Wingecarribee Shire heritage study and the thematic history

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Thematic histories are de rigueur in New South Wales heritage circles. I tried hard to popularise the term 'heritage history' to capture the essence of the historical context report which is an essential part of every heritage study, but 'thematic history' won the day. Since I was responsible, along with Dennis Jeans, the historical geographer, in enunciating the original 26 themes commissioned by the then Department of Planning to categorise all historic places and cultural landscapes in the state, I can hardly complain. The original 26 themes were later expanded to the present 35 to encompass the whole of human life.

When Jocelyn Colleran and I made our thematic stocktake of Wingecarribee Shire, we managed, being constructive consultants, to identify examples of every theme and created 108 local sub-themes. This system of state theme and local sub-theme is extremely useful for categorisation of heritage items and then for comparisons both within the study area and with other areas. Some themes, however, are more thematic than others and many are subsidiary in the historical and heritage development of any locality.

I have chosen in the very short space available to illustrate the effect of two foundation state themes on our comprehension and evaluation of Wingecarribee’s heritage. So, ignoring themes such as leisure or country towns which are prominent in everyone’s conception of the Southern Highlands, I am looking briefly at transport and at industry.

The key to the development of closer European settlement in this early pastoral area is the dynamics of realignment within the road system. Communications in Wingecarribee are dominated by north—south linkages; the way south from Sydney from Governor Macquarie’s time onwards lay inevitably through the Southern Highlands. In the 1810s the Old Argyle Road was developed from the county of Cumberland south through county Camden to county Argyle. In the 1830s Sir Thomas Mitchell, the formidable surveyor-general, fresh from his achievements on the Great North Road, created a new South Road, well to the west of the Old Argyle Road in this shire. When the railway reached Mittagong in 1867 and came south on a corridor more easterly than Mitchell’s road, the ironic consequence of town development on the railway was renewed traffic on the Old Argyle Road.

Bong Bong offers a neat but unfamiliar example of the effects of these changes in communications during the first half-century of European settlement on the Southern Highlands. Immediately after Macquarie visited the area in 1820, a government centre for law and order was established at Bong Bong. A constable was resident by 1822 and by 1830 there was a strip development of huts, gaol, soldiers’ barracks, commissariat store and school. This government village of Bong Bong lay just south of the Old Argyle Road, where it curved sharply west to cross the Wingecarribee River on a causeway which still survives. Mitchell’s new South Road (the present Old Hume Highway) created Berrima as the new centre for law and order in the 1830s and, as a direct result,
Bong Bong faded away in the 1840s; it had never attracted private housing (partly because the village lay in the heart of a wind-tunnel which is often swept by fierce, frigid winds and driven rain so all the buildings except the store faded away in the 1840s and beyond.

In 1865 Old Argyle Road was realigned just to the east, with a new bridge over the Wingecarribee River close to the present Moss Vale Road bridge. This eliminated the westward diversion and bypassed the causeway of the 1820s. When, two years later in 1867, the railway bypassed Berrima which began to lose its local significance, Bong Bong did not revive; instead, Moss Vale, just to the south of the river and Bowral to the north became new local *foci*. The Old Argyle Road became much busier again and had its route still led over the early causeway; it is likely that a new bridge would have destroyed the site of the original crossing. Because of the re-routing of the road, the causeway remained, completely bypassed, and the eastern end of the structure, made of ironbark logs laid horizontally in rectangles filled with basalt, survives as the earliest river-crossing of the sort in Australia.

Meanwhile, the site of Bong Bong village became, remained and remains derelict. The erection of Bong Bong Church in 1845 on the southern site of the river has confused popular perceptions — John Verge’s church has nothing to do with old Bong Bong and everything to do with the Throsby family and Throsby Park.
Some of the main features of the Bong Bong cultural landscape, including the archaeological sites of Bong Bong village, in cemetery and inn.
It is, however, a mistake to see the curtilage of Throsby Park (which is now managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service) and the original site of Bong Bong (which is now managed by Wingecarribee Shire Council) as two separate cultural landscapes. Charles Throsby senior had his original hut on the northern bank of the river five years before Bong Bong was built — his cattle grazed on both sides of the river. His nephew Charles Throsby, as magistrate living in the 1822 cottage on the south side near where Throsby Park was built in 1836, had a central role in Bong Bong’s affairs; and the Argyle Inn built by William Bowman in 1826-7 on the hill above Bong Bong looks straight across the valley to the two Throsby houses which are at the same elevation. After Bong Bong decayed, the Throsbys bought the area, including the inn site, and again ran their herds on both sides of the river.

The north—south section of the valley at the great bend of the Wingecarribee is defined on the north by the Argyle Inn and on the south by Throsby Park. The area between, on both banks, is powerful testimony to the long inter-association of Throsby grazing and local law and order. This is the cultural landscape, including the causeway, the archaeological sites of Bong Bong village, its cemetery and inn, Throsby’s original 1817 hut, 1822 house and 1836 mansion with their outbuildings and home paddocks. The various segments of this landscape are individually important but the sum of the parts has higher significance.

This then is one example of how a closer study of transport systems can illuminate the heritage landscape far beyond the usual concentration on linkages between local centres and between the locality and Sydney markets.

Linkages of this sort also dominate most of our interpretation of the impact of the railway, with its unique capacity to bring heavy goods from the country to the coast. The Southern railway accordingly is seen as being a vital impetus not just to the growth of townships — Mittagong, Bowral, Moss Vale, Bundanoon — but also to industrial development. There are, however, interesting twists to this supposedly linear progression on the Southern Highlands.

At Mittagong, Fitzroy ironworks had opened almost 20 years before the railway came. The first iron smelted from Australian ores was manufactured in Fitzroy’s bloomery from 1848 to 1852, although it did not produce a great deal — the lions cast for Governor Fitzroy and the spade which turned the first sod for the first Australian railway in 1850 are the principal survivors. In expectation of the railway, the first blast-furnace was built at Mittagong in 1863. A significant element in the railway’s routing was the multi-millionaire chairman of the iron company, Ebenezer Vickery, who ensured that Mittagong railway station was built on ironworks land in 1867. The government town of Fitzroy (now called Wollombi) on higher land to the north-west, was too far from the railhead, whereas the iron company’s town of New Sheffield thrived instead immediately north of the station, and New Sheffield continued to earn money through land-sales for Vickery and his associates after the blast-furnace finally closed in 1877.
This combination of the determined use of an industrialist’s power and the outcome in the siting of the railway station goes a long way towards explaining the shape of modern Mittagong, which is one of the oddest of Australian urban landscapes. This is not a case of industry responding passively to a railway initiative in which it had played no part.

Other industries in the Southern Highlands had a more conventional relationship with the railway in the 1870s and 1880s. There were numerous industrial tramways and private railways linking with the main south line. The most famous of these is the private railway linking Mittagong to the oil-shale town of Joadja. Some 25 kilometres of track across the plateau led to the top of one of Australia's classic industrial inclines, tumbling 800 metres down an acute slope into the landlocked valley of Joadja Creek. The winding engine which controlled skips on the single-track incline is still in place at the end of the railway line, while the valley contains extraordinarily rich and legible remains of the largely Scottish community which mined and retorted oil-shale and refined the crude oil into kerosene, lubricants and candles during the last quarter of the 19th century. The four benches of horizontal retorts, built in 1879-80, are unique in the world and afford vital evidence of the early technology of the...
industry which is lacking on Scottish, Welsh and American sites and lacking also in documentary sources. The community housing, social amenities, sophisticated piped water-supply, orchards, dairy and so forth offer, along with the industrial sites, one of Australia’s most significant and complete opportunities for industrial archaeology. The recent history of this beautiful and important cultural landscape is one of uncertainty and neglect, followed by the sub-division of the less sensitive parts of the lower valley and sensible controls demanded of the developer by Wingecarribee Shire Council.

Joadja could not have thrived without the railway. Similarly, the rail alignment near Bundanoon, beside the great rock escarpment on the western edge of what is now Morton National Park, gave an incentive in the 1880s to the opening of adits into the coal-seams outcropping on the cliff-face. Two of the outstanding mines were Erith, approachable by path or ladder beside a waterfall and Ringwood, where men and coal shared a cage descending 500 metres down the vertical cliff from a cantilevered top platform.

All these industries, coal, oil and iron, are closely linked in different ways to the railway. But transport corridors, both rail and road, in the Southern Highlands are more than routes linking local places with each other and with Sydney. Industry had preceded the railway in Mittagong and profoundly affected both the siting of the station and the town plan. The local effects of the successive changes in the north—south transport route are complicated; first the original Old Argyle Road, then the Hume Highway, then a partial realignment of the Old Argyle Road, then the railway and the decline of Berrima despite the Hume Highway, and finally the revival of the Old Argyle Road (as realigned) resulting in the preservation of an 1820s causeway as well as the creation of Bowral and Moss Vale. The interpretation of the cultural landscape of this part of the Wingecarribee Valley depends not least on establishing the precise chronology of these changes in communications and the social effects which flowed from them.

Historical themes do not always speak for themselves: like good children long ago, they wait to be asked the proper questions. Once asked, the questions can elicit some important and unexpected interpretations for the cultural landscapes.