

Lower Plenty Bridge Notes

1 Andrew Ross Reminiscences

Written by Kangaroo Ground teacher Andrew Ross in relation to his first visit to the area in 1851, Evelyn Observer 18 October 1887.

Copied from Reminiscences of Andrew Ross, Andrew Ross Schoolhouse Museum 1993

“At the Lower Plenty a temporary log bridge has been erected doomed to be swept away the approaching winter. Across the river the road lay up the hill by the fence on Turnbull’s section to the top, about half-a-mile, where it ended, and the track had to be followed through the bush. Descending the hill so very steep, and for long the main road, I soon made the Diamond Creek, at the well-known ford just below the present commodious bridge.”

2 Land Owners, East Side

To the east of the Plenty River is Crown Portion II (2) Parish of Nillumbik generally conforming with the mile square grid that characterized Government surveys of the mid 1800s. The western boundary of this portion was the Plenty River so that the grid was interrupted and the area of the portion was 950 acres. CP II was purchased in the first Nillumbik Crown land sale in 1840 by Benjamin Baxter. Land speculator Baxter is an interesting character in colonial history but because he did not develop or use this land his story is not really relevant.

The original Nillumbik survey made no provision for roads. The track crossing the Plenty at the ford passed through CP II. It was established by the Ryrie brothers in c1838 to provide access to their property at Yarra Flats. In 1840 only a few months after Baxter’s purchase the Government proclaimed a road passing through his land following the line of the present Main Road/Old Eltham Road. It crossed the river at the site of the present old bridge (indicating that the downstream ford was the main crossing point for a short time only). (Plan Old Roads W/5 that showed the line of road from Fitzroy to the boundary of the village reserve later to become Eltham). Although this road was proclaimed to be trafficable in 1847, a letter from local residents in 1849 complained of the lack of a bridge over the Plenty River. The comments of Andrew Ross also indicate that by 1851 at least the last section of the road to Eltham was hardly trafficable.

Within a year Baxter had sold his land to Patrick Turnbull, a Melbourne merchant and pastoralist. According to David Wilkinson (The Early History of the Diamond Valley, unpublished MA thesis), Turnbull “cleared and fenced the land and stocked it. He did not reside on this holding but he was well known and respected in the district and was elected parliamentary representative for Evelyn in 1851.”

In 1857 Turnbull sold that part of his land to the south of the road to John “Heidelberg” Brown a significant figure in the history of the area. A later purchaser of this land (1884) was David Thomas. The house on this property (now significantly altered as the club house of the golf club) has been known at different periods as “Preston Hall” and “Bryn

Teg". The northern part of Turnbull's land was sold to William Seville and later to Dr Robert Martin of Heidelberg.

3 Bridge Structure

The iron trusses of the existing old bridge are said to have been used as an example to engineering students of how not to design a bridge. This seems to be borne out by a paper published in 1906 by WC Kernot M.A., M.C.E., M. INST. C.E., M. AM. SOC. C.E.

Professor of Engineering, Melbourne University and titled "On Some Common Errors In Iron Bridge Design" (Second Edition). He says:

"A most glaring instance is to be seen in the bridge carrying the Heidelberg and Eltham Road across the Plenty River, near Melbourne, Here the main girders are of the X type, and both triangulations are equally strong." Following some technical comment he goes on: "Mr. J.A.L. Waddell, a leading American Bridge Engineer, to whom photographs and particulars of this structure were sent expressed himself as follows:- "For unparalleled ignorance and stupidity the triangular truss illustrated bears off the palm. It is almost incredible that any man with common sense could put in a whole system of triangulation where it is impossible for it to do any work whatever.""

This bridge carried main road traffic for 100 years and remains intact today.

4. Significance of the Site

The bridge and the adjacent area are of great significance as the "gateway" or 'main entrance' to Eltham and the former Shire of Eltham. This is in addition to the significance attributed to the site of the Willis cottage on the ridge above the bridge. Over many years the bridge and earlier crossings at this site were the main connection from Melbourne to Eltham and the area beyond. The area has been largely isolated from land to the south of the Yarra River by the lack of a crossing over that river and so the route via Lower Plenty avoiding a crossing of the Yarra provided the only practicable means of access. In 1855 a bridge was erected across the Yarra at the south end of Bonds Road, Lower Plenty in 1855 but it was swept away in the floods of 1863. According to Max Lay in his book Melbourne Miles a rickety timber bridge existed at this site in the 1920s and 30s but is likely that this was used only by locals of the Bonds Road area. It was not until after the building of the Fitzsimons Lane bridge in 1961 that the travel patterns of the area began to change and gradually the importance of the Lower Plenty route was reduced. The bridge and the adjacent toll house and Plenty Bridge Hotel formed an important gateway to the Eltham district and as such this area is considered to be a significant heritage site.

Notes by Russell Yeoman - Eltham District Historical Society

The Argus - 8 March 1867

On Wednesday last, the members of the Eltham and Heidelberg Road Boards, headed by Mr. H. Stooke, J.P., the chairman of the Eltham Board, and accompanied by Messrs. Watkins, Balfour, and Cope, the members of the Assembly for the two districts, walked in procession across the new bridge just completed over the **River Plenty**, on the Eltham-road. On arriving at the Eltham side, Mr. Stooke declared, amidst loud cheers, the **bridge** open for traffic. Messrs. Watkins, Balfour, and Cope, in short and appropriate speeches, congratulated the residents of the two districts on the unity of action and good feeling existing between the two boards, as evinced in the work now finished. The two boards afterwards adjourned to a large marquee erected on the premises of Mr. John Brown, and partook of an excellent lunch, provided by Mrs. Lewis, of the Old England Hotel. Messrs. Stooke and Sutherland presided. The **bridge** is of lattice iron girder work, with stone abutments, and is from the design of Mr. G. Francis, C.E. Mr. Enoch **Chambers** was the contractor for the ironwork, and Messrs. **Turnbull** and Co. for the masonry and approaches. It is eleven miles from Melbourne.

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/5787970?searchTerm=plenty%20river%20bridge%20turnbull%20chambers&searchLimits=l-state=Victoria|||f-title=13>