The road behind us: the Pacific Highway, Sydney to Brisbane, as a heritage corridor

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Abstract

The Pacific Highway, built in the late 1920s and early 1930s to carry traffic between Sydney and Brisbane, became an important road for Australian motorists, carrying commercial traffic along the east coast of Australia and becoming the preferred route of holiday makers travelling to the beaches and resorts along its route. Over half a century of use, the Highway developed cultural significance as a known and appreciated travel corridor, the location of services and attractions and a component of the landscape. In the 1980s, in response to concerns over the safety and efficiency of the Highway, NSW, Queensland and the Commonwealth Governments began a major rebuilding of the Highway with the aim of transforming it into a dual carriageway motorway, resulting in the bypassing of many towns and long sections of the old route. The heritage significance of the Highway has not been acknowledged in this process and the highway itself and listed sites along its verges are vulnerable to degradation and loss as part of these changes. Starting with the long bypassed section between Cowan and Somersby, the formal recognition and promotion of the heritage significance of the bypassed sections of the highway could protect this heritage resource and help bypassed towns to salvage their economies.

From the 1920s, the National Roads and Motoring Association (NRMA) produced ‘road-before-you’ highway maps for motorists in NSW. At each turn of the page, the navigator could see a driveable portion of the road to come on overlapping sectional maps (Official motor road guide to northern New South Wales c1928). This is the usual view taken of highways. They are designed for through traffic, for people looking onward to their destination and only intending to remain on the Highway for the shortest possible time. A more unusual perspective is the backward view, generally only enjoyed by small children and dogs, of the highway streaming away behind the vehicle. This vantage point calls into question the irresistible pace of changes in vegetation could be finely matched with progress toward the goal of reaching one’s destination.

The Pacific Highway, constructed in the late 1920s to carry traffic leaving the then soon to be completed Sydney Harbour Bridge north through the residential suburbs along the North Shore Railway Line to Newcastle, the North Coast, Queensland’s Gold Coast and ultimately to Brisbane, offers an opportunity to conserve the physical fabric and driving experience of an early twentieth century highway. The Pacific Highway is the second longest in NSW and was the state’s most heavily trafficked interstate route by the 1990s with a catchment of one-third of Australia’s population (Pacific Task Force 1995: 5; Nehl 1986: x). It was built to the highest contemporary standards, embodying innovations such as a cement concrete road surface in some sections. An early guide to the Highway praised its ‘perfect new road surfaces’, its ‘wonderful panoramic views’, its generous pavement width of 20 feet (6.2m), its ruling gradient of 1 in 20 and minimum radius of curvature of 200 feet (61m) (Phillips c1931). The Highway transformed ideas of space and journeying in the areas through which it passed (Cushing 2002).

The Highway showcased the surrounding landscape. The Main Roads Board counted this as one of its benefits. Its ‘scenic views [were] second to none in the Commonwealth’ making it one of only three main roads with ‘any pretence to Beauty’ and this aesthetic value was protected by exhorting local councils to place bans on unsightly roadside advertising signs (Main Roads Board of NSW 1926: 15, 32; Main Roads 1930: 139). Motoring writers waxed lyrical about the attractiveness of the highway: the ‘roadway winds serpent-like around towering hills and tree clad cliffs’ with orange orchards adding to the ‘entrancing picture’ extolled one in 1933 (‘Toronto, the Beautiful’ 1933: 8). Perhaps the most dramatic section was the approach to the town of Gosford. There, the Pacific Highway traversed the peak of the ridge line and then plunged back down to sea level. At the top of the ridge, travelling north, motorists, or at least their passengers, were met with a spectacular view over orderly citrus groves and the picturesque Brisbane Water backed by wooded hills. Capitalising on this sudden encounter, the local Historical Society had erected beside the Highway a memorial to the poet Henry Kendall recalling the inspiration he drew from the local environment and offering a high culture endorsement of the tourist experience. With such a rich variety of signs of place, the Pacific Highway also signposted the passage through space. The many landmarks of river crossings, passage through towns and changes in vegetation could be finely matched with progress toward the goal of reaching one’s destination.

The Pacific Highway was officially named in 1931, but it consisted largely of pre-existing roads, many of which themselves followed Aboriginal peoples’ tracks along ridgelines and through passes, of the items on the NSW Heritage Register with the address ‘Pacific Highway’, almost three-quarters are in the northern suburbs of Sydney and the majority of those predate the highway. The rerouting and widening of those old roads to form the Highway affected what we would now see as the heritage value of some properties. Church of England girls’ school Abbotsleigh, at Wahroonga, lost eighteen feet of land and had to pay the costs of moving their fence when the highway came through in 1929 (Marr 1983: 12). At Hillview in Turramurra, the front stone wall had to be taken down in 1936 and reerected many feet closer to the house to allow for the widening of the highway. (History of Hillview 1983) While the schools and churches held to their sites, many families vacated their roadside homes, leaving the highway for other uses such as petrol stations, shops and flats. Outside the major cities, the Highway was welcomed as a conduit of commerce. In a 1930s NRMA guide to the highway, advertisements for local businesses demonstrated the
welcoming of the motor traffic. The White Way Service Station, Lismore, the Ocean View Hotel at Urunga and the Black Cat Café in Taree with its ‘Frigidaire Cooled Cordials’ all sought to sell their services to motorists (Pacific Highway, Sydney to Brisbane c1935). The Highway not only spawned new sites and functions but emphasised the relationship of its route to the longer human use of its corridor.

Over the decades, the distinctive relationship between the Highway and its environment created a driving experience which became embedded in the memories of locals, holiday makers and transport industry workers. By the 1950s, thousands of Sydneysiders heading north, Brisbanites going south and Melburnians making the long trek to the Gold Coast drove their cars along the Pacific Highway, Highway One, laden with surf boards, Esokies and beach-towels and ideas of the beach holiday to come. Informed by these holiday trips, some people made a permanent sea change to the north coast or to the alternative lifestyle communities inland, entrenching the Pacific Highway as a road to peace and tranquility, an avenue to getting away from it all. The highway became an integral element of the holiday as it, and the sites on its verges, shaped people’s experience of arriving in a leisure space. Over time, the ease of access offered by the highway drew more and more motorists, creating long delays in travelling the highway on long weekends and during school holiday periods. Along the highway, items were constructed to attract the attention of motorists, from Ploddy the dinosaur at the Australian Reptile Park in Gosford, to numerous petrol stations and cafes, to roadside memorials for victims of collisions (Clark, Cushing and Oskley, 2004). The nature of the highway and people’s use of it made it a meaningful space associated with beauty, recreation, adventure and the frustration of traffic congestion. However, as a linear complex rather than a single place, the Pacific Highway has not received the heritage protection extended to more conventional sites.

Application of the Burra Charter criteria of aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations to the Pacific Highway suggests that it has a high level of cultural significance. The technological record provided by the highway, its role in commerce and the development of localities, its representation of a phase of state and national history, its aesthetic aspects or its meaning for individuals and groups in society equate to sufficient significance to warrant listing as of state if not national significance. Its role as a corridor along which other sites are located is evident from the over two hundred sites with a Pacific Highway address which appear on the NSW State Heritage Inventory. Yet, there is no heritage protection for the Highway itself. The only elements of the Highway to be listed on the NSW State Heritage Inventory are six bridges and the median, lights and palm trees between Hornsby Park and Police Station (NSW Heritage Inventory). This is not a wilful ignoring of the Pacific Highway. Very few other NSW roads enjoy heritage protection. Wyong Shire Council has listed a remnant of the Old Maitland Road at Kangy Angy in its Local Environment Plan and one section of the Great North Road, convict built in the 1820s and early 1830s, has a state listing (NSW Heritage Inventory). The government arm charged with responsibility for the Pacific and other highways in NSW is the Roads and Traffic Authority (hereafter RTA). As a statutory body of the NSW government, it has an obligation under Section 170 of the Heritage Act to manage heritage items it owns or affects, including the creation of a Heritage and Conservation Register (RTA 1999). Bridges and moveable heritage are well represented on this register but only two roads appear there: the 1792 alignment of the Old Windsor Road, Seven Hills to Kellyville, and an 1878 macadamised section of the Bruxner Highway near Tenterfield. Although roads are mentioned specifically as heritage items in the RTA guidelines for heritage management, the philosophy of conserving original fabric and repairing rather than replacement applied to other heritage items is not applied to its highways (RTA 1999). The priority placed on roads as thoroughfares seems to have put them largely outside the considerations of the RTA as heritage items, making them vulnerable to ongoing, unsympathetic change or bypassing and neglect. Other Australian states seem to be slightly more ready to list roads. Western Australia protects the Gunbarrel Highway, the Old Coach Road which was the original Albany Highway and the Stirling Highway Precinct in North Fremantle, including the road and associated buildings, while Victoria has listed several colonial era roads (Heritage Council of Western Australia Places Database; Victorian Heritage Register On-line).

The lack of protection is of concern because, by the 1970s, the Pacific Highway was receiving sustained criticism. The NRMA conducted regular surveys of the Highway, concluding that it was below adequate standards in terms of its narrow formation, poor alignment and the condition of pavement (Searles 1981: 42). Spurred on by public outrage after two bus collisions in October and December 1989, work began on a comprehensive upgrade of the Pacific Highway in 1996. With a budget of $2.2 billion dollars provided by the NSW, Queensland and Federal governments, the aim was to address accident blackspots, to reduce journey times and vehicle operational costs, to enhance the function of the road as a transportation corridor and to increase business development opportunities by diverting around population centres (ERM Mitchell McCotter 1999:1.1, 1.2). Five years into the project in 2001, the Pacific Highway was still a ‘death road’, with a fatality rate sixty percent higher than the NSW average (Sydney Morning Herald, 4 July 2001). At the time of writing in August 2007, the RTA website listed 29 projects completed providing 283 kilometres of double lane divided road on the Pacific Highway, with four projects under construction and 18 in the planning stages. This work has progressively transformed the Highway into a freeway, changing its course and dimensions, and, in the process, largely obliterating the earlier road and removing the logic of the cultural sites along its verges. All of this is taking place with little recognition of the heritage value of the Pacific Highway and its corridor.

Heritage assessment is part of the planning process. Before receiving approval to undertake each section of work, the RTA is obliged by state law to develop and publish an Environmental Impact Statement. Taking two years or more to complete, these Statements run to many volumes and draw upon the expertise of a range of specialists. Topics investigated and reported on include the nature of the local geology and drainage, adjacent land use, noise and vibration impacts, visual quality and landscape character, ecological effects and the impact on cultural heritage, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Archaeologists and other heritage consultants are retained to survey the history of the area, to liaise with local communities and to document any significant sites in the path of the upgrading. A frequent practice is for consultants to walk the length of the proposed route to locate potential heritage items (Sinclair Knight Merz 1998: 31, 34). In the EIS for the Buladelah upgrade, potentially significant sites noted included such unpromising items as an abandoned 1930s truck and...
refuse in a tip used in the 1940s (Officer 2004: 74). Sites deemed to be significant impact on how the projects evolve, ranging from rerouting, to sound barriers, to documentation prior to destruction. Heritage studies are an essential part of the EIS process.

The issue for the Pacific Highway and its corridor is that these heritage consultants are commissioned to study the route of the bypass, not the Highway. The new routes can generally be designed to avoid any well recognised sites, especially as most such sites are clustered along the path of the Pacific Highway. The Ultinarra Bypass EIS noted that there were two heritage listed items in the town, the Former Court House now Police Station and the Pioneer Dairy Company works, both on the Pacific Highway. The whole village was a National Trust Urban Conservation Area. The EIS’s authors concluded that these protected heritage items would not be affected because the bypass was outside of the conservation zone (Con nell Wagner 1998b: 151,152). The Bundacree Creek to Possum Brush Upgrade EIS demonstrated the Highway’s impact on the development of the town when it noted in its historical section that the rerouting of the Pacific Highway to pass through Nabiac in 1952 led to a population increase in the previously isolated area. Nonetheless, it found no element of the Highway of heritage significance although a house, butcher’s shop and cemetery in its corridor were investigated as heritage items which would be disturbed by the upgrade (Gay 2001: 14 - 15).

When a remnant section of an earlier alignment of the Pacific Highway used until 1969 was located during work on the Buladelah upgrade EIS, its presence was noted but it was not deemed to be of heritage significance and was approved to be built over with entry and exit ramps (Officer 2004: 102). Neither do the EISs assess the impact of diverting the Highway on the listed sites along the Highway or on potential sites. In the Ballina Bypass EIS, just three items of European heritage were mentioned, two residential buildings and one railway embankment on the proposed path of the bypass. (Connell Wagner 1998a: E-6) The Big Prawn located beside the Highway was not considered. The Big Prawn was built in the 1980s by the Mokana family to attract trade to their petrol station chain (Jenkins 2002). Like the Big Banana at Coffs Harbour, the Big Prawn is a well known and well loved structure, which helps to give the Pacific Highway its character and interest. This loss of context applies equally to pre-Highway era churches, schools and pubs as it does to the petrol stations, cafes and shops established to cater to motorists. The impact of taking away the Highway, the raison d’etre for roadside sites of significance, is not considered in heritage studies, although it is a factor in economic assessments of the impact of the bypasses. Clearly, there is an awareness that rerouting the Highway and its traffic will have both positive and negative effects but these considerations do not extend to the heritage value of the Highway.

In his book on the protection of historic roads, Marriott identified realignment, destruction, replacement and regional threats as the four principal risks faced by such roads as the pressures of resource age, ignorance, increased traffic and litigation mount (Marriott c1998: 25). Over time, changes to the Pacific Highway have made it a pastiche, an organic melding of elements from different eras, showing the evolution of transport and road design technologies. This is as it should be: the Highway has a social role and few would wish that it was frozen in the form it took in 1931, with ferries instead of bridges, long unsealed sections and no centre line. However, the current project goes beyond this piecemeal alteration, amounting to Marriott’s second category: incremental destruction or ‘systematic changes, destroying or modifying portions of the original road … to a point at which the entire road is lost’ (Ibid.: 27). By building over the old highway, any trace of it is obliterated and so, too, are cultural items along its verges when a two lane highway is replaced with up to six lanes of motorway, median and clearway. Of equal concern is the rerouting of the Highway and the bypassing of towns. While this offers some protection to the Highway by reducing expectations of it in terms of speed and traffic volumes and, therefore, the likelihood of future upgrades, it takes away its function as a long distance road and threatens the viability of items of cultural significance on its verges.

The future of the Pacific Highway is highly contentious, as the recent physical attack on Roads Minister Joe Tripodi by MLA Andrew Fraser in Parliament demonstrates. Fraser was frustrated by Tripodi’s apparent lack of concern with road deaths on a section of the Pacific Highway in his electorate (Sydney Morning Herald 20 Oct. 2005). The heritage road lobby argues that changes to historic roads allow vehicles to travel their routes more quickly and in greater volumes, often making them less safe, but theirs is a minority opinion (Marriott c1998: 23). Concerns over safety and efficiency drive the changes to the Pacific Highway. Removing sharp bends, creating divided highways, widening shoulders and removing roadside obstacles can all make highways safer. Environmental issues must also be considered. Freely flowing traffic uses less petrol to reach its destination; fewer exhaust fumes and less carbon dioxide are emitted into the atmosphere. Costs to transport companies fall, potentially keeping prices of goods delivered by road lower. The benefits heritage preservation brings are much less tangible. More so than in many areas of heritage conservation, protection of sites related to transport must engage with large questions of comparative value in our society. While the aesthetic, historic, social and technical significance of the Highway merits recognition, so do the claims of those who must use the highway.

The difficult task of balancing use with heritage value is being approached with varying levels of enthusiasm in the countries against which Australian generally measures itself, Great Britain and the United States. The English Heritage website lists just one road, the remnant Wheeldale Roman road in North Yorkshire. Its ‘Streets for All’ program focuses more on traffic management and removing clutter to create a heritage atmosphere than on the conservation of historic streets (Streets for All 2004) Roads, traffic and especially new motorways are seen as a threat to heritage rather than part of it (English Heritage 2004). In the United States, the original car culture, it is perhaps not surprising that the recognition and management of the heritage value of roads seems most developed with 60 historic roads listed in the National Register of Historic Places and an active ‘America’s Byways’ programme under the Federal Highway Administration. One of the listed roads is Route 66. Celebrated in song and story like the Pacific Highway, Route 66 was also a highway which offered escape, leading from cold and windy Chicago to the promised land of California. Like the Pacific Highway, it had a very definite heyday – from 1926 when it was patched together from various pre-existing roads until 1956 when the Federal Aid Highway Act enabled the construction of the Interstate routes. Route 66 was vigorous in decline; having been a major route for just thirty years, it took another thirty years to die (Scott 2000: 3, 5). It now survives as disconnected stretches of highway with many of its roadside services and attractions still
intact, 'a microcosm of roadside America that became pickled in time' (National Historic Route 66 Federation website). Active Historic Route 66 groups in several states promote and protect the Highway and its corridor, attracting leisure drivers to experience the road. Although their capacity to protect roads except from the actions of the Federal Government is limited, these American programmes provide a useful model for the recognition, funding and interpretation of historic Australian roads like the Pacific Highway.

On the historical Route 66 model, the bypassed sections of the Pacific Highway could be reinvigorated as a heritage highway protected under the NSW Heritage Act, marked with signage, set out on maps and promoted by local coordinating groups. Bypasses appeared early in the life of the highway. In the 1950s, the towns of Stroud and Gloucester were bypassed in favour of an alternative, more coastal route. In the early 1960s, the Pacific Highway was rerouted around Gosford. Newcastle and the urban strip of the Gold Coast were also bypassed in earlier phases of Highway evolution. The current rebuilding of the Pacific Highway creates dozens more bypassed sections.

A promising section to initiate this project is the stretch north and south of the Hawkesbury River where the Pacific Highway continues to offer an alternative to the freeway which replaced it. Although deemed perfect when first completed, this section was by the 1960s considered deficient in terms of grade and curves, as it descended to and rose from the Hawkesbury River and Mooney Mooney Creek. The topography of the region, which added to the delight of those seeking the picturesque, presented problems in periods of heavy traffic when the winding climbs up and down to the rivers left motorists trapped behind heavy vehicles. In 1960, a new four lane section near Mount White became NSW's first proclaimed motorway with controlled access and limited frontage development to ensure the free passage of vehicles at high speed (Broomham 2001: 151, 139). It allowed a safe and constant speed of sixty miles per hour by providing two lanes in each direction, a reduced grade, broader curves and a nine metre median zone. This expressway was extended through the subsequent decades. Nature was buried under the bitumen, through major engineering feats such as the 222 metre double bridge over Mooney Mooney Creek. Farwell's book Around Australian on Highway One published in 1978 celebrated this change, noting that where the original Highway had five hairpin bends per kilometre near the Hawkesbury River, the improved Sydney-Newcastle Expressway had only gentle curves (Farwell 1978: 23 – 33). Engagement with the natural environment was purposefully avoided.

A metaphor for this change in the road is the experience of the life-sized concrete diplodocus which stood at the side of the Pacific Highway in Wyoming from 1963, drawing visitors to the Australian Reptile Park. Known as Dino and later, Ploddy, the dinosaur was painted a dull grey or green colour and became an icon for visitors, travellers and local residents. In 1996, when the freeway had reduced passing holiday traffic and the encroachment of suburbia was growing, the owners moved the park to a new site in Somersby, near the Gosford exit from the F3 Freeway. Ploddy was cut from its permanently embedded feet, loaded onto a trailer and paraded through the streets of Gosford to its new home on a hillside overlooking the freeway. The dinosaur is now painted bright yellow in an attempt to draw the eyes of hurling motorists, who have no more than a fleeting glimpse of the statue and little time to decide to visit the attraction it promotes. In its new location, visible from the northbound lanes of the freeway, Ploddy continues to act as a signifier of home for many residents of the Central Coast and as a marker of progress toward their destination for those going further north. Only extraordinary features such as a yellow diplodocus can challenge the narrowed vision that the freeway successfully demands.

The bypassed Pacific Highway between Cowan and Somersby offers a very different driving experience. Gradients, curves, width of carriageway, the physical structures of the road were literally cast in stone, concrete and metal in the late 1920s and early 30s, and are still there to be experienced. The steep terrain, tight curves and surrounding bushland remind the traveller of the engagement with the natural environment of early road travel. The posted maximum speed is 70 kph rather than the 110 of the freeway, slowing down the journey to the pace of the past. As travel writer Bill Bryson noted about other Australian roads, they allowed him to remain part of the human and natural environment seen through the windscreen; it was 'not blurred into the same distant, tediously epic backdrop' as on a freeway (Bryson 2001: 102-4). Without commuters, trucks and holiday makers, the traffic on the Pacific Highway is light. Once again, it is a place for pleasure driving, its hills, curves and speed limit proving a deterrent to those in a hurry to reach their destination. These same features make it a road of choice for motorcyclists and fit bicyclists. Although its name has not been changed or applied to another road, this section is generally referred to as the Old Pacific Highway. With no other Pacific Highway to be differentiated from, this is a reference to a past known space, and a term of endearment, embodying memories of its time as the main road. This section of the Pacific Highway preserves the aesthetic appeal, the road building technology and the holiday driving experiences of the mid twentieth century and could act as the anchor of a heritage highway.

What is lost from this highway are the roadside features which it once sustained. Because of the low usage, roadside businesses and attractions have closed down. A trip along the highway in 1930 indicated that entrepreneurial activity had become established quickly, as it was recorded that cottagers were selling flowers such as waratahs. At the Hawkesbury River, where, until the bridge was completed in 1945, motorists had to wait for a punt, residents of the area took advantage of the captive market, playing music and offering goods for sale including oysters, pastries, lollies and even puppies to people in the queue (Simplissimus 1930: 33 – 34). The Oak milkbar was a landmark at Peats Ridge, selling 7000 Oakshakes a week to travellers between 1965 and its closure when the Mooney Mooney Creek Freeway Bridge opened in 1986 and its passing trade was diverted (RTA 2005). The loss of these activities and associated sites along its verges impacts negatively on the heritage value of the Highway. The importance of the corridor should be taken into account for newly bypassed sections of the Highway and ways sought to support the functions of roadside services, through continuance in their original uses.

As long as the circulation function of highways is taken as definitive, decisions about their future will be made with little reference to their significance as repositories of meaning. The current upgrading of the Pacific Highway requires the bypassing of almost every town along its route. Most of these bypasses run only for a few dozen kilometres around the towns, but taken together, the remnants, relieved of through traffic, could create a lasting experience of the Pacific...
Highway of the twentieth century. In a nation where history has been argued to have been driven by the tyranny of distance, highways clearly have played a key role in creating a sense of nation, of being citizens of the only nation to occupy its own continent. Their important role in communications, commerce and culture merits the recognition and conservation of some elements of highways and their corridors as part of the national heritage. Highways are complex, evolving artefacts but they need not fall outside of the purview of heritage protection.

References


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Pacific Highway, Sydney to Brisbane, c1935, NRMA, Sydney.


Endnotes

1 This source gives the date of the reconstruction as 1931; photographs held by the State Library of NSW indicate that the land (or additional land) was resumed in 1936. See, for example, GDP125267.

2 The bridges are the rail and road bridge over the Clarence River at Grafton, the Bascule Bridge at Coopernook, the steel lift span bridge at South Arm in the Clarence Valley, the Hexham Bridge, Martin Bridge at Taree and the Peats Ferry Road Bridge.

3 In Ulmarra, the BIS found that half of the businesses were of the arts/crafts/antiques genre and relied heavily on the passing trade of the Highway traffic. The impact on their turn over was assessed and it was estimated that the town would lose 30% of its total business turnover when it was bypassed.