

THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

Pick Volume 2:1

Establishing Wollombi Township Carl Hoipo

At the junction of the North and South Arms of the Wollombi Brook was the place the Aboriginal People from the north side of the Hawkesbury, and along the coast from Broken Bay to Port Stephens, and the Lower Hunter came to socialise, trade and for groups to go into the surrounding country for a variety of ceremonial purposes. These aboriginals were not friendly with the large inland tribe whose territory started around Denman, and extended to the north-west as far as Longreach, but who also came to the area west of Wollombi for ceremonies (1).

The Great North Road, built by the convicts in 1830-31, went right through this meeting place, and there was a junction in the road here, with one branch going to Maitland and Morpeth, and the other to the Upper Hunter. A road building Depot was established here, and several roughly made buildings were put up in the area where the Courthouse and St Johns now stand (2,3).

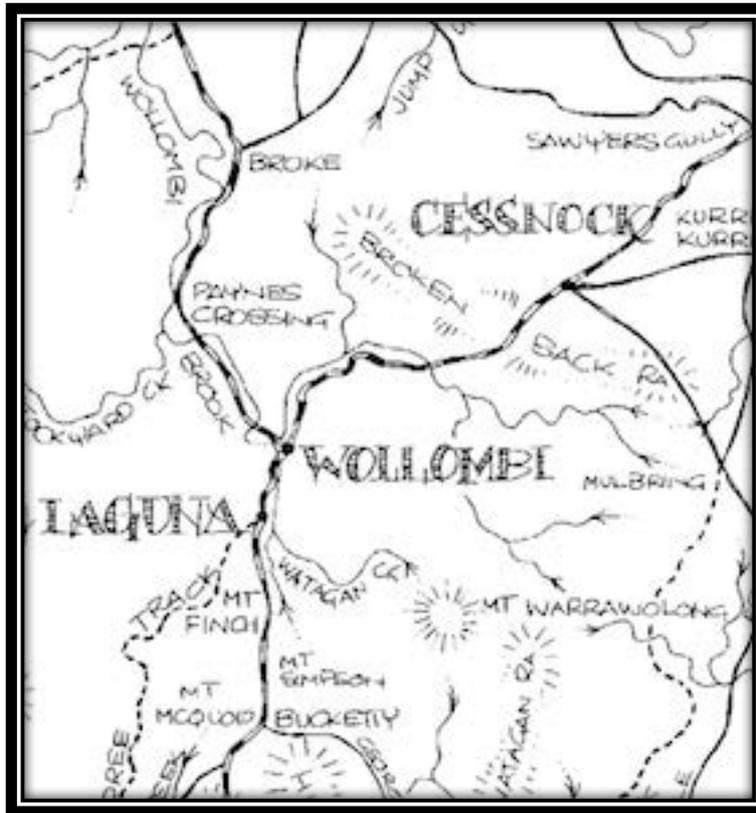
Heneage Finch surveyed the full area to be reserved for the township in 1831, and surveyed an area of allotments of about half an acre each. This subdivided area extended from Cuneens Bridge to today's Tavern, and then up to Quarantini's Restaurant. These allotments were offered for sale in the Government Gazette in 1833 (4).

Baron Charles Von Huegel, probably Wollombi's first tourist, travelled through in 1834 and stayed at Pyke's Inn, which he described in his diary as *'a newly erected inn, which in fact consisted only of a hut made of tree bark, but was spotlessly clean'* (5).

Most enquiries re land ownership within the Township have come up with 1838 as the date of purchase for much of this first subdivided area with most of it going at auction to John McDougal, an ex-convict who had been an overseer on the road construction. However, I feel that more investigation into this period 1833 to 1838 is needed, probably a lot by lot historical title search for the area from today's Tavern to Slack's Park, and the next lots in the Saleyards, as there are many indications that they may have been occupied in this period. One of the lots shows Michael Byrne as being the original owner (6).

To me, Michael is the most interesting character that we know about from this early period of Wollombi Township, in that he was the first shopkeeper, was at various time Postmaster, Pound-keeper, Auctioneer, and most of all, the correspondent for the Maitland Mercury from its inception





The next written description I have found is from the Sydney Herald, August 1, 1841...

But on to the Wollombi. On a moderate elevation, intersected by the far famed Brook, stands the township. Situated in a mountain gorge whose natural position concentrates at one spot, the openings to several points of the interior, it is the very key to communication in one line, the Thermopylae of internal intercourse. Placed with the Hawkesbury on one hand and Maitland on the other, its capabilities must not be overlooked. Had not the unprecedented growth of steam communication so far interfered with land conveyance, there is every reason to believe the township would in a few years have arrived as a degree of consequence.

The courthouse is nearly completed. It is an exceedingly neat building. Behind it is the lock-up, a formidable log building after the Sing Sing principle; its very appearance a terror to evil doers. The present police and post office and the houses of the constabulary are within short distance. Below there is a neat verandahed store and offices belonging to Mr Byrnes. Immediately facing stands the Sir George Gipps, kept by McDougall, the best appointed inn I have seen in the colony. There are the usual sprinkling of houses of lesser note, the dwellers, artificers and tradesmen. The Presbyterian Minister has likewise a residence. A spot I observed was marked out for a Roman Catholic Chapel. The Presbytery have a plot, and I was informed by the police magistrate that the Episcopalians who attend divine service in the courthouse amount in general to sixty. And whenever His Lordship the Bishop meets the wishes of the inhabitants the money is ready to commence building the Church.

The foundation stone was laid for St Michaels in 1840, and services commenced in 1843. It was originally built just towards Cuneens Bridge from the present vineyard beside the tennis court (8). Michael Byrne reported in the Maitland Mercury on 6th May...



Catholic Chapel. A neat stone edifice, about forty feet in length and a proportionate width, has been erected by the Catholics residing in this district. The building, which is dedicated to St Michael, is nearly finished, the roof having been shingled and the floor laid; the windows and doors will be speedily fitted in. On Wednesday, the 26th April, the Rev. Mr Lynch celebrated Mass for the first time in this chapel; there was a numerous congregation present. The erection of this chapel reflects great credit upon the Catholics in this neighbourhood, as when completed it will cost between £300 and £400, the whole of this being raised by themselves, with the exception of a few trifling sums subscribed by some individuals in Maitland, the people at Wollombi having had no assistance whatever from the government towards the erection of this building.

Serious flooding in the 1850s and 1890s lead to it being moved to its present location.

An effort was made to establish a local Council, and one was formed with R.A. Rodd or Broke, as Warden, with T. Wiseman of Laguna, T. Crawford of Congewai, G. Palmer of Barraba, M. Thompson, J. Walker & W. Wilks as Councillors. It met in the Governor Gipps Inn. Due to it not having any tax base of its own, it was not effective. The Governor proposed that they meet in the local Post Office which was one of the old road depot buildings mentioned earlier. Michael Byrne commented on this in the Mercury of 29.6.1844...

It conveyed permission from his Excellency to the Council to hold their future meetings in a wretched looking hovel, bearing the dignified name of post office, with the proviso that their meetings should in no way interfere with the duties of that establishment. Now to us in the township, who know the building in question, this gracious offer with its stipulation appears highly ridiculous; and we will venture to say that this murky looking affair would never have been honoured by the Governor's notice had he been rightly informed of its appearance and history. We will give both in as few words as possible. It is one of a group of old ruinous road-party huts, which have been allowed to remain, a standing disgrace to the township; it is composed of slabs, with a mixed covering of thatch and bark, and it has served in its time for a constable's barrack, a bawdy house, and a gambler's hell.

Life in Wollombi was getting livelier. As wheat growing was extensive in the district, (official returns show approaching 1000 acres on the Wollombi) a flour mill was established in Wollombi on the Millpond, opposite the Cemetery. The Mercury of April 26, 1845 reported...

The district inhabitants have no little reason to congratulate themselves on the early prospect of a consummation so long and so devoutly desired – a mill to grind and a market to vend their grain at. The laudable enterprise of Mr J. Portus, of Morpeth, so long and deservedly respected by every good citizen upon the Hunter, now demands an equal gratitude and support of the good people of Wollombi, by his projected introduction of steam, with all its valuable concomitants. The mill and granaries are immediately to commence, and we heartily wish them success.

Over the next 60 years, after Portus, who also had a major mill at Morpeth, the mill was operated by Crothers, then the Chapman family, a Co-operative and the Milson family, prior to it burning down about 1905 and not being rebuilt. Apparently the Millpond had been a natural swampy area, and its outlet had been raised by a dam to improve it as a water supply for the steam engine (9).



Other nearby mills were at Broke, Millfield and Ellalong. The output of the mills was small. The specifications at Wollombi are unknown, but Millfield had an 8 horsepower steam engine, and Ellalong had a milling capacity of eight bushels per hour.

The first records of schools occurs in 1840, when three private schools with a total student enrolment of twenty-five were reported in the official returns. A National school was opened in 1852, behind the Saleyards. Maximum enrolment was in 1859 with a total of 114, out of which the average attendance was seventy-seven; going to school every day was not an established habit (10).

The Anglican Church, 'St Johns', had its foundation stone laid in 1846, and was consecrated in 1849 (11). The Post Office mentioned above as a possible venue for the Council stood on the site the church was to be built on, and had to go, but not without a fight, as Michael Byrne told us in the Mercury of Oct. 31, 1846...

From about four o'clock in the evening of Friday week, until nearly the same on Tuesday last, our post office exhibited such a state of disorder as has seldom been witnessed within the walls of a public establishment, and which unrestrained riot, while it furnished cause for mirth to the thoughtless part of our community, could not be regarded otherwise to the sober-minded inhabitants than with feelings of unmixed indignation. On calling there for our letters on last Saturday night, after the arrival of the mail, the office presented the appearance of a wreck. We observed the window shattered, the outer door gone altogether, and other signs of recent tumult; and we also remarked that the duties of the office were performed in a small inner apartment, while the large outer room, where such business had been usually transacted was in possession of Mr Galway, the contractor and mason to the church now in course of erection, between whom and the watch-house keeper who resided here a struggle for possession had taken place. It may be necessary, for the reader's information, to state that the present post office was originally a road party hut, and that it has now become church property, as it stands upon the acre which has been lately granted as a site for that building. The matter was dealt with in the Court, next door, where it was reported that – Mr Galway, on the previous Friday evening, had effected a peaceable entrance into the post office, where the complainant resides, by the talismanic aid of a brandy bottle, and that after sharing its contents with the complainant, he not only refused to depart, but insisted upon holding at least a joint occupancy with him in the post office...

These extracts from the papers of the 1840s give an insight into the interesting frontier community that the township of Wollombi was at that time.

1. Needham, *Where the Spirit Walked*.
2. Margaret DeSalis, *Two Early Colonials*.
3. A.P.Elkin, *The Wollombi & Parish of Wollombi, A History*.
4. Map N1d W.701a, NSW State Records
5. Baron Charles von Hugel, *New Holland Journal*
6. Stan Parkes, *Mines, Wines & People*
7. Carl Hoipo, Personal research, various Maitland Mercury articles
8. A.P.Elkin, *The Wollombi & Parish of Wollombi, A History*.
9. Carl Hoipo, Personal research, various Maitland Mercury articles



10. Malcolm Goudie, *Schools of the Wollombi Valley*

11. A.P.Elkin, *The Wollombi & Parish of Wollombi, A History.*



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