

Historical Roads of New South Wales

*BARRIER
HIGHWAY*



EXTRACT FROM MARCH, 1959 ISSUE OF "MAIN ROADS"

JOURNAL OF DEPARTMENT OF MAIN ROADS

NEW SOUTH WALES



The Barrier Highway, 25 miles west of Broken Hill.

Historical Roads of New South Wales

The Barrier Highway

THE Barrier Highway extends from Nyngan in central New South Wales via Cobar and Wilcannia to Broken Hill, and beyond to the South Australian border, a total distance of 402 miles. Together with the Great Western Highway from Sydney to Bathurst, and the Mitchell Highway from Bathurst to Nyngan, it forms the major east-west connection across the centre of the State. It was named after the Barrier Range near Broken Hill. Over almost its entire length it passes through flat to undulating pastoral country of low rainfall. The average annual rainfall at Nyngan is 15 inches and at Broken Hill 9 inches.

Exploration of the Western Interior

The journeys of the early explorers Evans, Oxley, Sturt and Mitchell contributed to the opening up of the west, but their journeys were confined mainly to the lands adjoining the Lachlan, Bogan and Darling Rivers, along which they travelled, and little exploration was made of the surrounding country. The detailed exploration of the great tract through which the Barrier Highway runs for most of its length, was carried out by people whose work was seldom recorded—the graziers and their shepherds who entered and occupied the western areas. The country contains practically no regular flowing streams apart from the few rivers, and lack of water greatly increased the difficulties of exploration and made settlement hazardous.

In 1815, Surveyor Evans discovered the Lachlan River which forms the greater portion of the southern boundary of the Western plains. He was followed in 1817 by Lieutenant John Oxley who attempted to explore the course of the river and to examine the western interior of the State. He did not succeed in the principal object of his journey and formed the opinion that the western country was largely uninhabitable. On 13th August, 1818, however, he came to a small stream which seemed to rise in a range of hills to the south-east of his route. This stream he named "Allan's Water". It was later found to be part of the Bogan River, which flows at the eastern edge of the plains.

On the 10th December, 1828, Captain Charles Sturt set out from Wellington with the object of tracing the course of the Macquarie River and on the 17th January, 1829, came to a stream which he named "New Year's Creek" but which later was found to be the lower course of the stream earlier named by Oxley. This stream was known to the natives as the "Bogen" and Sturt used this name in his account of his journey. Sturt had been informed that a considerable river flowed to the westward of his route and he sent Hume, who accompanied him, to ascertain "if a descent upon the 'Bogen' district would be practicable" from the south. Hume's report was unfavourable and deterred Sturt from an exploration of the district. The Darling

River, which bisects the western plains, was discovered by Sturt on the 18th January, 1829, at a point a few miles upstream from the present town of Bourke.

In 1835, Surveyor-General Mitchell led an expedition to explore the Darling River. The expedition left Parramatta on the 9th March, 1835, and by the 15th April, 1835, had reached the Bogan which was followed to the site of Nyngan and on to a point near its junction with the Darling River which he reached on the 28th May, 1835. Here Mitchell established a base camp which he named Fort Bourke and from there travelled south-easterly down the Darling to where Wilcannia is now situated and on to the site of the present town of Menindee.

In 1844, Sturt again set out for the western interior. On the 15th August of that year he left Adelaide in an attempt to explore the interior of the continent and on the 11th October reached Laidley's Ponds, now known as Menindee. Sturt had not forsaken Oxley's theory that the Lachlan and Macquarie Rivers terminated in a great inland sea and when the second in command of the party—James Poole—reported seeing to the north-west some distant ranges "rising like islands out of a vast sheet of water", Sturt decided to make for these in the hope of finding the water he so badly needed. He reached them at a point near to where Broken Hill was later founded. These hills he named "Stanley's Barrier Range" after Lord Stanley, the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London.

In his "Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia during 1844, 5 and 6" Sturt wrote "That the range of hills I have called 'Stanley's Barrier Range' and that all the mountain chains to the eastward and westward of it, were once so many islands, I have not the slightest doubt, and that during the primeval period, a sea covered the deserts over which I wandered . . ."

For several days Sturt and his companions were engaged in exploring and surveying the surrounding country but principally in a search for water, the lack of which had become serious. On the way to the range the expedition had passed over country that was grassed in places but which consisted mainly of scrubby hills and stony sandstone gullies. In parts the ground was covered with small boulders of rock which made progress so difficult as to cause Sturt to write "it appeared as if McAdam had emptied every stone he ever broke to be strewed over this metalled region".

From the neighbourhood later to be known as Broken Hill, Sturt travelled to the north-west and after almost incredible hardship and perseverance, returned to Adelaide in January, 1846, broken in health and temporarily blind.

Settlement of the Area

Settlement of the vast area that had been disclosed by the travels of the explorers did not follow immediately in their steps. Until 1836 settlement was limited by the Government to the nineteen counties embodying the central coastal portion of the Colony. This was due primarily to the desire of the Government to concentrate population but the unfavourable reports made by

Oxley and Sturt concerning the character of the interior probably also assisted in delaying expansion towards the west. Until 1830, the settled area did not extend more than 200 miles in any direction from Sydney. From 1815 onwards, a steady infiltration of population had been taking place and this, together with a considerable natural increase in the flocks of sheep, led to the occupation of land outside of the arbitrary legal boundaries by enterprising persons termed "squatters" who pioneered parts of the Liverpool Ranges and the eastern portion of the Murrumbidgee. By 1833, the Wagga district was settled but expansion westward from this point was arrested for some years by a natural hesitancy on the part of settlers to occupy the more arid plains.

By the year 1836, the country adjoining the nineteen counties had been so extensively invaded that in that year an Act was passed which legalised the practice of "squattening" by allowing any reputable person to obtain a licence authorising him to graze stock over so much land as he cared to use. By 1843, the land adjoining the Murrumbidgee and northward to the Lachlan had been taken up and in that year the whole of the country east of the Darling River was divided into Pastoral Districts. Further expansion westward occurred down the Murrumbidgee to its junction with the Murray and from that point, north-east along the Darling River. By 1850, settlers had reached Wilcannia and most of the country east of the Darling River was occupied. During the next ten years large areas were occupied between the Darling River and the South Australian border and small settlements had become established upstream of Wilcannia.

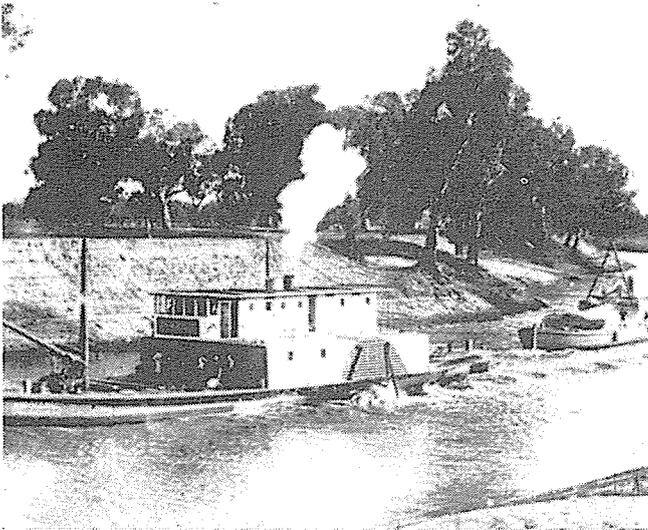
In 1859, Captain Francis Cadell, who in the previous year had pioneered a steamer service on the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers, took one of his steamers, the "Albury", to the Darling in an attempt to open up the navigation of that river.

Writing to a friend on his return to Adelaide, Captain Cadell said, "You will have doubtless learnt through the public press that I have succeeded in getting up the Darling as far as Mount Murchison (Wilcannia). My reception from the settlers was everything I could desire, and I will use by best endeavours to work that river with steamers as well as the Murray and the Murrumbidgee. It may be useful to overlanders to know that I have established a small depot at Menindie where they can be supplied with rations on their way down the Darling. I have also a large store at the Darling junction".

The River Darling became a most important supply route for the settlers and was for many years almost the only outlet for their produce. As late as 1890 about ninety river steamers were regularly employed in catering for the river traffic.

Early Tracks and Roads

For many years after settlement began on the western plains, access to the country was difficult. The absence of permanent water on the land between the rivers made settlement over wide areas hazardous, and the



River Steamer "Renmark" and wool barge near Wilcannia.
[Photo. by courtesy Mitchell Library.]

squatters were reluctant to take up land away from the river frontages because of the difficulty of moving sheep and cattle across wide stretches of waterless country.

The discovery of copper at several places from 1865 onwards assisted in the development of a road system, tracks that could be travelled in comparative safety being necessary for the transport of the ore from the mines for treatment. In addition, more or less defined tracks were established by mail carriers. In 1871 a

road from the copper field at Cobar to Bourke was marked out, although before it could be used water supplies for the use of teamsters had to be provided along its route, by the sinking of tanks.

Earlier, in 1869, a sum of £5,000 was voted by Parliament for the sinking of wells and tanks, as a first step in the provision of water supplies on the more travelled routes.

In 1875 a coach service was established between Hilston and Bourke, this service traversing from south to north, the country now crossed from east to west by the Barrier Highway. A newspaper reporting the opening of the coach service commented: "The success of this projection should be looked upon as a colonial gain in assisting to open up the 'terra incognita' hitherto looked upon as 'no man's land' and referred to as a country sterile in nature and practically useless; it is today, through the indomitable perseverance of the lease holders, being made the haunt of woolly monarchs."

A map of the "Postal Stations and Roads of N.S.W." published in 1882 showed a system of mail routes in use at that time. The map shows a route extending from Warren through Nyngan, Hermitage Plains (Hermidale) and Cobar to a road linking Ivanhoe with Milparinka. At Cobar, roads branched northwards to Bourke and Louth and in a southerly direction to Nymagee. The road from Ivanhoe to Milparinka crossed the Darling River at Wilcannia from where another road lead in a westerly direction to Mount Gipps and the South Australian border.

Approaching Cobar on the Barrier Highway.



In the New South Wales Government Gazette of 21st January, 1884, notification was given of the award of a contract for the carriage of mails to "Cobb and Co.—Nyngan, Hermitage Plains and Cobar. Twice weekly by means of 2 or 4 horse coaches." In the same gazette reference is made to "the road recently surveyed from Cobar to Wilcannia" and in the issue of 8th October, 1884, the reservation of Crown lands southerly from the southern side of "the surveyed road from Nyngan to Cobar" was notified. By this date, therefore, the route of the future Barrier Highway had been established as far as Wilcannia.

On the 31st October, 1884, the Government Gazette notified the award of a contract to George A. McGowan for the carriage of mails between Wilcannia, Mount Gipps (about 16 miles north of Broken Hill) and Silverton "once a week" and on 23rd March, 1889, reference is made in a Gazette notice "to the southern

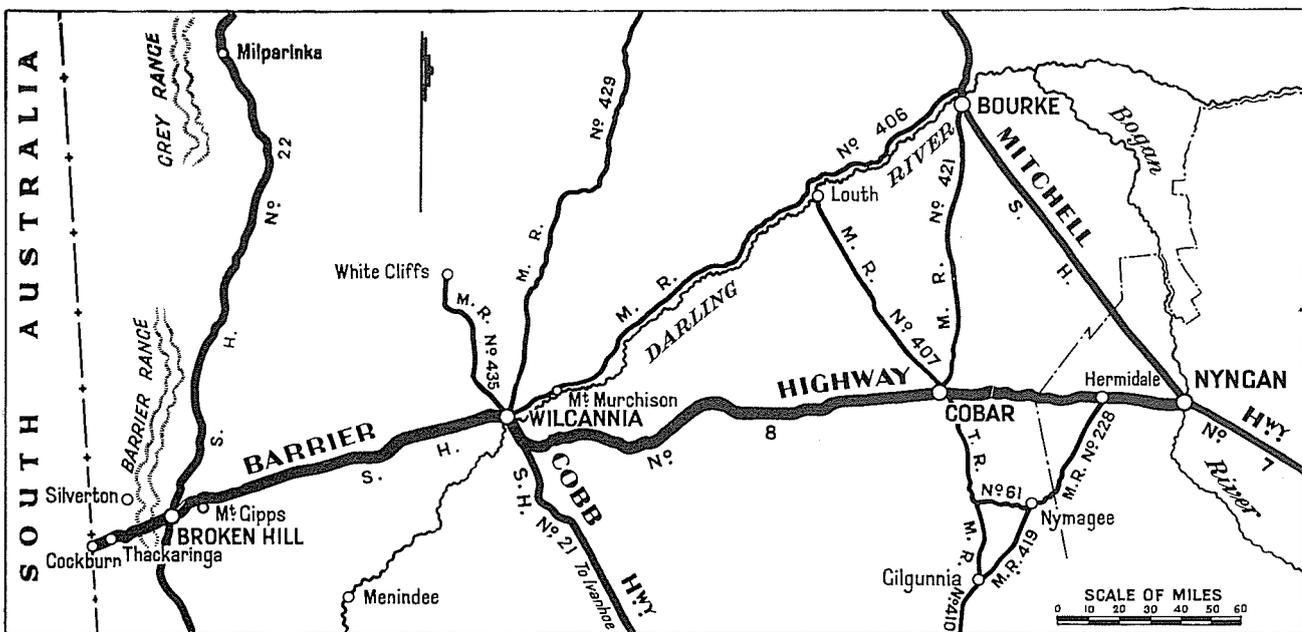
few bridges had been built, the principal being the bridge over the Darling River at Wilcannia built in 1896.

The Present Route

The Barrier Highway passes through four towns. They are Nyngan, Cobar, Wilcannia and Broken Hill.

Nyngan

Nyngan was known originally as Nyingen and was mentioned by Major Mitchell in his report of his journey down the Bogan in 1835. He referred to it as a "long pond of water" but later, in 1848, the water was identified as that of the River Bogan. According to the New South Wales Gazeteer of 1870, "Nyingen" was a back station comprising 32,000 acres with a grazing capability of 640 head of cattle.



Route of the Barrier Highway.

side of the 3 chain road from Wilcannia to Silverton". The final link in the route of the Barrier Highway seems to have been forged about 1897, when in an issue of the Government Gazette of 4th September, a description of a reserve "bearing south to the north-western side of the road from Cockburn to Silverton" was given. At a later stage the route was altered to pass through Broken Hill and Thackaringa to the South Australian border but for the greater part of its length the route of the Barrier Highway remains as it developed from the stock routes and the tracks of the mail carriers.

Until almost 1930, the Barrier Highway comprised in the main merely a defined earth track with occasional minor improvements, for example, improved crossing places at some of the normally dry watercourses. A

* 60100—2

About 1881, Nyngan became the centre for one of the principal construction camps in connection with the extension of the main western railway line beyond Dubbo and in December of the following year, a township was laid out and gazetted.

Cobar

Copper had been reported from the Bogan River area in 1865 but no attempt had been made to exploit the discovery. In 1870, a party of well sinkers who were on their way from Bourke to the Roto station on the Lachlan River, camped one night at a small public watering place near where Cobar now stands. In order to conserve the little water that was available, troughs for watering cattle had been erected and from the ground near these a peculiar looking "stone" was



Business area, Wilcannia.

picked up which one of the party recognised as a piece of copper ore. Subsequent rough smelting proved the ore to be rich in copper.

Early in 1871 a surveyor was sent to examine the field and as a result of his report a company was formed to work the deposits. In 1871, also, gold was discovered in the vicinity of Cobar. It is said that one Henry Cornish, an experienced miner who was prospecting for copper, hearing an opossum picked up a stone to throw at the animal and found a flake of gold adhering to the stone. Samples were sent to Sydney for assay and these proved that gold was present in payable quantities. Cornish was unable to develop his claim through lack of financial support and it was abandoned. The claim was, however, repegged in 1887 and successfully developed.

Mining activities at Cobar practically ceased in 1952 but up to that date the field had produced more than 136,000 tons of copper, 1,175,000 ounces of fine gold and approximately 1,125,000 ounces of silver.

The name "Cobar" is believed to have originated from an aboriginal word "copar" meaning a small water hole out of which, from time immemorial, the aborigines have procured a red clay with which to decorate themselves for ceremonial purposes. Another account is that the name originated in an aboriginal's attempt to pronounce copper.

Cobar was incorporated as a municipality in 1884.

Wilcannia

The site of Wilcannia was first selected in 1863 by J. C. Wore, Commissioner of Crown Lands in the Albert district, at which time the only habitation within

miles of the town site was a shepherd's hut belonging to the Mount Murchison sheep station. During his journey down the Darling in 1835, Mitchell crossed the river near to the later site of the town and ascended the range on the other side. He named "the first hill beyond the Darling ever ascended by any European, after (his) friend Mr. Murchison" and the station which played an important part in the development of Wilcannia took its name from the hill so named by Mitchell.

The track from Cobar to Wilcannia passed through Paddington Station, said to have been one of the largest leaseholds in the western district of New South Wales, carrying, in a fair season, over 100,000 sheep.

Within twenty years of the selection of its site, Wilcannia had become the centre of trade for the Paroo River, Mount Browne, and for south-western Queensland. It was also the crossing place for stock driven from Queensland and the back stations to the Melbourne markets, and one of the busiest of the river ports. An idea of the size of the shipping trade done at Wilcannia in the 'eighties may be gathered from the fact that in the year 1887, 218 vessels aggregating 36,170 tons entered inwards and 222 vessels with 26,552 tons of cargo, were entered outwards of the port.

When the railway was extended to Bourke in 1885, and later to Cobar and Broken Hill, trade was diverted to the railheads and the river towns lost much of their importance as ports.

Wilcannia is the centre of a series of radiating Main Roads. As well as being on the Barrier Highway, it is the terminating point of the Cobb Highway which

leaves the Victorian border at Moama and passing through Deniliquin, Hay and Ivanhoe, joins the Barrier Highway a little south of its entry into Wilcannia. The town is the point of departure for roads leading along the Darling River north to Bourke and south to Menindee and Wentworth; along the Paroo River to the Queensland border at Hungerford; and to White Cliffs, an opal mining centre. The town was declared a municipality in 1883.

Broken Hill

"The Broken Hill" is so named from the rugged nature of its rocky summit. This hill is the highest point on a narrow ridge which forms a distinctive feature of the undulating plain country on each side. Its official name is "Willyama" an aboriginal word meaning "a youth".

There is a local tradition that from the crest of "the broken hill" Sturt made a sketch of the surrounding country. It is believed also to be probable that the exploring party made their camp where a city of 32,170 inhabitants now stands and under the shadow of a hill that formed the cover for one of the richest silver-lead deposits in the world.

Sturt reached the area of the Barrier Range in November, 1844, and for a few days was engaged in exploring the country and in searching for water. He seems to have paid little attention to the metalliferous character of the country although he recognised that an ore body was present for he wrote—"the veins of the

metal run north and south as did a similar crop at the S.E. base of the ranges". From a map included in his narrative, his route seems to have almost completely encircled the line of lode, the outcrop of which he must have observed but which, like many who followed, he passed by without realising the vast potential wealth beneath his feet.

The existence of silver and lead in the area was first discovered in 1876 when one Paddy Green located a deposit at Thackaringa. A rush to the spot took place but the claims were not properly worked until 1880 when fresh shafts were sunk and a lode found, so rich in quality as to attract wide attention.

In 1883 a deposit was found at Silverton and another rush set in. While excitement over this find was at its height, a boundary rider, Charles Rasp, while mustering sheep in "the broken hill" paddock of the Mount Gipps run, noticed a similarity in appearance and formation of "the broken hill" with that of the outcrop at Silverton. In partnership with two contractors named Poole and James who were engaged in sinking wells on the sheep run, Rasp pegged out a claim. He mentioned the matter to the manager and part owner of the Mount Gipps run, Mr. George McCulloch, and together they pegged out further claims which took in the whole of "the broken hill" itself. The existence of silver chlorides was first noticed in a shaft sunk by Rasp on one of these claims in 1884.

From that beginning a great industry of great economic importance to Australia has developed. Within little more than seventy years a progressive city, with

The Original Diggings at Thackaringa.

[Photo. by courtesy Mitchell Library.]





Typical street tree planting by the Broken Hill City Council.

the amenities of modern life, has developed in a semi-arid area lying within a rainfall belt of less than 10 inches per annum.

Broken Hill was incorporated as a municipality on 25th September, 1888, and was proclaimed a city on 24th July, 1907.

The Barrier Highway Today

During the past thirty years the Barrier Highway has been converted from a bush track to a formed road with a gravel or equivalent surface. Its location has been reviewed throughout with the aid of air photographs and it is at present undergoing reconstruction and bitumen surfacing. This work will necessarily extend over a number of years, and has so far been concentrated between Nyngan and Cobar, and in the vicinity of Broken Hill.

Between Nyngan and Cobar (84 miles) traffic on the Barrier Highway averages from 50 to 70 vehicles per day over the more remote sections but reaches 180 vehicles per day around Cobar and Nyngan. On the length between Cobar and Wilcannia (165 miles) daily traffic averages from 30 to 60 vehicles while from Wilcannia to Broken Hill (122 miles) the volume ranges from 50 vehicles per day on the more easterly sections to 275 vehicles per day at a point 4 miles east of Broken Hill. On the last 31 miles of the Highway

between Broken Hill and the South Australian border, approximately 200 vehicles per day are carried on the average. The traffic using the Highway comprises:—

	%
Cars and utilities	65.5
Light to medium trucks	29
Semi-trailers and similar heavy vehicles	5.5

Acknowledgments

Material used in the preparation of this article has been obtained from:—

The Mitchell Library, Sydney.

The Public Library, Sydney.

"Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia during years 1844, 5 and 6"—Captain Charles Sturt.

"The Squatting Age in Australia"—S. H. Roberts.

"The Vegetation and Pastures of N.S.W."—N. C. W. Beadle.

N.S.W. Department of Mines Geological Survey, "Mineral Resources" Nos. 36 and 39.

Commonwealth of Australia Bureau of Mineral Resources—Report No. 6.

S.G.P.

This brochure is a reprint of one of a series of articles which were originally published in the Department's Journal "Main Roads". The reprints are made available for those people who wish to know the early history of our highway routes and thereby learn "the alphabet of our roads".