

PIONEER ENGINEERING IN ILLAWARRA

All the oldest inhabitants of Dapto declare that, at anyrate below the dam at the main road crossing, the water in Mullet Creek has never been so low as now since 1838—sixty years ago. Mr. John Brown, J.P., of Brownsville, declares this to be the case; and, as he has resided in that locality all that time and is one of the most intelligent and close observers, his statement may be accepted as absolutely correct.

And this ebb tide, as it were, of three score years brings to light a most interesting portion of the ruins of an engineering work of great magnitude for those pioneer days that was attempted and carried out to a certain extent there. Immediately below the dam may now be seen closely together just under the surface of the receded water the heads of nearly a hundred piles that were driven down there in 1837 or 1838 with the intention of forming the foundation of a stone bridge. Now-a-days stone foundations are laid for wooden structures, but then, in the virgin settlement of Illawarra at anyrate, the reverse appears to have been the engineering order.

This bed of piles, as may be said, is 24ft. wide, and from the stream end can be traced back to a length of 38ft. to the side of the existing dam, under which they disappear westward. After being driven to the required depth, whatever that may have been, the piles were all sawn off on an equal level. They are not quite close together and in thickness are rather under than over a foot. The sawn heads of them are as smooth, round and level as when cut sixty years ago. It is impossible to ascertain what kind of timber they are, but doubtless it is some of the hardwood class. Here and there a gap occurs without piles being seen, and it is not improbable that a different kind of wood was used there for piles and rotted away long since. It would be well worth the attention of the Government to have a few of the existing piles pulled up so as to learn the kind of timber they are, its power of endurance under water having been proved to so marked a degree.

The level heads of the piles constituting the base for the end of the arch of the intended bridge were to be decked with hardwood planks 3 x 10 inches, some of those planks, in a fair state of preservation, being still in position or nearly so. Mr. Brown says the necessary wooden arch on which the stonework was to be constructed had been made near at hand, and was ready for use in due time. In order to permit of the bridge construction being carried out, a coffer dam was erected on the lower side of the site, and a dam which acted as a temporary bridge was thrown across the creek on the upper side, ample provision, as was thought, being made to deviate the stream down an opening on the north side of the natural channel. Man proposes, but God disposes, however. Before the wooden

framework for the stone arch was placed in position—although a considerable portion of side-stone masonry had been carried out—the memorable drought broke. The windows of Heaven poured such a flood upon the land as never before had been experienced in the new settlement. Mullet Creek rose high over its banks, and away with one fell sweep, as might be said, all preparations for the bridge were carried crashing down the stream into the lake and probably not a little of the material into the surging sea.

The piles, driven into the bed of the creek and cut off as here stated, however, remained firmly fixed in Mother Earth some feet under water, and for a period of sixty or sixty-one or two years they were out of sight there until the drought of this season exposed them for a time—a brief time, it is to be hoped—for inspection, which should be deeply interesting to all who may behold them while "on view."

Mr. Brown estimates, as far as his recollection can serve him, that between £3000 and £5000 worth of work had been carried out in the operations before the catastrophe occurred. That, and the commencement of the shipping basin at Wollongong a few years before, were the greatest engineering works attempted in the Illawarra district up to that time.

After the devastation by the flood, His Excellency Governor Gipps visited the district, inspected the scene of the wreckage, and evidently ordered the discontinuance of the whole scheme, which afterwards was not proceeded with.

The whole work, also that of the Wollongong harbour, was carried out by convict labor, so far as the workmen were concerned.

—Illawarra Mercury, 18 February 1899.