Abstract

This paper examines three heritage roads in New Zealand – their legal and public recognition and their management under public bodies. Old Coach Road, Wellington (built 1856-1858), Ohakune Old Coach Road (1905-06) and Skippers Canyon Road, near Queenstown (1883-90), are all narrow roads built prior to the arrival of motorised vehicles. All are in a good state of preservation and have statutory recognition for their heritage significance. Only one – Skippers – is in vehicular use at present, while Ohakune Old Coach Road is only beginning to be opened up for public. The former and Old Coach Road, Wellington face considerable challenges to maintain their existing fabric and condition, even under sympathetic, public owners.

Each road is examined under three headings – historical background, legal protection/recognition and conservation planning/work. Each section ends with an analysis of efforts to protect and conserve the road and the tasks ahead. A concluding summary examines the future of road heritage in the present regulatory environment and the on-going challenges in achieving conservation and protection of listed historic roads.

Introduction

In August 2005, a narrow dirt road in the North Island back country of Taranaki between Stratford and Taumarunui hit the news. Known as the Whangamomona Road, it is a dead-end side road that heads east off the somewhat exotically named Forgotten World Highway at the town of Whangamomona. The road it gives its name to is unsealed (some 25 kilometres) and was closed for many years before being reopened for visitors in 2002. Now it is being overused by 4-wheel drive enthusiasts and motorbikers and deteriorating quickly. It may have to be closed again.

In most media reports this road, which winds through some spectacular scenery, is described as ‘historic’, although the road has no specific heritage status. However, the Forgotten World Highway was New Zealand’s first heritage trail. It shows what can happen when the media decides to bestow a title on something. The road was built in the early 1900s to give access to farms in a remote valley, before the advent of the motor vehicle and so can certainly be described as from what one might call the ‘horse-era’. And the road has been little altered since it was first built. These are two ingredients that may well make the road historic.

Many New Zealanders now know that the Whangamomona Road is ‘historic’ and as a result, they also know that there are such things as ‘historic’ roads. But while an appreciation of the heritage of roads in New Zealand may have begun, official recognition of the value of historic roads has come more slowly.

The reasons for this are many and varied, but have their origins in the sheer utility of the road. It is there to be used to get from one place to the other. Most New Zealanders, understandably, use roads without a consideration as to when and why they were built and who built them. Some of those roads – the main streets in our towns and cities – could be considered among the most historically significant places we have. But working out how to recognise and protect such roads is some way off. The New Zealand Historic Places Trust (NZHPT) has registered just three roads – and none of them is in the middle of an urban area. Perhaps, given the sheer extent of change involved in urban roads, it may never happen.

Perhaps the main way to recognise historically important but highly modified routes is to acknowledge their significance in heritage landscapes. For example, assessments of important streetscapes in New Zealand have rarely, if ever, acknowledged that the reason the buildings are there at all is because a road was once formed there and still exists, albeit much modified. There are a few, listed historic working roads, and one of them – Skippers Canyon Road – is featured in this paper. The famous Te Anau to Milford road, which was begun in the 1930s, retains a number of its original features, such as hand worked cuttings and bench walls, which are being conserved by the national roading authority, Transit New Zealand, in an agreement with the Department of Conservation (DOC). Nevertheless, appreciation of historic roads is still in its nascence in New Zealand. But the following three case studies can tell us something about where the recognition and conservation of heritage roads in New Zealand is heading.

Old Coach Road, Wellington

Historical background

Old Coach Road was the first road in New Zealand to gain national heritage status. It is a short, narrow (roughly 4.2 metres wide) road on the northern outskirts of Wellington between the suburb of Johnsonville and the farming settlement of Ohariu. It was built by the Wellington Provincial Council between 1856 and 1858 and left the main road out of Wellington at Johnsonville, climbed over a ridge and down to the valley of Ohariu. It was only in regular use for six years before a new access road – more sheltered and less steep – was completed about 1866. Although Old Coach Road was ‘stopped’ in 1936, it remained legal road.

Today it mainly winds its way through farmland, but it was originally cut through thick, native bush. The view from the top of the road (some 300 metres above sea level) over the hills to the South Island is wonderful – even with the power pylons – but accounts from the late 1850s suggest it was quite spectacular before the bush was removed. When it was constructed, the

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road was approximately 6 kilometres long. Today it has been reduced to about 2.5 kilometres as a result of land subdivision and sealing. The last sealing took place in 1971.

For the following 20 years the road remained undisturbed. Local residents had always been aware that the road was old and, with little farming traffic to worry about, they made great use of it for walking, horse riding and more latterly trail bike riding. A well-researched newspaper article on the road in 1963 revealed its interesting history, including the titbit that the road's construction workers went on strike - unsuccessfully - for better pay. The name Old Coach Road is a misnomer because no coaches ever ran on the road, but it does indicate the relative antiquity of the road, albeit inaccurately.

In 1992, some local residents walking at the southern end of the road turned a corner to see a digger dumping fill. The land around the road had been bought from a local farmer by a developer, who had applied to subdivide the land. The council, which actually owns the road, granted consent for the work without notifying the public and, as part of the initial landscaping, approved the dumping of fill on the road. But the council had not checked to see if it was legal road and work had to stop amid the clamour from protesting road users. By this time some 150 metres of the road had been obliterated and the original road surface is most unlikely to ever be seen again. It is an example of how awkward the fight over this road has become that, 13 years later, agreement has only just been reached on the construction of the houses on the sections next to the road.

My involvement with the road began in 1996 when I was asked to prepare an assessment of its heritage significance by the Wellington City Council. Local residents had been telling the council that the road was historically important, but the developer's consultants (including at least one archaeologist), local farmers and other land owners were just as adamant it was not. The road retains its original alignment and the grade is generally consistent along its length. It is mostly made up of bench cuts that follow the folds of hills. In patches the bedrock is evident. The edge of the road is particularly well defined on some stretches, indicating that, despite the unstable nature of the underlying greywacke rock, the road was extremely well-built. The road was metalled and regularly maintained until traffic there fell away in the 1920s. The site inspection and subsequent research concluded that Old Coach Road is:

- One of the country's oldest intact "horse-era" roads and one of the oldest historic places in the Wellington region.
- One of the few remaining examples of a public work undertaken by the Wellington Provincial Council, having been built during the Council's first road building initiatives in the mid-1850s.
- In remarkably original condition, a result of the road being quickly superseded by the 'new' route to the Ohariu Valley in 1863-64 and also because regular use of the road largely finished before the arrival of the motorcar.

Figure 1: Old Coach Road looking towards the Ohariu Valley.
(M.Kelly 2005)
Legal protection / recognition

The outcome of this work was that the Wellington City Council (WCC) decided to list the road on its district scheme, but it specifically excluded the portion covered by fill, following submissions from the developer and others. Listing on the district scheme was covered by rules that did not permit the road to be destroyed, but did not exactly protect it either. In terminology clearly unsuited to roading heritage, the rules stated that proposals to alter or add to the road could not be turned down, but demolition could. These rules remain in place, but how they work in practice it is still difficult to say.

In 1997, the road was proposed for Registration by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust (NZHPT). Again, although the NZHPT approved the Registration, it too excluded the portion under fill. It also ranked it Category II, the lower of its two categories, on the grounds that not enough was known about the extent and integrity of New Zealand’s historic roads. Later, in 2001, it reconsidered its registration and upgraded the Registration to include the entire road, this time as Category I. NZHPT registration does not offer direct protection but the road is also a recorded archaeological site, so it is protected by the archaeological provisions of the Historic Places Act. This means that the permission of the NZHPT must be sought before any proposed change to the road. The NZHPT can turn down any application to modify or destroy an archaeological site, although it rarely does.

Conservation planning / work

Having listed the road on its district plan, the WCC then followed that up by commissioning me to write a conservation plan. This was the first time a conservation plan had ever been written for a road in New Zealand. I tried to treat it like any other plan and, by and large, that was successful. After extensive consultation – with the land developer, adjoining land owners and the public – I undertook a close analysis of track repair and maintenance specifications written by DOC for historic tracks. This formed the basis of the plan for restoring the road and keeping it maintained. The plan was completed in early 1999.

Analysis

Although the road has its heritage status as a nationally significant historic place, and a conservation plan to guide its care and maintenance, this has actually done little to protect the road. It remains under constant threat from users, earthworks and unsympathetic council officials. The only thing that prevents the road from greater damage is a vigilant public. The conservation plan has never been put into action, with the exception that the road is now regularly mowed. As far as I know, few council staff, whether ‘policy’ or ‘delivery’, have ever seen the plan or read it. Despite the role the NZHPT has in monitoring changes to the road, it is often unable to stop minor works. Subdivision work alongside the road frequently encroaches on the formation. New drains and culverts suddenly appear on the road without permission. At the northern end of the road, big trucks and earth-moving machinery have used the road to gain access to power pylons built across the valley in the 1960s, and as a result have caused huge damage. Houses now loom over the road at the southern end, ruining views back to the road from further up the ridge. Interpretation, which would have been very helpful in warning against inappropriate use of the road, has never been erected, despite being promised as far back as seven years ago.

As a postscript, I can report two recent developments of interest. Firstly, work on the subdivision that caused all the difficulty 13 years ago has finally begun, but not before an out of court settlement between the developer and local residents, which has led to an agreement to install a significant buffer between the houses and the road, including the planting of trees and a battered wall. The view of the subdivision will still not be great, but it will be much better than it otherwise would have been.

Secondly, and less optimistically, there is one last battle ahead for those who want to save the road in its present form. The WCC, maintaining its strangely inconsistent stance over the road’s future, has decided to build a new link road for buses and wants to take it straight over the portion of Old Coach Road covered by fill. Old Coach Road’s supporters are gearing up for what they hope will be the last fight to keep the road intact.

Ohakune Old Coach Road

Historical background

Ohakune Old Coach Road, situated in the middle of New Zealand’s North Island near the skiing resort of Ohakune, is the direct outcome of the lengthy construction of the country’s main trunk railway line. The road began as a bridle track, completed in 1886. In 1895 it was upgraded to a dray road. In the meantime, construction of the North Island main trunk railway line, which had been pushed through with some ease in the South Island, was proving a difficult proposition. It took decades to be completed as engineers grappled with a series of major engineering challenges on the island’s awkward inland topography. As the two ends of the line from Auckland and Wellington got closer together, the Public Works Department began considering how to bridge that gap. It decided that the economic and publicity benefits to be gained by somehow linking the two railheads was justification enough to build a road to carry passengers and goods. It would also be able to carry construction traffic to and from various sites. Work began late in 1905 or early in 1906 and was completed in November 1906.

A considerable part of the existing dray road was upgraded by paving it with setts (rock pavers), giving it a durable, all-weather roading surface for heavy horse-drawn traffic. At the point the road was completed, the distance between the railheads was 39 kilometres. The road was used for more than two years until the main trunk line was finally opened to public use on 15 February 1909. With rail construction traffic also finished, much of the road fell into disuse. Northern sections were incorporated into State Highway 49 and later sealed. The portion that remained was used intermittently by local residents, and was still in use in the early 1960s when the Ohakune Borough Council put logs over the eastern end of the middle section to prevent vehicle access. It became overgrown or covered in forest litter. In 1987, during work on a major deviation of the main trunk line, a large cutting near the Taonui Viaduct cut the road in two places. Much fill from this cutting was dumped on the road. Nevertheless, the old road was never forgotten by locals, hunters and trampers familiar with the terrain. In the early 2000s, local businessmen and enthusiasts began to promote the potential of the road to provide a tourist attraction and recreational opportunity. They were keen to expand the range of activities available for tourists in the Ohakune area beyond skiing, which is susceptible to the
vagaries of the weather. The road’s owner, DOC, was soon convinced of its significance and the viability of restoring it to a usable condition to show off its unique surface.

The portion of the road that remains relatively intact is constructed of closely packed setts (rounded stones rather like cobbles) on a 3.6 metre formation, bounded by large rocks (kerbstones) that lock the setts in place. The setts were not carefully rounded so the coach ride was most uncomfortable. Recent test excavations on the road suggest that in an effort to smooth the road surface, it may have been covered with fine fill. If this is so, most of it has been washed out. The road was primarily constructed of bench cuts, but a section of embankment was built to carry the road above boggy ground. There were stone culverts (some very substantial and made up of large rocks covered by smaller fill), and of course drains. The culverts were once stone-lined but few if any now remain in original condition.

Much of the road is today covered with nearly 100 years of forest litter and loess, which has almost completely obscured the original surface. However, the formation is still fairly easy to follow as it winds its way its way over the hills, maintaining the gentle grade once necessary for use by the teams of horses.

Although it is a recreational asset, the road is certainly significant heritage, for a number of reasons:

- It is a rare example of roading engineering heritage. The reuse of an old road construction technique allowed the road to be used all year round; of great importance given the kind of traffic the road carried and the environment encountered.
- The construction of such a hard wearing surface means it was probably the best constructed, rural road in New Zealand at the time.
- It was briefly used as the link between the two ends of the main trunk railway and for construction traffic.
- The end of the road’s useful life froze it in time and, other than the natural deterioration it has undergone since its use stopped, it is in remarkably good condition.

Legal protection / recognition

The road sits within the Tongariro National Park and is managed by DOC, so it enjoys the highest legal protection. Nevertheless, DOC was keen to see its national heritage status confirmed, and a proposal to register the road as a Category I historic place was approved by the NZHPT in 2004. The road is not yet listed on the local district plan, but that will come. Although the last upgrading of the road took place in 1906, the road’s origins as a packtrack in 1882 (and upgrading to a dray road in 1895) required DOC to err on the side of caution and treat the road as an archaeological site, even though the Historic Places Act has a cut-off date of 1900 for statutory recognition of archaeological sites. As a result, the NZHPT has been, and will be, consulted about each stage of work and any alteration of road fabric requires an authority to modify the site from the NZHPT.

Conservation planning / work

With the strong support of the local community behind it, DOC decided to undertake a staged restoration that would eventually see the whole road returned to something akin to its original appearance. The preparation of a conservation plan was a necessary prerequisite to the start of work and I was commissioned to prepare that plan. While the plan drew on work done previously with places such as Old Coach Road, Ohauiti and DOC’s historic tracks, the unusual paving - deliberately constructed to provide an all-weather surface - presented an unusual challenge to planning. This was made more so by the fact that there was no place along the length of the road where more than a few setts were visible, such had been the layer of deposits on the road. So, in the absence of any firm evidence, the extent of the setts had to be determined by prodding into the surface.

DOC was happy to have the plan completed without undertaking an invasive investigation, which took place in winter this year. This work, undertaken by archaeologist Kevin Jones, revealed that a typical section of the road consisted of three layers with the top layer of 20cm made up of ‘large stones and gravel worked and compacted together to the point that the surface rang when hit with a hammer’. There was a pronounced wheel-rut formation towards one edge, repeated on other parts of the road. Work on the first stage begins in earnest this summer with the exposing of the surface of the section of road closest to the township of Ohakune and the clearing of culverts and drains.

Analysis

It is indeed fortunate that this significant road lies within a national park and has been little altered in the period since it was abandoned in 1909. Having a committed owner and manager in DOC and with the community right behind the restoration project, the ingredients are in place to ensure the road has a new purpose and a bright future. The road will be restored according to ICOMOS principles and thereafter managed to that level. The significance of the road and the importance of its conservation will be reinforced to users by regular interpretation along its length. This will also allow an opportunity to educate more visitors about roading heritage in general.

Skippers Canyon Road

Historical background

Central Otago was a significant gold mining area; the first place in New Zealand where gold was discovered. The reminders of that history are to be found in many places. The hills behind Queenstown were the richest in the Otago Goldfields and gold was first discovered at the Upper Shotover in 1862, soon after the first major gold find in Central Otago. By 1865 there was a
The end of gold mining operations did not end use of the road and, from quiet beginnings, tourist use has increased markedly over the past 30 years. Today, many visitors to Queenstown take the trip up the road to start a white water rafting trip or to bungy-jump off the Skippers Pipeline, a bridge 100 metres above the river built on the site of a pipeline constructed across the canyon in 1864. In recent years at least 70,000 people per annum have travelled on the road.

The road is not for the faint hearted though. It takes some care and skill to navigate its awkward alignment and there have been a number of fatalities on the road over its history. The road’s narrow formation and imposing, steep walls highlight the difficulties posed during its construction and are reflected in its high maintenance. Many important features have been swept away by rock falls or removed in ‘clean ups’ by local roading staff. The rock walls are particularly vulnerable and are not nearly as extensive as they once were, although some were ‘restored’ in the 1980s.

The wider public is very aware of the significance of this road but this is the very reason so many want to come and see it. While interest in the road should not be discouraged, the increasing tourist traffic represents a growing problem for such a sensitive place.

Legal protection / recognition

The road is managed by the Queenstown Lakes District Council (QLDC), which recognises the importance of the road as an access route and as a significant tourist attraction in its own right. The Council has listed the road on its district plan. The road is not registered by the NZHPT but a registration proposal to the Trust, funded by the QLDC, is in preparation. Regardless of its status, the road is recognised locally, nationally and internationally as an historic road in a dramatic and scenic part of the country. Despite an awareness of the road’s status within the QLDC, staff, contractors, and members of the public, have undertaken work to keep it open or make it more useable which has resulted in the loss of significant fabric.

Conservation planning / work

There is no conservation plan in place for this road as yet and no specific maintenance plan to help maintain the road’s special character. A conservation plan may be prepared, now the road is registered by the NZHPT. Information gathered for the proposal can be used in the plan. Once a plan is in place, the council will be better able to restrict or curtail inappropriate use of the road and conserve existing fabric or even restore elements that have gone from the road.

Analysis

While Skippers Canyon Road has been publicly recognised for its heritage significance for a long time, its protection and conservation have lagged far behind. The road is a valuable resource, both as a destination in its own right and for the access it provides to the Upper Shotover, and so is under increasing pressure. It is rare indeed to have a surviving road of such heritage significance carrying so much traffic. The challenge for the QLDC is to find a balance between use and heritage that allows the road to survive for another century. It also has to start educating its staff and contractors, and the general public, on the value of the road and how to care for it.
Conclusion
In an ideal world, heritage roads would be treated much like buildings. The kind of uses, not to mention the level of use, would be appropriate to a road's heritage value and the fragility of its fabric. New Zealand's oldest roads are precious places because they were built in a dynamic environment and, even if they have avoided widening or sealing, they remain vulnerable to the instability of the rock or movement of the earth or the harsh climate.

However, roads — even old roads — are still seen as essential utilities and the only way that a road's heritage values can be matched to an appropriate use is when the road's manager can exercise total control over all the relevant factors. Preparing conservation plans is one thing, getting them adopted and used is another. The Ohakune Old Coach Road, which also has the most stable fabric of the three roads under discussion, will naturally benefit from being managed by DOC, for which the protection and care of historic resources is one of its key roles.

Territorial authorities have a range of matters to consider under planning law and the difficulties they face in trying to please a range of stakeholders is never better exemplified than by the fate of the other two roads, both of which show how heritage struggles to compete with other demands. Old Coach Road in Wellington ostensibly benefits from the protection offered by listing as a heritage item on the local district plan, but that heritage becomes expendable when the council has to consider competing demands. It is symptomatic of a wider problem within many of New Zealand's local authorities. Heritage might be a matter of national importance under environmental planning law, but experience suggests the reality is far different.

The sheer success of New Zealand's tourist industry has made the future of the Skippers Canyon Road much more uncertain. The local authority does not want to see the road's fabric compromised any further, but it dare not undermine tourist use of the river and its many attractions. It is in a bind, for even if the tourist activities moved away, more and more people would want to see the road itself, simply to experience the drive. It can not control traffic without a major intervention. More traffic will have an even greater impact on a vulnerable road that is, in many places, so narrow that it is impossible to turn around.

It is clear that use, or more particularly carefully managed use, is the key to the future of vulnerable heritage roads. The greater the general, unfettered use, the less likely it is that a road can be properly conserved. As more roads are, inevitably, added to heritage inventories, managing access and the form of use, allied to education and interpretation, will become the best tools for protecting these valuable resources.

Bibliography
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Kelly M. (2005) "Old Coach Road, Ohakune Conservation Plan", Department of Conservation, Tongariro-Taupo Conservancy, Turangi,

Endnotes
1 Heritage trails - self-guided walking or driving tourist trails - were, internationally, a successful way of getting the public interacting with heritage. The Heritage Trails Foundation began in New Zealand in 1989 and the country now has about 120 heritage trails.
2 Elsdon Best Scrapbook Vol.9, MSK-3196, Alexander Turnbull Library. Best quotes directly from the New Zealand Gazette of 1859.
3 Evening Post 7/12/1963.
4 “Old Coach Roads” can be found in various parts of New Zealand but few, if any, ever had coaches on them. The use of that road name is more reflective of romantic notions than historical fact.
5 It is one of the curious anomalies of the Historic Places Act 1993 that it offers blanket protection for pre-1900 archaeological sites but not registered historic places.
6 Early in 1908 a reporter from The Wanganui Herald took the rail-coach-rail trip from Wellington to Auckland. He wrote that the “metal is coarse in places and one jocular passenger estimated 433 bumps in the first quarter of an hour, and then declared his inability to keep further tally”.
7 Section 18 Authority 2005/239: Old Coach Road, Ohakune, prepared by K. Jones. Department of Conservation. p.2
8 The National Parks Act 1980 which is administered by DOC, states that “sites and objects of archaeological and historical interest shall as far as possible be preserved”.

1 Ohakune Old Coach Road
2 Old Coach Road, Wellington
3 Skippers Canyon Road