HAWKESBURY

HISTORIC

ROADS

Putty Road

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History of the Putty Road

The 168 kilometre Putty Road links the Hawkesbury to the Hunter Region. The road has been known as the Parson's Road, the Bulga Road, Military Road, Singleton Road and the road to the Coal River (an early name for the Hunter).

The first official exploration of the Hunter Valley, in 1801, reported favourably on the soil and timber resources, and to allow these to be developed it became important to have a route from Windsor to the western parts of the Hunter River.

The first European expeditions from the Hawkesbury were looking for new routes to Bathurst – these were led by former convict and mineralogist William Parr in 1817 and Hawkesbury mill owner Benjamin Singleton in 1818. These expeditions were hampered by thick bush and difficult bushfires near Putty and retreated.

In 1819 local businessman John Howe ventured north with a party of seven from Windsor which included an Aboriginal called Myles. Howe's party encountered similar navigation problems around Putty but this time used Myles to find a local Aboriginal guide. With the assistance of a local guide named Murphy, Howe followed a difficult route along Doyle's Creek to its junction with a larger river. Howe wasn't confident that this river was the Hunter and returned to the Hawkesbury.

"Spent upward of 2 hours travelling over stupendous rock that had the appearance of being impassable" – Howe 1819

Within 4 weeks of Howe returning, Governor Macquarie provisioned an Aboriginal party led by Myles to head back north. Nineteen days later Myles returned having gleaned local Aboriginal knowledge from the Darkinjung people of an easier route through the ranges to the river.

Howe returned in 1820 to explore the river with a party of fifteen which included Singleton. Again accompanied by Myles, they continued along the river to just east of present-day Singleton. As it was almost St Patrick's Day, Howe named the area St Patrick's Plains, and was later known as Patrick's Plains. They did not realise that the river they were following was the Hunter until they reached Wallis Plains (the current Maitland).

Although Howe's track was used to move cattle from existing settlements no attempts were made to improve it. By 1831 with the opening of the Great North Road, Howes track was even less popular and it had a reputation as being isolated and dangerous! From around 1828 travellers along the road were at the mercy of rogues such as "Bold Jack' Donahue of the Wild Colonial boys. As late as 1847 and 1853, robberies were so frequent that the Magistrates at Windsor recommended that a police constable be based at Upper Colo.

After the 1850's the track between Windsor and Colo continued to be used for local traffic, as was the section between Putty and Singleton, but the intermediate section fell into disrepair.

The road remained in a semi-derelict state until the 1940's, when the military significance of having an alternative, inland route between Sydney and Newcastle became apparent.

A new route was chosen between Wilberforce and Wheelbarrow Ridge that crossed the Colo River at Moran's Rock – the original crossing was upstream near present day Colo Heights Road. The existing section between Putty and Singleton was also widened.

Although road improvements commenced in 1939 as unemployment-relief works, they were fast-tracked during World War 2 to provide an inland route for

Building the Singleton Road c.1940's - (Kurrajong Comleroy Historical Society)

possible evacuation of Sydney should the city be invaded. At one time 200 men worked on the road camped in rough tents near Putty. This improved road also provided a strategic inland route between the munitions works at Lithgow and the steel works at Newcastle.

In the mid 1950's truck drivers realised the road was a shorter route to Sydney than the Pacific Highway so traffic increased. Subsequently in 1957 the road was closed as a travelling stock route. By June 1964 the entire road was sealed.

Cover photo: Putty Road near Colo Heights, Rear Photo: Colo River

St Johns Church, Wilberforce (Hawkesbury Library Service HLS)

1. WILBERFORCE

One of Governor Macquarie's Five Towns planned in 1810, Wilberforce is on the banks of the Hawkesbury River about 7 kilometres north of Windsor. Historic features include Wilberforce Cemetery (1811) where many well-known pioneers are buried, St Johns Anglican Church (1859), and the Macquarie School House (1820), the only surviving schoolhouse from the Macquarie era remaining in the Hawkesbury.

Colo River Bridge 1945 (National Library of Australia)

2. COLO

In July 1789, Governor Arthur Phillip's expedition came across the Colo River and named it "the Second Branch". They rowed upstream and camped on a sand spit, believed to be where the Putty Road bridge crosses the river today. European settlers were living on the Colo from the early 1800s with the first land grants made in 1804. Before vehicles, the Colo was serviced by boats which took farm produce to Lower Portland where the goods were put on bigger boats for Sydney. In 1939, a bridge costing 3000 pounds was built across the Colo River. This wooden bridge was damaged by numerous floods and was replaced in 1994 by a higher concrete bridge.
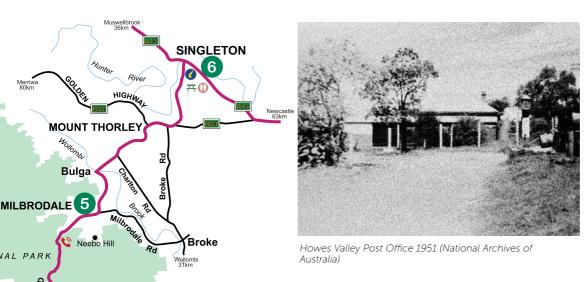

Hannah Laycock 1826 (State Library of NSW)

3. PUTTY

The Putty valley is home to the Darkinjung Aboriginal people. It is thought the name of Putty came from the aboriginal word which sounded like "Booty or Parbooty", meaning 'place of plenty'. Having heard reports from the explorers Parr, Howe and Singleton who noted the lush native grasses, plentiful waterways and abundant wildlife, Governor Macquarie promised a land grant to Hannah Laycock, beef providore to the commissariat of Sydney. The land was named "Putty Farm" and was settled by Hannah's descendents.

MOUN

Merriwa
80km

Bul

MILBRODALE

WOLLEMI NATIONAL PARK

Mt Poppong ●

PUTTY STATE FOREST

Commission Rd

PUTTY ROAD

Howe's 1819 route to Singleton

HOWES VA

4

Mt Wareng ●

Garland Valley

T

Macdonald

Boggy Swamp Rest Area

Mt Yengo ●

PUTTY

3

River

Parr's 1817 route

YENGO NATION

PUTTY ROAD

Kangaroo Waterhole

● Mt Wirraba

Howes Swamp

WOLLEMI

NATIONAL

PARK

Gibba Swamp

Wollemi Wilderness Area

Womerah Range T

Mellong

Crawfords Lookout

PAR

Culoul Range Trail

CONSER

Grassy Hill

Grassy Hill Trail

Devils Hole

● Mt Barakee

Drip Rock Trail

Mile Ridge

COLO

HEIGHT

Colo River

Bob Turners Tk

Mt Townsend ●

Wollemi Wilderness Area

Upper Colo Res

Mt D'Arcy ●

WOLLEMI NATIONAL PARK

Mountain Lagoon

BILPIN

Lithgow
52km

BLUE MOUNTAINS
NATIONAL PARK

Comero

B59

KURRAJO

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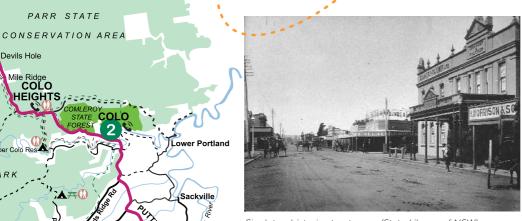
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4. HOWES VALLEY

Isolated Howes Valley once boasted a post office and school house, and the inhabitants often lived long, productive and resilient lives. An article in The Land in 1927 describes Mr Jackson aged 90 and his wife aged 89…."This wonderful old man still rides behind the plough, and his wife is up at daylight to milk her four cows and make butter and cheese. She has never bought any clothes, and even now makes her own. She has had 12 children and has never been attended by a doctor".

Howes Valley Post Office 1951 (National Archives of Australia)

5. MILBRODALE

Milbrodale has an eighty-hectare site containing rock shelters with many signs of Aboriginal occupation. One of the main features is Baiame Cave, which contains a group of Aboriginal paintings; the central figure is a large male figure that may represent Baiame. Baiame is understood by some Aboriginal people to be the creator, the 'Father of All', the most important ancestor and lawmaker of the Wonnarua people who are the traditional custodians of the artwork. The site is on private property but can be visited by prior arrangement.

Baiame Cave near present day Milbrodale

6. SINGLETON

Named for Benjamin Singleton the town is located on the banks of the Hunter River and is subject to major flooding. When the area was being settled the government originally attempted to create a town at Whittingham in a flood-free area, but the town grew by the river nonetheless Singleton retains many historic buildings, including the original court house built in 1841, various large churches and many traditional pubs. The countryside surrounding Singleton contains many fine old mansions, reflecting the aristocratic nature of land grants when the area was settled.

Singleton historic streetscape (State Library of NSW)

Map labels

Muswellbrook 36km
Merriwa 80km
SINGLETON
Newcastle 63km
GOLDEN HIGHWAY
Hunter River
MOUNT THORLEY
Wollombi
Bulga
Charlton Rd
Broke Rd
Milbrodale Rd
Broke
Wollombi 31km
MILBRODALE
Neebo Hill
ROAD
PUTTY
Mt Isobel
Howes Mountain
HOWES VALLEY
Mt Wareng
Mt Yengo
N
YENGO NATIONAL PARK
Waterhole
0   5   10 Kilometres
Emergency Satellite Phone
Payphone
Womerah Range Trail
Swamp
ba Swamp
PARR STATE CONSERVATION AREA
Devils Hole
Mile Ridge
COLO HEIGHTS
Trail
COMLEROY STATE FOREST
COLO
Lower Portland
Upper Colo Res
Sackville
PUTTY RD
Hawkesbury River
Blaxlands Ridge Rd
Comleroy Rd
East Kurrajong Rd
WILBERFORCE
KURRAJONG   RICHMOND   WINDSOR
M2 24km

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Benjamin Singleton (1788-1853)

Benjamin was the second son of William and Hannah Singleton who arrived on the Pitt in 1792, settling in the Hawkesbury on a grant of ninety acres. Benjamin and his older brother James established a grain mill on Wheeny Creek near Kurrajong and later set up two successful tidal mills on the Hawkesbury River.

In 1817, Benjamin Singleton set out with William Parr to explore north and find an alternate route to Bathurst, but left Parr after sixteen days and returned to the mill. Journals kept by Parr suggest there was tension between the two men. The following year, Singleton led his own private party to the north, this time wanting to get to the Hunter. Again an easy route with reliable water beyond Putty proved to be elusive and the party retreated.

Benjamin Singleton was in John Howe's second expedition in 1820 which found a good route to the Hunter. Singleton received a grant of 200 acres on the Hunter where he moved with his wife and six children in 1822. By 1828 he had 1280 acres. Benjamin Singleton died in 1853 leaving ten children and the town of Singleton to commemorate his name.

John Howe (1774-1852)

John Howe and his family arrived in the colony on board the Coromandel in June 1802, one of ten free families on the ship, all of whom took up land grants at Portland Head (Ebenezer).

An enterprising man, he was contracted to build a bridge over South Creek, a road to Sydney and a wharf at Thompson Square. He was Chief Constable from 1812 until 1825 and established a ferry over the Hawkesbury at Windsor in 1814.

In 1819, encouraged by Governor Macquarie, Howe led an expedition from the Hawkesbury which succeeded in reaching the Upper Hunter. This expedition took 11 days to get to the Hunter – a journey that now takes 2 hours by road. Not happy with the route and unsure if he had actually reached the Hunter River, Howe returned the following year with a second expedition which reached the Hunter near where Whitingham is situated. On his return he marked a track by which settlers soon followed with their stock. This track became the current Putty Road.

Although Howe received a grant of 700 acres in the Hunter he continued to live at Windsor. After residing in Windsor for 30 years, he retired in 1839, leaving Windsor to live out the remainder of his days at Raworth Farm near Morpeth, where he died in 1852 at the age of 78.

Howe House: Built in the 1820s, Howe House is now part of the Hawkesbury Regional Museum and is open to the public. 1878, (Hawkesbury Library Service)

Myles (1792-unknown)

Myles (Mioram) was a local Aboriginal who played a crucial role in the success of the early expeditions north to the Hunter. During 1815 Myles had been identified as one of a group of Aboriginal resistance leaders involved with attacks on local European farmers. Overtime hostilities began to settle and by 1819 Myles had been pardoned by Governor Macquarie. Not long after he was included in Howe's first 1819 expedition.
Clearly Myles bush skills and ability to connect to the aboriginal people further north was a great asset for the party. After they returned Myles led the first governor appointed all-Aboriginal party back to the Hunter a few weeks later. The knowledge gleaned by Myles on this trip paved the way for Howe's 1820 trip.

Within a short period Myles had gone from outlaw rebel warrior to being a trusted guide. Myles was promised a breastplate (or gorget) and was allowed to keep his musket as appreciation for his role in the success of the expedition.

What's In a Name

Windsor named by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1810 nostalgically for the township it resembled in England.

Wilberforce named by Macquarie in 1810 after William Wilberforce (1759-1833), English politician, philanthropist, anti-slavery campaigner and one of the founding members of the RSPCA.
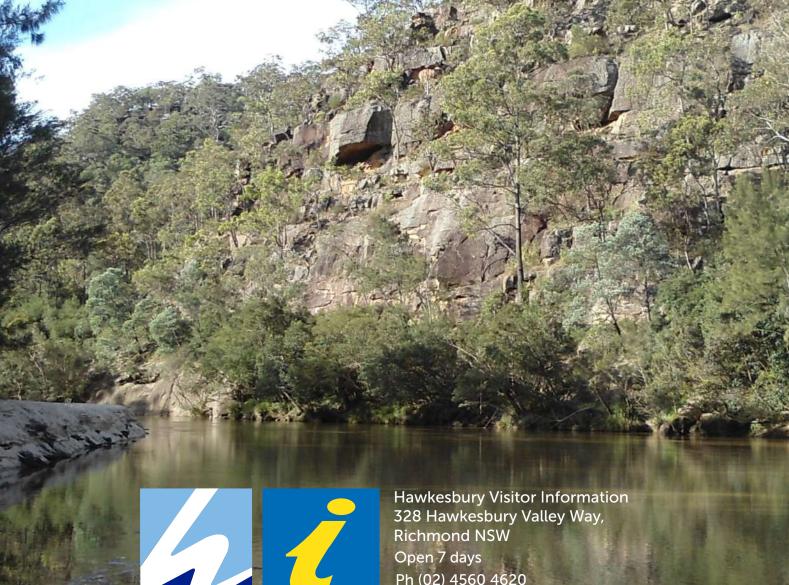
Colo derived from the aboriginal word for "native bear".

Putty derived from the area known by the local Aborigines as "B'pooty". meaning "place of plenty".

Howes Valley named after John Howe, one of the explorers responsible for establishing the way north to the Hunter area via the "Putty Road'.

Bulga Derived from an Aboriginal word for "mountain" or "isolated hill or mountain"

Milbrodale first established by the Rev. Richard Hill in 1832, who named his property Milbro Dale after his mother (her name had been Marlborough, which was commonly shortened to Milbro).

Singleton Named for Benjamin Singleton, the town was originally named Patrick's Plains by John Howe, as it was nearly St Patrick's Day when he arrived at the site.

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