HODDLE’S ROAD

[The following historical note on Hoddle’s Road was prepared by Mr. Beale for the South Coast Conservation Society in connection with their Heritage Week walk on Sunday, March 21st, along the line of Hoddle’s Road from the Barren Grounds Nature Reserve to Saddleback. It is published by kind permission of the author and the Conservation Society].

Aged barely 36 when he surveyed his bridle track from Bong Bong to Illawarra in 1830, Robert Hoddle had wide experience behind him, gained as a surveyor first in the army, then in Cape Colony, and then in New South Wales, where amongst many other duties he surveyed Bell’s line of road over the Blue Mountains, and went exploring with John Oxley.

For his Illawarra task, he certainly had to call on that experience. Indeed, it is to be doubted if he ever had a harder task than cutting this track to provide a public utility. The need came in this way: Illawarra’s main communication was then by sea, the only overland routes being essentially variants of Throsby’s original track, which, after all, led to Sydney. There was nothing between the Bong Bong Tablelands and Illawarra. There was, of course, a route from Bong Bong via the Great South Road, but that led to Sydney too. Although Illawarra’s toy boat-harbours, or rather shelters, did not amount to much in those years, they were coveted by settlers on the tablelands, because their produce would have both an easier and a shorter journey if it could be despatched overland to Illawarra’s sea-lanes.

Thus it came about that on 27th March 1830 Hoddle, the future planner of Melbourne’s flat lands, was set to his rough task of cutting a track eastwards through the brushes of the tableland. He had a road gang of twenty men for the purpose; and, as he later reported, “With the exception of six men and the Overseer I have never met with a more idle and useless set of men. I have never had more thanTen at work. The first day they commenced, four or five shammed sick.” But then it was no fun for his convicts either: “The weather was very unfavourable, and they had only the Canopy of Heaven for a shelter, and with a few Boughs to protect them from any heavy rain, which poured in torrents from some days.”

The early stages in particular were exceptionally hard going, as Hoddle’s later report made very clear:

“Having surveyed the Wingecaribbee Swamp, and ascertained the most southern part of it, I commenced to encounter the most formidable brush I have ever met with, for so great a distance, since I have been in the Colony. It abounded with every species of Prickly brush, brambles, and nettles. The Native Vines were so thickly entwined around the trees, as to render the sun obscure; at the time it shone with great brilliancy. From the difficulty of looking about me I got two or three times off the centre of the Range ... I followed the Range until I was stopped by Cliffs, and proceeded then to endeavour to descend towards Illawarra, or to make for Kiama. I was unable
to descend, except by the Range bending 15 degrees southward of East, from the Southern Point of the Wingecaribbee Swamp. I discovered the leading Range to Kiama and after employing the Gang for two days I was enabled to descend the cliffs to that range. The road I have made is sufficiently good to enable Pack Horses to descend. I think a Cart Road might be made without much difficulty. The great obstacle I had to contend with was the Brush. In general the Gang were unable to cut through more than one mile each day."

So it was a very real achievement when on 18th June 1830 Hoddle was able to report that his job was done. Yet it was maybe a blessing for him that by 1837 he had moved to his comforting new sphere in Melbourne, because a later historian, James Jervis, said that his hard-won track had within a few years fallen into disuse, if indeed the whole of it was ever effectively used even in those early years. None the less, its existence was well known, for in 1832 a traveller, writing in the Sydney Gazette of 17th March 1832, said Hoddle had performed:

"an Herculean task in making a road, or rather a path, from hence to Illawarra, through a brush so thick that every yard in advance required to be cut through before a passage could be effected. The rays of the sun did not even penetrate its recesses, and when a tree was cut through at the stump, it was lashed at one side of the path with vines, the closeness of creepers and branches over head not allowing it to fall. Many weeks were laboriously passed by twenty men in making a pass sufficiently wide for a pack bullock to travel, but it was eventually completed, and some day or other it is probable a channel of communication will be opened between the two districts. At present it is attended with difficulty and peril."

On the other hand, one can only wonder if Hoddle's track was really as disused as this report would imply. Certainly in the mid-summer days of 1840 the bustling little parson-geologist, Rev. W. B. Clarke, made his way up Osborne's Butter Track, often clambering on all fours and dragging his horse behind him, headed for Kangaroo Valley. On the tableland, his passage was easier. As he wrote in his diary, "Seven miles over a wild black burnt forest carried us to a dividing road to Jamberoo marked by a tree cut all round, the only guide post there." This must have been the crossing of Osborne's Butter Track with a section of Hoddle's Road, even if the Jamberoo road was a by-pass from Hoddle's. Another mile took Clarke to the descent into Kangaroo Valley.

Now the existence of a guide post in 1840, even in the form of a mutilated tree, does not imply disuse of Hoddle's line. And yet it remains probably true that other (and minor) parts came to be forgotten. At the same time it is necessary to realise that this was a long line of road, extending from somewhere east of Bong Bong (probably Wingecaribbee Swamp) to the coast, so that the main route survived, roughly following the present Illawarra Highway to the escarpment, with divergences from there onwards, to cope with
the difficult descent. Thus there was Alley’s line (an extension, as it were, of Bong Bong Road, Dapto) and Osborne’s Cattle Track (running up Johnston’s Spur, but not to be confused with the Butter Track). Finally came the present Macquarie Pass, in the latter years of the 19th century. All these were offshoots from Hoddle’s original road. So the basic structure of that line remains substantially the same as it ever was. The Saddleback section may have fallen into disuse: but that is nothing for bushwalkers to complain about!

One may be sure, then, that Robert Hoddle cared not a jot about disuse or under-use. He was too busy in Melbourne making a fortune which, when he died in 1881, was sworn for probate at half a million good, old-fashioned quids!

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PERSONAL

At the March meeting of the Council the chairman welcomed Mr. B. Perrotta as a new Councillor. The Council looks forward to a long and happy association.

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The Society welcomes as a new member Mrs. V. Fowler (Campbelltown), the Hon. Secretary of the Campbelltown-Airds Society.

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The President of this Society was among the sixty or so people who did the Conservation Society’s walk along Hoddle’s Track on 21st March. He was heard recalling his war-time Canungra training course experience.

WESLEY CHURCH CENTENARY BOOK

Members and others who have personal or family associations with Wesley Church, Wollongong, or with the early days of Methodism in Australia, will find much to interest them in “One Hundred Years of Service,” a carefully-researched and handsomely produced book compiled by Ralph and Roslyn Parsons and published by Wesley Church to commemorate the centenary of the church building in Crown Street, Wollongong. (Obtainable from Church office, price $7.00).

A MESSAGE FROM AN OLD MEMBER

The Editor recently happened to meet at Blackheath another former Vice-President, Mr. Wilfred Musgrave, now living on the Blue Mountains. Mr. Musgrave sends all good wishes to the Society, and particularly to Mr. Worland, Mr. Grenfell, Brother O’Malley and Mr. Beale, who were Councillors at the same time as he was. The Society returns to Mr. Musgrave best wishes for his health and happiness.