"THE GRANDEST IMPROVEMENT IN THE COUNTRY"

An Historical and Archaeological Study of the
Great North Road, N.S.W., 1835-1836

submitted by

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SYNOPSIS

The line of road originally intended to link Sydney with the booming settlements of the Hunter Valley underwent a ten year survey and construction period, beginning in 1825 with Heneage Finch's hastily selected, winding line, and ending in 1836 with two small road gangs caught in a continuous cycle of construction and decay. In the interim period, however, the road had aroused the enthusiasm of the best surveyors and engineers available in the colony. These men envisioned a fine, all-encompassing, permanent thoroughfare - a most appropriate goal in view of the contemporary optimism with regard to the colony's future. The structures and formations were impressive and extensive and built as far as possible according to the latest principles emerging from the road building revolution in Britain. The methods were, of necessity, simplified in response to the colonial conditions of rugged terrain, vast distances and the large but unskilled and, for the main part, unwilling convict labour force. The results were highly successful, as is still evident today, and never failed to impress early travellers and reassure them that they were, after all, in a "civilized" country. The road never actually fulfilled its builders' plans. A steamboat service established between Sydney and the Hunter Valley robbed it of its role as a vital link, and other more hospitable or more direct routes were discovered and used by what traffic did proceed on land. After the few remaining gangs were finally withdrawn, section after section quickly fell into disuse and abandonment. Both the grand and modest structures and formations were left neglected, and thus preserved, to the present day.
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