

BELMORE BRIDGE

The site of the first Belmore Bridge was decided by the government surveyor, G.B (George Boyle) White and was upstream from the Punt Crossing at St Andrews Street.

In December 1864, after more than ten years of community campaigning for a safe and reliable means to cross the river in place of the punt service, the Government accepted the tender of Mr Francis A. Bell, C.E. (of the Gundagai Bridge Works) for the construction of an iron lattice bridge at West Maitland to be finished in twenty months. Francis Bell also constructed the Dunmore, Pitnacree and Gundagai Bridges.

The first West Maitland bridge

Construction of the first West Maitland Bridge commenced in 1865. Bell was assisted by Mr. Franklin, who acted as Superintendent.

It was designed by the Engineer-in-chief for Harbours and Rivers (Mr. E. O. Moriarty), and built under the direction of his department.

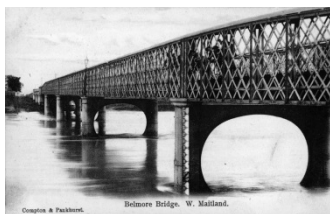
In January 1865, Mr. Bell, placed an order for the cylinder piers, trusses and lattice ironwork to be cast in England by Lloyds, Forster and Co. at the Lowmoor ironworks, in Staffordshire. The pier cylinders were in segments nine feet long, four segments to form the circle, secured with bolts and nuts.

In December 1866 the first iron cylinder was laid by the then Minister of Works, Mr. Byrnes, in the presence of the Mayor and Aldermen of West Maitland.

Early difficulties arose due to the bed of quicksand found under the gravel and clay on the site that required an extra drive of seventeen feet to be made before the ground required for the piers was reached. Additionally, bad weather and poor roads caused difficulty getting the necessary timber in from the bush and frequent interruptions from floods that delayed the work for several weeks.

The site was visited in January 1869 during the 81st anniversary of the foundation of the colony by the then Colonial Secretary and Premier of NSW, Hon. John Robertson and the Minister for Works, Hon. John Sutherland. They both gave close inspection of the work in progress, expressed their satisfaction with the bridge itself, as well as with the manner in which the contractors were carrying out its erection.

Upon completion, the engineering skill and substantial workmanship was declared as one of the finest iron bridges in the Australian colonies.



The bridge measured 460 feet (180 metres) in length and being exclusively iron, the greater portion wrought iron, weighed 180 tons. The five spans of continuous lattice girders were riveted together and the cylinder piers were filled with concrete. The girders, struts, diagonals and flooring were constructed from ironbark obtained from the Clarence Town and Seaham areas.

In August 1868, some of the castings for the approaches were manufactured at Hargrave's Pyrmont Foundry under order from Mr. J. Mather, the contractor for that work. In June 1869, the Department of Public Works accepted the tender of Mr. James McLaughlin for construction of the northern road approach to the bridge.

Opening in 1869

On 4 October 1869 amid great processions and ceremony the West Maitland Bridge was pronounced open for public

use by the Hon John Sutherland, now Minister for Lands.

The Mayoress of West Maitland, Mrs W.H. Mullen, broke a bottle of champagne decorated with ribbons and flowers against the ironwork of the eastern railing and christened the "Belmore Bridge" in honour of the Earl of Belmore (Sir Somerset Richard Lowry Corry) who was then the Governor and Commander in Chief of New South Wales. The Earl subsequently visited Maitland in October 1870.

Shortly after the opening the bridge was lit with fourteen gas lamps, seven on each side. The lamps were large globular ones, and, when lit, emitted "magnificent" light.

In consideration of the great cost of the structure (£23,564) which had been provided from the revenue of the colony, Mr. Sutherland stated that it was necessary to impose a toll of one penny, to be paid only once in any day.

On the 1st January 1872 the Governor-in- Chief of the colony increased the toll rates.

Planning for a new bridge

By 1934 plans were initiated to replace the first bridge as part of a state wide plan to improve main road linkages.

In May 1940, a proposal was put forward to West Maitland Council by the Department of Main Roads for a more modern structure to replace the Belmore Bridge.

The line selected for the new structure would pass through a point approximately 66ft downstream from the eastern abutment, to intersect High Street between St Andrew Street and the Imperial Hotel.

Postwar construction works delayed any further decision making or progress on this proposal.

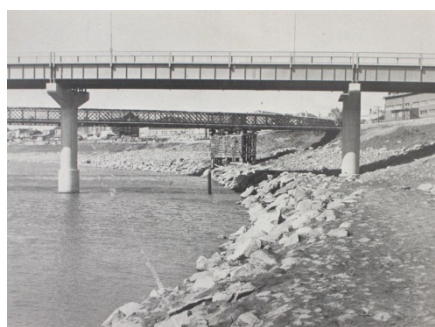
The old iron and timber bridge continued in use, withstanding the periodic floods that battered and choked it and the surrounding riverbanks which led rise to claims that the bridge would be washed away before the Department of Main Roads completed its repair works.

In December 1950, the Department of Main Roads began plotting a slightly altered course for the new Belmore Bridge. To give a better curve and not interfere with the current bridge, the centre of the new approach on the Lorn side was to be moved 35 feet upstream from the spot plotted some months previously. The centre of the approach near the Courthouse on the Maitland side remained unaltered.



The new Belmore Bridge

By August 1954, a new Belmore Bridge was in the designing stage and was to be located upstream from the existing structure in almost direct line with Maitland Courthouse. But progress was delayed because of post-war work initiatives being undertaken by the Department of Main Roads.



Having been in service for over 90 years, the old bridge had never been fully covered by floodwaters, even in the record flood of February 1955.

It had survived five major floods and 890 minor ones, was flood ravaged and rammed by debris, and was restricted to a load limit of eight tons and a speed limit of 12-15 miles per hour.

Construction begins

The first test pylon of the new and current Belmore Bridge was driven on the 5 October, 1961. At a cost of £300,000, the new concrete and steel bridge was designed with the deck constructed above record flood level with single column round-shaped piers to deflect flood water and debris and consisting of eight spans and is 643 feet (198 metres) in length.

Opening in 1964

The bridge, built by Mr John Scott of Carrington, was opened on 4 April 1964 by the Minister for Local Government and Minister for Highways, Mr. Pat. Hills, in the company of The Mayor, Ald. H. Skilton, and Milton Morris, the State Member at the time.

REFERENCE

Trove-Digitised Newspapers <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>