



# Bells Line of Road

Hawkesbury Visitor Information



# History of Bells Line of Road



The Bells Line of Road runs for 60 kilometres between North Richmond and the tiny mountain village of Bell. Today's road is well maintained however this was not always the case and driving along one can imagine the difficulties encountered, in discovering and building this alternate route over the Great Dividing Range.

The Darug, Wiradjuri and Gundungurra peoples are the traditional owners of the Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains region and have moved through this country for thousands of years. There is evidence of early habitation along the route including artsites and grinding grooves.

The first, unsuccessful, European attempt to find a route was made by Governor Phillip in 1789. The three peaks of Mount Hay, Mount Banks and Mount Tomah was the horizon that greeted Phillip. He named the ridge the "Blue Mountains" and the peaks the "Carmarthen Hills".

The second attempt was in 1804, when naturalist George Caley set out from Richmond along the ridge to Kurrajong Heights reaching Mount Banks, collecting around 30 new plant specimens and descriptively naming areas such as The Devils Wilderness and Dismal Dingle. Caley's journals and collection of flora, birds and animals have added substantially to the knowledge of early Australia.

*"The roughness of the country I found beyond description" George Caley 1804*

In 1823 a young Hawkesbury man called Archibald Bell Junior with the help of two Aboriginal guides found an easier route by following the ridges. It took him two attempts and his success was reported in the Sydney Gazette, noting it would be the "readiest" route from the Hawkesbury and Hunter River, and as near to Parramatta as the Old Bathurst Road via Emu Plains over the Blue Mountains. Once over Mount Tomah, his route followed the ridgeline until it turned south at today's Darling Causeway. Halfway down the Darling Causeway it turned west again down a gully into Hartley Vale.

In 1855, Sir Thomas Mitchell reported on the condition of Bells Line Road, stating that considerable sums had been spent on the Emu-Blaxland route (the current Great Western Highway) and settlement had followed on this line. He wrote "Two roads across the mountains were not required for the young colony".

Despite being part of Main Road No.184 the route gradually fell into disrepair and it was not until about 1930 that maintenance was re-instituted. However, as it was narrow and winding it was not able to carry modern traffic.

The road acquired a new importance in early 1942 when, with the entry of Japan into World War 2, it was seen that the war might move to Australia. The Military thought that the unconstructed sections of this road should be improved, so that the road could be used as an alternative route to the Great Western Highway. However, by late 1942 construction work ceased as the east coast of Australia was no longer in immediate danger of invasion.

In 1945 a decision was made to recommence the work to upgrade the road. Bells Line of Road once snaked its way through Kurrajong village before a deviation was put through by building a concrete beam bridge across Little Wheeny Creek in 1947. The portion through the village is now known as Old Bells Line of Road, and further along Bells Line of Road other sections of the original Old Bells Line of Road can still be seen.



Photo: Construction work west of Mount Tomah, 1946 (State Library of NSW)

In 1946 the formidable cutting on the western side of Mount Tomah was started. A huge ravine had to be filled and the cliffs cut away. To start the cuts on the cliff face, jack-hammer workers were slung over the edge in bosun's chairs. Jack hammered rock fell on the old road below and bulldozed over the edge.



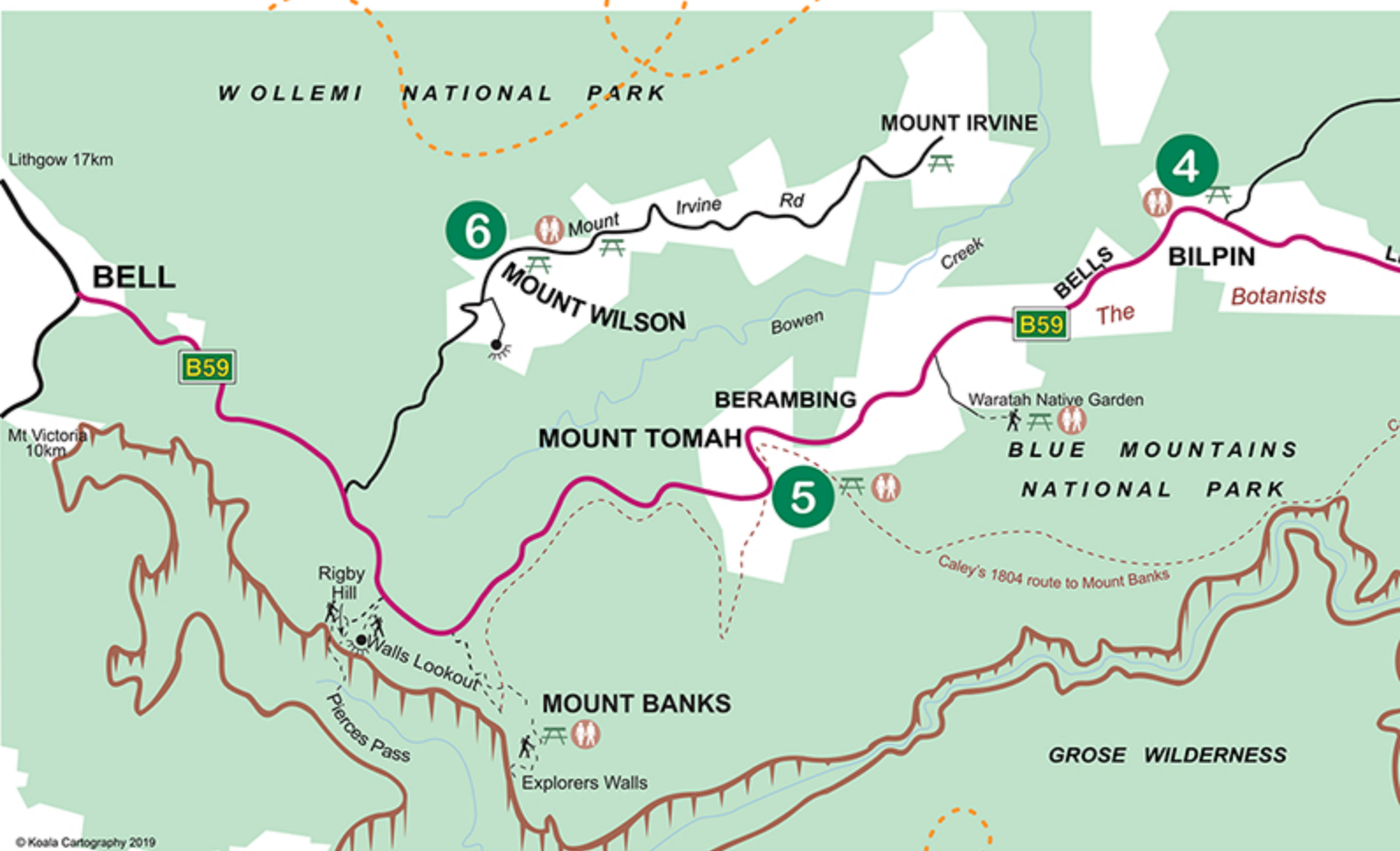
"Pansy" running along March Street, Richmond, 1940s-1950s. (NSW State Archives)

## 1. RICHMOND

The historic town of Richmond was one of five selected by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1810 to provide safe residences and storage of produce for farmers already settled on flood-prone Hawkesbury land. The first train service from Sydney to Richmond took place in 1893 but it was not until 1991 that the line was electrified from Riverstone to Richmond. In 1926 a line from Richmond to Kurrajong opened, the train operating on this line being affectionately referred to as 'Pansy'. This line closed in 1952 after serious damage due to landslides.



North Richmond Bridge (Hawkesbury City Council Library Service- HLS)



© Koala Cartography 2019



Mount Wilson 1915, Harry Phillips (Blue Mountain Library, Local Studies Collection)

## 6. MOUNT WILSON

Mount Wilson and nearby Mount Irvine are two basalt capped peaks originally timbered with sassafras, coachwood, lilli pilli and tree ferns. The area was named Mt Wilson in honour of John Bowie Wilson, Minister for Lands in 1868, who drew up a plan of 62 portions ranging from 7 to 45 acres. By 1880, eight houses had been built for use as retreats from the summer heat of Sydney with extensive gardens being established in the rich volcanic soil. Many of these early landholders were well known in high society, business and government.



Log trucks descending Mt Tomah at the Devil's Elbow, 1943 (HLS)

## 2. NORTH RICHMOND

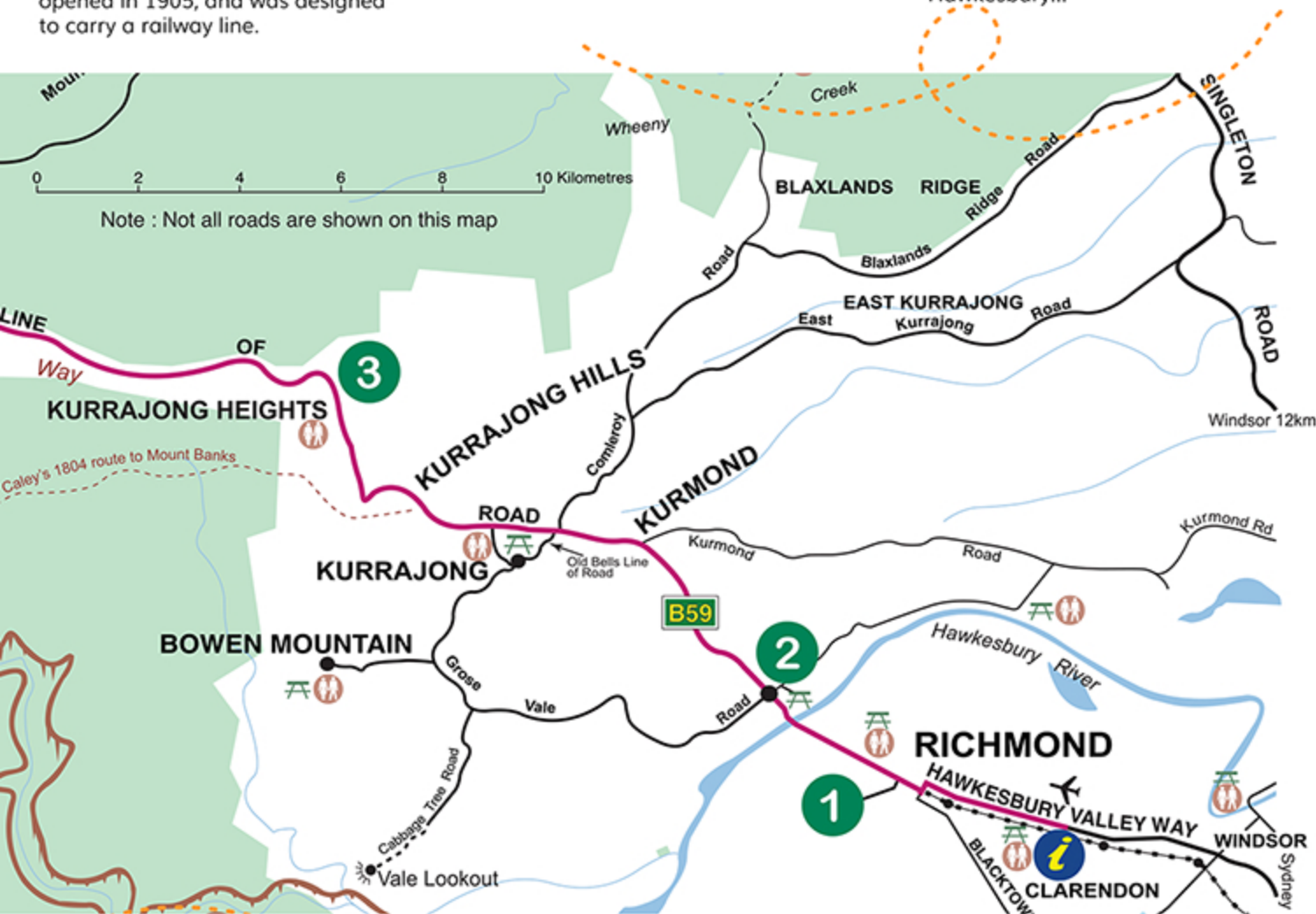
In 1821 the Hawkesbury River was crossed at North Richmond by a punt close to the site of today's bridge. Cattle swam across the river but the punt held about 180 sheep, with as many as 5000 crossing in one day. As the road through Richmond was the main thoroughfare west, with thousands of people tramping to the goldfields, it became urgent to construct a bridge over the river to replace the ferry. The first bridge, a wooden bridge, opened in 1860, and as it weakened due to continual flooding, a new bridge opened in 1905, and was designed to carry a railway line.



Women on the road at Kurrajong Heights, c. 1890-1900 (State Library of NSW)

## 3. KURRAJONG HEIGHTS

On her visit to Bells Line in 1834, Mrs Felton Mathew described the road up to Kurrajong Heights as 'dreadfully steep'... "we were obliged to walk nearly two miles, and the heat was intolerable". Returning the next day, Mrs Mathew looked back from the top of the Heights: "...I enjoyed the magnificent view from the Heights extremely: on one side looking down on a dark unbroken forest, undulating like the sea, the horizon bounded by a chain of mountains....on the other side...Richmond and Windsor in the distance, the cleared and cultivated lowlands on the banks of the Hawkesbury..."



## 5. MOUNT TOMAH

'Tomah' is an Aboriginal word meaning 'tree fern'. In 1804, George Caley became the first European to visit Mount Tomah. In 1830 the first land grant in the area was made to Susannah Bowen who used it for dairying and resting paddocks for cattle. Three sawmills also operated here. In 1934, the property was bought by the French-born horticulturist, Alfred Brunet, and his Australian wife, Effie. They grew flowers that supplied Sydney florists, specialising in bulbs and other cool-climate plants. In 1972 the land was donated by the Brunets to the Royal Botanic Gardens.



Load of apples on truck outside Hanlon's Store at Bilpin, 1945-46 (HLS)

## 4. BILPIN

Famous for its apples, Bilpin is 25 kilometres from the North Richmond Bridge. The name Bilpin was in use by the early 1830s but there is no record of its meaning. During the 1830s, discharged Royal Veterans were offered land grants in the vicinity, and although some took up the grants, they didn't stay long and the allotments were left empty and auctioned in the 1840s. The Hanlon family started a grocery store here in 1929 and its distinctive silhouette remains today. Hanlon's trucks carried apples and timber to Richmond Railway and later to Kurrajong when the line was extended.

## Archibald Bell Junior (1804-1883)

One of ten children, Archibald Bell Junior grew up in the Hawkesbury area. His father Archibald Bell and mother Maria Kitching arrived in the colony in 1807 and were granted land at North Richmond, and built and developed the property 'Belmont'. Here Archibald Jnr and his elder brother William grew up to become good bushmen, with William being involved in exploring areas of the Hunter River. When Archibald was 19, his opportunity to explore came when he noticed that an Aboriginal woman, captured near Belmont by a tribe from the west of the Blue Mountains, escaped and returned by a route different from that taken by the tribe.

In August 1823 he set off following her directions from Richmond to Mount Tomah. On this first expedition young Archibald "took two men with him...and two blackfellows 'Cocky' and 'Emery' and a couple of pack horses". It took him 2 days to get from Richmond to Mt Tomah – a journey that now takes 45 minutes.

On this first trip he was unable to find a safe descent to the west, but the next month he returned and found a practical way finishing in Hartley Valley. Soon after a road was surveyed by Robert Hoddle and built along this route by convict labour. It avoided the steep Mount York descent and had more resting places for stock. The township of Bell, Mount Bell and the route itself were named after the explorer.

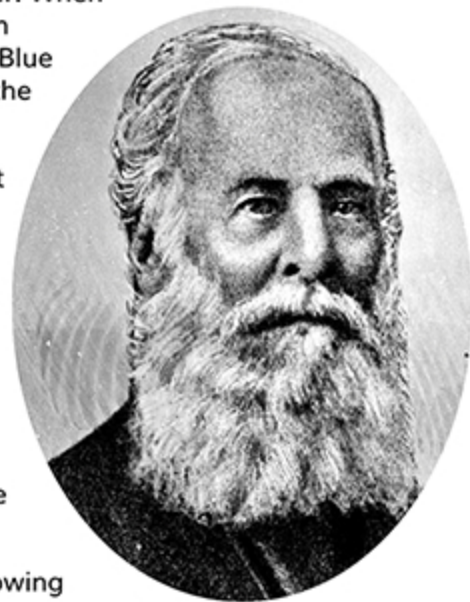
Immediately after this success, Bell left Belmont for the Hunter Valley, following



Mount King George from the Bathurst Road, 1848, Conrad Martens (State Library of NSW)

the route of John Howe and Benjamin Singleton, whom he found dying of starvation at Patrick's Plains. This rescue expedition won him a grant of 1000 acres near Singleton where he built a two-storey house named 'Corinda'. He was one of the first in the area to introduce cattle, and the first to bring in horse teams.

Following his father's interest in public affairs, Archibald Junior was elected to the Legislative Assembly for the Upper Hunter, and in 1879 was appointed to the Legislative Council. In 1859 he bought 'Pickering' on the Hunter River where he lived until his death in 1883.



NSW Government Printer, Parliamentary Archives

## George Caley (1770–1829)

George Caley, natural history collector for Sir Joseph Banks, arrived in New South Wales on board the Speedy in 1800. He was given a house at Parramatta where he could keep his specimens and maintain a botanical garden. His next ten years were devoted to the collection of natural history specimens and exploration and he was the first to make a determined effort to study the Eucalyptus.

In the four years he spent in the colony before making his 1804 journey to Mount Tomah, he travelled extensively in the Sydney area and made journeys to Jervis Bay and Western Port. He sent much collected material to Sir Joseph Banks, describing his specimens and commenting on the affairs of the colony.

In 1804, he made an attempt to cross the Blue Mountains, his journey being a very rough one, likening it to travelling over the tops of the houses in a town. On this journey he found around thirty plants he had not seen before, ending at a place he named Mount Banks overlooking the Grose Valley, where he spent two full days making observations and allowing his men to rest.

Only a few of the names he adopted from the Aboriginals or gave to geographical features on his expeditions have endured. Caley's journals and collections of flora, birds and animals have added substantially to the knowledge of early Australia.

Despite his significant contributions, his work didn't receive much recognition, although some botanical specimens were named after him. These include the orchid genus *Caleana*, *Viola caleyi*, *Banksia caleyi*, *Eucalyptus caleyi* (Caley's ironbark), and *Grevillea caleyi*, a rare and threatened species originally from some small pockets in Sydney's northern suburbs.

# What's In a Name

**Richmond** named by Governor Macquarie in 1810 for its resemblance to its English counterpart for 'it's beautiful situation'.

**North Richmond** originally known as the village of Enfield, the name changing during the 19th century to avoid confusion with Enfield in Sydney's inner-west.

**Kurmond** originally known as Longleat, the current name being a blend of KURrajong and RichMOND.

**Kurrajong** reportedly the Aboriginal name for the *Brachychiton populneus*, a fodder and shade tree.

**Bilpin** in use by the early 1830s but there is no record of its meaning.

**Mount Tomah**, originally Fern Tree Hill, is named for the indigenous word 'Tomah' meaning 'tree fern'.

**Mt Wilson** named in honour of John Bowie Wilson, Minister for Lands in 1868, who drew up its original plan.

**Bell** named after Archibald Bell Junior (1804-1883), Bells Line of Road's most successful explorer.



Hawkesbury Visitor Information  
328 Hawkesbury Valley Way,  
Richmond NSW  
Open 7 days  
Ph (02) 4560 4620  
[www.discoverthehawkesbury.com.au](http://www.discoverthehawkesbury.com.au)