ANTIQUE ROAD GUM:

The September issue of the National Trust Bulletin announces that the Antique Dealers' Association of N.S.W. will hold its Fair at Mosman Town Hall, open to National Trust members on 17th October, and to the public on subsequent days until Saturday, 22nd October.

ROAD GANG JOTTINGS:

The construction, now in progress, of the by-pass from Geord’s Hill to Five Islands Road, recalls the first making of the present highway in the same area. The route was marked out by Major Mitchell in 1834, Mount Keira Road being marked out at the same time. The convicts engaged on the job were quartered in a stockade at what became Geord’s Corner (the Cross Roads), where they were guarded by a detachment of the 80th Regiment under Lieut. Otway. “They only just formed the road,” says Alexander Stewart. “They cut the water-tables and threw the dirt into the middle of the road, to raise it there... These roads and the streets in the town were in a terrible condition when it rained until the councils were formed and took them in hand. No metal was put on the roads until the corporations did it.”

James Backhouse, the Quaker missionary, saw the road gangs at work when he visited Illawarra. Under the Quaker-style date “21st, 9th mo., 1836” he recorded, “In the afternoon, we met a large road-party, under the charge of a military officer, at a place, a mile and a half from the town. They were assembled in a large, open shed, where they take their meals: the officer and his wife, with a number of military, who were under arms, and their wives were also present; the whole company was quiet and attentive, both while we addressed them, and while we remained with them in silence. The prisoners here, are those sentenced from Great Britain, to work on the roads, for certain periods, before being assigned. They were, at one time, ordered to work in chains, and for periods as long as seven years, but this excessive, and injurious severity, has been relaxed, and they are now exempted from chains, unless as a punishment for improper conduct, and if they behave well, they are assigned, at the expiration of two years. Hope being thus kept alive, while strict discipline is likewise maintained, their conduct is generally good; only three cases have occurred to be subjected to flagellation, within the last month. They are lodged and guarded, in the same manner as the ironed-gangs. Though this station is called a stockade, there is no defence around it; but no prisoner can wander off the premises, on account of the military guard. The whole place is remarkable for its cleanliness and order. The prisoners are employed in the formation of roads and bridges: they have already formed a road, from the top of the mountains, wide enough for one carriage; but it is yet only available for horses, as a creek on the way to Appin, remains impassable for carriages, without a bridge.”

Lieutenant Otway, the first commander of the guard, came to a tragic end. Stewart says that he “went up to Keira one night to dine with Colonel Leahy, and he probably drank too much wine there. When he returned to the stockade the sentry challenged him, but, instead of replying and giving the pass word, he seized the sentry and attempted to take his musket from him.” This constituted the grave military crime of forcing a sentinel, and Otway found himself facing a court-marital and cashiering. The disgrace so weighed on his mind that he shot himself. “His body,” says Stewart, “was buried in the Protestant burying ground at Wollongong (the site of the Public Library — Ed.) and it lies there still. Another body was also buried there, but it was afterwards taken up. I was told the other day by a townsman that he had seen human bones there recently, and these must be Lieut. Otway’s, for his was the only body that remained there.”

The traditional English practice had been to bury a suicide at a cross-roads
with a stake through his heart. The neglect of this precaution left Otway's ghost free to walk, and I have heard that he was the ghost of Ghost's Creek, just down the hill from the stockade. (Can any of our older members confirm this?).

Until fairly recently Ghost's Creek was still a place where one could imagine the unhappy Otway's unquiet spirit wandering among the trees, but today neither the neat suburban cottages on its upper reaches nor the waste of earthworks and bulldozers lower down can provide a proper setting. And now the benevolent efforts of certain aldermen to provide reasonably suitable alternative accommodation on the site of his grave, in a dark and deserted library, have been frustrated, at least for the present. Alas, poor ghost!

When the first section of the work has been completed, the stockade was removed to "Ryan's paddock at Figtree . . . on the flat opposite the old post-office there, between Hickman's Hotel and the creek below." According to Stewart the discipline there was lax. Although the prisoners were supposed to be locked up at night, they used to get out (the guard being "in collusion with them and conniving at their depredations") and go robbing settlers' drays and outlying farmhouses.

These nocturnal amusements came to an end when three convicts set out to rob the house of an elderly settler named Green. After unsuccessfully trying to force the door, one of them, a man named Blackall, tried, like Santa Claus, to come down the chimney, but stuck. Old Green, hearing the scrabbling and cursing up above, loaded his gun, but could not pluck up courage to fire. His stout-hearted, if unsporting, wife snatched the gun from her husband's trembling hands and blazed away up the chimney. Blackall, dislodged by the blast, and extensively but not fatally lacerated and perforated, rushed back to the stockade leaving a trail of blood which the constables followed up next day. He received a life sentence. The evidence against his two companions was held insufficient to convict. The complaisant guard was replaced by a detachment of another regiment less prone to connivance, collusion and condonation.

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