SURVEYORS, SETTLERS AND LAND GRANTS
IN ILLAWARRA 1815--1816

INTRODUCTION

My interest in this topic was initiated by a letter to the Lord Mayor of Wollongong which he referred to the Heritage Advisory Committee in November 1999.

This letter, from the Port Kembla Advisory Committee No. 9, requested that the plaque marking the location of Throsby's stockman's hut be returned to its "rightful place" at Port Kembla.

On investigation, I found that this argument had been contested twice before: once in 1954 when the plaque was placed at the corner of Smith and Harbour Streets, Wollongong; and again when it re-surfaced in 1978.

When the Port Kembla letter to the Lord Mayor was referred to the Heritage Advisory Committee, I was the first to object. Hence I felt it incumbent on me, especially as the representative of the Illawarra Historical Society, to marshall all the available evidence and finally convince Port Kembla that the plaque really belongs where it is. Here is the evidence in chronological order, with quotes in italics followed by my own comments in plain type:

1. **From Sydney Gazette, 18 March, 1815:**

   "A considerable extent of fine grazing ground is described by late travellers to be about the Five Islands; to which, however, it would be thoroughly impracticable to convey cattle by land."  
   [McDonald, W G, Earliest Illawarra, p. 28.]

2. **The Stockman’s Hut.** From Charles Throsby Smith’s reminiscences.

   "In the year 1815, the County of Cumberland was suffering from the effects of a drought....and the cattle were dying daily from want of food and water. My late uncle, Dr Throsby, was then residing at a place called Glenfield, a few miles south of Liverpool, and ....in one of his rambles around Liverpool met some of the aborigines who told him there was plenty of grass and water at the Five Islands". Having cut a track from Appin to the foot of the mountain, Throsby verified the presence of water and grass, whereupon he lost no time in bringing a mob of cattle to a location now known as Wollongong where "a stockyard was erected for them near the site of the present Roman Catholic school-house, while a hut was erected for the stockmen near the corner of Smith Street."
From Charles Throsby Smith’s *Reminiscences of Forty-two Years' Residence in Illawarra*, an address he delivered c. 1863. Later published in amended form in *Illawarra Mercury* 3/10/1876

There is no doubt that Dr Charles Throsby was the first to occupy land in Illawarra or where his hut and stockyard were placed. Throsby’s nephew, Charles Throsby Smith, had first-hand experience of these locations as he helped move Throsby’s cattle to Bong Bong in 1820. The hut and the stockyard were situated close to the fresh-water lagoon which disappeared under Wollongong’s Lang Park after World War II. Throsby could well have been influenced by the report in the Sydney Gazette of 18 March, quoted in 1 above.


3. Lieut Parker’s report on military excursion to Five Islands April - May, 1816:

    On the 25th I could only take McCudden’s cart as far as King’s Falls a distance of about three miles. I procured an additional horse from Mr Kennedy’s, and arrived that same evening at the Hut of Mr Throsby’s Stockman (at Wollongong) where I halted for the night, and on the morning of the 26th reached the long Point (Red Point), about six miles south of the Hut and as that was the Ground I was to occupy I gave directions for building the Huts and had them constructed before night. [The words in brackets were inserted by the Editor to explain location in today's terms]

    On the 27th, being in expectation of you joining me & having a small allowance of salt provisions, I ordered a bullock belonging to Mr Cribb to be kill’d and served out to the men and a small allowance of Biscuit at four each day per Man.

Organ, M, Ed: *Illawarra & South Coast Aborigines 1770 - 1850*, Wollongong University, 1990, p. 79.

This report suggests that Mr Cribb was running cattle at Hill 60 in April, 1816. Michael Organ in his footnotes to Charles Throsby Smith’s *Reminiscences*, published in the Illawarra Historical Society’s Bulletin in June and July 1990, mentions that men like Charcoal Will and George Cribb were overseers on early grants, and so were actually the first residents on these grants. In view of this it seems likely that Cribb was already in the Hill 60 area (Port Kembla) as stockman/overseer for David Allan. Cribb later took up his own land in the Figtree
The presence of cattle in Aboriginal territory suggests that Allan already had a stockyard as early as April 1816. Later, Surveyor Meehan used this stockyard as a reference point.

Meehan, J: Field Book No. 119, 8 December 1816.


This illustration shows “Location in 1816 of Mr Throsby’s Stockman’s Hut by J. Meehan’s Field Book 119 and plan 1.163 at Wollongong.” All angles and distances can be followed exactly from the figures given in the field book, and we will learn later that Meehan called the headland Throsby’s Point.


5. Governor Macquarie in Government and General Orders, 28.9.1816.

The natives of the new stock settlement at the Five Islands are described as being very amicably disposed towards us and the general mildness of their manners to differ considerably from the other tribes known to us. Several gentlemen have removed their cattle thither, as the neighbourhood affords good pasturage; and it is to be anxiously hoped that the stockmen in charge of their herds may be able to maintain the friendly footing that at present exists with them.

This provides clear evidence that by September 1816 Charles Throsby (or at least his stockman) had neighbours not far away. It seems logical that they would have brought their cattle down the same mountain track as Throsby used, and passed through Throsby’s holding on their way. On both of his trips to Illawarra that year, Meehan used Throsby’s route.

6. Governor Macquarie’s notice in Sydney Gazette, 16/11/1816 re promised grants

Those Gentlemen and Free Settlers who have lately obtained His Excellency the Governor’s Promise of Grants of Lands, in the new District of Illawarra, or Five Islands, are hereby informed, that the Surveyor General and his Deputy have received His Excellency the Governor’s Instructions to proceed thither in the Course of the ensuing Week, to make a regular Survey of the said District, and to locate the several promised Grants. And in order that the Location may be made accordingly, those Persons who have obtained Promises of Allotments are
hereby required to avail themselves of the approaching Occasion of the Surveyors being on Duty in Illawarra, to get their Locations marked out to them; and for this Purpose they are required to meet the Surveyor General at the Hut of Mr. Throsby’s Stockman, in Illawarra or the Five Islands District, at the Hour of Twelve at Noon, on Monday the 2d Day of December next; at which time he is to commence on locating the Lands, agreeably to the Instructions with which he will be officially furnished previous thereto.

By Command of His Excellency,
J. T. Campbell, Secretary.


7. Macquarie’s instructions to Surveyor-General Oxley, 16/11/1816, re meeting at Mr Throsby’s hut.

These instructions are quite lengthy, beginning with orders to make a general survey to cover the area as well as to connect it to known parts of the colony. The final two paragraphs refer specifically to two of the prospective grantees:

“The Governor has no objection to Mr Depy. Cy. Gen’l. Allen (sic) receiving the exact equivalent in Illawarra for those Lands he now possesses in Upper Minto, or Airds (2200 acres) or to his getting them in the situation He is desirous of obtaining them in........and....On similar terms and under the like restrictions the Governor has no objection to the Lands promised to George Johnston Esqre. Senr. being located for him at or near the Macquarie River on its Western side in the said District of Illawarra.” [Ibid pp 30-31]

8. B T Dowd’s account of grants and map of first five land grants in 1817.

Inside the cover of Dowd’s book, one finds a map of the first five land grants:

I. Richard Brooks, Exmouth, 1300 acres, (Mount Brown, Koonawarra, Tallawarra.)

II. George Johnston, Macquarie Gift, 1500 acres, NW of Macquarie River, (now Rivulet)

III. Andrew Allan, Waterloo, 700 acres SW of Macquarie River, (Albion Park area.)
IV. Robert Jenkins, *Berkeley*, 1000 acres, (Allan’s Creek to Lake Illawarra.)

V. David Allan, *Illawarra Farm*, 2200 acres, (Allan’s Creek, Lake Illawarra, Red Point.)


9. **James Meehan’s Field Book No. 119.**

Having looked at all available printed evidence, there remains only the primary sources of Assistant Surveyor General James Meehan’s records from which to expect further enlightenment. Fortunately our own City Council Library has a photostat copy of portion of Meehan’s Field Book No 119 which contains his notes on the Illawarra surveys. Although Dowd must have gained access to Meehan’s maps, both the NSW State Archives and Mitchell Library now deny all knowledge of them, so that source appears to be no longer available.

10. **Meehan’s first visit, June 1816.**

10.1 Having arrived at *The Stockyard of Mr. Throsby* on Sunday 17 June, 1816, James Meehan spent two days surveying the coast, evidently northward, before working back to Throsby’s hut.

10.2 Starting from Throsby’s hut on Saturday June 23 after being *Confined by bad weather* for several days, he surveys what we now know as Wollongong Head or Flagstaff Point, as shown in the map opposite page 1 of Dowd’s book. From there he works southward as far as the entrance to a lagoon to which he erroneously awards the appellation of *Tom Thumb’s Lagoon*. Not having access to Flinders’ journal as historians had later, he supposes it to be the place where Bass and Flinders landed in the Tom Thumb. [*Earliest Illawarra*, p 16, note 9] Frustrated in his attempt to survey the lagoon, Meehan *left off chaining, being a mere swamp*, and presumably returned to Throsby’s hut where he was confined again by bad weather.

10.3 On Wednesday 26 June, Meehan gets a break between showers for long enough to to use his sextant to take a sight of his position, presumably from his usual mark at the NE corner of Throsby’s hut:

MADC 3°. 54’ .10” E 34 . 24 . 41’4 So.
Checking these readings in two ways, first of all with a Global Positioning Satellite unit (GPS) and then from a large-scale map of Wollongong, the following readings were obtained:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Longitude (E)</th>
<th>Latitude (S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meehan from Hut</td>
<td>MADC 3°.54&quot;.10&quot;</td>
<td>34°.24.41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPS from Plaque</td>
<td>150°.54'.08&quot;</td>
<td>34°.25.27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map from Plaque</td>
<td>150°.54'.10&quot; (av)</td>
<td>34°.25.35 (av)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPS from Hinton St</td>
<td>150°.54'.10&quot;</td>
<td>34°.25.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20m E of Fig Tree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill 60 from Map</td>
<td>150°.55.6</td>
<td>34°.29.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(for comparison)

**Comparative distances calculated from Map** (Approximate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latitude &amp; Longitude at 34° S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1° S = 112km approx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1° E = 92km approx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1' S = 1.86km = 1860m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1' E = 1.53km = 1530m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1&quot; S = 1860/60 = 31m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1&quot; E = 1530 / 60 = 25.5m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1&quot; = 3.1m *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1&quot; = 2.55m *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A glance at a globe will show that as latitude approaches the pole, distance between meridians decreases, hence the difference between these two sets of measurements.*

Using these figures to compare Meehan’s measurements with the GPS reading from Hinton St, they indicate that the spot marked X should be approximately 12 metres north of that spot in Hinton St, which places in somebody’s unit in the block called Harbour Lights, always bearing mind that the GPS units are made deliberately a few metres off line by the Americans who perfected the system, just in case Saddam Hussein or one of his ilk should want to use one.

Using the same measurements, it is calculated from the map that Hill 60 is almost 8 km S and 1.2 Km E of the hut, or 5 miles x ¾ mile approx.
10.4 On Thursday 27 June he resumes the survey, reaches the south side of Tom Thumb’s Lagoon and later in the day ascends to the Top of the Hill over the Five Islands Point, from which he takes many bearings before working his way down to Port Kembla beach to finish the day.

10.5 **Bearings from Five Islands Point.**

Without access to Meehan’s maps, the two most readily identifiable points in Meehan’s field book are Throsby’s hut and Five Islands Point, now known to us as Hill 60, a steep ascent to the top of the hill over the Five Islands Point from which Meehan recorded bearings on 27 June 1816. Here are some of the most convincing samples to confirm the location:

- **Throsby’s Point**  \( N 12\frac{1}{4} W \) (i.e. Wollongong Head)
- **Highest part of Centre of Hat Hill**  \( W 19 N \) (Mount Kembla)
- **Extreme of Five Isl’d point**  \( E 19 \frac{1}{3} S \)
- **Line of bearing of the So Pt of the three Isl’ds off the Pt**  \( E 3 2/3 S \)
- **Centre of E Isl’d**  \( N 34 1/3 E \)
- **Wt Isl’d**  \( N 9 E \)
- **So. Extreme of Land**  \( S 3° E \) (Tip of Bass Point)

East’n Extreme of a small Is’d off the Entrance into Alowrie S 18° W (Windang Is.)

All of these have been checked from Hill 60, as well as can be done with a hand-held prismatic compass on a windy day.

This proves that Meehan was indeed on Hill 60, overlooking James Cook’s Red Point, on Thursday 27 June, 1816, and that he referred to Wollongong Head as THROSBY’S POINT. Although this should settle the argument about the correct location of Throsby’s hut, let us press on with the field book.

The entry for Friday 28 June reads: *Detained for want of Provisions, sent in two men to procure some, and enquire why Crow who was dispatched a week ago has not returned.* Unknown to Meehan, Oxley had appeared on the scene and on Thursday had marked a Honey Suckle Tree somewhere near Allan’s Creek. Whether he received the provisions or not, Meehan was withdrawn for duty elsewhere.
11. Meehan's Second Visit, November - December 1816

11.1 Meehan did not return to Illawarra until November 27 to begin work on Thursday 28th November 1816, presumably sent by Oxley in execution of Macquarie's orders of 16 November. The starting point this time was From the Honey Suckle Tree marked by Mr Oxley on Thursday 27th June 1816. From this tree, Meehan chained $S 24^\circ + E 38.9$ (38.9 chains) to a block on the beach on the North side of a Salt Creek, the entrance to which is at present stopped with Sand, overflown at HW (High Water). Was this the Salt Creek of later times, now overgrown by the steelworks?

From the honeysuckle (Banksia) tree, Meehan and his party worked their way south towards the entrance to Lake Illawarra. Later that day, he and his party crossed the River or Lagoon entrance of Allowrie (note double L this time) which we were able to wade over between 4 to 5 feet water, and slept on the side of a fresh water Lagoon ab. ¼ mile in shore, presumably Little Lake.

11.2 This Allowrie was of course the entrance to Lake Illawarra, or what Bass called the Canoe River, so this may be an appropriate place to examine Port Kembla's claim that Throsby's hut was at Port Kembla, or more specifically, near Coomaditchy Lagoon.

Part of the "evidence" for this was an interpretation of Lieutenant Parker's report of a military excursion to Hill 60 in late May of 1816. Parker, visiting the place for the first time, probably with the aid of native guides, called it the long Point which some Port Kembla people have construed as Bass Point which has long had the alternative name of Long Point, as evidenced in Bob West's My Port Kembla, [IHS, 1999] (See extract from Parker's report in section 3 above)

Parker could not be expected to know the details of Bass's journal, any more than Meehan could when he mistakenly named Tom Thumb's Lagoon.

One Port Kembla argument is that if Throsby's hut was at Port Kembla, then it is only six miles to Bass Point. As stated earlier, this completely ignores the barrier presented to this military contingent by the waters of Bass and Flinders' canoe river, which caused Meehan some difficulty in reaching the southern side of Lake Illawarra. After all, the Windang bridge wasn't opened until 1938! And had Parker and his troop crossed the canoe river it must certainly have warranted reference in his report.

Supporters of the above claim also infer that Parker and his troop actually built a stockade. Parker's own report says that their Huts were erected that day after they had ridden six miles through trackless country. The accommodation the
troop required was only temporary, as they were not establishing a presence there, only looking (without success) for known troublesome aborigines. As they left on 1 May, their stay was limited to five nights, hence they had no reason to build a stockade.

11.3 For the next three days, Friday 29 November to Sunday 1 December, Meehan continues his general survey, filling numerous pages with numbers and hieroglyphics, but indicating few points that are readily recognizable. On Friday 29th he mentions the *S. Head of Allowrie* and takes bearings on to an island which is obviously Windang Island. There is also reference to a saltwater river and a mangrove swamp. After lengthy records on Saturday he has worked around the lake to a river, presumably Macquarie River, and spends the night at a hut not far from the mouth of a creek which flows into the river.

On Sunday he is obviously working along the river bank, with mention of oaks, cabbage trees and gums which seem to confirm that he is in the general area of Albion Park. The survey party returns that night to the same hut. As the only stream Meehan ever calls a river is the Macquarie, the presence of a hut seems to suggest another settler in the area, either George Johnston or Andrew Allan, as their lands shared a common frontage to Macquarie river.

11.4 Survey of Grants

Next day, Monday 2 December 1816, the day of the historic meeting between the settlers and Surveyor-General Oxley, Meehan begins his survey of the first of the five grants, starting *from the corner of Captain Brooks’s Hut in the District of Illawarra*, which provides definite evidence of another hut in the area. There appear to be no entries for December 3 & 4, but on Thurs 5th he starts out from Brooks’s hut again, presumably having completed that survey and maybe having a couple of days rest. (Or is there a page or two out of sequence in the Library copy? Or was Meehan a day out with his dates and did attend the meeting at Throsby’s hut?)

That Thursday he works his way back to the bank of the river, on the way mentioning *the junction of two drains forming the one past Brooks’s House*, which raises the question that Brooks may have a house as well as a hut. Elsewhere he makes reference to *Brooks’s Farm* which hints that Brooks may already be clearing and cultivating, which could make him the first genuine farmer in Illawarra, albeit very much a gentleman farmer.

That same day he picks up his old trail *at the stringy bark tree where left off Sunday Evening* and evidently camps back at the hut by the river, ready to survey George Johnston’s grant next day.
On Friday 6 December he starts From an Oak Tree on the North Bank of the Creek and Macquarie River.....to survey.......1500 Acres for George Johnston Esq’r to be called Macquarie Gift.

On Saturday 7/12/1816 he begins another survey, this time from the mouth of the Small Creek falling into the Macquarie River in the District of Illawarra on the South side of that River....700 acres for Mr And’w Allan (who, incidentally is David Allan’s son, not his brother as is sometimes assumed). For this survey, being a simple rectangle with a river frontage, he gave such clear figures that yours truly was able to follow them and draw the diagram.

Next day (evidently Sunday is all the same to surveyors) Meehan is back at Oxley’s honeysuckle tree where he began on Thursday 28/11/1816, from which he chains W 2¾ S 6.80 to the South Corner of Mr Allan’s Stockyard. If only we could locate that honey-suckle tree!! That would really deserve a plaque.!! But this does tell us that David Allan had a stockyard, helping to confirm Lieut. Parker’s purchase of a bullock from Mr Cribb back at the end of April. It may also be noted that this stockyard is only 6.8 chains from the honeysuckle tree.

During the survey Meehan mentions the line for Mr. Rob’t Jenkins and concludes with to the Illawarra Lake, 2200 acres for David Allan Esq’r. Here we note an evolution in spelling since June, from Allowra to Alowrie to Allowrie and now Illawarra.

On Monday 9/12/1816 Meehan proceeds to lay out 1000 acres for Robert Jenkins, joining David Allan’s property on its western boundary along a common line reaching all the way from Allan’s Creek to Lake Illawarra. During this survey, readings are taken on Hat Hill and False Hat Hill, the latter presumably referring to Mount Keira. Earlier, Meehan makes references to Mount Throsby, which was mentioned also by Macquarie on his visit in 1822. Bill McDonald comments: Mr Dowd thinks this was probably Marshall Mount, possibly based on Macquarie’s statement in 1822: from Colonel Johnston’s farm...we continued in a westerly direction to Mount Throsby. [Earliest Illawarra p 38] However the writer has not been able to reconcile this with some of the bearings given. Meehan quotes bearings taken by David Allan from Mount Throsby, but these indicate a point somewhere to the south of Albion Park.

12. Summary of Meehan’s Surveys.
From Meehan’s field book a number of points emerge quite clearly:

1. Both Oxley and Meehan were in Illawarra at least five months before the allocation of grants.
2. Although Meehan misnamed *Tom Thumb's Lagoon*, he did positively identify *Throsby's Point* which we now know as Wollongong Head or Flagstaff Hill, leaving no doubt about the location of Throsby's hut.

3. We have to re-think the location of David Allan's stockyard. Instead of being close to Coomaditchy Lagoon it must have been quite close to Allan's Creek, only 6.8 chains from the honeysuckle tree. Would the hut have been nearby?

4. Meehan completed measuring the five grants within a week of the historic meeting, no doubt helped by his earlier general surveys.

5. Several of these grantees were already in possession. These five gentlemen had all selected the land they wanted and there is evidence of considerable occupation before survey, especially by Richard Brooks and David Allan. The meeting at Throsby's hut was Macquarie's way of bestowing official sanction on what had already happened. In effect, it opened up the valuable lands of Illawarra for further grants.

13. **Conclusion**

The evidence already provided by B T Dowd in *The First Five Land Grantees* and W G McDonald in *Earliest Illawarra*, supplemented by Michael Organ's copy of Lieutenant Parker's report and Charles Throsby Smith's memoirs, constitute a large body of compelling evidence. When this evidence is combined with the information gleaned from Meehan's field book, there can no longer be any question about the location of Throsby's hut. We also have a clearer picture of the sequence of events in Illawarra during the years 1815-1816, although there is still some doubt about the locations of David Allan's hut and Mount Throsby.

14. **POSTSCRIPT**

14.1 The five grants were issued in the following month, January 1817, yet another example of Governor Macquarie's efficient administration. Strangely, Throsby did not apply for a grant, being content to remain in occupation for 5 years before moving his cattle to Bong Bong.

According to Dowd, Andrew Allan sold his farm "Waterloo" to Terry in the early to mid 1820s; David Johnston kept in close touch with his property until his death in 1866; George Johnston's "Macquarie Gift" remained as part of Johnston's Meadows until auctioned in 1876; Richard Brooks' "Exmouth" was gobbled up by
Henry Osborne in the 1830s; and David Allan left the colony in 1819 but “Illawarra Farm” was not sold until 1827, the buyer being Richard Jones who in turn sold it to William Charles Wentworth in 1828. [Dowd: The First Five Land Grantees, pp 2-14]

14.2. PPS

At a meeting with the Heritage Officer on 16th March, 2000, representatives of Port Kembla Neighbourhood Committee No 9 conceded that Throsby's hut is in exactly the right place: their surveyor said so!!

15. Meehan’s Third Visit, 1819

Almost two years later, on 1 October, 1819, Meehan was back in the Albion Park area, starting at the SE corner of And’w Allan’s farm to survey a large tract of land for Mr Terry:

Mr Terry wishing to take only 1200 acres Viz. 700 for himself and 500 for Mr Hobby - is to be marked from And’w Allan’s SE corner.--- S 35 E 80, * then W 35 S 102, and N 35 W to the River and And’w Allan’s farm bearing S 40 E and E 40 N 48 to the first corner. * To translate, S 35 E 80 means South 35° East for 80 chains.

Mr Terry is to have 800 acres added on the SW side in the name of Mr Cordeaux having exchanged Land with him, and to have one grant for 2000 acres in his own name with only a marginal note to explain the conditions whereby it was procured. How much of that was surveyed on Friday is not certain, but next day he is marking out 600 acres for David Johnston, son of George Johnston: From the two marked oak trees near the small meadow on the SW side of Col. Johnston’s Macquarie Gift Farm - along his line...... Here followed measurements as for Terry’s 1200 acres above.

Thus a huge area known as Terry’s Meadows had its beginning.

SURVEYORS

What type of men were these surveyors in the early years of settlement? The very nature of the work meant that they could not do it by themselves, but Meehan gives few clues about his team, using broad terms about the men, but only naming one of them - Crow - who had been sent for supplies a week ago and has not returned.

[Meehan’s Field Book 119, 28.6.1816]
As late as 1841 when Francis Peter MacCabe arrived in Australia as an assistant-surveyor, straight from Dublin, within three weeks he was dispatched to the Snowy Mountains in charge of a party consisting of another assistant surveyor, a draughtsman and nineteen convicts. His letter back to Surveyor General Mitchell revealed continued complaints about lack of supplies of clothing as well as other items, with men working half naked in freezing temperatures. [Michael MacCabe in IHS Bulletin, August 1992, p 75] In brief, officialdom was not providing the necessary backing to men in the field, just the same as in Meehan's day.

James Meehan, whose field book we have been investigating, was born in Ireland in 1774. By taking a minor part in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 he obtained a free passage to Australia.¹ He arrived at Sydney aboard the Friendship on 16 February 1800 after a very slow passage of 176 days, during which 19 of 133 prisoners died, one in every seven.²

On arrival, Meehan began as servant to Surveyor-Generals Grimes and later Evans who both found they could entrust him with their survey work. From 1901 onwards he was engaged with exploration parties, visiting places like Hunter River, King Island, Port Phillip and Van Diemen’s Land. In the latter, he explored the Derwent and laid out Hobart Town He obtained his absolute pardon in 1806 and was appointed by Colonel Johnston as acting surveyor of lands, which office was confirmed by Macquarie in 1812 under surveyor-general Oxley. In 1814 Meehan became collector of quitrents and superintendent of roads, bridges and streets, which was quite appropriate considering that he had laid out many of the colony’s towns. In 1820 Meehan told Commissioner Bigge: “I have measured every farm that has been measured since 1803.”³ His superior officers were loud in their praise of his skill and attention to duty, and Macquarie summed it up: I have...had an opportunity of witnessing his indefatigable assiduity in the fulfilment of his arduous duties. I believe that no man has suffered so much privation and fatigue in the service of this Colony as this man has done.⁴

As reward for his labours, Meehan received various land grants, beginning with 100 acres in 1803 and finishing with 2020 acres at Ingleburn which he named Macquarie Fields, crowned by what Macquarie called Castle Meehan. Somewhat broken in health, as indicated in Macquarie’s tribute above, he attempted to retire in 1821, but was not freed from his duties until 1823 and died in 1826. Although he began life in Australia as a political prisoner, he finished as a highly respected land-owning gentleman, drawing a government pension of 100 pounds per year.

1 Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1788 - 1850, p 219
2 Bateson, C: The Convict Ships, p 159.
3 Australian Dictionaryof Biography 1788 - 1850, p 220
4 Ibid.
So this is a glimpse of the man who measured Illawarra’s first land grants. He was certainly true to his reputation when he marked out all five grants in seven days. One must also consider the nature of the work, using his theodolite to sight the next target in the line, following the chainmen as they measured the distance, uphill and down dale, carrying the theodolite to the next sighting point, levelling and aligning it again; working through mostly unexplored country, lots of it heavily timbered; living roughly in bush camps, seldom sleeping in a bed, experiencing all kinds of weather, fording rivers etc. No four-wheel drives or GPS systems in Meehan’s day, just sexton and theodolite, saddle-horses and pack-horses, most likely a tarpaulin for shelter. Never a murmur in his field book, except when left without supplies or when a horse lay down and crushed the bread.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a surveyor like Carl Weber had it slightly better with horse, sulky and tent when he surveyed routes like the coast road from Clifton to Stanwell Park, the top section of Macquarie Pass, the deviations at the top section of Mount Kembla Road and the first Look-Out at Bulli Pass. He even enjoyed a fixed camp for some time while taking soundings of Lake Illawarra for the harbour that never eventuated.

These men had all served their time as virtual explorers, working in the forefront of the spread of settlement. MacCabe for instance was one of the first in the Snowy Mountains and in the Gladstone/Calliope River district of Queensland. Meehan had been with early exploration parties in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. Weber, surveyor, engineer, photographer, was associated with the initial survey of the Sydney water supply at the back of the mountains and as Government Road Superintendent had charge of the district from Sydney to Moruya before entering private practice at Wollongong. All were tough, resourceful and adventurous men who contributed a great deal to the development of Australia as we know it today.

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5 Photo PO2885 C D Rom, Wollongong City Library.
6 Illawarra Mercury, 13.4.1923