

Reminiscences of John Devitt

The Bitumen road - Tom Uglys to Wollongong.

The bitumen road - Princes Highway - reached Bulli in 1928 except for Bulli Pass.

This road was laid by the Main Roads Board being a *macadamised pure bitumen sealed road at the time as good as any in the country.

Road gangs camped on site in the uninhabited areas of Heathcote Waterfall onwards to the top of Bulli Pass.

Much of the work was done manually but they had steam rollers with rippers attached to the rear, some Vulcan and thornycroft tip trucks horse tip drays, mobile tar boilers that were towed along by truck or steam roller.

After the surveyors had done their work the width of the road, about 18', was dug by rippers, pick and shovel and where necessary blasting powder.

When the trench about 18" deep was dug out, large blue metal spalls were tipped in and arranged by hand. On top of this, blue metal about the size of an orange, was spread and rolled in by the steam rollers.

When this was compacted another layer of blue metal golf ball size next was spread and rolled. Bitumen, imported in wooden kegs from South America was chopped up with broadaxes, put into the tar boilers and melted. The remains of the wooden kegs fed the boiler fires.

When the bitumen was boiling it was tapped off into large cans similar to watering cans with a fan shaped spout.

Men with their legs encased in hessian puttees picked up two cans each by means of yoke. They carried these to the road bed applying the hot tar like watering a garden. This was hot, hard, dangerous work needing big brawny men.

After a coat of bitumen over the rolled in golf-sized metal, smaller chip-sized metal was spread over the hot tar and rolled in again. Still another coat of hot tar with much smaller metal chips was again rolled in.

Finally after another coat of tar, very fine metal was spread and rolled thus forming the final surface of the road.

Considering the methods of construction the road progressed at a steady rate, however every worker pulled his weight. No room for loafers or bludgers, who were given the heave ho quick smart. Lots were getting scarce.

This road had stood the test of time and is still the centre of the much widened highway we now call the Princes Highway. The sections on both sides of the original road were not as well made as the centre section by a long chalk.

At the time the crossing at Tom Uglys was made by steam punt. After the bridge was opened some years later, these punts were taken to Batemans Bay for the river crossing until the bridge was built there when they were finally retired from service.

*The success of a macadam road is in the fact that it acts as a large rubble drain allowing excess water to run through the bottom spalls without any damage to the rest of the road above. The modern technique of compacting earth and sealing with tar and metal is supposed to be cheaper and faster to construct but once water saturates the compacted earth the weight of the traffic destroys the road bed.

Macadam knew what he was doing.