The Convict Trail: 1990-2005

Paul Budde, Chairman and instigator of the Convict Trail Project.

SUMMARY: The Convict Trail Project was initiated in 1990, with the aim of protecting, restoring, maintaining and promoting the 240km convict-built Great North Road. The Project draws on support from community volunteers, participating stakeholder organisations and the government. An overall Management Plan was generated, consisting of a Conservation Management Plan, Business Plan and Tourism Plan. The long-term goal is to persuade the Roads and Traffic Authority to adopt the Great North Road and share the responsibility for the management and the funding of its restoration and maintenance.

1. THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

1.1 Introduction
Modern Australia was founded as a convict settlement. As the settlement grew, convicts were sent to build infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, and to open work in new industries. The Convict Trail is a monument to these former felons, and a tribute to their work.

Figure 1. Convict carving – road sign Twelve Mile Hollow

Between 1804 and 1822 convicts who committed another crime after arriving in the Colony were banished to the penal settlement at Newcastle, then only accessible by sea. In 1826 re-offending convicts were put to work building one of 19th century Australia’s greatest engineering feats – the Great North Road, providing a land link for the new settlers in the fertile Hunter Valley.

1.2 The Great North Road
Extending north from Sydney to the Hunter Valley, the Convict Trail follows the route of the 240km Great North road, built between 1826 and 1836. Most of this road continues to be used today, offering an alternative, slower-paced scenic route between Sydney and the Hunter, where one can explore the brilliant engineering works created by hundreds of convicts – many of whom worked in leg-irons.

Figure 2. Overseer with pipe

Relics such as stone retaining walls, wharves, culverts, bridges and buttresses can still be seen along the entire length of the Great North Road – in Sydney suburbs like Epping and Gladesville, at Wisemans Ferry or...
Wollombi, BucKetty or Broke, or when walking in Dharug and Yengo National Parks.

The re-offending convicts who worked on the Road were assigned to Iron Gangs and worked in leg-irons – an iron collar around each ankle was joined together by a length of chain. Weighing up to 6kg these could only be put on or removed by a blacksmith.

One overseer was assigned to each gang of between 50 and 60 men. The men lived and worked under difficult conditions – the discipline was harsh and the shelter minimal. Some convicts absconded, but most didn’t stay at liberty for long, as the bush was wild and forbidding to those unaccustomed to it.

The engineering techniques used to build the road were at the cutting edge of technology at the time, incorporating the latest European ideas. The work was labour-intensive and the equipment crude. Up to 700 convicts worked on the Road at any one time – clearing timber, digging drains, blasting and shaping stone, and shifting it into position. Some of the blocks weighed up to 660 kg. Originally 33 bridges were built, their timber decks often supported by elaborate stone foundations. The few that remain are the oldest bridges in mainland Australia.

The Great North Road is unique in today’s world – a 240km monument of convict engineering. We are fortunate to still be able to enjoy this 175-year-old engineering project – a project that ranks amongst the world’s great engineering wonders and large parts of which can still be enjoyed in 2005.

The Road has been nominated for World Heritage listing and, while the outcome of this nomination is uncertain, this is clear evidence that we have been very successful in raising the profile of the Great North Road.

2. THE CONVICT TRAIL PROJECT

2.1 The Early Years: 1990-1996
The origin of the Convict Trail Project goes back to Australia Day, 26th January 1990, when I discovered, at the foot of the property where I live, that 80 sandstone blocks had been stolen from a convict-built wall in Bucketty.

I live halfway along the Road, at Mt McQuoid, where it turns from Wisemans Ferry and St Albans towards Laguna and Wollombi.

I contacted the police, local, State, Federal and Heritage authorities, and everybody was extremely sympathetic and concerned. But no one was prepared to take any responsibility for this unique piece of Australian heritage.

In this fairly remote corner government responsibilities are shared between four local councils, State Forestry and National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), but no one actually thought that they had responsibility for the damaged monument, so there was plenty of buck-passing.

After two years of organising official visits I hadn’t made any progress. After this unsuccessful lobbying for their assistance I decided to take some action myself. And so I initiated the Convict Trail Project (CTP).

The aim is to protect, restore, maintain and promote the Great North Road as a unique piece of Australian heritage.

2.2 Planting the Vision and Gathering Community Support
Based on the rather unsuccessful experiences of the first few years I realised that the management of such a project would be rather complex. There is no single body responsible for this 240km-long heritage road – on the contrary, a dozen or so government authorities share the responsibility, which is fragmented and often very unclear. And, as I had experienced first-hand, this was an ideal situation for buck-passing.

I concluded that, to get the support and attention of these organisations, I needed to harness and maintain the enthusiasm of the local communities. I felt that people power might be used to either persuade or shame the responsible authorities into action. I used the media to communicate the CTP vision and to describe the way that local communities had taken ownership of this project.

Our volunteers are our most precious assets but, in order to generate funds for what obviously was going to be a multi-million-dollar project, a totally different level of activity was needed.

I saw the power of the local people to be the grassroots movement that I could use to get the attention, interest, and ultimately the support, of local councils and other organisations that had responsibilities towards the Road.

The local communities took ownership and their assistance, support and enthusiasm remains invaluable to this day. Their enthusiastic volunteering was crucial in getting the attention of those who had the funds to assist us financially. We had to prove to them that it was worthwhile to support projects initiated by their own citizens. This formula worked wonderfully well, and became another key feature of the Project that got the attention of the media. We were soon a well-recognised organisation amongst all the stakeholders.

2.3 Getting the Stakeholders on Board
This was our next task and to achieve this we identified key people within the potential stakeholder organisations who could champion our project. This was a very successful strategy – today, even 15 years later,
we still have a number of these key people actively involved in the project.

Instead of asking the organisations for the millions of dollars needed to restore and maintain the Road (which I was sure I wouldn’t get) I envisaged using existing funds and resources (road gangs, equipment, support) within the local, state and federal government infrastructure to develop the project to a point where it could be presented to the State Government of NSW as a regional heritage/eco tourism showcase.

From the outset we also decided to employ the highest level of professionalism in everything connected with the project, including two of Australia’s top historical archaeologists, Siobhan Lavelle and Grace Karskens. The thesis Dr Karskens wrote on the Great North Road for her masters degree, became one of our most valued references.

**Exhibit 1 - Vision**

The money for a project such as the CTP is already available but you have to look for it. It is there in the form of existing council funds, heritage money, road works, tourist funds, projects such as LEAP, Landcare, Probation and Weekend Detention Schemes and so on. What is needed is lateral thinking, to avoid red tape and come up with creative and innovative regional approaches.

2.4 **Building up the Organisation**

It was not too difficult to earmark the organisations needed to support the CTP – NSW Heritage Office, Councils, RTA, NPWS, Tourism NSW, Department of Corrective Services, Environment Australia, University of Newcastle, National Trust, Department of Corrective Services, Australian Geographic and others.

In order to balance this with the grassroots nature of the project I also invited other organisations to participate – Historical Societies, Tidy Towns and other community groups.

By 1994 I had gained the support of a handful of organisations, and, one by one, these communities began to take responsibility for the convict heritage in their area. Three years later we had some 30 organisations on our support list.

In 1994 and 1995 we organised CTP summits in Sydney – one at the National Trust and one at the RTA, which lifted our profile further amongst organisations we identified as being critical to our cause. I had already made contact with the Heritage Office, in 1990; I did so again in 1993, and the 1994 and 1995 restoration events in Bucketty and Laguna (see below) further assisted us in building up our credibility with this important organisation, which is now our most important sponsor.

We didn’t form an incorporated organisation until 2002, and we only did so then because we were driven by public liability insurance requirements. All the stakeholders involved were very much in favour of a loosely structured organisation. Our transparency, flat organisation and accountability gave us the credibility that allowed us to operate in this flexible structure and we still very much operate the CTP along these lines.

We set up a Management Team from the key stakeholders who met regularly to ensure ongoing accountability and credibility for the project. On an ‘as needed’ basis we established specialised workgroups. The most successful still is the History Workgroup, consisting of representatives of local historical organisations. This group alternates its meetings north or south of the Hawkesbury.

Heritage Forums have been organised, the CTP participates in the annual Heritage Week activities, and ongoing excursions and presentations take place.

Since 1997, we have produced Annual Reports, which are distributed amongst the stakeholder, local politicians, state government official, and others.

**Table 1 - CTP Members**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major stakeholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW Heritage Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baulkham Hills Shire Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cessnock City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gosford City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkesbury City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hornsby Shire Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyong Shire Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supported by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Corrective Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPWS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R T A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bucketty Tidy Bush Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wollombi/Laguna Tidy Valley Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abermain Heritage Preservation Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane Water Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broke Fordwich Tourism Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle Hill Historic Site Community Com.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cessnock &amp; District Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalfields Heritage Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dharug &amp; Lower Hawkesbury Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dural &amp; District Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkesbury Family History Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkesbury Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hornsby Shire Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunters Hill Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter Valley Wine Country Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Engineers (Aust)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maitland Historical Society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5 From Vision to Strategies
Back to the mid-1990s … our vision now had to be developed into executable strategies. On a high level they could be split into two key issues – engaging local communities and attracting national attention for the project.

Local communities would have little interest in taking ownership of the full length of the road, but would be interested in taking ownership of local sites.

On the other hand, promoting a culvert in Bucketty or a stretch of road in Wollombi would not directly excite the larger population so, from the outset, we promoted the project on a two-tiered basis:

- act locally by getting local communities involved in the restoration and maintenance of the numerous walls, bridges, culverts and the remaining parts of the original road surfaces.
- act nationally to promote the project on a federal and state level for regional cooperation, regional tourism, etc.

Subsequently this was developed into a more structured form, and defined in the various Management Plans. At this stage, however, the Project was still very much in its infancy.

2.6 The First Project – the Bucketty Wall
For this project we harnessed the support of the Bucketty (180 people) and Wollombi (300 people) communities. We did some initial cleaning up in 1992, but started in earnest at this site in 1993, following a visit and free advice from Siobhan Lavelle, another renowned historical archaeologist.

In 1992, after a visit to Bucketty by Maree Callaghan, the then Mayor of Cessnock, and several local council members, we decided to form Bucketty Tidy Bush and under the ‘Keep Australia Beautiful’ scheme we received $500 from Cessnock Council. This was supplemented with a $100 donation from the Dharug and Lower Hawkesbury Historical Society and $1000 from Cessnock Historical Society – plus an enormous amount of enthusiasm through local community working bees, supported by the public works department of Cessnock Council, the Weekend Detention Centre in Gosford and, later on, from the newly-formed Mobile Prison Unit of St Helliers in Muswellbrook.

We used some of that money for the very first CTP Restoration Plan for the Bucketty Wall, written by Siobhan Lavelle.
In the middle of that year the Bucketty community completed the restoration of the remnants of a convict-built bridge, now known as the Bucketty Wall. The official opening took place in the middle of that year and was again celebrated at a carols night we organised in December of that year, an event that has been repeated every year since that time. This confirms the ongoing involvement of the community.

Since 2003 the NPWS has assisted the Bucketty community with the maintenance of the Bucketty Wall precinct.

In all, close to 100 local people have been involved in these projects and the ongoing maintenance of these sites has now been carried out by these local communities for well over ten years.

In November 1993 we formalised the partnership between the Bucketty, Wollombi and Laguna communities and Cessnock Historical Society with a Memorandum of Understanding.

2.7 Modern-day Convicts
The cooperation between the CTP and the Department of Corrective Services is legendary – modern day convicts working on the convict road.

Desperate for manual labour, short of money and in those days not the well-known organisation that we now are, I was scrounging for help.

From the very first I had had the idea of using modern-day convicts to work on the restoration of this convict-built road. It took me over two years – writing letters to the various institutions, the Minister and so on. We had many visits and discussions with the various people involved in the prison system and finally in 1995 the first people arrived.

Initially we had a few groups of weekend detention prisoners, but this was a bit problematic, as quite often people didn’t show up and there was very little enthusiasm amongst this group of people.

During that period, and after some discussions with the Minister for Corrective Services, we were able to manoeuvre ourselves into the Mobile Prison Project. This initiative allows selected prisoners who are approaching the end of their term to be placed in work teams to go out and work on community projects. They have their own kitchen and toilet facilities and camp near the projects they work on.

Since that time many groups from St Helliers Open Prison have been involved in the Project and their work took them to many other spots along the Convict Trail Road.

2.8 CTP Video and Book ‘Adopt a Convict’
We also organised the production of a video, which encompassed the full length of the Road and documented the important events of that year. Clips of the video were also shown on ABC TV.

The next year saw the publication of one of our most important books about the Great North Road – By Force of Maul and Wedge. It covers not just the Road, but also its environmental setting, Aboriginal history and the early developments of the Convict Trail Project.
Hundreds of people have since become involved in projects like ‘Adopt-a-Convict’, historical research, heritage conservation, cartography, exhibitions and publications.

Exhibit 2 – Royal Australian Historical Society

The ‘Adopt-a-Convict’ Project is the brainchild of Management Team member Mari Metzke, Manager Outreach Services of the Royal Historical Society. The link with this organisation has been invaluable to the CTP. The convict database is another project that was born from this partnership. Mari also represents another important stakeholder, Hornsby Shire Historical Society.

Mari works closely with Ralph Hawkins a convict period historian and he became another important contributor to the Project. Ralph’s knowledge of the convict era has been of great value and his collection of convict tools has been on display on several occasions.

Since 2004 the Management Team has included another member from Hornsby – Neil Chippendale, Local Studies Librarian at Hornsby Library.

2.9 National and International Focus
On a national, and even international, level the media has generously supported us, with over 100 articles in major newspapers, local community press and specialised magazines. The project has been featured many times on radio and TV and has attracted the attention of international media (Japan, NKH, UK BBC and USA National Geographic). Increasingly local schools, as well as high school/university students, are visiting the 50-plus major heritage sites along the Convict Trail.

3. THE YEARS OF CONSOLIDATION 1997-2004

3.1 From Enthusiasm to Structure
As the momentum gathered it became evident that we needed the services of a person who could dedicate a large amount of their time to the management of the Convict Trail Project.
A key task of the Executive Director is to maintain regular contact with our stakeholders and to this end presentations are regularly made at council meetings, RTA audiences (eg heritage surveyors) and, of course, at many local heritage meetings, Heritage Week events and so on.

The Heritage Office funding basically meant that they entrusted our voluntary organisation (at our own request) with the management of this important piece of Australian heritage and I believe that we all can be proud of such an achievement.

Our project is often used as a best practices case for combined community and Heritage Office projects and we are proud to see that other communities have since embarked on similar projects.

3.2 Management Plan

Based on the strategies we developed during 1996 work began on a Management Plan.

This Plan describes the primary function of the organisation as being:

To work together to conserve, manage and promote the Great North Road as an outstanding example of our convict and early colonial heritage.

To achieve this we aim to:

- Protect the Great North Road from further degradation
- Restore appropriate sections
- Promote it as a unique historic trail that illustrates convictism and the vision of the developing colony

The Management Plan consisted of:

- Conservation Management Plan
- Business Plan
- Tourism Plan

3.3 Conservation Management Plan

In 1996, the Heritage Office provided us with a grant of $20,000 to develop a Conservation Management Plan (CMP).

This project was led by our Heritage Committee, in which representatives of the local councils, the NPWS and the RTA participated. We appointed Siobhan Lavelle and Dr Grace Karskens, historical archaeologists, to undertake the work involved. Both have been associated with the Convict Trail for many years. In their work on the CMP they were supported by a very active CTP Heritage Committee under the leadership of Clare James, the Heritage Officer at Cessnock Council.

The Conservation Management Plan identified for the first time all known heritage sites along the 240km network of roads and branches that make up the Convict Trail. It was also the first time that local councils had an overview of which parts of the Road are in their areas. This provided them with a unique piece of information that is now used for education, promotion, maintenance and heritage management.

3.4 Business Plan

The second element of the Management Plan, the Business Plan, includes the following strategies:

- Maintaining ongoing support and involvement of all stakeholders.
- Eliciting grants and subsidies and other contributions of cash, in-kind contributions, knowledge and skills pursuant to the Great North Road
- Integration of Business Plan and CMP.
- Appropriate site works and site management to be undertaken
- Promote the Great North Road and the Convict Trail Project
• Undertake further research into the Great North road and associated features.

The Plan is regularly reviewed and revised so that it stays abreast of needs, developments and achievements.

3.5 Tourism Plan
Finally, the third element of the Management Plan – the Tourism Plan:

**Figure 14. Tourist guide**

The key objectives of this Plan were:

- Identify target markets for heritage eco-tourism
- Formulate a marketing strategy
- Determine the current level of support from the business community
- Recognise issues and determine possible impacts to stakeholders and the community

Target markets were identified as being family groups and couples without children, on journeys of one or more days, originating from Sydney, and travelling by private car.

Heritage and nature-based eco-tourism were also identified as important markets for the Great North Road.

Mass tourism, such as tourist coaches was identified as being inappropriate.

Ways of minimising the impacts of increased tourism have been addressed – these range from site management strategies, to overcoming potential community hostility resulting from increased traffic flows and visitation.

Key marketing strategies identified in the Tourism Report include:

- Improve signage and information
- Develop a more detailed marketing plan and employ a tourism officer to coordinate activities
- Educate communities about the Road and tourism
- Involvement of the CTP Executive Team in local and regional tourism committees
- Development of tourism brochures
- Look at a relevant events with which the CTP can be associated
- Extend information available to include Sydney-based operators and tourists
- Obtain listing in relevant guides (eg NRMA ‘scenic drive’)

The NSW Minister for Tourism expressed an interest in the report and a presentation on it was given to his Department and Tourism NSW in November 1997.

The first house-style and website for the Convict Trail Project was developed by design students from the University of Newcastle. The university has been involved on an ongoing basis in a range of other design projects.

Together with the RTA/Tourism NSW we also produced a high profile glossy booklet. This publication has made it possible for us to much better communicate the full scale of this convict engineering project.

Thanks to a grant from Environment Australia the major sites were provided with interpretative signage and information poles at key locations during 2001.

A Regional Tourism Summit was held in March 2005, in which all regional tourism organisations cooperated. The first activity to come out of this will be the production of a tourism/map brochure which we hope will be published in 2006 (25,000-50,000 copies). This will be by far our largest tourism activity to date. The Summit participants also formed a permanent working group to develop further regional tourism activities and signage will most probably get a priority here.

3.6 Award Winning Project
Siobhan Lavelle accepted, on behalf of the CTP, the National Trust/Energy Australia 2000 Heritage Festival Award.

In 2001 The Institution of Engineers, Australia declared the Great North Road to be a National Engineering Landmark – only one of 33 such projects (others include Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, The Great
Zig Zag, Trans-Australia Railway and the Sydney Harbour Bridge).

**Figure 15. Restoring stonework**

In 2002 the Project was awarded the NSW Heritage Volunteers Award.

The Bucketty community has received two heritage awards – one for their initiative in establishing the Convict Trail Project and one for a second project in Bucketty, the partial reconstruction of one of the largest culverts on the Road.

### 3.7 Projects

Over the last 15 years we have undertaken numerous projects. The major projects are listed below.

**Conservation Management Projects:**
- Restoration of the remnants of the Mt McQuoid bridge and original road surface at Bucketty
- Restoration of the Murrays Run culvert
- The cleaning up of the Fernances Crossing culvert
- Restoration and clean-up of the St Albans Ramp
- Conservation and clean-up of walling at Ramseys Leap St Helliers MOP
- Restoration Devine’s Hill (done by NPWS)
- Restoration Circuit Flat Bridge
- Restoration Clares Bridge (with a grant from Environment Australia and assistance Gosford Council and Transgrid)
- Restoration historic barns Laguna
- Clean up Maroota Loops and Finch Line
- CMP for Wisemans Ferry stockade (NPWS)
- Clean-up of the creek crossing at Pyes Creek (Hornsby Shire Council)
- Clearing and Weed removal Eloura Road pavement (Department of Corrective Services and Hornsby Council)
- Partial reconstruction culvert at Bucketty (Grant from Heritage Office of NSW and labour from the Department of Corrective Services)
- Critical repairs and stabilisation Sampson Pass. Some critical conservation – much more stabilisation/conservation needed. (Department of Corrective Services)
- Research and Survey of Mr Sharpes Track (Students and BHSC)
- Some clearing of weeds at Bedlam Point (assistance Hunters Hill and Ryde Councils and Department of Corrective Services)
- Clean-up and clearing of culvert Sawyers Gully (Department of Corrective Services)
- Repair of culverts Sawyers Gully (CCC)
- Water well and parkland at Wisemans Ferry (Baulkham Hills Council)
- Clean-up and restoration Thomas Budd’s grave Wollombi.
- Mapping of convict graves with the assistance of the RTA in Glenorie
- Discovery of a range of items such as abandoned road loops, abandoned stretches of the road, convict camps and quarries.
- Survey of evidence on and clearing of Simpsons track (Graham Nelson, Gosford Water Catchment Management Team and CTP History Group)

**3.8 Other Projects:**
- Tourism brochure (RTA)
- Tourism booklet ‘Let’s explore’ (RTA and Tourism NSW)
- Tourism brochure Baulkham Hills/Hornsby Councils
- A range of occasional monographs
- CTP Journal ‘The Pick’
- Book on the GNR (By Force of Maul and Wedge)
- Video of the CTP
- Friends of the CTP (and quarterly newsletter)
- Touring CTP exhibition and touring tools exhibition
- Website
- Educational CDROM (now incorporated into our website)
• Institution of signage
• Regular Heritage Week and History Week Activities.

Figure 17. Honouring Aboriginal heritage

3.9 Synergy
The kind of creativity that surfaces within our Project can be demonstrated by a few examples:
• Cessnock City Council has provided the team with maintenance assistance from their Roads Department;
• Cessnock Council’s Strategic Planning Department produced a blueprint for regional tourism;
• Gosford Council has been instrumental in restoring Clares Bridge, for which Transgrid provided much-needed additional funds;
• NPWS assisted us in getting a team together to look at a regional approach towards a 20km stretch of the Road on the border of Dharug NP, Gosford and Hawkesbury Council.

4. THE FUTURE STARTS IN 2005
4.1 The Great North Road: A Multi-million Dollar Asset
I estimate the value of the work done on the Convict Trail Project to be close to one million dollars – of which two-thirds consists of assistance from councils, NPWS, RTA, Department of Corrective Services, plus in-kind work done by the many volunteers.

The remainder is money spent from grants and financial contributions for the Road's restoration, heritage work, management and administration, promotion and education.

Our long-term goal continues to be trying to get the RTA to adopt the Great North Road and take over the responsibility for the management and the funding of the restoration and the maintenance of this Road. It is the oldest road built by our colonial predecessors and is still more or less in its original condition.

The State Government should take responsibility for this state asset, which is recognised as unique, not just in Australia but in the world. The Heritage Office and the CTP would both be partners in a cooperative model.

Figure 18. Clares Bridge

In 2005 we started to build towards this future.

A Road Engineering and Heritage Summit is on the planning board, to which all stakeholders will be invited to send their representatives to discuss regional cooperation regarding this heritage road.

In 2005 we launched, in association with the Heritage Office, a study on the bridges on the Great North, aimed at saving these last remaining bridges (7 out of an original 33 bridges). Most bridge owners (the councils) currently have no idea what the overall impact would be if they demolish just one of the bridges – often remarking that there are many of them elsewhere in NSW, therefore suggesting that their ‘upgrade’ has little impact.

We try to ‘sell’ local councils on the tourism value of these bridges, especially in rural and bush landscapes. We argue that within a few years, when most of the historic bridges on other roads will have disappeared in
the name of progress, they will have a very unique tourism asset.

Exhibit 3 - Millfield Bridge: Heritage vandalism by NSW government

One of the key bridges on the GNR was the longest timber bridge in the Hunter Valley in Millfield.

After initial hesitation the local community organised itself into a committee with the aim of saving this bridge. It was already bypassed by a concrete bridge and the plan was to retain the timber bridge and, with the assistance of the local community, prisoner labour and other typical CTP can-do activities, we hoped to be able to use the $700,000 demolition fund for the preservation of this bridge.

Expert advice indicated that $200,000 was needed for urgent repairs and maintenance and the rest could be used for ongoing repairs. With the assistance of the Heritage Office a special trust would be established that could own the asset, it all looked like a straightforward solution. However, when the then NSW Minister for Roads stated in Parliament:

_Not only am I aware of the demolition of the Millfield Bridge but I absolutely approve of it. I would like to be the person who takes a chainsaw and puts the first cut through the bridge. I know this bridge very well; it is three kilometres from my house._

The Millfield Bridge was not around when the Convict Trail was built; it was built in the forties. It has absolutely nothing to do with the Great North Road walk. More importantly, the new bridge has a walkway. So, those who want to retrace the steps of the convicts can walk along the state-of-the-art concrete walkway. I congratulate the demolition team. In fact, on the way home I will ask them to speed up their work, if they can,

we then knew that we had an uphill battle and, indeed, a few days later the Minister had made sure that the RTA chainsaw crew arrived and started to cut the bridge into pieces.

This is not a good omen for the ongoing GNR plan that we would like to develop with the State Government and the RTA.

As time goes by, and more and more of our historic terrain disappears, we are certain that the value of the remnants of our colonial history, such as the Great North Road, will increase. The economic tourism value of this is significant and is slowly being recognised, but the CTP still struggles to ensure the ongoing involvement of communities and councils.

As a voluntary organisation we can easily be bypassed. We have no real power – only that of persuasion – and this is sometimes frustrating, as we are not always fully informed about plans and developments in relation to the Road.

We are disappointed that some key councils are still not fully committed to the project, while, at the same time, they reap the benefits from the work carried out.

We always are looking for individual people who can help with historical research, interviews, archive work, deciphering and retyping of old documents, with the setting up of electronic databases, and with publishing.

But our commitment remains strong and we are determined to continue to build on the success of the Convict Trail Project.

For more information see our website: [www.convicttrail.org](http://www.convicttrail.org)

or contact:
Convict Trail Project
Elizabeth Roberts
Executive Director
The Convict Trail Project
PO Box 96
WAHROONGA NSW 2076
Phone 02 9489 3603