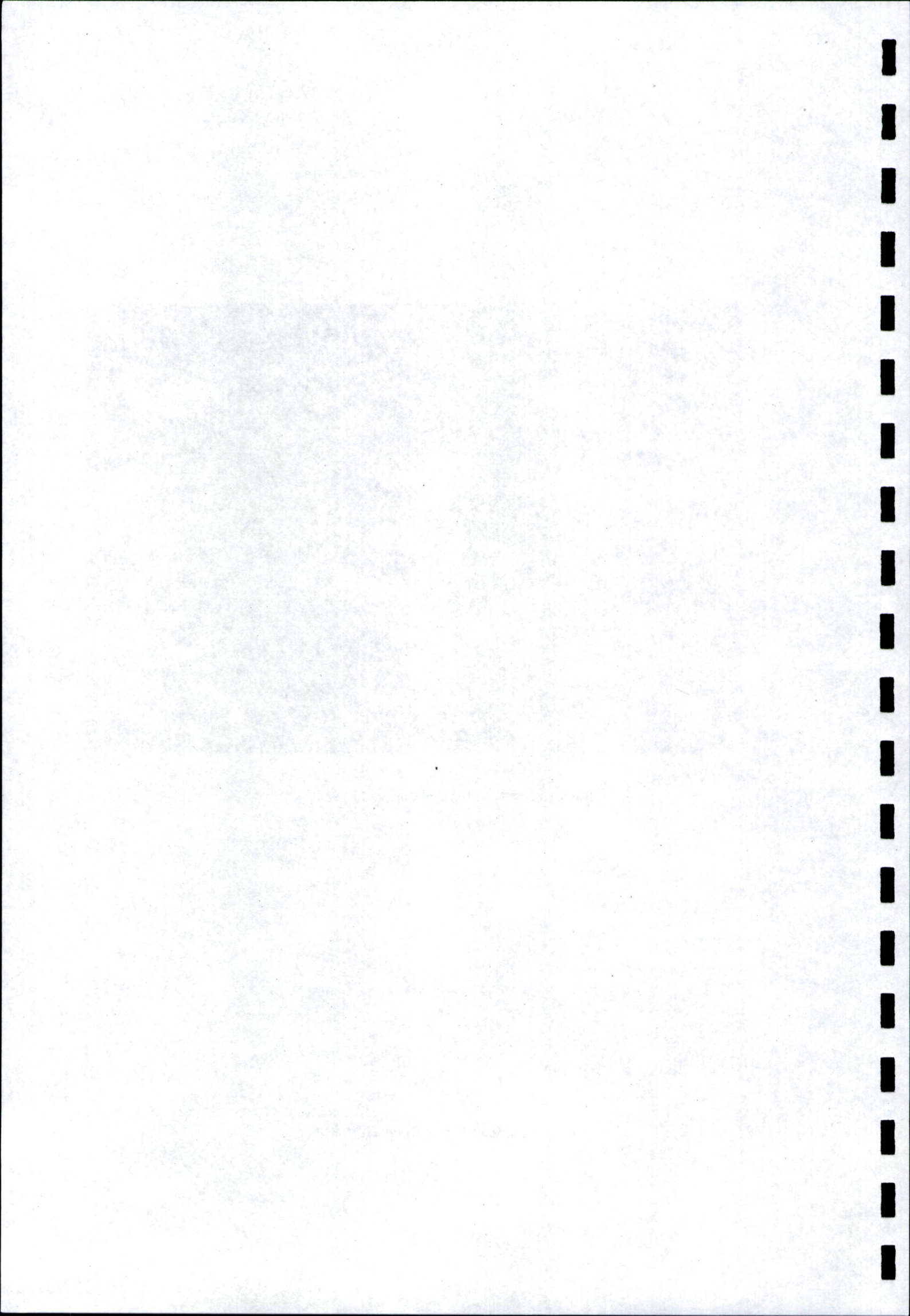
Webbs Creek ferry, Hawkesbury River

Photographs courtesy of Dennis Mitchell



Hawkesbury River in flood during the 1980s

Photograph courtesy of Dennis Mitchell



## 5.0 THE MURRAY RIVER VEHICULAR FERRIES

The Echuca, Moama, Barham - Koondrook and Bethanga ferries are four examples of the many ferries that once crossed the Murray River.

The punt that came to be known as the Moama ferry, was established in 1838 by James Maiden. Initially it was used to transport Maiden's wool clip over the river on route to Melbourne and became busier over the years, providing a public transport link from Sydney to Melbourne.<sup>24</sup>

In Echuca, Henry Hopwood owned and operated a ferrying business servicing local farmers. He was known as being an enterprising Echuca figure whose dream was to replace his punt with a bridge. In 1856 this was realised with the completion of a pontoon bridge at the Echuca crossing.<sup>25</sup>

Many farmers along the Murray River operated punts privately to transport their stock to or from markets and machinery to their farms. One example is of a farming family on Beveridge Island near Speewa, who owned and operated a steel hull barge style vessel and regularly used the punt to ferry sheep across to the markets on the mainland. Bill Brooks, former Speewa contractor, recalled his father telling him that this farmer lost his bulldozer when it toppled off the ferry. Apparently they started the diesel bulldozer up underwater and drove out of the water onto the bank.

There are currently two vehicle ferries operating on the Murray River, one at Speewa near Swan Hill and one at Wymah on the Hume Weir near Albury. The Speewa ferry is a three car, steel hull ferry while the Wymah ferry is the last timber ferry owned by the RTA, which also administers the contracts for the ferries operation. It also oversees the maintenance of the ferries with the costs being shared with the Victorian Government.

As on all of the RTA owned ferries, the responsibility for the daily and monthly maintenance of the ferry lies with the contractor. This work includes daily oiling and greasing of cables, drive wheels, engine and deck cleaning. The monthly service involves changing the engine oil, filters and checking condition of cables.

Minor repairs tend to be done unofficially by the contractor as they are required. Unexpected and major repairs have been dealt with by the RTA regional depots or by the Sydney based ferry maintenance team, but in more recent years some of this work, such as the engine overhauls, is outsourced to local businesses .

The ferry maintenance team still handles the major maintenance activity which occurs every three years when a complete overhaul and inspection of the vessel's hull and engine takes place.

There are no slipway facilities on the Murray River, so the three yearly overhaul is carried out on the banks of the Murray River at Speewa and at Wymah. A portable slipway is required to position the ferry on the riverbank and the engine is taken out and

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<sup>24</sup>Phillips, *Valmai, Bridges and Ferries of Australia*, Bay Books, Sydney 1983, p. 91

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91

sent to a local engineering shop for reconditioning. On site, the hull is inspected, repaired, abrasive blasted or stripped and repainted. The Wymah ferry poses particular maintenance challenges in dealing with its aging timbers. For example, in May 1998, John Clifford, the Ferry Maintenance Supervisor, experienced considerable difficulty in locating suitable unknotted Oregon timbers to replace deck timbers damaged by dry rot.

During the overhaul, the ferries are taken off the crossing for a period up to 2-4 weeks. Speewa locals access the Victorian side of the river via the bridge at Swan Hill. Wymah ferry users must travel a considerable distance out of their way over the Hume Weir when the ferry is out of service.

## Speewa Ferry

The Speewa ferry is one of the two ferries that are still in operation on the Murray River and is one of the three ferries directly administered through the RTA rather than through a local Council.

The Speewa ferry crossing is 300 metres wide and is located on the Murray River. The ferry travels between Speewa, in Victoria and Speewa Island in New South Wales and services the farming community on Speewa Island.

Ferrying the school children from the Island to the Victorian side of the river in order to attend school each day has been one of the most important and consistent services provided by the ferry since 1919. The ferry carries people to and from work and trucks taking stock and produce to the Melbourne markets. If the ferry is ever out of service the ferrymaster is required to row all foot passengers, including the school children across the crossing.

While the Island is accessible by bridge further upstream from the ferry crossing, locals prefer to use the ferry for it is quicker and more convenient. In recent years the ferry has become part of an increasingly popular tourist route around the Murray Valley area.

The Speewa ferry was established as a private punt by a local Speewa Island farmer, a Mr. J.F. Jager in 1914. At this time the crossing was located about one kilometre upstream from its present location.<sup>26</sup> The Main Roads journal of March 1979 notes that Jager subdivided and sold off his farm in 1919. At this time ownership of the punt was transferred to the new settlers who employed a ferryman to operate it.<sup>27</sup> By 1924 the Department of Main Roads took over the ownership and operation of the ferry.<sup>28</sup> This role has been continued by the Roads and Traffic Authority to the present day.

The DMR and later RTA have contracted numerous ferrymen over the years. In the late 1970's Bill Brooks' father won the Speewa ferry contract. The operation of the ferry was undertaken by various members of the Brooks family until the early 1990s when they lost

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<sup>26</sup> Department of Main Roads NSW 'New Ferry at Speewa on the Murray' in *Main Roads DMR Sydney*, March 1979 p. 84

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

the ferry contract to Rod Harrop. John Jager has the current contract and is a descendant of the original owner of the Speewa ferry, J.F. Jager.

The first ferry was a small hand winched timber vessel. It was replaced by a larger hand winched ferry in May 1928. In 1952 a motor was installed and according to the Main Roads journal of March 1979, this ferry operated with only a drive cable until 1963 when guide ropes and a more powerful diesel engine were fitted.<sup>29</sup>

During the 1970s it became apparent that this ferry was soon to need major repairs to its aging timber hull. At this time, the viability of keeping the ferry running was under question and there was serious consideration of discontinuing the service. This proposal drew fierce objections from the Speewa community especially from the parents of school children living on the Island and attending primary school in Victoria.

In view of this public protest it was decided to retain the ferry and the Department of Main Roads Workshop in Granville built a new three car steel hull vehicle ferry which began operating in 1979.

Martin Haley commented that the building of a ferry was "quite revolutionary for the DMR at the time". Martin was involved with the design and the transportation of pontoons to Speewa and said;

*The ferry (design) was too big and heavy to be carried by road and that cost was too large - and the weight was also too heavy for some of the bridges, - we had a design problem - so they decided to make it out of pontoons, separate tanks that they could bolt together on site.*

Once on site, Martin recalled that there were a few problems with the design of the ferry. The ferry was built with square ends and because the approaches on that crossing are shallow, the ends of the ferry had to be modified to have tapered ends, ramps were lengthened and bolted on to extend the reaches. Martin recalled another problem associated with the ferry's design;

*it floated like a cork, it was so buoyant, it was unstable ... we wanted the pontoons to be sealed air tight so as not to have internal corrosion ... so in the end we had to ballast the hull with concrete test cylinders*

A combination of the steep grade of the Murray River banks and the seasonally low river levels has always made it difficult for the ferry to smoothly dock on either side of the crossing. This problem was addressed in the late 1960s with approaches being concreted and the ferry being fitted with tow flaps.

The Speewa Ferry currently operates from 6am to 9pm every night except on Tuesdays (local community meeting) and Fridays until 11pm and then on Saturdays until 12.30am.

When Bill and Cheryl Brooks had the contract, peak time for morning traffic on the ferry was from approximately 7am to 9.30am when school children were ferried across the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

river. The afternoon peak period started when school children returned to the Island and lasted until 5.30pm or 6pm. Bill and Cheryl recalled that during the middle of the day the traffic was intermittent with cars crossing about every 15 minutes.

Other busy times were Friday and Saturday nights when locals used the ferry to travel to entertainment spots. On these busy nights Bill and Cheryl Brooks commented that it was virtually impossible to have their evening meal without disruption. In fact, their distracted behaviour, the ferry stare, was material for a long standing joke among their family and friends;

*You get what you call the ferry stare (while sitting inside the house)... of a night time - you just wait for the lights (of the cars) ... and you continuously just look out the windows and you've got your visitors there and because you're doing it (looking out for cars) your visitors end up by doing it too - so you called it the ferry stare*

It seems that most of the ferrymasters came to know regular users of the ferry quite well and established a rapport with them. Bill and Cheryl recalled feeling that their work as ferrymasters was not just a job but they were providing support and service to the community, often ferrying locals across the river out of operating hours or helping to fix cars that had broken down on the ferry. Bill's father became quite a legendary figure in the local community and the stories of his practical jokes and outlandish sense of humour still circulate today.

Unlike many of the ferry crossings in NSW, the Speewa ferrymaster's contract includes accommodation for the ferrymaster and family. The ferrymaster's house is located on the NSW side of the crossing and is owned by the RTA. The various families who lived in the house have adapted it to their own uses and tastes, verandahs have been erected and animal pens constructed.

### **Incidents**

Working the ferry contract inevitably involved various dramas. At Speewa, Bill recalled his role in the arrest of a group of car thieves where he stalled the ferry mid stream in order to delay the thieves until the police arrived. Late another evening, Bill unknowingly caught a thief in the process of stealing the outboard motor from the ferry's dinghy. He was able to identify him to the police the following morning. There have also been minor accidents on the Speewa ferry such as trucks rolling off the end of the ferry and cars breaking down on board the ferry, but there have been no major accidents at this crossing.

Although the Murray is not subject to daily tidal changes in water level, seasonal changes in the level of the river have had an impact on the operation of the ferry over the years. Interestingly, Bill and Cheryl did not refer to the river in flood as such, instead they spoke of the river running at its high level, noting that the river rises gradually over a period of months. While high river levels do occasionally bring the problem of debris and drowned stock being caught in the ferry cables, it seemed that the ferrymaster was more concerned by low river levels. In some years the river has been so low that the ferry has been unable to operate.

## Wymah Ferry

The Wymah ferry is located on the Hume Weir, travelling between New South Wales and Victoria. When the Weir is full, Lorraine Wait, the current Wymah ferry contractor, estimates that the crossing is half a kilometre wide and takes thirteen minutes to cross.

Like the Speewa ferry, it is administered directly through RTA and services the local farming community, providing transport across the Weir for farm vehicles and stock trucks. In recent years the ferry has also become part of a popular tourist route around the Albury-Hume Weir area.

The ferry crossing was established in the 1860s by Baker Vincent whose interest was in ferrying people from the southern shore to his hotel, the Victoria Hotel in Wymah, NSW. It was used by locals to reach local stores and services in Wymah. At this stage the ferry was located upstream approximately one to two kilometres from its present position. It was initially named the Wagra ferry and was built by Baker who employed an operator to drive it.

Shortly after 1906 when the Hume Shire was established, the council took over administering and maintaining the ferry. Initially, there was a toll for users of the ferry of tuppence per foot passenger, sixpence for horse/cart, half penny to a farthing for sheep, thruppence for goats and tuppence for bicycle. This toll was abolished in 1908 when the Victorian and New South Wales State Governments and the Towong Shire Council collaboratively funded the ferry service.

In 1921 the ferry sank and was not replaced until 1924 when F. E. Millican built a new timber ferry on site. This second ferry on the crossing weighed 200 tonnes and as well as providing an essential service for the Victorian and NSW farmers, it also proved its worth carting materials for the construction of the Bethanga Bridge.

In 1935, the NSW DMR took responsibility for the ferry and crossing and moved the crossing to its present location. In 1946 the timber ferry that is in operation now was put into service on the Wymah crossing. The old ferry was firstly sunk and then later sold to Bert Hanley who retrieved the ferry timbers and used them to build sheds and fence parts for his property at Granya, Victoria.

The present Wymah ferry is a 2 car ferry and continues to act as an important link between NSW and Victoria for locals who commute to work and farms and for transporting stock on their way to market. Weekend traffic is swelled by tourists and in the 1970s and 1980s by Victorian patrons of the Dora Dora pub at Wymah. The Wymah ferry is the only remaining timber ferry owned by the RTA in NSW.

As with the Speewa crossing, the seasonally low river levels on the Hume Weir have affected the ferry's operation and smooth docking on either side of the crossing. Lorraine mentioned that there had been several times over her years operating the ferry, where the crossing has had to close for weeks because of the low water levels in the Weir. This was the case in May 1998, when we interviewed Lorraine. At this time the ferry had been out of operation for six weeks. Over the previous year the Weir had dropped from its high point to a level of 10 percent capacity and the original river bed could be seen. Lorraine



commented that the current level of the river is the lowest she has seen for approximately 35 years.

To handle these huge changes in river level, a unique and essential feature on the Victorian side of the Wymah crossing is a timber jetty. It is fitted with rollers running on metal tracks which allow the jetty to be rolled or pushed or up or down by a winch, or by the ferry depending on the Weir water level. Lorraine recounted stories about the jetty occasionally being towed half way across the river and then having to get local farmers to tow the jetty back to the Victorian side with their tractor.

Lorraine Wait has had the Wymah ferry contract since 1987. She was born in Tallangatta and lived on the Victorian side of the river and until she met her husband she had not used the ferry at all. It was the courtship with Alan Wait in the early sixties that introduced her to the ferry and she recalled being quite "terrified" on her first journey across the river to meet her future inlaws for the first time. At this time she had no inkling that she would eventually be the ferrymaster, however this role has become a much enjoyed part of her life.

Lorraine is one of a line of women drivers who have worked on the Wymah crossing over the past several decades. Although the contracts have generally been let to the husband of a husband and wife team, it seems that much of the day to day operation of the Wymah ferry has been done by the women while the men work on their farms or in other employment.

Lorraine recalled the names of previous ferry contractors including Arthur Jackson, Jack Robertson and Ron Hoard. Merv and Dorothy Cox were the contractors in the late 1960s early 1970s. Dorothy operated the ferry with the assistance of her family for quite a few years relinquishing the contract when she moved from the area after marrying George Barnes, the Ferry Maintenance Supervisor at the time. Tony Edwards was the next ferry contractor who worked the crossing until 1987. Tony noted that his wife Pat also operated the ferry while he tended his other business interests.

Lorraine's working day begins at 6am and she provides the ferry service as requested until her breakfast break at 7.15am. She operates the ferry until her lunch break at 11.45am and then again until her tea break at 5.15pm. Alan drives the ferry when Lorraine does the weekly shopping on Saturday and does heavier maintenance work on the ferry. Generally on weekdays, traffic on the ferry is light, except on stock sale days, weekends, during holiday season and during shearing season when traffic increases significantly.

Wymah ferrymaster's contract also includes accommodation for the ferrymaster and family at Wymah in New South Wales. Similarly to the Speewa contractors, the Wymah ferrymasters' have left their mark on the cottage. Lorraine's particular contribution has been to erect a verandah area and establish well tended gardens.

Like the Speewa contractors, Lorraine considers it important to provide a generous and flexible service to the small local community who use the ferry. For example stock trucks needing an early start on auction day are carried across out of regular hours often at 4 or 5 in the morning.

Knowing most of the regular users, Lorraine prides herself on keeping well informed on events and happenings in the local community and will often share her local knowledge with tourists visiting the area.

### **Incidents**

There have been numerous incidents involving the Wymah ferry, perhaps the most infamous being the 'hijack' of the ferry by a local policeman in the 1970s.

The antics of a local farmer in his amphibious car were recalled by Tony Edwards and Lorraine Wait. Tony had several near misses with the car as it raced him across the crossing and Lorraine was left doubting her sanity when first sighting it on the day she took over the contract;

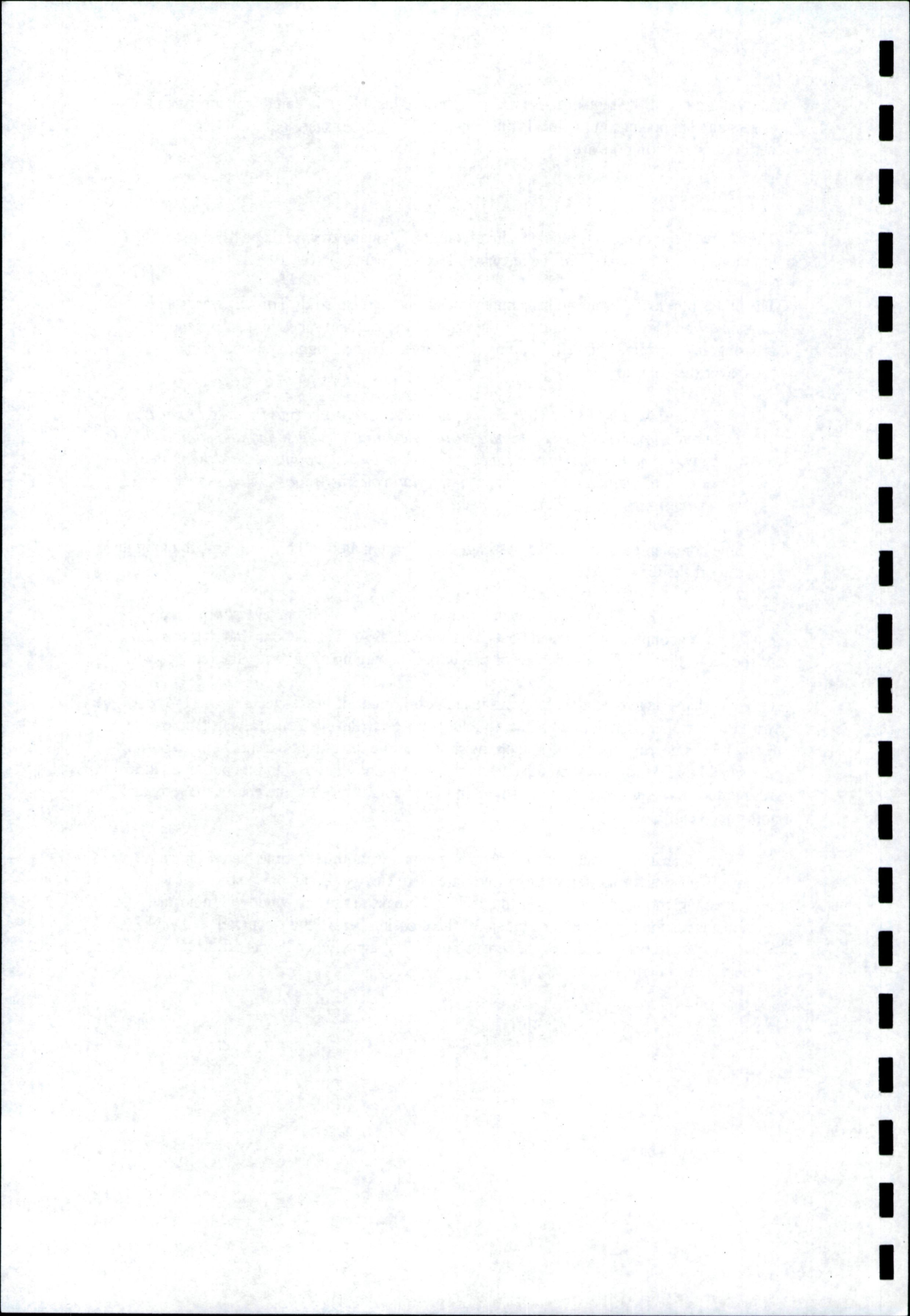
*I looked out and I saw a car driving around in the water and I thought I must be seeing things and I said I am not telling them that (her husband and son) ... then David came running in and said "did you see that amphibious car driving in the weir" and then I said "by crikeys, I am glad you saw it too, I thought I was seeing things"....he often races me across.*

Lorraine commented that alarmed passengers have often alerted her to the car, thinking it had run off the ferry or jetty.

The Weir is used as a recreational watercourse and there have been several potentially dangerous encounters with speed boats over the years. As well as boats moving too close to the ferry, there is also the danger of speedboats damaging or severing the ferry cables.

Other mishaps have been the result of the lack of thought of passengers, as was the case with one unsupervised young child who fell off the ferry during Tony Edwards time. Tony recalls hearing a splash and then the shouts of the distraught parents before spotting the small boy floating away on the current. Tony stopped the ferry and then jumped in to rescue the boy. Another incident resulted in a ute being driven off the end of the jetty and into the Weir.

The Wymah crossing is subject to very strong winds from time to time which can cause various problems for the ferry. Lorraine related that the winds can be so strong as to whip up waves big enough to wash over the deck and break on the car windows. In normal circumstances the ferry would be taken off the crossing before this occurred. The high winds were also responsible for the ferry being blown away when it was off its cables while undergoing maintenance.





**THE  
MURRAY  
RIVER  
FERRIES**





Old timber Speewa Ferry now located at Swan Hill's Pioneer Settlement



Speewa ferry on the banks of the Murray River during an overhaul



Cheryl Brooks taking children across the Murray River to the local primary school in Speewa, Victoria

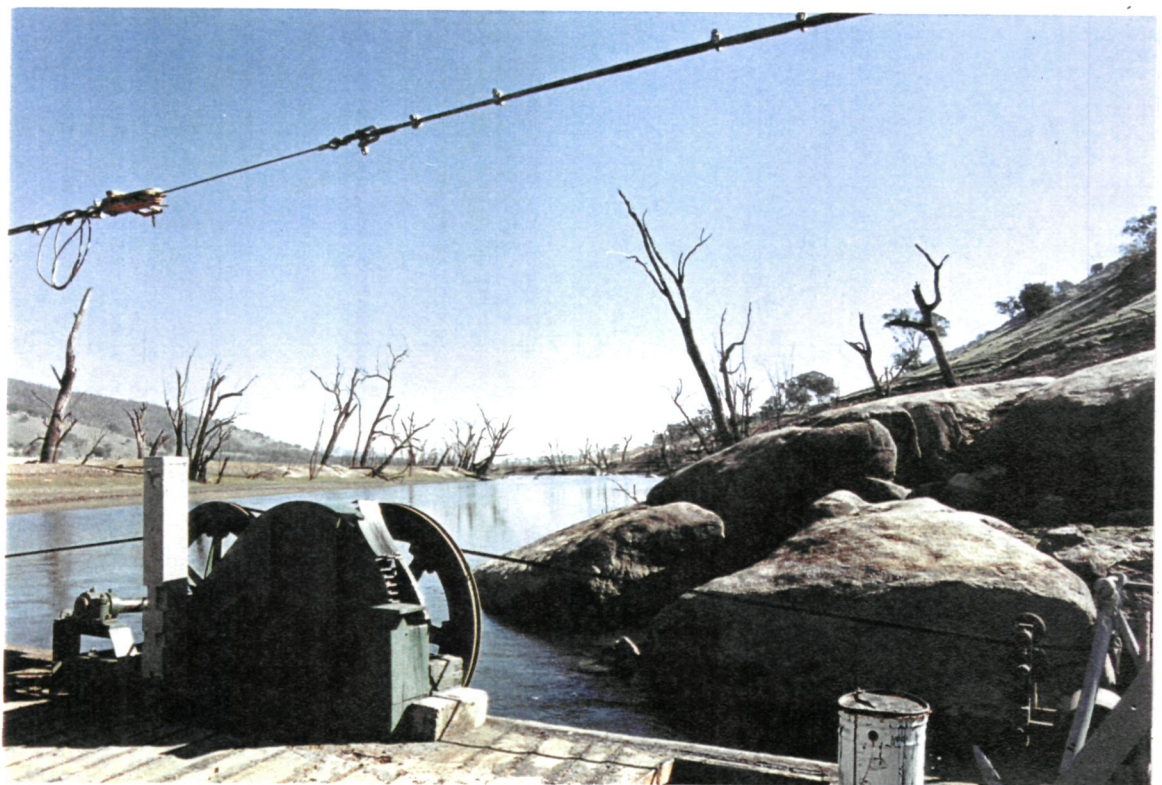
Photographs courtesy of Bill & Cheryl Brooks, Swan Hill



Views of old timber Speewa ferry at Swan Hill's Pioneer Park



Wymah crossing when Hume Weir is full



Wymah Ferry on Hume Weir at low water level

Photographs courtesy of Lorraine Wait



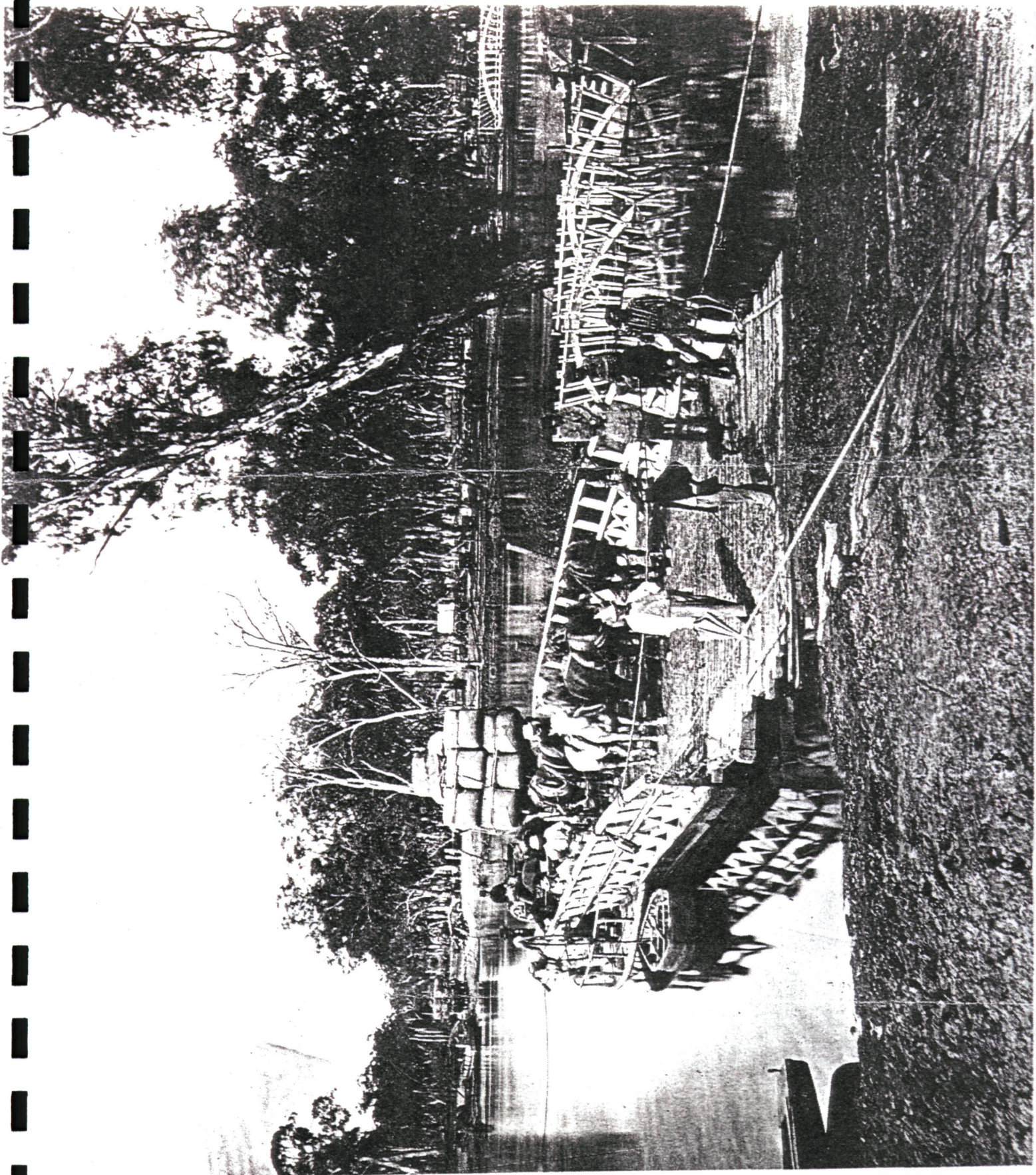
Lorraine Wait in Wymah ferry cabin



Wymah ferry deck

Alan Wait on Wymah ferry

Photoghs. courtesy L. Wait



D. Moore 6K, p 160a

Henry Hopwood with the punt and pontoon bridge in Echuca.  
Wool wagon ready to disembark punt and queue of customers on far side

Thomas Foster Chuck, c 1860



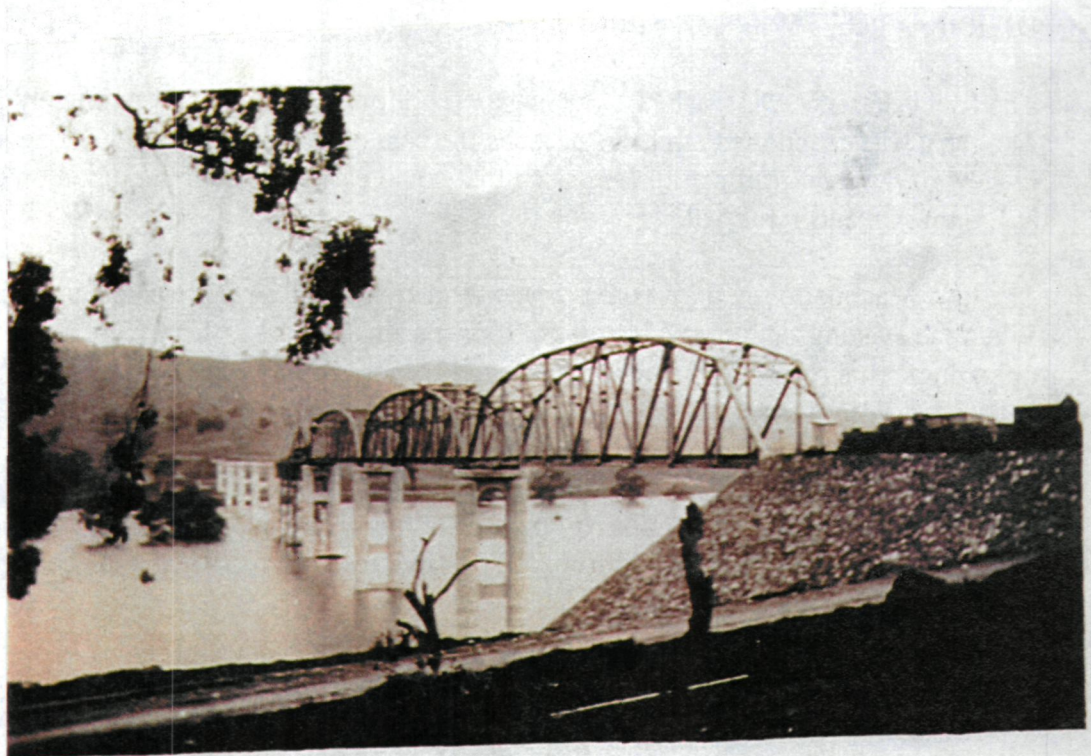
1998 view of ferry rail leading to Wymah crossing - taken from Victorian side of Weir



1998 Wymah ferry jetty - Photog. courtesy of Lalith Amaraweera



Old Wymah timber ferry – poss. Pre 1928



Bethanga Bridge

Photographs courtesy of Lorraine Wait

## 6.0 THE HASTINGS RIVER VEHICULAR FERRIES

There are currently two vehicular ferries operating in the Port Macquarie region, the Hibbard and the Settlement Point ferries, both owned and operated by the Hastings Shire Council.

Until the late 1960s, there were several vehicular ferries in the region owned and operated by the DMR (now RTA). These crossings were at Blackmans Point on the Hastings River and on the Macleay River there were ferries at Smithtown, Jerseyville and Kinchela.

Brian Pearson, former DMR Chief Engineer, Bridges, recalled that the Blackmans Point ferry on the Hastings River was part of the Pacific Highway and was the busiest of the DMR crossings in the area.

Blackmans Point punt commenced operation in 1844 and was the first punt to operate in the region. Initially the 20 ft x 12 ft punt was rowed across by the operator and it was later fitted with a hand winch. Apparently the passengers regularly helped the ferrymaster winch the ferry across the river<sup>30</sup>. According to H.H. Dare, a new timber cable driven ferry was built for this crossing in 1911 and was fitted with an oil engine because it was thought that at the time the crossing was not busy enough to warrant a steam driven engine.<sup>31</sup> At some stage it became a steam driven ferry and possibly in 1950 a diesel motor was fitted. 1961 saw the opening of the Dennis Bridge, a seventeen span, steel truss and plate girder bridge and the Blackmans Point ferry ceased operating.<sup>32</sup> The Dennis Bridge was named after Spencer Dennis, the first Bridge Engineer to come to the DMR from Public Works Department.

The Kinchela ferry was washed away out to sea during a flood in approximately 1950. The ferry was abandoned after this because the cost of salvaging it could not be justified in view of the light traffic at this crossing that could easily be accommodated on bridges at Smithtown and Jerseyville.

The Port Macquarie region was also home to many council owned vehicular ferries. When the Hastings and Port Macquarie Councils amalgamated, there were five ferries operating in the region, the Rocks, Hacks and Dunbogan ferries as well as Hibbard and Settlement Point ferries.

The Rocks ferry operating at the site of the Hastings River Bridge in Wauchope, was a two car ferry with a diesel engine. It operated at this crossing ferrying mainly school children and dairy farmers to and from their properties. The ferry was replaced by a bridge in March 1983.

The Hacks ferry crossing was established in 1910. This ferry, crossing the Maria River provided a small farming community with access to Telegraph Point and Port Macquarie.

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<sup>30</sup> Historical notes sourced and provided by Jim Pittman, included in Appendix 6

<sup>31</sup> Dare, H H 'Vehicular Ferries in NSW' in *Minutes of the proceeding of the Institute of Civil Engineers London*, Vol. 187, p 292 - 300, 1912.

<sup>32</sup> Department of Main Roads, 1987 op cit., p. 236

The crossing was abandoned in March 1985 and the Hacks ferry was transferred to Hibbard as a relief ferry.

Jim Pittman, Hastings Shire Council Plant Superintendent, remembered an incident involving the sinking of the Hacks ferry which was carrying a Council F350 truck and super spreader. Apparently sometime in the early eighties the contractor was a Mr. Murphy and he was in the habit of letting his seven and eight year old children operate the ferry. The extraordinary load together with the fact that the children did not pump out the ferry as they should caused the ferry to sink. Fortunately no one was hurt.

Jim Pittman mentioned some of the ferrymasters who have operated the different ferries over the years. Fred Stiles operated the Hibbard ferry from about 1963 to 1983, a Mrs. Rose operated the Rocks ferry from 1980 to 1983 and the Murphy family operated the Hacks ferry from 1981 to 1985. The Settlement Point Ferry was operated by Bert Hayward from 1976 to 1979, by Allen Schmith from 1983 to 1995 and by Paul Eades and Rick Doney from 1995 to 1998.

A number of the people associated with the ferries in the Port Macquarie region commented that some operators suffered the effects of boredom on the quieter ferry crossings. It was not uncommon for them to find relief from the boredom by taking to drinking while on duty. This was a problem particularly during the 1950s and 60s. On at least one occasion the police were required to pacify the operator and get the ferry operating again.

### **Hibbard Ferry and Settlement Point Ferry**

The Hibbard and Settlement Point ferries are located on the Hastings River and they travel between Port Macquarie and Port Macquarie's north shore. These ferries are owned and administered directly by the Hastings Shire Council.

The Hibbard ferry carries 80,000 vehicles per year and the Settlement Point ferry carries 286,500 vehicles per year. A toll of \$1.00 for cars, \$2.00 for trucks and \$4.00 for semi trailers is charged on both ferry crossings. There is a half price concession for locals using the ferry services.<sup>33</sup>

The Hibbard ferry started operating in 1900 and at the time, it was a steam operated timber punt capable of carrying two cars. Three ferries have operated at this crossing over the years.

A new steel pontoon ferry was constructed by the Hastings Shire Council and put into operation in 1984. Jim indicated that the design and construction of this ferry was a major initiative for a Shire Council. It was constructed at the Hastings Shire Workshop in three pontoon sections and was transported to the crossing in sections. On site it was assembled on a trolley and then launched into the river. Jim mentioned that there were initial buoyancy problems which required the ferry to be modified;

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<sup>33</sup> Notes compiled by Jim Pittman, included in Appendix 6

*We needed to get more buoyancy either end of it (the ferry) so the ramp units were disconnected and lowered down until they were in the water and that then gave us buoyancy right up to the nose where the flaps were mounted on and we kept lowering it down until we got the same angle as the concrete approaches so the ferry wouldn't beach.*

Jim pointed out that the short flaps were also a problem and were replaced by five metre flaps.

The Hibbard ferry was initially started up to service the dairy farms and oyster leases on Port Macquarie's north shore. Jim pointed out that the ferry has also been used by the cane industry on the north shore and currently the growing tea tree industry. Over the last twenty years, the north shore has become an increasingly popular residential area for retirees and the ferry has become essential to these residents.

Current operating times of the Hibbard ferry are 6.30am to 10am and then again from 2.45pm to 7pm. In school holiday periods, the ferry operates from 6.30am to 7pm without a break.

Limeburners Creek Bridge on the north shore was built as part of the DMR's ferry replacement program in the early 1980s. It was thought that the building of this bridge would replace the Hibbard ferry. At the time there was much local opposition from the land owners to the closing of the Hibbard ferry and concerns were also raised about the impact of increased traffic on the Settlement Point ferry. It was decided to keep the service operating indefinitely after this local pressure.

The Settlement Point Ferry commenced operating in 1954. In 1975, a steel hull ferry that was in service on the Hawkesbury River (possibly ferry No. 22) was purchased from the DMR. Jim mentioned that a large amount of work was carried out on this ferry over the following eight years because there was quite a lot of rust damage and other problems that needed attention.

In 1987 the Settlement Point ferry underwent a major overhaul, replacing all the white ant damaged timber protection rails and kerbs with steel fittings.

The Settlement Point ferry provides Port Macquarie's north shore residents with access to Port Macquarie and gives the local community and tourists access to the nature reserves and beaches. The ferry is located downstream from the Hibbard ferry and crosses the river close to its mouth.

The Settlement Point ferry provides a 24 hour service every day of the year except on the fourth Wednesday of the month when it is given a maintenance service.

Over the years, there has been pressure from developers to open up Port Macquarie's north shore to major residential development, necessitating the replacement of the Settlement Point ferry with a bridge. The Hastings Shire Council was concerned at the costs of servicing these developments on the flood prone land and approval was not granted.

Both the Hibbard and Settlement Point ferries undergo daily maintenance by the contractor, in addition they have a monthly service day on site. These are carried out by Jim Pittman and his maintenance crew as is the major overhaul.

The ferries are taken off their crossings when they undergo the major overhaul and for many years were taken to the Council owned slipway at Hibbard. The slipway was established early this century and was busy for many years servicing Council and DMR ferries as well as privately owned vessels.

The environmental impact of sandblasting and the associated noise pollution in an expanding residential area are the main reasons the Hibbard Slipway ceased to be of service to the Hastings River ferries in 1984. The Hastings Shire Council currently uses Burden Sand's slipways in Port Macquarie when overhauling and sandblasting the ferries.

### **Incidents**

Aside from incidents involving trucks straddling the bank and the ferry and the occasional car going through the ferry gates into the river, the most frequently remembered events are the emergency crossings. One incident in particular, involved the Hibbard ferry operator deliberately delaying the trip across the river with a north shore hemp grower on board. The ferry was delayed until the police arrived at the crossing.

As on many of the large north coast rivers, floods, threat of flood or run out tides are a concern to both operators and those using the ferry service. Over the years there has been a number of occasions when both the Hibbard and Settlement Point ferries have had their cables dropped and been taken out of service until waters subside. Jim commented that the major threat to the ferries in a flood is the huge amount of debris racing down the river. Debris catching in the cables can sever or damage them and also damage the drive mechanism.



# HASTINGS RIVER FERRIES



Hibbard ferry, 1984



Settlement Point ferry, 1988

Photographs courtesy of Jim Pittman



Fitting the old Hibbard ferry with a hydrostatic drive, pre-1984



Photographs courtesy of Jim Pittman

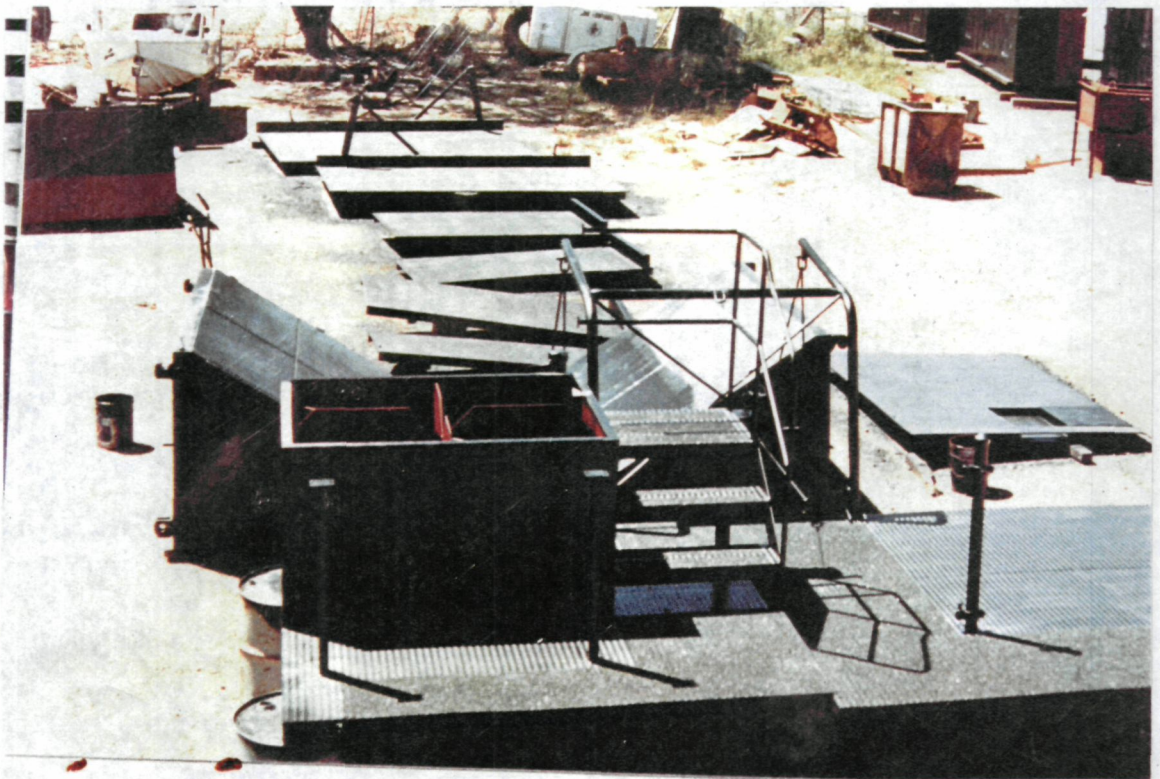


New Hibbard ferry on Hibbard slipway. 1984

Photograph courtesy of Jim Pittman



New Hibbard ferry pulled apart ready for sandblasting, 1984



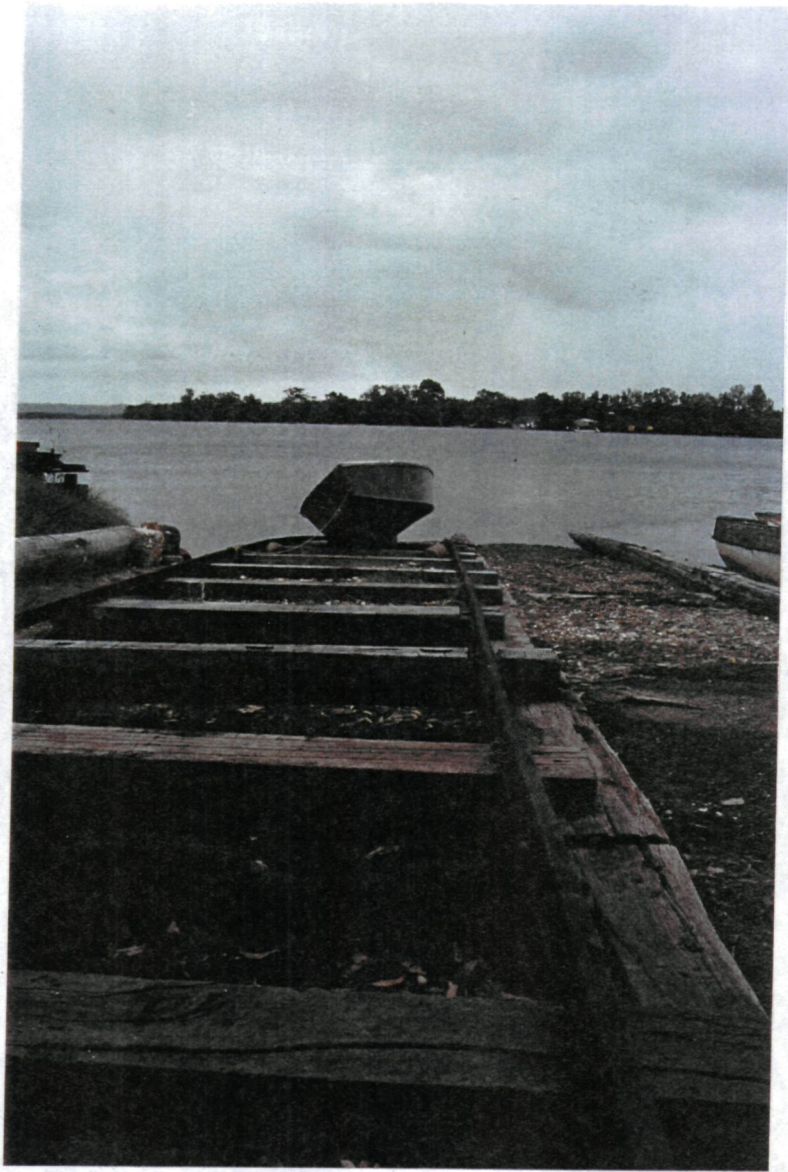
Photographs courtesy of Jim Pittman



Hibbard ferry,  
1998

Hibbard ferry,  
Engine room, 1998





Hibbard slipway  
1998





Large loads carried on the Settlement Point ferry



Photographs courtesy of Jim Pittman



Settlement Point ferry on a local slipway after an overhaul, 1987



Settlement Point ferry, 1987

Photographs courtesy of Jim Pittman



## 7.0 THE CLARENCE RIVER VEHICULAR FERRIES

The Clarence River winds its way through a large part of northern New South Wales, through Grafton to Maclean and down to the sea at Yamba. Until the 1950s the river supported a flourishing ship building industry and was bustling with boats, trawlers, tug boats, cane barges and large ships which transported bully beef and wool to Sydney.

Terry Doolan, Bridge Maintenance Planner, RTA Grafton regional office explained that the cane industry has had a long history in the Clarence River area. CSR owned a sugar refinery at Harwood and all the cane grown in the area was transported there by river. In the 1970s CSR sold their mills, prompting the cane farmers to form a co-operative and buy the mill. He recounted;

*Up until the late 70s, all the cane was transported by cane barges.....the cane barges were quite a sight to see, there were probably 50 to 70 cane barges all strung together and they are quite massive things towed by tug boats*

As the Clarence River reaches the coastal hinterland it is broken up by up to a hundred islands. Until the late 1950s and early sixties travel on the Pacific Highway from Sydney to Brisbane was punctuated at the Clarence river by numerous vehicle ferry crossings. One virtually 'island hopped' across the river, using ferries including the Harwood ferry, the Chatsworth Island ferry and Chatsworth-Mororo ferry.

Similarly local traffic was facilitated by vehicle ferries to other small, populated islands in the region. In fact, the vehicle ferries were essential to the island communities in the area until the late 1960s as demonstrated by one of our interviewees who travelled from Iluka to Maclean High School;

*I lived on Chatsworth Island and went to high school in Maclean and had to use the ferry every day to get across to school....some days it could take two hours to get to school on the bus, with bad roads, old buses, the irregular ferry service and the tides*

Within the recollection of our interviewees there were said to be up to 19 vehicle ferries on the Clarence River. These included;

- Brushgrove - Cowper ferry
- Brushgrove-Lower Southgate ferry
- Tyndale ferry
- Bluff Point ferry connecting Lawrence and Woodford Island
- Maclean-Woodford Island ferry
- Broadwater Creek ferry
- Maclean - Ashby ferry
- Harwood ferry
- Palmer's Channel ferry
- Oyster Channel ferry
- Ashby-Warregah Island ferry
- Chatsworth -Warregah Island ferry
- Chatsworth - Goodwood Island ferry

- Goodwood Island - Iluka ferry
- Ulmarra ferry
- Grafton ferry

In the early days, as well as these publicly used ferries, there were also privately owned punts or barges operating at various locations facilitating the movement of produce and supplies across the Clarence River. The ferries to Turkey Island and Gourd Island are an example of this.

Currently there are only two vehicular ferries crossing the Clarence River, the Ulmarra ferry and the Bluff Point ferry. Ferries were gradually replaced by bridges and in the post war years, as cars became more popular and the transport of produce by ship was replaced by road transport, this process was accelerated. As well, with the introduction of mechanised cane cutting, there was a sudden increase in road haulage of sugar cane, necessitating a strategy for the development of roads and the prioritisation of bridge works in the area.

John Clifford, the current Ferry Maintenance Supervisor, mentioned that the Clarence River ferries were and continue to be important to the local community and are a highlight for tourism in the area.

*The ferries are important to the local community, they have always been a part of peoples lives.....Bill Day on 2GF gets on his show at 9.30am and says "a good trip is to go across the Ulmarra ferry and then down to Lawrence across the Lawrence ferry (Bluff Point) then across to Maclean for lunch back up the highway again"*

Terry Doolan added, that the vehicular ferries have played an important role in the development of the NSW north coast.

*In the 1900s you couldn't travel by road from Sydney to Brisbane without travelling on ferries - the ferries played a massive part of the trip with 20 or 30 ferries to cross....they were an integral part of life and people probably don't realise how difficult it was to bridge across rivers ... industry relied on the ferries too*

### **Brushgrove - Cowper Ferry**

The Brushgrove to Cowper ferry commenced in the mid 1800s, servicing mainly maize farmers in Brushgrove. According to 'Ferries of the Lower Clarence', there were two ferries operating across the South Arm of the river at Brushgrove, however the lower ferry was discontinued when the local store and hotel closed, leaving the upper ferry to provide an important link between Woodford Island and the main Grafton road.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Towner D Stuart with additional material by Eleanor H. McSwan *Ferries of the Lower Clarence*, Maclean Historical Society, Maclean NSW, 1985.p. 28.

This ferry was owned by the Public Works Department and was a hand operated two car ferry. Around 1932, the ferry was replaced by a new four car ferry fitted with a diesel engine and was later rebuilt in 1941. After the Second World War there was local pressure to replace the ferry with a bridge. The Wingfield Bridge was opened in August 1958, putting the ferry out of service at this crossing.<sup>35</sup>

### **Brushgrove-Lower Southgate Ferry**

Council records indicated that in 1907, a ferry was purchased for the Brushgrove to Southgate crossing. In 1909, this ferry was transferred to the Maclean to Ashby crossing and the small hand operated ferry from Oyster Channel was transferred to the Brushgrove to Lower Southgate crossing. This ferry was later replaced by a larger ferry with a diesel engine and operated until the 14th October, 1968 when the service was terminated.<sup>36</sup>

Phil Hicks and Ray Blanch both operated the Brushgrove to Southgate. Phil recalled that at night on this crossing, some people would take themselves across on the ferry rather than wake the operator.

### **Tyndale Ferry**

The Tyndale ferry operated between Woodford Island and Tyndale. It served Woodford Island locals with a convenient route to connect with the bus and train services on the mainland.<sup>37</sup> The ferry was a timber, hand-winch vessel and one of our interviewees recalls that it remained hand-winch until the early 1950s. The ferry ceased to operate in the mid 1950s.

### **Maclean-Woodford Island Ferry**

The Maclean to Woodford Island ferry was possibly the first ferry to operate on the Lower Clarence River. It was possibly established by a Mr. M. McLeod who charged ninepence to travel across the river in his small timber hand winched ferry. A ferrymaster's house was established on the Maclean banks of the Clarence River. Charles Wilson 1837 - 1919, was the last operator to run this ferry. Pressure from the local community and the local MP Mr. John McFarlane resulted in the building and opening of the McFarlane Bridge in 1906, a wooden bridge noted for its bascule type opening.<sup>38</sup>

### **Broadwater Creek Ferry**

The Broadwater Creek ferry serviced through traffic and the local farming community travelling via the alternative route from Lawrence to Maclean. The small hand winched timber ferry was possibly operated from as early as 1880 until 30 September, 1907, when a bridge was built over Broadwater Creek. This ferry was taken to be used at the Warregah to Chatsworth Island crossing.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 31-32

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 17

## **Maclean - Ashby Ferry**

The Maclean to Ashby ferry service travelled across the Lower Clarence River from McNaughtons Place, near the current Post Office, to the mainland at Ashby. There are no records of when this ferry began operating. 'Ferries of the Lower Clarence' quotes from a newspaper article on the 26 July 1890, which reported the Ashby ferry was nearing completion, but points out that this may not have been the first ferry at this crossing. Like many of the other ferries operating on the Clarence River during this period, this ferry was also a small hand operated ferry which was fitted with a twin cylinder engine in 1920. It was not until 1936 that a new 39ft x 20ft6ins cable operated, timber ferry was built locally. This ferry was fitted with a Lister diesel engine.<sup>40</sup>

The Maclean to Ashby ferry serviced the local communities of Ashby, Maclean and Tully Morgan. Lyn McSwan, Maclean Historical Society member, noted that the crossing was busy, ferrying children to and from school, dock workers to work at the Ashby Dry Dock and serving local traffic and industry.

This ferry ceased operation in September 1981, when the bridges linking Ashby to Chatsworth across Warregah Island were completed. The local community were opposed to the closure of the ferry because it provided a convenient link between Ashby and Maclean. It was felt that the bridges were built primarily to accommodate the growing cane industry. Locals regarded the ferry so warmly that a farewell party was organised on the ferry's last day of operation.

The ferry was installed in Ferry Park, Maclean, as a reminder of river transport in the early days. (see photographs at end of this section)

Lyn recalled that for a long time the ferry operated only on one cable, so often broke away during periods of flood. Another interviewee, Margaret Switzer, who lived on the banks of the river at Harwood, recalled seeing this ferry drifting past her house during a flood, some time in the early 1960s.

These were not the only times the Ashby ferry broke away. During the 1970s Ray Blanch, the operator at the time, recalled the Ashby ferry's cable catching on a rock and snapping. The ferry, loaded with cars, drifted down the river until a fishing trawler came to their aid. Stuart Harding, former RTA Ferry Maintenance Foreman in Grafton, recalled another occasion when the Ashby ferry broke a cable. The ferry started drifting down stream and the operator threw the anchor overboard in an attempt to stop the ferry. Unfortunately the anchor was not securely tied to the ferry. He then let down the lifeboat to row passengers to land only to discover that there were no oars to be found in the boat.

## **Harwood Ferry**

Until steam ferries were introduced on this crossing, the great width of the Clarence River (750 yards at this point) prevented a hand winch ferry from being used on the Harwood crossing. Being on the main north - south road from Sydney to Brisbane, it fell to the NSW Public Works Department to commission the first ferry to operate on the crossing.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 9-13

The ferry, which was built locally, started operating in 1885. It was a timber, steam powered ferry of 55ft3in in length, 22ft8in in width, with engines fitted to the sides of the ferry.

Up until the 1950s, increases of traffic on this crossing were handled by employing progressively larger ferries. By the early fifties it became clear that this strategy would not continue to service the traffic and discussions took place regarding the possibility of operating two ferries. Finally, in 1954, two ferries were put on the crossing in time to accommodate the Christmas traffic. By the time the Harwood Bridge was built in 1966, there were three ferries operating in tandem on this crossing, running on separate cables, approaches and ramps. These ferries were ferry No. 7, which came from Grafton, No. 8 which came into operation in 1937 on the crossing and No. 25 which came from Blackmans Point crossing on the Hastings River.<sup>41</sup>

The pressure of traffic on the crossing gave rise to many personal accounts of long delays with people sometimes having to sleep in their cars overnight during the peak holiday times. Edith Dobbin recalled that there was a huge build up of traffic at the Harwood crossing during the Queen's visit in 1964.

*.. when the Queen visited Casino, the traffic was lined up to the Serpentine Bridge past Tabbimoble (more than 20kms) ... it went for miles*

In the recollection of our interviewees, all the ferries were central to the life of the community, in particular the Harwood ferry because that it was a main road ferry. Many people indicated that the ferry timetable "*governed your life*" - dictating when you woke up in order to catch the ferry to school, work etc, when one made their shopping trip or simply planning one's activities to avoid peak periods or times on the ferry.

As well as governing one's timetable, the ferries themselves played an important part in activities of the community. Margaret Switzer recalled that during fishing season, bream and prawns would be swept up on the ferry flap and the local children often ran down to collect them. Earlier on, locals occasionally provided accommodation for people who missed the last ferry.

Lyn pointed out that the ferry operators were often more than helpful, mentioning that the ferrymasters kept a list of due dates of pregnant women on the island and gave them priority crossing as their due date grew nearer.

Edith Dobbin, member of the Maclean Historical Society, expressed the warm regard the Harwood ferries were held in by the community;

*Harwood was the most beautiful, precession thing, the work room, the cabin, all the brass clocks - the time clocks were polished to the nth degree - all the steam pipes were covered with rope and painted white and kept in immaculate condition, always - and the puntman with his beautiful brass oil can, he used oil every trip - every trip he oiled the cogs ... if cattle went across - (the ferry) was always hosed down. Harwood was always a beautifully kept set up*

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 33-40

The coal for the ferries came from Newcastle and the water was drawn from the government wells located on Margaret's family property. (See Appendix 7). In the mid 1940's Margaret recalls spotting DMR personnel bicycling down to the wells to check the pipelines.

There have been several incidents involving the Harwood ferries. Margaret recalled being present on the ferry when a load of cattle raced to the far end of the ferry, tipping it up. She claimed that the incident did not frighten her - it was just one of many small "fun" dramas that happened on the ferry. Other incidents have included a local young woman getting her foot stuck under the ferry flap and cars and trucks crashing through the ferry gates into the river. Ruth McAuley, Maclean Historical Society member, recalled being a passenger on a school bus that broke through the gates on the Harwood ferry, almost ending up in the river.

Every one we spoke with recalled the opening of the Harwood Bridge in 1966 and the farewell celebrations for the ferry. While the bridge was welcomed as a much needed convenience the community continues to regard the memory of the Harwood ferries with affection.

### **Palmers Channel Ferry**

The Palmers Channel service was a small chain driven wooden ferry without gates that operated between Palmers Island and the mainland near Maclean. This ferry was replaced by a bridge sometime between 1924 and 1928 when the Main Roads Board built a bridge further up the channel. This bridge was later replaced by the Camberon Bridge.<sup>42</sup>

### **Oyster Channel Ferry**

During the 1880s the Oyster Channel ferry was established and continued to provide an important service for the Yamba and Maclean communities until a bridge was built in 1908.<sup>43</sup>

### **Ashby - Warregah Island Ferry**

There was a small hand hauled privately owned ferry operating at this crossing during the late nineteenth century, however when the CSR's mill at Chatsworth closed in 1987 the ferry was abandoned.<sup>44</sup>

### **Chatsworth -Warregah Island Ferry**

In 1907, the Broadwater ferry was transferred to service a new crossing from Warregah Island to Chatsworth. It was operated by Alex Anderson, a local farmer, who then employed operators as the crossing became busier. The ferry service was discontinued in 1976, when the Warregah-Chatsworth Bridge was completed.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 17

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 18-19

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 24

An interviewee recalled the hand operated ferries at Chatsworth - Warregah and noted that sulkies and cars travelled by ferry, whereas foot passengers travelled by row boat.

Edith recalled her Saturday trips on the Warregah ferry when she was a child;

*I used to have to ride my bicycle from Harwood to Warregah Island to get eggs every Saturday morning and you can imagine what it'd be like for people who weren't used to punts, getting in the punt with their bike and a basket full of eggs, but you sort of learnt how to ride with the roll*

Phil Hicks operated this ferry during 1965 and noted that the service was important for transporting fertiliser and other supplies to the Warregah Island cane farmers. He pointed out that the Island was home to only five families. Phil operated the ferry 24 hours per day and between the hours of 11pm and 6am, charged a toll of 20c per vehicle. He described the ferry as a two car timber ferry with a single cylinder Lister motor. Ray mentioned that he took over the contract for this ferry in 1968 and continued working the ferry until 1974. After this he went on to drive the Brushgrove to Southgate ferry.

### **Chatsworth - Goodwood Island Ferry**

The Chatsworth to Goodwood Island service was operating from as early as the 1870s, servicing local residents, school children attending school on the north bank and local cane farmers. It seems that this ferry was privately operated until 1906, when it was taken over by Harwood Shire Council. It was then purchased in 1907 by the Public Works Department. The ferry remained on this crossing until 1967, when the Goodwood Island Bridge was opened and was then transferred to Chatsworth - Warregah crossing.<sup>45</sup>

As with all of the ferries, the Chatsworth to Goodwood Island ferries had their share of dramatic incidents. Phil recalled that in 1966 the ferry sank. Apparently a truck overloaded with electricity poles bound for Iluka proved too heavy for the vessel. It was later restored to service.

### **Goodwood Island - Iluka Ferry**

1911 saw the long awaited introduction of a ferry linking Iluka and Goodwood Island, giving the Iluka community more convenient access to Maclean and Grafton. After local pressure the Esk Bridge was finally built at this crossing in 1964 and the ferry was given to the residents of Turkey and Gourd Islands.<sup>46</sup>

Locals perceive that the township of Iluka was slow to develop initially because there was no ferry, thus making it a long journey by road to Maclean services, and in later years by an unreliable ferry service. This crossing was rough and often the ferry would have to be taken off service. Edith recalled times when waves would wash over the ferry and other times when there was a long wait to get across.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 22

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 30

The difficulties faced by residents of Iluka were exemplified in Lyn's story of school children travelling to school each day;

*I was teaching at that time and I really admired the Iluka boys and girls who came to school in those days, having to cross those ferries and they were always late and sometimes they left early if there was a rise in the river... they left home at 7 in the morning and didn't get home to 6 at night, so they really earned their education*

The ferry service at this crossing not only provided a much needed means of transport, the ferrymaster also acted as the provider of fruit and vegetables for the local community. This seems to have been a feature of many of the ferry services on the Clarence and Richmond Rivers. Ruth recalled;

*The Goodwood ferry operated as the local fruit and vegie shop, he had local fruit and vegetables on board and as the ferry went across people did their shopping as well ... always fresh*

The mishaps on this crossing were caused to a large extent by the environmental conditions. Being located quite close to the mouth of the Clarence River, the area is prone to significant tidal changes, moving sand bars and large waves in bad weather.

Like many of the other ferries on the Clarence River, the Iluka ferry also had its share of vehicles pushing the ferry off the banks and also vehicles crashing through its gates. One such incident occurred in 1960 when a disembarking bus pushed the ferry away from the bank landing the ferry into deep water. Fortunately no one was injured and Lyn McSwan noted such incidents led to the introduction of tighter safety measures.

The last Iluka ferry ceased operating in 1964.

### **Chatsworth to Mororo Ferry**

As one travelled north on the Pacific Highway, the final crossing over the Clarence River, was provided by the Chatsworth to Mororo ferry. Initially owned and operated by the Public Works Department, it was taken over by the newly formed Harwood Shire Council in 1907. In the early 1920s, the original ferry was replaced by a small timber, hand-winchd ferry. It was not until 1928 that a powered ferry was installed on the crossing. The ferry was replaced with a bridge in 1935.

It is well remembered in local legend, that this ferry served as an impromptu "concert hall" for Dame Nellie Melba on one of her northern tours. Regularly, from the 1860s, the ferry carried Ashton circus trucks, animals and other circus paraphernalia on their way across the final arm of the Clarence River. Locals remember the year that the ferry sunk under the weight of the circus and also the annual gathering of circus elephants at the ferry approaches.



## Ulmarra Ferry

The Ulmarra ferry is one of the two remaining ferries on the Clarence River. A small timber hand winched ferry was established at this crossing sometime between the late 1860s and before 1880s to service a small local community with access to Grafton. Today, the ferry is mainly used by locals and tourists who wish to travel the alternative scenic route between Maclean and Grafton. Terry Doolan mentioned that traffic on the ferry is minimal with approximately six cars crossing per day. The ferry remains in service due to community pressure.

The current ferry at this crossing is a steel hull six car ferry constructed in 1959. Unlike the Bluff Point ferry, the Ulmarra ferry is run and administered by the RTA South Grafton office, including contracting out its operation. The regional workshop is responsible for routine maintenance on the ferry and the Sydney maintenance crew conduct the three yearly overhaul.

The ferry takes up to 12 minutes to make a crossing. During rough weather, the high winds noticeably affect the operation of the ferry, with cars slipping around the deck from time to time. Another difficulty with this crossing is its steep winding approaches. After years of large vehicles being stuck or damaged trying to embark and disembark the ferry, large articulated vehicles and caravans have been prohibited from using the service.

John Clifford recalled that early in 1998, the hydrostatic drive “locked up” on the Ulmarra ferry in the middle of the crossing while two cars were on board. A boat had to be called out to tow the ferry into the bank.

An incident that occurred in 1926, involved a Mr. Albert whose brakes failed when he was driving down the approach to the Ulmarra ferry and his car crashed into the river.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in the late 1970s a car crashed through the Ulmarra ferry’s gates ending up in the river. Terry recounted the incident;

*a woman was drowned up at the Ulmarra crossing, they panicked, hit the accelerator (instead of the brake) and went through the gate, it was a low car, went under the chain and straight into the river, she was quite a big lady, she was a passenger, someone else was the driver and they couldn't get her out*

Ray Blanch recalled operating the Ulmarra ferry between 1983 and 1987. He worked for Ted Skinner, a contractor who also had the contract for the Bluff Point ferry at this time. Ray noted that the traffic at Ulmarra was relatively light with most traffic being the local butter factory’s milk trucks. The ferry was a four car ferry when Ray drove it and it operated all day until 11pm. After this time only emergency vehicles were taken across.

Lawry Duff purchased the last timber ferry on the Clarence from the Ulmarra crossing and converted it to pile driving barge which he continues to use to this day.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 47

## Bluff Point Ferry

The crossing at Bluff Point was established in 1882, linking Lawrence to Woodford Island. Historically the crossing provided a route for the transport of goods and passengers to Grafton and Lawrence. Both these towns were at one stage major commercial and shipping centres. During the early years of this century, Grafton eclipsed Lawrence in importance and became the main destination for traffic using the Bluff Point crossing.

As the Pacific Highway has been progressively upgraded, it has attracted most of the north - south traffic along the coast. The Bluff Point route now serves as an alternative route for local and tourist traffic from Grafton to Maclean. It is still one of the busiest crossings in NSW, now ferrying a total of approximately 35,000 vehicles per month. As well as local commuter and tourist traffic, the local sugar cane industry depends upon this crossing.

Ferry No. 91 is the current ferry at the Bluff Point crossing. The eighteen vehicle steel hull ferry is owned by RTA and the Maclean Council administers the ferry and contracts its operation. The Sydney maintenance team carries out a three yearly overhaul on the vessel and the Maclean Council is responsible for routine maintenance and servicing.

The original ferry was a small hand winched timber ferry accommodating sulkies and foot stock. In 1928 a larger timber ferry was put on the crossing. It was not until 1959 that the ferry was fitted with a diesel motor. This ferry continued to service the crossing through the 1960s, when locals began to agitate for a bridge to be built at the crossing. In response to this, the Smithtown (Macleay River) ferry was transferred to Bluff Point in 1971. This ferry was a timber, six car ferry. In 1982, again in response to increasing traffic, the old Woodburn ferry No. 7 came into service on the crossing. This ferry could handle twelve cars or one cane truck and four cars. It was soon realised that this was totally inadequate for a crossing handling such a volume of cane trucks.

Ferry No. 91 that currently is in service at the Bluff Point crossing was originally a six car ferry, serving as a relief ferry on the Hawkesbury River. It was constructed in 1985 by the State Dock Yard to replace the Hawkesbury ferry No. 4 which was lost at sea while being towed to Port Macquarie for slipping. It was soon found to be unsuitable for the volume of traffic on the Hawkesbury crossing and so it was decided to be put on the Bluff Point crossing after being modified. The ferry was towed to Ashby Dry Dock where John Clifford and his team cut the ferry in half and welded a twelve metre section (built by Yamba Welding and Engineering) into the middle of it. According to John, traffic on the Bluff Point crossing "snow balled" after this larger ferry was put into operation.

John regarded his work on the modification of the Bluff Point ferry as one of his biggest challenges and takes great pride in that particular job.

Cane truck traffic on the crossing has increased dramatically since the farmers ceased using the cane barges as transport in favour of trucks. This change began in the 1970s and by the early 1980s the cane trucks posed huge problems for the ferries and operators alike. Stuart Harding noted that the configuration of the cane truck's rear axle caused serious damage to the ferry flaps which were modified through a process of trial and error

and became a feature of the current Bluff Point ferry. Additionally, as Ray Blanch and Phil Hicks noted, the cane trucks were regularly overloaded, causing increased wear and tear on the ferry and stress for the ferry operators.

Phil Hicks held the Bluff Point ferry contract from 1966 to 1972, operating the ferry on request 24hrs, seven days a week recalling that the traffic was constant and only broken by meal breaks of half an hour. His wife occasionally drove the ferry and he sometimes employed a relief driver. Phil mentioned that his contract was worth about \$7,500.00 per year. He pointed out that there was a ferrymaster's residence owned by DMR, located on the Woodford Island side of the crossing that was rented to the contractor for \$15.00 per week.

### **Incidents**

The increasing number of cars and heavy vehicles has resulted in a number of dramatic incidents over the history of the Bluff Point crossing. In 1926 a car with driver and several passengers plunged into the river when the ferry took off from the bank with only the front wheels of the car on the flap of the ferry. Fortunately, everyone managed to get out of the car and swim back to shore.<sup>48</sup>

In 1973 one of the smaller Bluff Point ferries sank under the weight of a Shire low loader. Ray Blanch remembered hesitating to ferry the vehicle across and that at approximately mid way through the crossing the ferry began to take water and eventually both the ferry and low loader sank. Luckily Ray and the Shire worker were both able to swim to shore. During the two week retrieval operation, the crossing was closed much to the consternation of the local community.

Another incident recalled by Ray occurred in 1972, when an overloaded timber truck almost sank the ferry and caused it serious damage. A relief ferry operated on the crossing until the ferry was repaired.

Some accidents on the Bluff Point ferry have been fatal. Edith recounted an accident that occurred in 1939 involving the Lanshaw family, a local dance band, crashing into the river on their way home. All the family managed to swim to safety except for the father who drowned.

More recently in 1983, a Grafton woman drowned. She was a passenger in a car that crashed through the gates and sank in the river.

Ray and Phil recalled other incidents, such as having to hand winch the ferry when the guide cable broke and trawlers getting caught in the cables.

Floods, storms and winds have plagued the ferry over the years. During floods farmers often transported their livestock on foot on the ferry. These times were problematic for the operators because there was always the danger of the ferry tipping when the livestock were herded onto the ferry.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 47

Many times over the years, the ferry has had to be taken off service due to bad weather or during floods. Ray recalled that, on occasions, when it was too stormy or windy to operate the ferry, some people became very impatient and irritable about being delayed or having to reroute their journey.

As with the Ulmarra ferry, wind was also a problem at this crossing. Phil recollected that the engine room on old Bluff Point ferry hung over the side of the ferry and the wind often would cause the waves to wash through the engine room.

## Ashby Dry Dock

For many years, maintenance on the Clarence River ferries was done at Ashby Dry Dock in Ashby. The Ashby Dry Dock was owned by the Public Works Department who operated the dock until the cane barges ceased operating in 1974. Terry recalled that in 1975, the dry dock was bought by the DMR for \$10,000.00.

In addition to servicing local ferries, many of the Sydney region ferries were towed up to the Ashby Docks for overhauls. Ferries from the Richmond River were towed to the docks for maintenance work up until the 1980s when the Maritime Services Board required the ferries to be towed by professional tug operators rather than local fishing trawlers.

Over the years the Ashby Dry Dock has been upgraded. Improved hydraulic motors were fitted to the gates, modern pumps were fitted to the dock and the old crane, built in the 1920s, was replaced. Currently the site is undergoing an environmental study which is checking for contamination.

Lalith Amaraweera, RTA Ferry Maintenance Engineer, explained that waste management procedures now in place at Ashby Dry Docks have increased the duration of time spent on overhauls by two to three weeks. In line with growing environmental concerns, Lalith noted, that currently all waste and water at Ashby, must be collected and transported off site. The area is required to be covered when sandblasting ferries.

Terry Doolan emphasised the historic significance of the Ashby Dry Dock;

*(Ashby Dry Dock is) ... definitely of heritage significance because it has been the hub of all the ferry and boating activity on this river ... up until the 1950s the river was incredibly busy, there were massive wharves all the way up the river....there would have been dozens of ships tied up there*

Lawry Duff, Yamba tug boat operator, started towing the vehicular ferries to the Ashby Dry Dock during the late 1980s. He pointed out that in recent years silt has built up in front of the dry dock gates at Ashby, because dredging is not allowed any longer.

*The last couple of times I have towed the ferry, I have had to spend a day blowing the silt away from the gates with the propeller of the tug so the gates can open wide enough for the ferry to get in and out ...*

Maintenance, repairs and overhauls to the Ulmarra and Bluff Point ferry are carried out at the Ashby Dry Dock. Many of the interviewees pointed out that towing and docking the ferries is not a simple task, with tides and winds posing particular challenges.

Phil Hicks, former Clarence River ferry operator, recalled Stewart Towner, from the Maclean Shire, putting the relief ferry on the Bluff Point crossing while the permanent ferry went to Ashby for an overhaul.

*It took about three hours, he had to pull the wire rope through the drive and then rethread it right back through the other ferry (relief ferry) and it can be a dangerous job ... you had to have two ferries side by side and do the cable changeover ... it is hopeless to do it in a run out tide because the ferries don't lie straight, an in tide is the best*

Lawry Duff also recounted the problems involved with towing the relief ferry from the dock to the various crossings, changing over ferries and towing the other ferry back to the docks for its overhaul or repair.

*There is a lot more to worry about when you are pushing a vehicle ferry, particularly the Lawrence ferry (Bluff Point ferry) because it is so big ... there is a correct position to be tied up to them, you can be out by 5 -10 feet and they won't handle as they should ... I bought the Lawrence car ferry down and a 35 knot southerly came along and I was tied to the wrong side of it and I had to start turning 2km before I had to turn into the dock otherwise I would have gone past the dock onto the mud flats ...*

The current relief ferry is a steel riveted hull ferry built in 1899 and worked the crossing at Grafton. Initially it was steam operated and was converted to diesel in 1957. Terry shared a local joke about the relief ferry turning 100 years old.

*We are holding celebrations next year for it (the relief ferry), the good news is it has lasted for 100 years and the bad news is that it will have to last for another 100 years.*

## Grafton Ferries

The "Swallow" was built in United Kingdom and was used around the 1860s as a coal transporter in Newcastle, England. It then was converted to a troop carrier and travelled to North Africa during the First World War. The "Swallow" then came to Australia, working possibly in Sydney and in Tasmania and finally arrived to work on the north coast as a train carrier.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rail was an extremely important part of the transportation infrastructure in New South Wales and other states. The "Swallow" provided an invaluable link in the intercapital route from Sydney to Brisbane, ferrying trains across the river until the Grafton Bridge was built in 1932. Terry thought that the remains of a hull that can be seen in the Clarence River near Grafton is that of the "Swallow".

The Grafton vehicular ferries were also a focal point for locals. Ferries operated across the river near the present Catholic school to an approach in South Grafton near the Marina Hotel. Terry pointed out that before the bridge was built in Grafton, north and south Grafton were quite different towns. They had their own mayors and there was some friction between the two communities.

Terry mentioned that there was a hotel on each side of the crossing and the south Grafton men drank at the hotels on the southern side and the north Grafton men drank at the northern hotel. Apparently to contravene this protocol would result in fights. When the bridge was built in 1932, north Grafton, became the major centre.

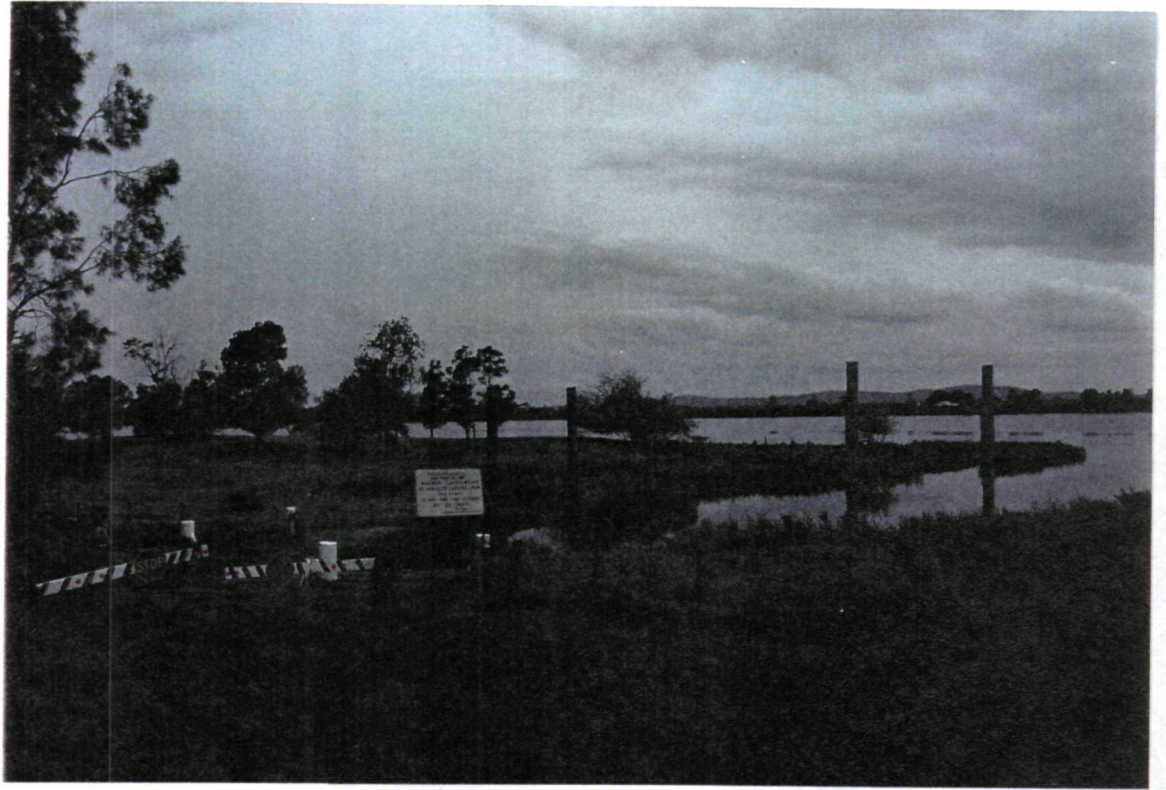
# CLARENCE RIVER FERRIES



1998 Ulmarra crossing

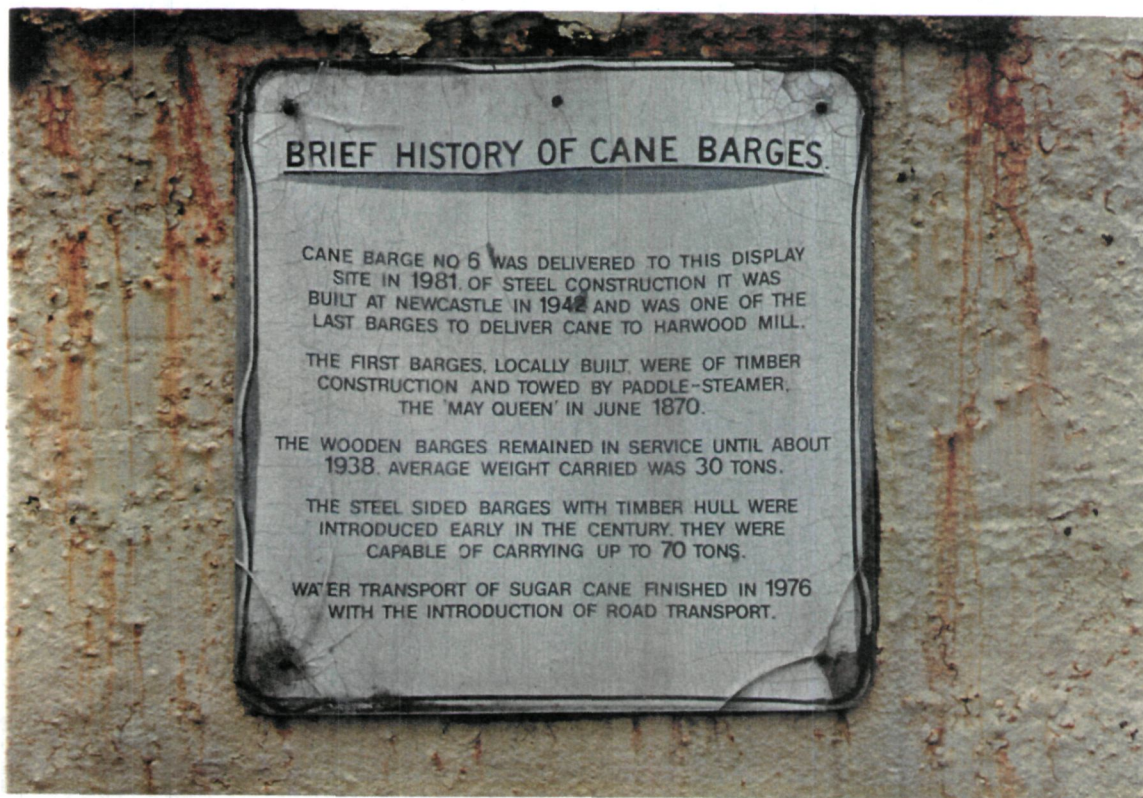


1998 Bluff Point ferry and crossing



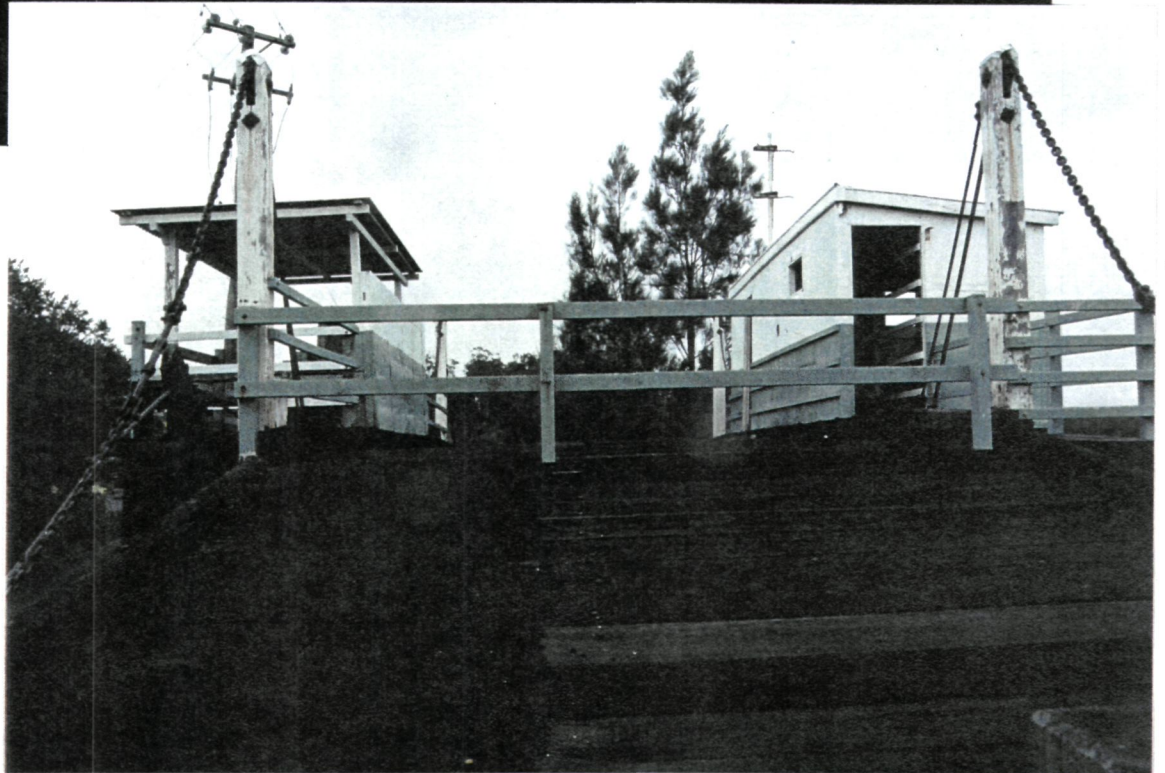
1998 - Ulmarra ferry approach





1998 - Cane barge at Ferry Park, Maclean NSW

Views of old  
Ashby ferry at  
Ferry Park,  
Maclean NSW



1998 -  
Views of  
Bluff Pt.  
ferry





1998 - Bluff Point approach and ferry mooring piles



1998 - Lawry Duff in  
front of tug used to tow  
Clarence River ferries to  
Ashby Dry Docks

## 8.0 THE RICHMOND RIVER VEHICULAR FERRIES

The Richmond River, in northern New South Wales, runs through Kyogle, Casino, Coraki, Woodburn, Broadwater, Wardell, Ballina and finally out to sea.

Many towns of varying size developed along the river, supporting a community made up of primary producers, service industries, schools and local shops.

Like the Clarence River, the Richmond River was bustling with river trade. Large ships and boats transported cane, dairy produce and other farm produce locally and to Sydney and Brisbane. Marie Newman, local Historian, recalled that when she was young there were boats still going to Lismore taking people to shops and services there.

Laurie Clifford, former Richmond River ferry operator, remembered that up until the 1960s, there were large boats using the river. Laurie worked cutting cane in the region and pointed out that the cane industry was very well established in the Richmond River area. Ships took refined sugar from mills on the Richmond River to Sydney. Laurie said of the river;

*In those days this river was terrific, there was plenty of water everywhere, but since the boats and barges have stopped running around the river it has silted up.*

There were many vehicular ferries servicing the community along the Richmond River. They played an integral part of the community's life. The ferries took stock, produce and passengers across the river to towns, farms, work, schools, church or shops.

Within the recollection of our interviewees there were said to be up to six publicly owned vehicle ferries on the Richmond River and these included;

- Wyrella ferry
- Coraki ferry
- Wardell ferry
- Woodburn ferry
- Swan Bay
- Broadwater ferry
- Burns Point ferry

As well, there were privately owned punts that aided farmers in getting their produce and supplies across the Richmond River, the sugarcane barges being the most common.

Like on the Clarence River, a lot of the punts were initially privately owned and operated with the Council taking over the responsibility for them and later some were taken over by Public Works and then the DMR.

## Wyrella Ferry

The Wyrella ferry was located on the Lismore arm of the Wilson River. Norm Newman, husband of interviewee Marie Newman, recalled that the ferry was always a timber hand operated ferry. He knew the operator at this ferry, Pete West, and recalled a sign Pete had nailed to the ferry, "I work 165 hours per week". Norm pointed out that the operators on this ferry worked 24 hours per day on request.

## Coraki Ferry

Coraki was established in 1849 by William Yabsley. The next few decades saw Coraki develop into a flourishing port and a large population growth in the town.

Marie Newman commented that a ferry service was operating in the 1870s at Coraki and a new ferry was launched by William Yabsley Jnr in August 1879. This ferry travelled the Richmond River between the present police station and McDermotts Point.<sup>49</sup>

Marie mentioned that up until the Council took over the Coraki ferry from the Minister for Works in 1897, the ferry service was leased to Mr. Nolan in 1891 for ten pounds, Patrick Gillick in 1892 for 53 pounds and then in 1894 to J Hutchison for 93 pounds. In 1898 a new ferry crossing was built at Adams St, Coraki (North Arm ferry) by Public Works and the operation for the new hand winched ferry was contracted out to P. Roche for 50 pounds 7 shillings and 6 pence.

She added that the South Arm ferry ceased operating when the bridge was built over the south arm of the river at Coraki in September 1904. Mr Jack Hile was the last ferryman at this crossing.

In September 1910, a new steam ferry built at Ballina replaced the old oil driven Coraki ferry. This new ferry was initially run by coal sent up from Newcastle and then later was powered by wood. Records collected by Marie from the December 1948 Main Roads Journal, state that the eight car steam ferry made approximately 740 crossings per week carrying 646 vehicles. She compares these statistics to 1989 figures of 1218 crossings and 1260 vehicles.

Marie recalled a story told by a ferryman Mr. Bill Tarpley, who was involved in converting Coraki's six car steam powered timber ferry and other Richmond River ferries to diesel during 1959.

*it meant a lot less work for the ferryman because the diesel fuel was delivered on to the ferry ... they used to deliver great loads of wood and would have to move it onto the ferry with a wheelbarrow and they would have to interrupt the ferry service while they were loading the wood*

Apparently the Coraki ferry operated on request. Marie remembered that the crossing was often quite busy, particularly on cattle and pig sale day and church days. She said;

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<sup>49</sup> 1990, Marie Newman, *Ferry to Bridge - Crossing the Richmond River at Coraki NSW*, Mid-Richmond River Historical Society, Coraki 1990, p. 7

*All the farmers on the north side of Coraki between Lismore and Woodburn had to use the ferries it was the only way they would get anywhere*

The Coraki ferry was the last DMR owned ferry on the Richmond River and was also one of the few operated by DMR employed staff. From as far back as the late nineteenth century the Coraki community had lobbied for better roads and for a more satisfactory and reliable means of crossing the river at Coraki. Although the locals acknowledged the important part the ferry played in the river's history, there was much celebration on the 30th June 1990 when the Coraki bridge was finally open to traffic and the ferry ceased to operate.

The funding of the bridge is considered by many to be an innovative joint initiative of the Roads and Traffic Authority and the Richmond River Shire Council. Terry Doolan was involved in administering the initiative. He commented that because of the large costs associated with keeping the ferry operating, the proposal was for the DMR to pay off a loan to the Richmond River Shire of \$250,000.00 per year (the same amount as the yearly ferry operating costs) for ten years and the Council would build the bridge.

*DMR wasn't building a bridge there because it wasn't a priority, it wasn't on a main road and other bridges had priority ... The Council borrowed the money and built the bridge. They didn't have the expertise but we did, so to pay off the first year's loan we hired them our bridge gang for the year, while we did, they put a crew in and our team taught them how to build bridges. Richmond River(Council) have gone on to become entrepreneur bridge builders in Northern NSW. It was a good deal we were paying off no more that we paid out on the ferry anyway over ten years.*

## **Incidents**

The Coraki ferry was involved in many dramas over its long history of crossing the Richmond River. Some of the stories told are not as humorous as others, but they all speak about the important part the ferry played in the life of the community.

The following are two of Marie's favourite stories that reflect the attitude of the day;

Gladys Hunt told Marie a story about her sister-in-law who was pregnant. The woman's labour had started so they made their way to the ferry in their sulky;

*When we got there we found the ferry was off (due to flood)...so we rang the bell and the ferryman came over promptly (in a row boat). About half way over the river our oarsman broke the silence by asking "is one of yez sick?" To which enquiry we replied, "yes". One didn't talk to men you didn't know very well on delicate subjects.*

Another incident involved catching thieves at the ferry in 1980. To set the scene, Ruth and Bill Mitchell's ornamental ducks, purchased while on holiday on the Gold Coast in the 1950s, had become a landmark in East Coraki. On hearing a car outside their house one night Bill got up to investigate and discovered that the ducks were missing;

*Bill could see the car going towards the ferry and told me to ring Alan Hancock, the local Constable, while he got the car out and followed them to the ferry. There was the car waiting at the ferry in front of us. Alan arrived on the ferry that came into the bank. Well, these young men had the ducks wrapped up under the front seat.*

Marie related that the men were later charged and the ducks are now back sitting on the Mitchell's front lawn.

A fatal accident occurred on the Coraki ferry involving Angus Arthurson, the operator on duty when Marie Robinson drowned at Woodburn a few years earlier. Norm Newman gave this account of the incident;

*...he never got over the accident, (Woodburn drowning) he blamed himself, he went across on to the ferry (at Coraki) went straight through the gates and his car was balanced on the wire and then went into the river, after this they always had to have a big heavy chain outside the gate ... his brother was on duty at the time, he (Angus) was just driving across ...*

Marie mentioned that the Arthurson men from Coraki all worked on the river boats in the area before vehicle transport became common. Apparently they all went to work on the ferries on the Richmond River, one on the Burns Point ferry, another on the Woodburn ferry and another at the Coraki crossing.

As with the other ferries on the Richmond River, the Coraki ferry was also affected by flood and debris over the years and was taken off service until the flood waters subsided or debris cleared.

## **Wardell Ferry**

Traffic over the quarter mile Wardell crossing in the late 1930s, required about ten ferry crossings per day of five minutes duration. The traffic was mostly made up of horse and sulky and the occasional farmer crossing with foot stock going to market.

Laurie Clifford remembered the first ferry to operate on the Wardell crossing when he was a child. Apparently it was a hand winched hardwood ferry that operated on only one cable. This ferry was replaced around the mid 1930s.

Laurie Clifford started working on the Wardell ferry as a casual operator in 1939, at the age of sixteen. He worked there for a period of two years until he joined the army. Laurie recalled that at this time Bill Cooper had the contract to operate the ferry and the ferry was managed by Tintenbar Shire Council. Apparently the contract was worth thirty two pounds per month from which he paid Laurie ten pounds a month for driving. There was no toll on the Wardell ferry.

Laurie described this ferry;

*It was an old time thing, it had a clutch, not like they are now, it had like a big gear stick and you had to regulate your revs with your throttle, and pull this*



*clutch in and if you pulled it in too quick it would go ratter tatter tatter ... it had no self start on it, it was a kick start, you'd have to kick a big flywheel to start it.*

Laurie recalled that the ferry ran 24 hours on request and the ferry operators could generally go to bed at 10pm, after the Wardell Exchange telephonist finished work and made the crossing home. He also remembered the contractor insisting that foot passengers had to be rowed across in a row boat instead of on the ferry, except however for the local nuns who were taken across on the ferry. After much pleading from the nuns, the contractor finally gave permission for Laurie to row them across.

*I took them for a row in the boat and they were so excited ... then they used to come nearly every evening and I would have to take them for a little row all the way up the river*

Laurie went back to work on the Wardell ferry in the late 1950s, operating it during the season when he was not cutting cane. Laurie worked for Jackie Thomson who had the ferry contract at the time. Laurie drove the Wardell ferry on the last crossing it made on the 10 April 1964, the day the bridge was opened.

The ferry on the Wardell crossing during the late 1950s early 1960s was a six car Oregon ferry, powered by a diesel motor. It was made locally by Barrows Engineering at Ballina at a cost of 14,000 pounds. Traffic in the area increased significantly during the late 1940s through to the 1960s. Laurie remembers that often the traffic would be banked up for almost one mile waiting to cross on the ferry, particularly during school holiday periods. Apparently the ferry at the Wardell crossing was transferred to the Burns Point crossing when the bridge opened.

Although no date was given, Laurie recalled that the DMR owned and operated the Wardell ferry and when the ferry was given over to the Shire to operate, DMR subsidised maintenance of the ferry for approximately two years. Laurie remembers Dan Finey inspecting the ferries in the area.

## **Woodburn Ferry**

The Woodburn ferry was owned by the DMR and the 200 metre crossing linked the main road going from Woodburn to Lismore. The ferry, which was initially started up to service the local cane industry, was part funded by cane growers.

Pressure from the local community, the cane industry and lobbying by Don Day, Labor MP, finally resulted in the Woodburn Bridge being built. It opened on the 9 October 1981.

Marie Newman also lived at Woodburn for a time and she commented that some wonderful anecdotes have been created around the ferry and of the local community who used it;

*wonderful stories of when people missed the ferry, especially men, they'd go up the pub and miss the next trip across.....people used the ferry in all sorts of ways, you had parcels put on the ferry, you would ring up from home and give the*

*butcher your meat order and he would run down and put it on the ferry and you would nip down to the ferry and get it.....I did this all the time from 1949 - 52*

Marie remembered that there was a ferrymaster's house located just above the ferry approach at this crossing.

Like other ferries, the Woodburn ferry has been involved in some dramatic incidents. Marie recalled a sad and tragic incident that occurred during a storm while the relief ferry was on at the Woodburn crossing on 26 January 1961;

*Bill McCormick had collected a whole lot of cattle to put on the ferry ... there wasn't the usual ferry, it was the small relieving ferry, they drove the cattle on the ferry, on the ferry as well was a Mr. McGregor who was the ferryman but he was off duty, in the cabin was a lady from just up the road who worked in the post office, Marie Robinson ... Angus Arthurson from Coraki was the ferryman, they told Marie to shut the door into the cabin because of all the cattle on the ferry, with the pouring rain and the wind coming from one direction all the cattle ran to one corner of the ferry and the ferry went down ... Bill and Angus were able to get to shore but Marie - she was drowned*

### **Swan Bay Ferry**

The Swan Bay ferry was down stream from Coraki on the Richmond River. It was a short crossing, which serviced the local farming community. The ferry that operated there was a small timber hand winched ferry. Although the date it commenced service was not found, it was in operation when Norm Newman was young (late 1920s). He remembers as a small child swimming out to the ferry with friends. Marie mentioned that the Swan Bay ferry was still in operation in the mid 1940s.

### **Broadwater Ferry**

The Broadwater ferry crosses the Richmond River at Broadwater. The ferry is currently owned by the Richmond River Shire Council and the contract is administered by them. While none of our interviewees spoke at length about this ferry, Norm Newman related that an operator was killed in an accident on the ferry.

### **Burns Point Ferry**

The Burns Point ferry crosses the Richmond River between South Ballina and Ballina Island. Laurie pointed out that the Burns Point ferry started operating at this crossing in 1883 and at the time was mainly used by milkmen taking milk and cream to the butter factory in Ballina. Like many other ferries in the state at this time, the first ferry would have been a small hand winched timber ferry.

The Burns Point crossing was located on the Pacific Highway and was a very busy crossing particularly during holiday periods. As part of the ongoing development of the Pacific Highway, Wardell Bridge and an associated highway deviation was built which took the Burns Point crossing off the major highway route.

The Burns Point ferry was owned by the DMR until the Wardell Bridge was built in 1964 when the Ballina Shire Council took over responsibility for the ferry and crossing.

The ferry is still owned by the Ballina Shire Council and the contract for its operation is also administered by them. The present toll for crossing on the Burns Point ferry is \$2.20 with a concession to local residents. The toll is collected by the Council. The ferry which currently operates at this crossing is a steel hull fifteen car ferry, fitted with a Perkins diesel engine. It has automatic gates and is fitted with hydraulic flaps.

From 1968 until 1991, Laurie operated the Burns Point ferry full time. Laurie had a heart attack in 1991 and retired. When he started on the Burns Point ferry he worked for the contractor, Jack Thompson and in about 1970 they became joint contractors. In 1980, Laurie became the sole contractor, with his first contract worth \$2000.00 per month which covered wages, fuel and oil. Laurie pointed out that when the new ferry was put on the crossing the value of the contract increased significantly. He also mentioned that the contractor was responsible for public liability and workers compensation.

While Laurie and Jack held the joint contract, they employed casual ferry operators, one of them being Toby Watkins, in 1972. Toby went on to be the sole contractor for the Burns Point ferry after Laurie ceased working. Toby currently employs three casual drivers and noted that the cost of insurance premiums and other responsibilities of the contractor has increased over the years.

From 1964 to 1991 the crossing was serviced by a six car timber ferry, which had been transferred from the Wardell crossing in 1964. In 1991 the timber ferry was replaced by a ferry brought from the Daintree in northern Queensland. Laurie remembered the initial problems encountered with the new ferry. Apparently the flaps were too steep and not long enough, so they were modified. Laurie commented on its construction;

*It's unsinkable....the one thing it lacks is a brake*

The crossing has always been used by local residents who use the ferry to cross to Ballina for work, school and by many cane workers in cane harvest season. He pointed out however that cane trucks were not allowed to cross on the ferry.

Laurie recalled that from time to time two ferries were put on at this crossing to cope with the increased traffic particularly during holiday times;

*When the Main Roads had the ferry there were two ferries operating ... they had to have, it was chaos (because it was on the Pacific Highway) ... those people they would live only a mile away from the ferry and come to Ballina and it would take them two hours to get home ... even when I was working on the ferry and the highway went around ,at holiday time and when the surf at South Ballina beach was good, the traffic gets banked up*

Laurie pointed out that the ferry is important to the local community because there is no public transport in the area and the ferry cuts out an eighteen mile alternative road journey to Ballina for the South Ballina residents.

Toby Watkins, the current contractor on the Burns Point ferry, ferries approximately 1000 cars per day across the river, noting that over the 1998 Easter holiday the ferry took \$5250.00 in tolls.

It is the responsibility of the Council to repair and overhaul the ferries at this crossing, however the contractor attends to minor mechanical problems, cables and pulleys, as well as daily maintenance. During Laurie's years operating the ferry, it was annually towed to Barrows Engineering Works in Ballina where it was slipped for major maintenance. Laurie recalled the towing procedure as often "hairy rides".

### Incidents

Cables breaking, particularly the drive cable, can pose problems for the operation of the ferry. Laurie remembered when a drive cable broke on the old ferry in the middle of the Burns Point crossing.

*if you've got enough people on the ferry that will help you, all you do is lean over the other side and you can pull it ... I've done it several times on the old ferry, particularly after a flood*

Discussing the safety requirements on the ferry, Laurie mentioned that he did not have any serious accidents on his ferry, unlike Jack Thomson who was knocked over by a car.

Another not so serious incident was recalled by Toby Watkins where a low loader which was carrying two rocks weighing at least ten tonnes each, pushed the ferry out into the river. Toby had finished for the day and the relief driver tried to load too many cars on the sides of the ferry and when the low loader was embarking in the centre lane of the ferry, the truck driver realised he would not get on. Toby said of the incident;

*the driver of the low loader decided he'd reverse off the ferry and when he reversed he necked down on the deck ... and pushed the ferry straight out from underneath him and once he started moving Nick put it (the ferry) in reverse and stopped it from going under ... the prime mover was sitting just on the flaps and there was so much weight that it (the steel arms on the flap) just bent like a U*

Emergency vehicles were given special consideration, with ambulances, police and fire trucks given priority when crossing. It was a practice for many local pregnant women to notify the ferry operator of their due date so they could be given priority when crossing. Toby recalled often being roused during the night to get a woman in labour across the river quickly and on to the local hospital in Ballina.

As on the Clarence River, the ferries on the Richmond River have all been affected by flood, strong tides and winds at some point or other.

Laurie recalled that his ferry was always the last ferry to be taken out of service and tied to the bank during a flood. He noted that in 1974 and 1978 there were four floods in one year.

Toby explained that storms in the area hit quickly and waves of more than three feet high were common during these times.

Debris drifting down the river potentially causes great problems to the operation of the ferry, particularly at night when visibility is low. Laurie remembered seeing huge amounts of debris coming down the river during floods. Objects such as trees, logs, water hyacinth and pieces of the bank that had broken away often caught in the cables or buffeted the ferry. This debris poses the biggest problem for the cables.

*There'd be a patch of water hyacinth an acre round come down the river and if you didn't get out of its way and let it go over the wires, you'd be there for hours and hours cutting it off ... logs they were, pretty nasty experience, the logs caught the ferry out in the river and couldn't get it...they jam in the wires ... and around these logs which were on these wires there was an eddy this deep, a big hole you could look down into it, we had to get two people out in the row boat to get it off, gee I was frightened, but we got it off*

Toby also had similar stories. One particular incident involved the willow trees getting caught in the cables of old Burns Point ferry .

*this night the river was in flood .... there was a lot of whole willow trees coming down ... I went out about 20 or 30 yards to free one of them but it wouldn't free and by gee the water was whizzing past, if I had of fallen in you wouldn't have a chance ... it was hooked in wire so I got back to bank and tied the ferry securely to the bank and I didn't sleep a wink ... because the whole ferry was shaking ... when I got up in the morning there was eight full trees hooked up in the wires ... I said to Laurie if you don't get them (the Council) out here we'll (the ferry) be out at sea...*

Working on the Burns Point ferry has obviously been a highlight of Laurie's working life. Although the work was physically challenging, Laurie expressed regret at having to give up the contract. He nevertheless continues to have a great sense of pride in his years on the Burns Point ferry.

## **Rileys Hill Dock**

Major work to the Richmond River ferries was mainly carried out at the Rileys Hill, and in more recent times Ashby Dry Dock. Overhauls and repairs at either of these docks required that the ferries be towed to the dock. Like towing ferries on the Clarence River, tides and winds posed particular challenges for the tug or trawler towing and manoeuvring the ferries to the dock.

Marie mentioned that there was a gang who worked at the dock on the Richmond River ferries. They were Jack Male, Perter Bolton, Cecil Tegge and Bill Dann. If on site repairs needed to be carried out on the ferries the DMR Ballina Depot sent a maintenance crew out to the ferries.

# RICHMOND RIVER FERRIES



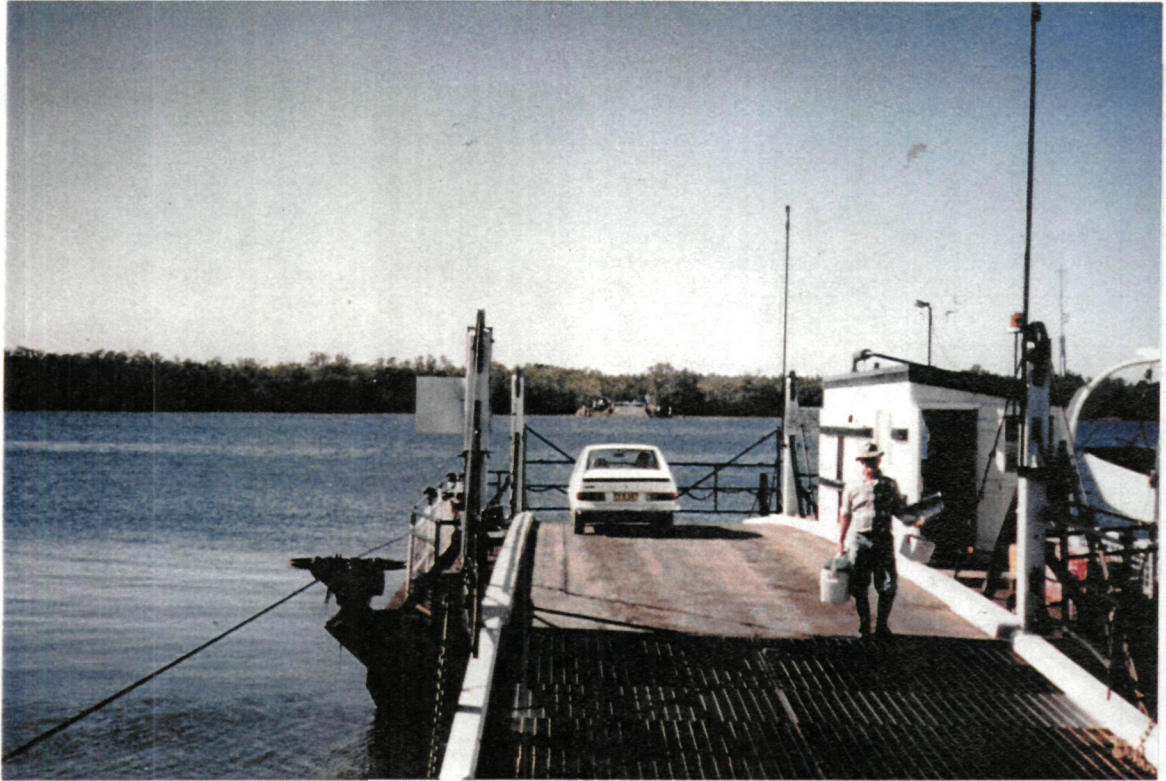
1991 Laurie Clifford and Burns Point Ferry

Photograph courtesy of Laurie Clifford



Laurie Clifford and offsider on the Wardell ferry possibly in the late 1950s

Photograph courtesy of Laurie Clifford



1991 Laurie Clifford and Burns Point Ferry

Photograph courtesy of Laurie Clifford





1998 - Burns Point ferry



1998 - Burns Point ferry

## 9.0 HUNTER RIVER VEHICULAR FERRY AT STOCKTON

The Stockton Bridge opened to traffic on the 1st November, 1971 linking the towns of Newcastle and Stockton and ending a particular chapter of river history in the area.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century the only means of transport for local farmers to get their produce across the Hunter River from Stockton to Newcastle markets was by row boat. In 1889, an enterprising Peter Callen, started a ferry service operating across the river from the south west point of the Stockton peninsular to the Newcastle wharf on Wharf Road, near Perkin Street. The timber punt was towed by a tug and was capable of carrying "a few sulkies or drays".

Ross related a story of the farmers that used the service;

*The farmers used to come down at night time, the night before( the night before they needed to get across to Newcastle) – The Callen shipway also had a timber mill and timber racks and the farmers used to sleep in the timber racks so they could be first on the punt in the morning, - because it couldn't take very many*

By the early nineteenth century, the population and industry in and around Newcastle and Stockton was growing and there was a need for a larger ferry to support this development. In 1916, the S. S. Mildred was put into service operating between the new docks at Merewether St, Newcastle and Punt Rd, Stockton. The ferry was commissioned by the NSW Public Works Department and built at Walsh Island Dockyard.

The Mildred, a steel hull steam powered, self propelled vehicular ferry, was capable of carrying 15 vehicles and 70 passengers. The Mildred initially provided an hourly service, but later changed to every 40 minutes and then to 30 minute service as traffic increased. A flat topped punt towed by a steam tug was used three weeks every year when the Mildred went for its annual maintenance overhaul.

By the 1930s, traffic was increasing on the crossing and lengthy delays prompted the DMR to purchase the S. S. Kooroongaba for 7,500 pounds in 1932. The "Gabba" as it was affectionately known was bought from The Sydney Ferry Company when the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened to traffic. The steam powered vessel was built in 1921 at Walsh Island. It was capable of carrying between 28-35 vehicles and 190 passengers. New docks were built both at Stockton (150 yards upstream from previous dock) and Newcastle (near Darks Ice works) to accommodate the increased width of the Kooroongaba.

With the new docks built, the Kooroongaba took over the service and the Mildred was used as a relief ferry at this crossing until 1942. It was moved to the Hawkesbury River to service the Peats crossing while the George Peat and Francis Peat vessels were used for war service.

When the Hawkesbury River Bridge was finally completed in May 1945, the Mildred returned to Newcastle and was sold in 1946 to the Phillip Island & Westernport Shipping Co for 9,250 pounds. The Mildred was towed to Westernport, Victoria and operated

between Westernport and Phillip Island for two years before being converted to a barge around the Geelong area and finally being scrapped.

Traffic again had increased to such a degree at the Stockton crossing that in 1946 the DMR purchased the S. S. Lurgurena to operate in conjunction with the Kooroongaba. It was built at Saltney Shipyards, Chester, England by J. Crichton & Co. Ltd. in 1925, for the ferry service between Hobart and Bellerive on the Derwent River in Tasmania. The Lurgurena had to be overhauled and refitted before she went into service at Stockton. As well, dredging on the Stockton side of the river also had to take place because of the Lurgurena's deep draught.

The Kooroongaba and the Lurgurena both worked this vehicular crossing until 1952, when a larger steam powered steel vessel, the Koondooloo took over from the Kooroongaba.

The Koondooloo came to Stockton still fitted out as a floating workshop for war service and underwent extensive conversions transforming it into a vessel able to carry 42 vehicles and 283 passengers. The Kooroongaba became the relief ferry.

Like the Kooroongaba, the Koondooloo was purchased by The Sydney Ferry Company to operate across the Sydney Harbour until the bridge was completed. The vessel was built in Scotland in 1924, sailed to the Sydney and joined the Sydney fleet before being converted to the Sydney Showboat in 1936. In 1945 she was used by the navy in war service at Port Moresby.

During the years from 1950 to 1971, the Koondooloo and the Lurgurena operated on a quarter hour service firstly from 6.45am to 6.30pm and then in the later years to 11.45pm. From 11.45pm to 2.15am one ferry operated a half hourly service and then crossed hourly until 6.45am.

The two vessels had seven crew members each, a skipper, an engineer, two firemen, two deckhands and a toll collector, working a rotating shift. The narrow channel in the river was often difficult to navigate, with shipping movements, floods, fogs, winds, strong tides and heavy swells hindering the safe passage across the river.

Ross pointed out that there have been several collisions over the years. These have involved;

Lurgurena and the tug Heroic  
Lurgurena and Koondooloo in 1961  
Lugurena and SS Tatana in 1964  
Lurgurena and the Stockton passenger ferry in 1966  
Koondooloo and the Kooroongaba in fog in 1967

As well as these collisions, there have been a few incidents where passengers have ended up in the river and fortunately have managed to be rescued.

In 1934 a cyclist fell into the harbour, in 1952 two motor cyclists slipped off the ferry flap and in 1968 a station wagon slipped off the flap into the water.

Floods, fogs and smogs have all disrupted the ferry service at various times over the many years the Stockton vehicular ferries have been operating. Ross recalled when services were stopped;

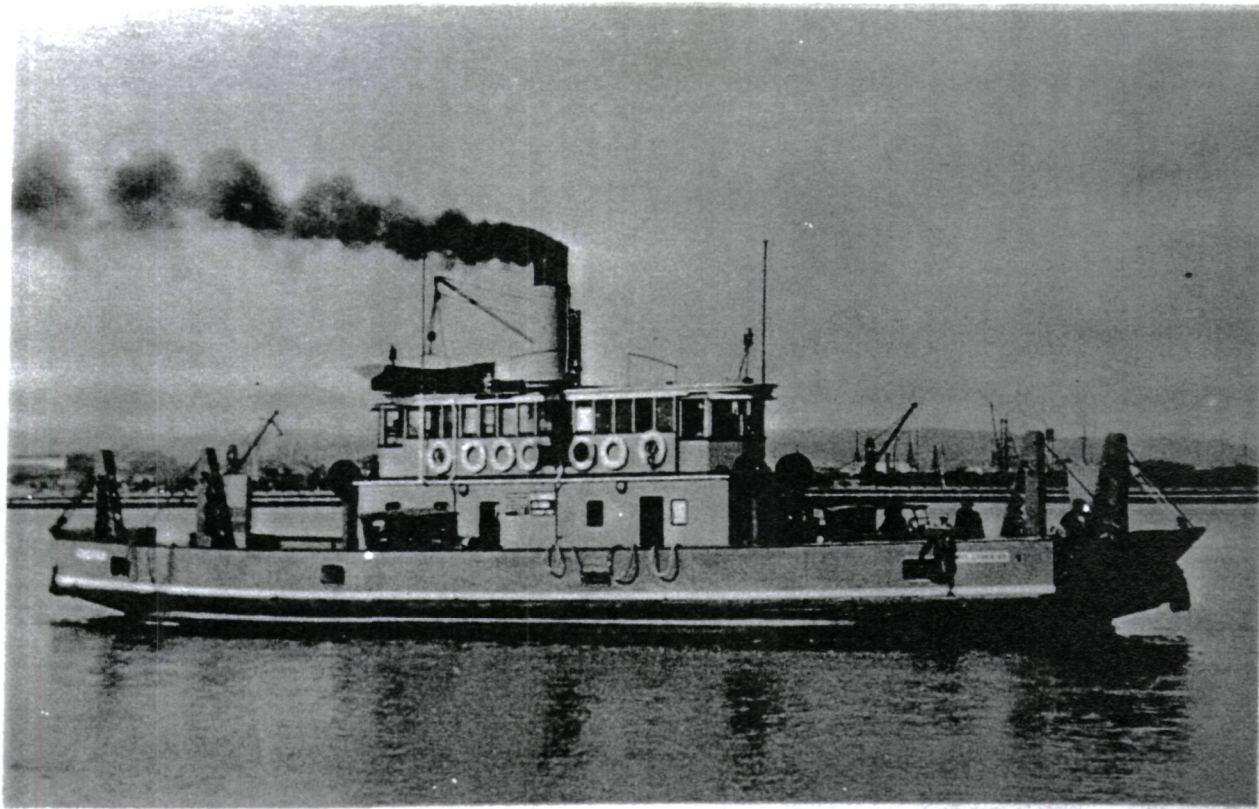
*The only time services have been stopped is in floods and fogs. I can remember in the late 1940s and 50s, we had some very heavy fog and smog, you couldn't see more than a few yards it was that thick ... if it was overcast we'd be there for hours, but if the sun came out it would clear quickly – on occasions it stopped the ferries*

The Koondooloo and the Lurgurena made their last trip at the crossing on the 1st November, 1971 when the Stockton bridge was officially opened. The three Stockton-Newcastle vehicular ferries were sold for \$12,000.00 and early in 1972 together with a former showboat the Sydney Queen, the towed vessels started their journey bound for resale in the Philippines. Sadly none of the vessels made their destination, with the Kooroongaba sinking in heavy seas off Crowdy Head, NSW and the other three running aground on the beach at South West Rocks, NSW. They were not salvaged.

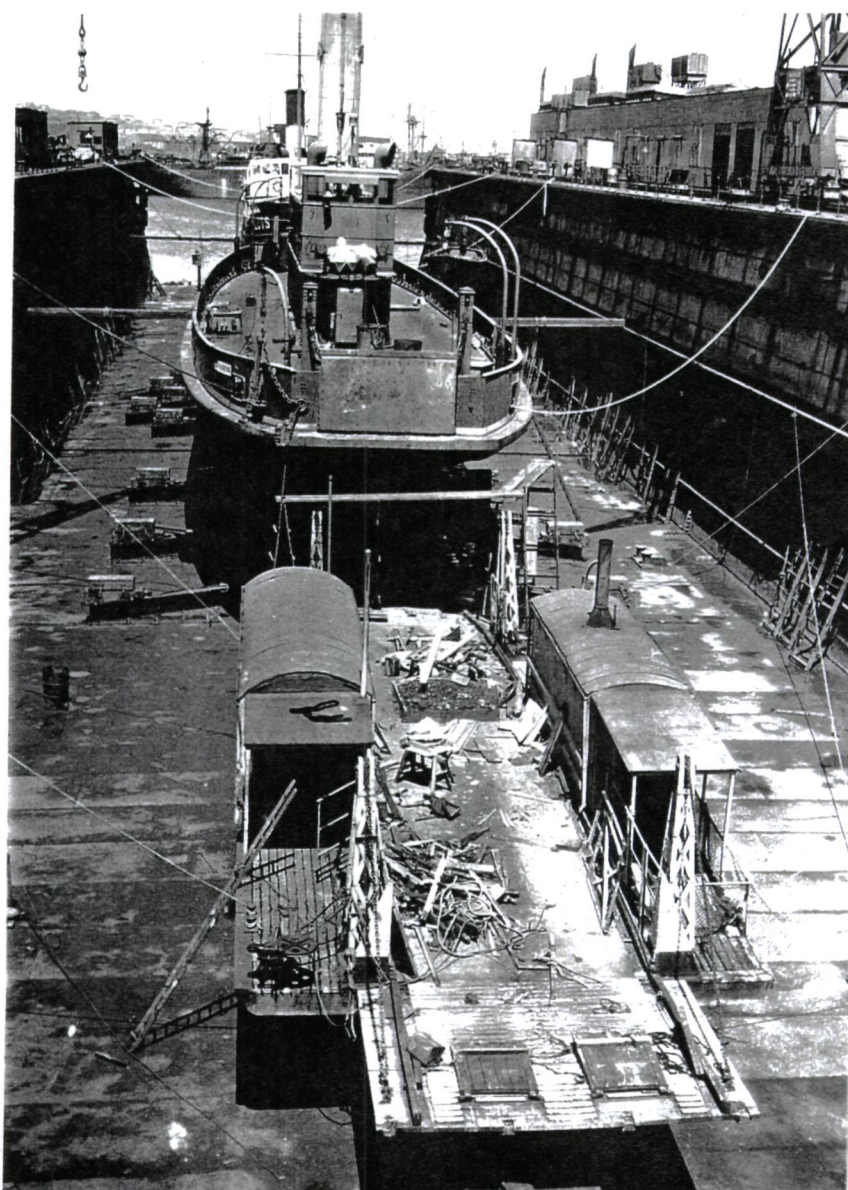
# STOCKTON FERRIES



Peter Callen's Horse Punt operating from 1889 to 1916



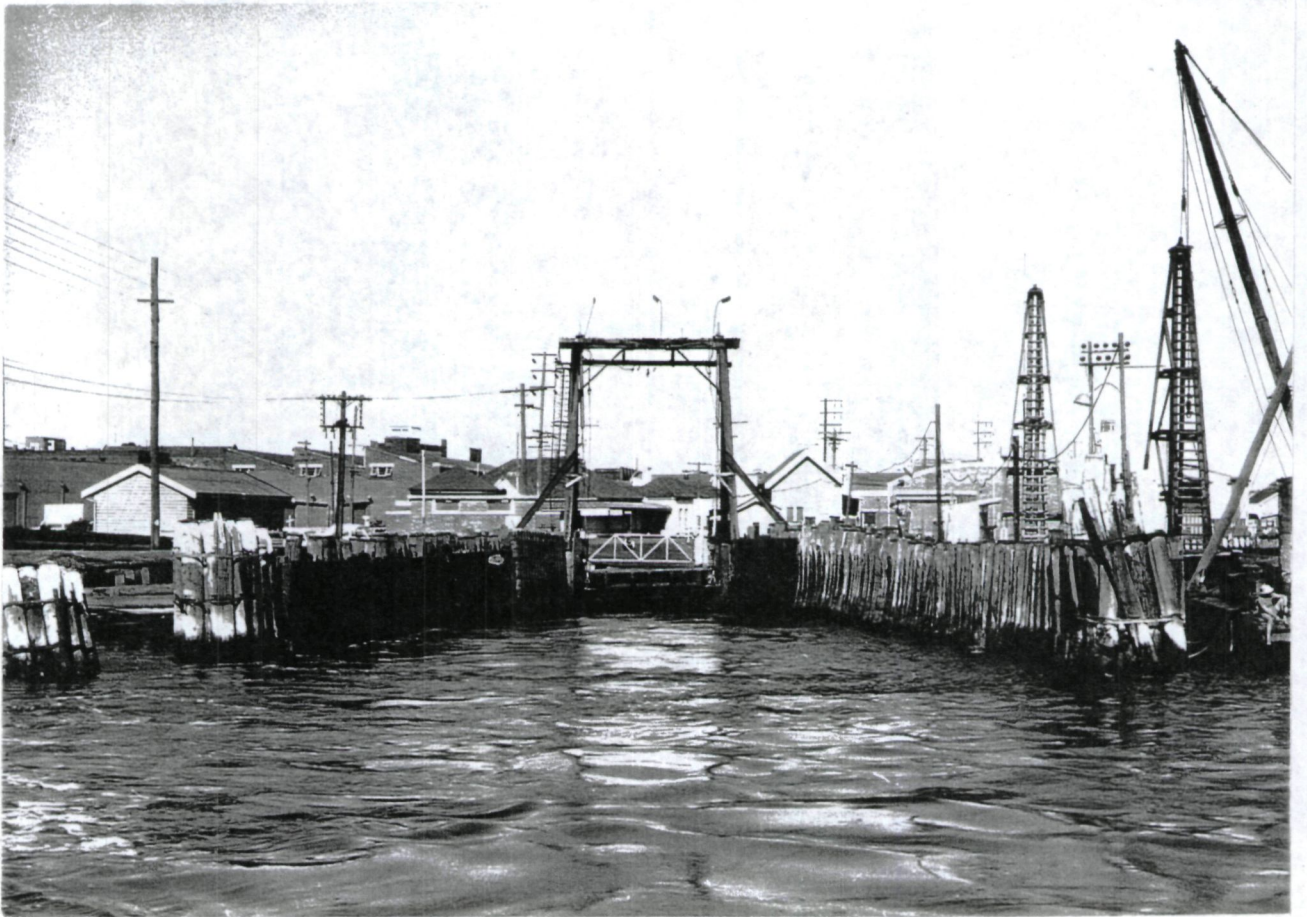
S.S. Mildred 1946



Lurgurena in dock with one of the local hand winched timber ferries - mid 1950s



Stockton Dock 1950s

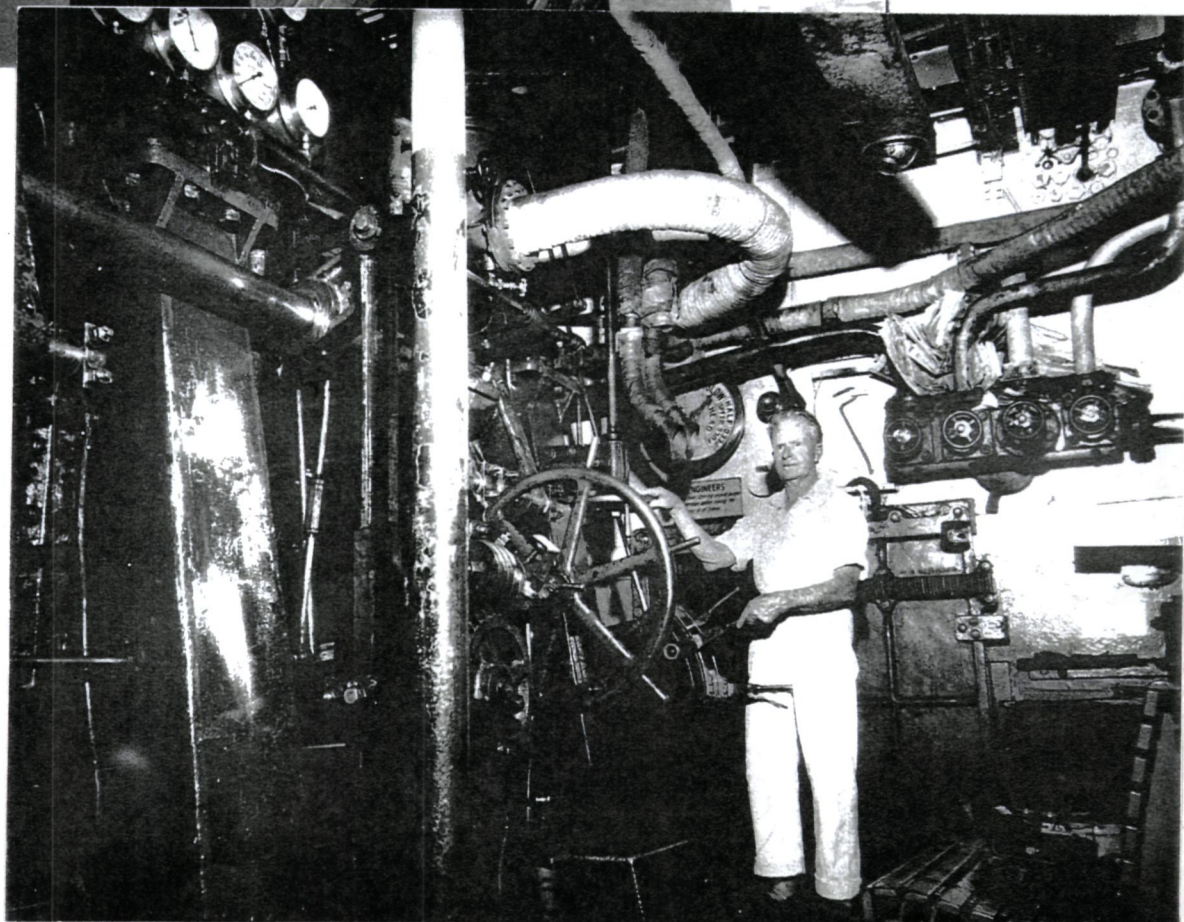


Newcastle Dock

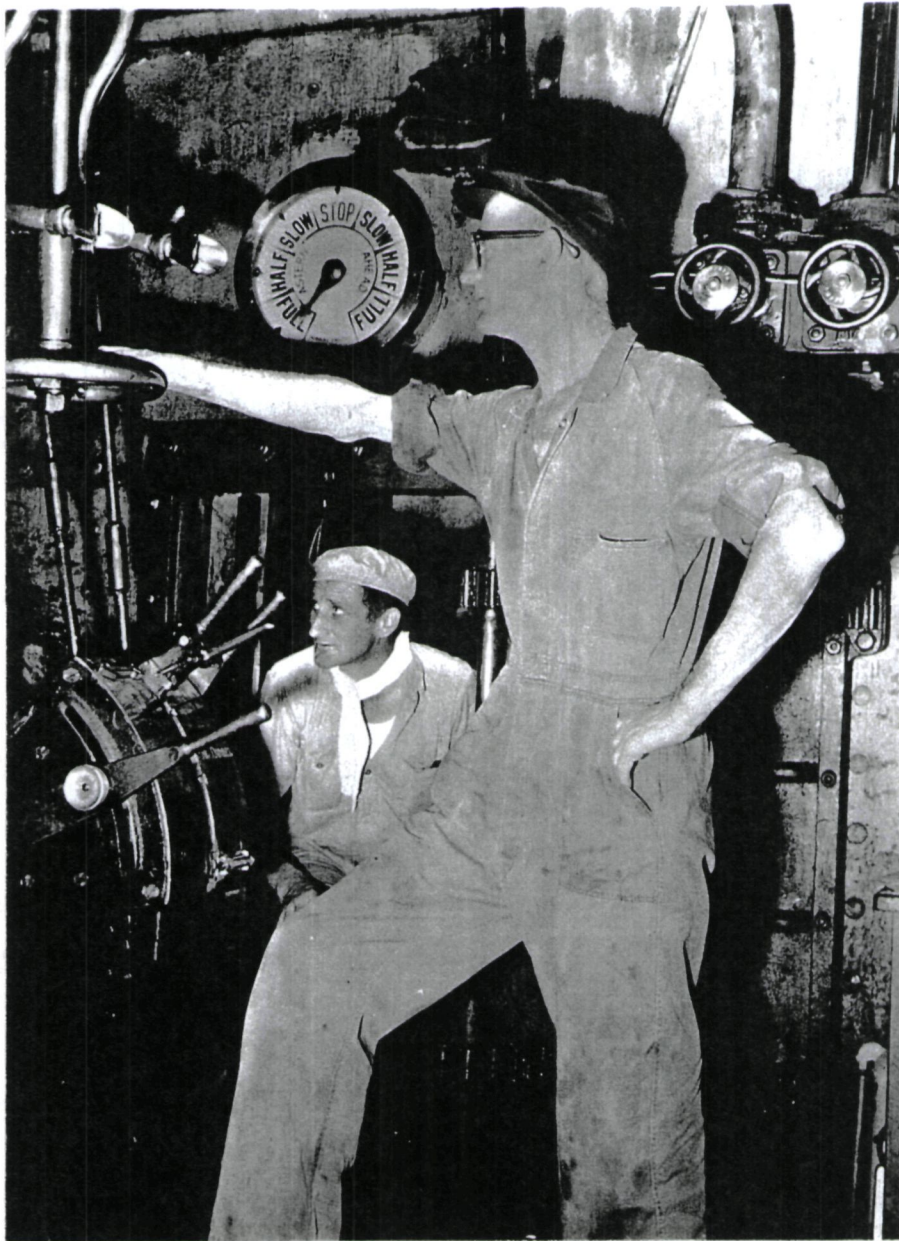


Vince Roach  
Captain

Below deck  
on the  
Koondooloo







Fireman  
Bill Hill &  
Charles Morton  
Engineer on the  
Lurgurena

Fireman  
Brian Russell



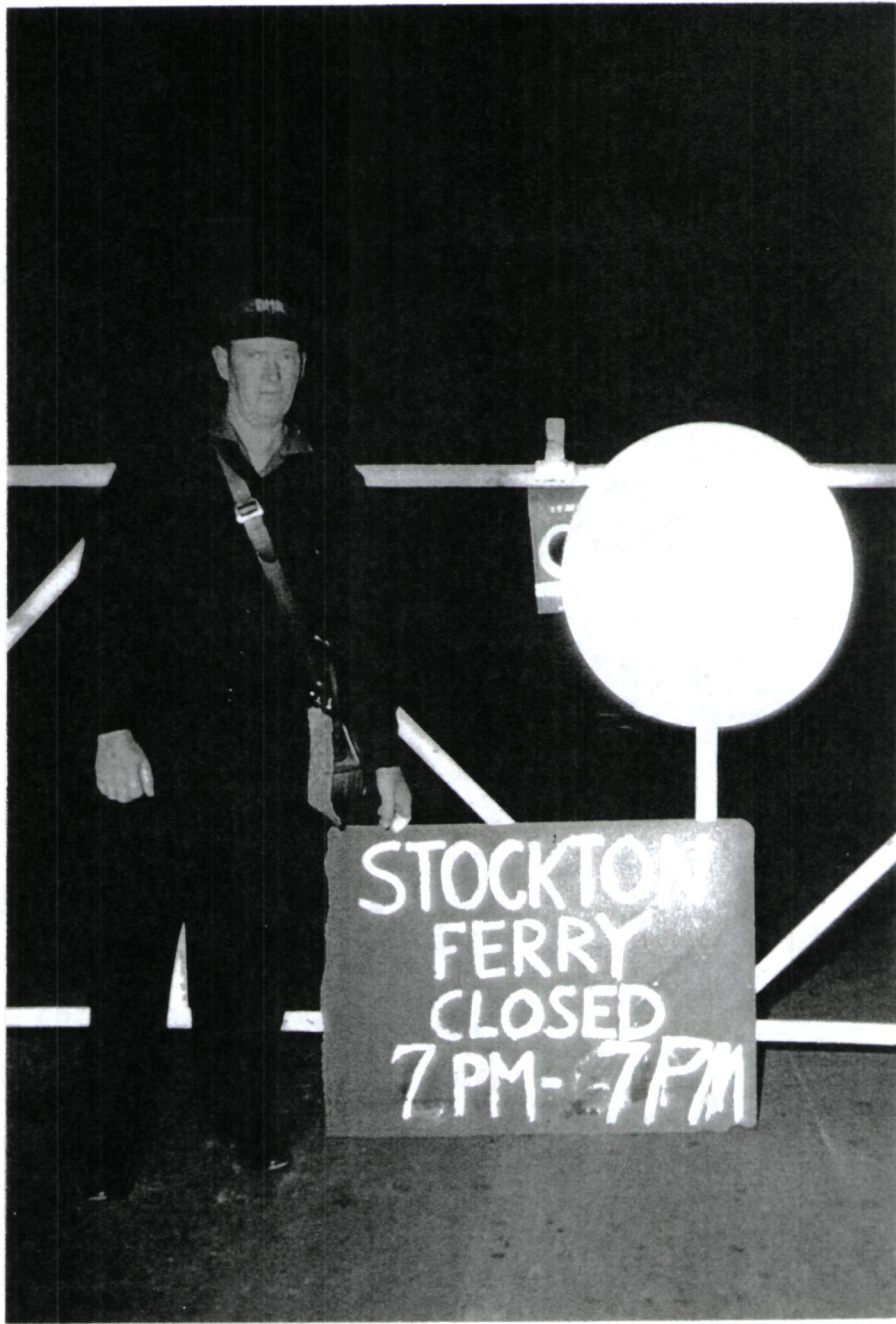
Toll collector  
Alex Donnyman  
Newcastle



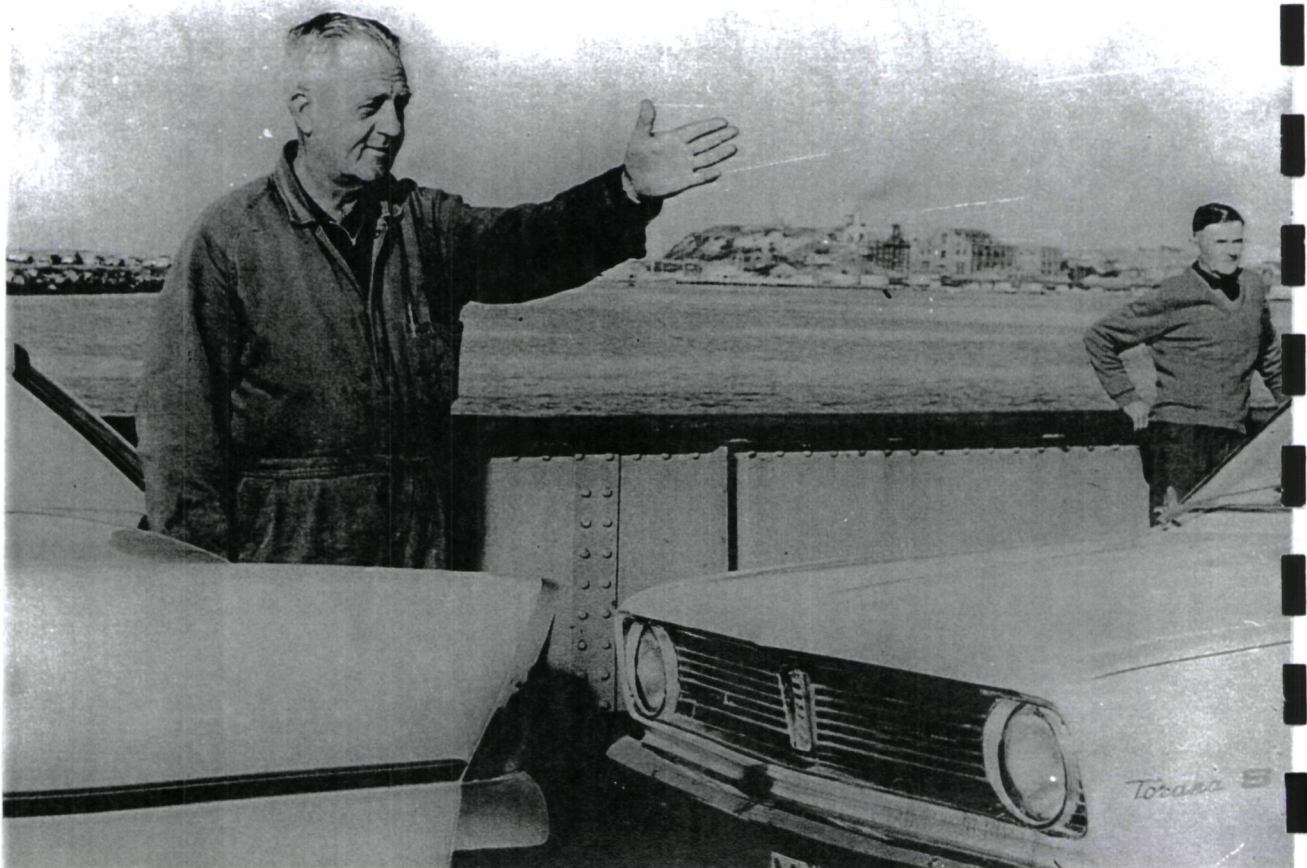
Ferry queues  
Newcastle



Stockton ferry  
closed due to  
strike



Deckhand  
Roy Guard

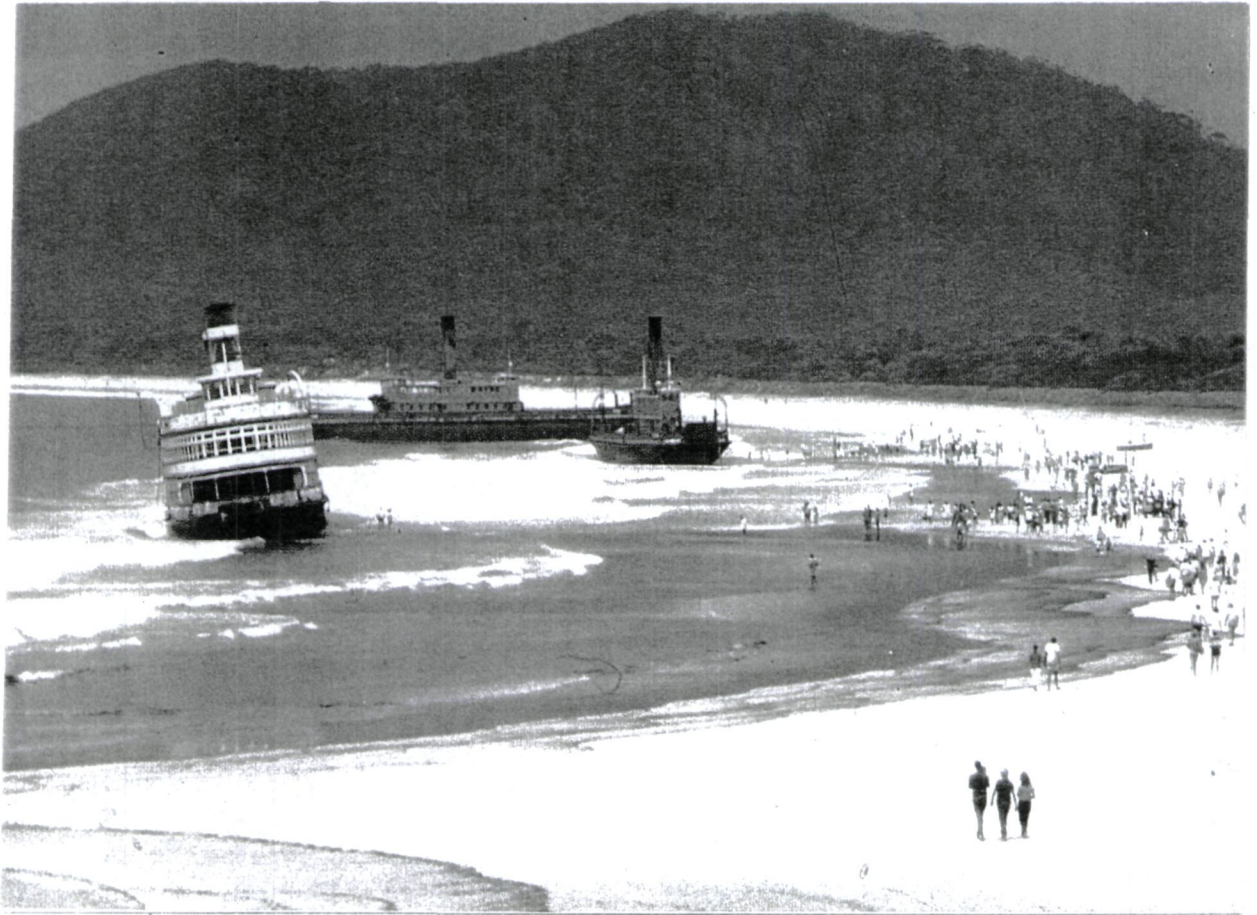


November 1971  
Last trip by  
Koondooloo

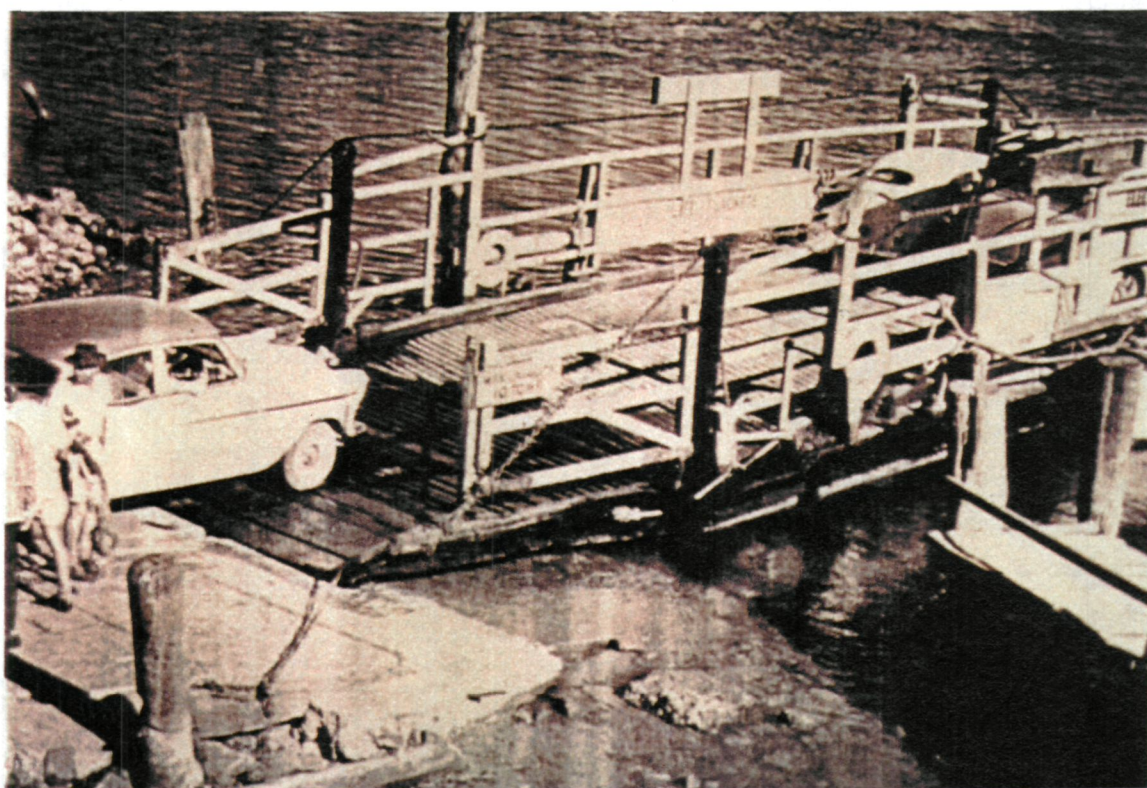


1971  
Stockton Bridge



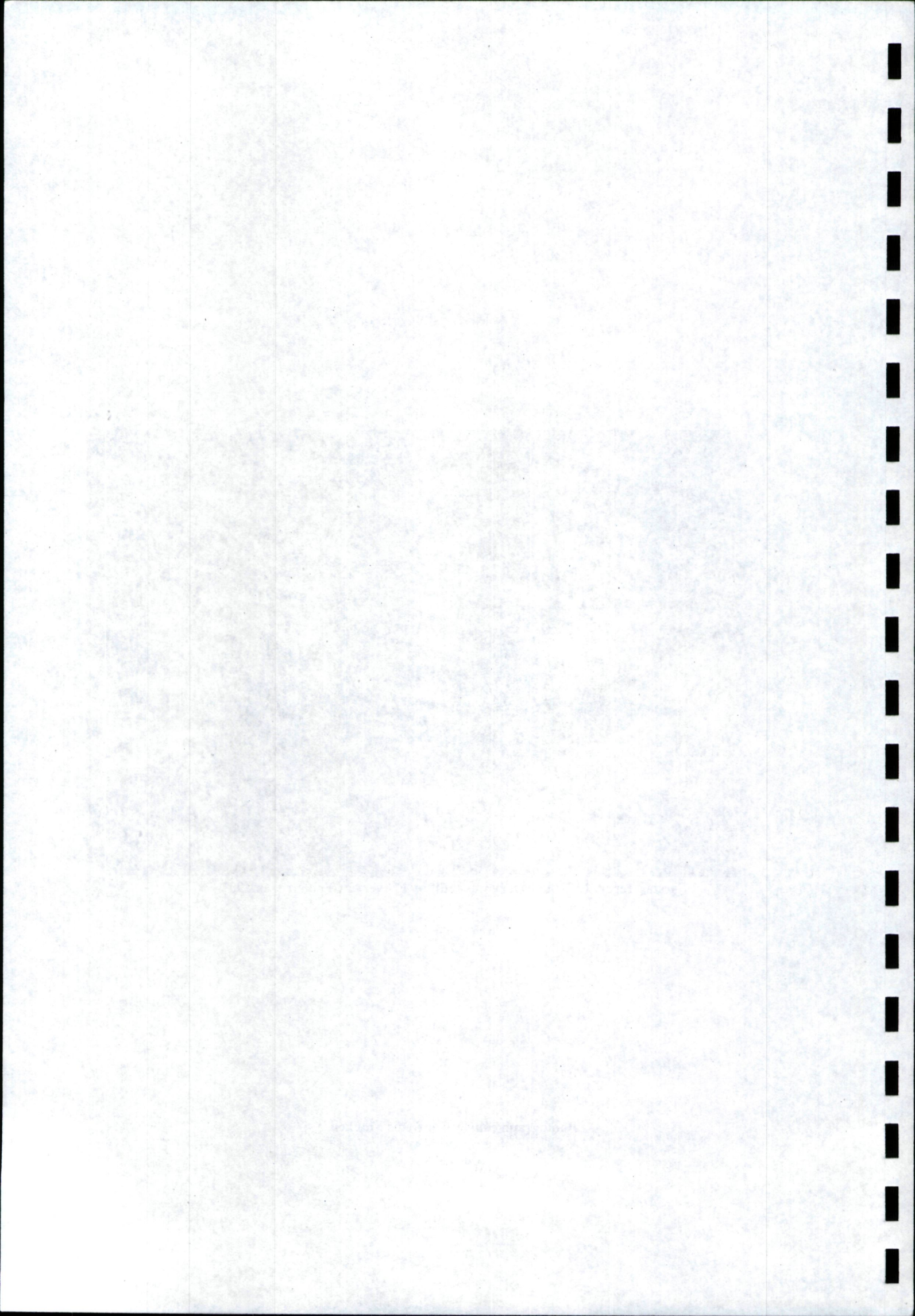


The Lurgurena, the Koondooloo and a Sydney Showboat beached at Trial Bay, NSW 1973



Forster ferry, 1959. The ferry was built by F Avery in Tuncurry in 1937

Photograph courtesy of Denis Mitchell



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