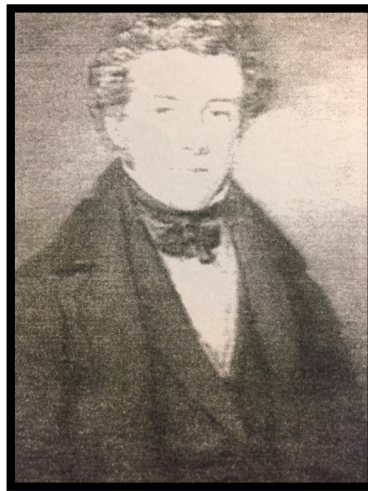## Pick Volume 3.13

The Blaxlands and the Wollombi

Carl Hoipo

Blaxlands Arm and the Parish of Blaxland are names associated with the Wollombi from early times. However the Parish Map does not show any of the Blaxlands as landowners in that area. What is the story behind this? (1)

John Blaxland arrived in the Colony in 1807, aged 38, in a 252 ton ship, *The Brothers*, loaded with goods to sell in New South Wales. He jointly owned these goods with a London merchant company. He was a younger brother of Gregory, who explored the Blue Mountains. He was granted land between Parramatta Road and the River, which he called *Newington* and later acquired a second large property, *Luddenham* (2).

John's first wife, Sarah, died in childbirth and he married a second time to Harriott, daughter of Jean Louis De Marquet of Calcutta. They had five children by the time they arrived in Sydney, the eldest being John de Marquet Blaxland who was born in 1801.

John de Marquet Blaxland may have been the first white settler to arrive on the Wollombi. In 1821, Major Morrisett, Commandant at Newcastle, reported that he had lost 12 convicts who had escaped along a route which had been marked with blazed trees by Blaxland (3). This route started from the

western side of the Hawkesbury at Kurrajong, followed Blaxland Ridge Road, crossed the Colo River, the headwaters of Webbs Creek, the Macdonald River, passed Burragurra, then through Blaxlands Arm to Laguna. A survey of Blaxlands Arm by Peter Ogilvie in 1833 shows that part of it clearly. During his survey work around Warrawalong in 1829, Major Thomas Mitchell noted that he came across a line of blazed trees on a ridge at the head of Watagan Creek (4). These are likely to have been part of the route. If Blaxland was originally working on compass headings for Newcastle but looking for the easiest route and followed the South Arm of the Wollombi from Blaxlands Arm to Watagan Creek, then up it and over the ridge to Congewai, on past Ellalong, and around the north end of the Sugarloaf Range to Newcastle, this would probably be a rough description of the route. (Ian Webb raises the possibility of some of the other early surveyors marking these trees). Ray Crump advises that the year 1819 is chiselled into rock in Watagan. This man relate to Blaxland's first trip.

This route was sometimes referred to as the Parson's Road as it was used by the Rev. G. A. Middleton to reach Newcastle. Someone took 173 head of cattle to Newcastle at the same time. But the western and central part was more generally known as Blaxland's Track. Major Morrisett was transferred from Newcastle to Bathurst and the Sydney Gazette on 1ˢᵗ May 1823 reported that he used Blaxland's route. It took him 9 days to reach Windsor and the distance was 109 miles. It is likely that his party travelled by foot. It is noted that due to the rugged country inland, communication with Hunter's River would be very difficult. This route was in use until about 1830 when the Great North Road from Wisemans Ferry became useable but was never more than a bridle trail and droving route.

Severe drought in 1822 lead the Blaxland, Milson and Murray families to drive a combined herd of cattle into the Wollombi. This story will be dealt with as a separate article but briefly, they used the areas now known as Murrays Run, Blaxlands Arm and Milsons Arm to save their stock (5). A part of Blaxland's track was used to link Laguna with St Albans through Blaxlands Arm, past Burragurra and down to the St Albans Common. This was the quickest route until the Mogo Creek route was developed in 1847. Going via the Great North Road meant going past St Albans and then back again through Shepherds Gully. David Dunlop used the Blaxlands Track route to first visit Wollombi in 1840. A *Maitland Mercury* article dated 25.10.1846 described

> *…. Is for nearly its whole length what is commonly known as a 'bush road', on which the traveller has to encounter several abrupt or rather precipitous elevations, impassable to any sort of wheeled vehicle, and where, without a guide, if unacquainted with all the intricate turnings of the mountain passes, he may be left in a state of bewilderment, which, to say nothing about minor evils, may end, in such a lonely mountainous region, in rather awkward consequences.*

John de Marquet Blaxland was rewarded by the Governor for his efforts in finding the route to Newcastle with a square mile of land. But he decided that he preferred the Broke area, lower on the Wollombi to Blaxlands Arm, so made his selection there and called it *Fordwych* after the family home in Kent. He also acquired 40 acres at Paynes Crossing (6). In 1825 Allan Cunningham, on his expedition to the north, stopped at Blaxland's "extensive sheep farm". He had taken 13 days to travel 100 miles from Richmond to *Fordwych*. By 1829 Blaxland's neighbour was John Tremaine Rodd who had been a surveyor and Superintendent of Works at Newcastle. His son Robert Adamson Rodd went on to be a Magistrate and first President of Wollombi's Council, formed in 1844, and later was the owner of the Minimbah property near Singleton (7).

By 1831, Blaxland had a salt store in Maitland supplied from his own salt pans at Newcastle. In that year he was involved in a court case for refusing to pay toll at the bridge at Maitland. He was quite blatant in forcing his way through for his wagons. John Daly wrote to William Dumaresq-

> *On Saturday the 17th John Blaxland junior repeated his custom of forcing his way over the bridge and pulling the gates open. While I was attempting to stop his men from hooking the bullocks on, he spurred his horse to make him tramp my guts out. I escaped by climbing on to the gate, when he backed his horse, spurring him and saying he would make him kick my brains out. There was a constable present named Moran in company with Mr T. Nowlan, Mr W. Dunn, the Coroner and others. While we were contending my wife came to my assistance. Blaxland turned his horse around to ride over her. She got over the fence while I locked the gate, but Blaxland's men very soon broke it open. There was a great crowd of people who laughed very hearty. Mr Blaxland's teams were well loaded with passengers from the steamer. I went to Captain Anley and told him about Mr Blaxland's trying to ride his horse on us. He said he could not interfere until the case could be decided in a court of law. Mr Blaxland thought he had a right to do so, therefore he did not think it was an offence until decided by law.*

Wollombi's first tourist was the Austrian, Baron Charles von Hugel, who was extremely interested in Australian native plants. He passed through in 1834. His New Holland Journal was recently translated by Dymphna Clark:-

> *Wolombey, one of Mr. Blaxland's properties, takes its name from the brook of the same name which flows into the Hunter. I had a letter from the Blaxland family to John, the eldest son, who lives here. He received me in a very friendly fashion and, as it was not yet too late, I suggested a walk into the valley which extends for a mile in front of the house and to mountains which rose beyond. This walk, tiring as it was, brought me many new specimens. Particularly magnificent was the treelike shrub, Bursaria, with its flowering branches, dazzling white, reaching up many feet into the air… there is deep, fertile soil in the valley, but it would be difficult to imagine anything more dry and arid than the mountains. Mr. John Blaxland was planning to go to Gammon and Liverpool Plains the following week, where there are two stations belonging to his father, but he agreed with me that the weather looked certain to lead to severe flooding. He could only advise me to continue on my way as quickly as possible, as my time was too limited to wait for the flood to subside… the road, that is to say, the route of the road, runs straight through the forest. In fact we left the tracks of wagons that had previously come the same way, in order to make a bee-line for the entrance to the range, which could be distinguished by a high round summit. This is all open forest country, with nothing to stop you riding as fast as you like in any direction until you reach the mountain range. John Blaxland accompanied me for 6-8 miles…*

By 1838 he had expanded Fordwych to 12,800 acres. It bounded the village of Broke on the north and eastern sides. John de Marquet Blaxland never married and died in 1840 aged 39. At Fordwych, his successor developed a boiling down works in 1844 to convert surplus sheep and cattle into tallow. In that year, 389 cattle and 2,489 sheep were processed yielding just over 50 tons (8). Until canning and refrigerated shipping were developed later in the century, the supply of meat far exceeded local demand. Exporting salted meat was tried, but without much success. Other members of the Blaxland family continued to live on the property until the 1920s, and there were several marriages between the Blaxland and Rodd families (9). The use of the place name Wollombi has

meant various things over time. In the 1820s it referred to the complete catchment area of the Wollombi Brook right down to the Hunter, and was often referred to as "The Wollombi". There is a Parish of Wollombi, which contains the Fordwych area, just north of Broke, a considerable distance from Wollombi township. In recent times, it refers to the area upstream of Payne's Crossing to Millfield, plus the South Arm.

Cockfighter's Creek is another ambiguous term. It was widely used for the stream form Wollombi township to the Hunter, but I have not found any maps that use the term at all. The official maps have shown it as Wollombi Brook.

1. Lands Dept. Map, Parish of Blaxland, County of Northumberland
2. Australian Dictionary of Biography
3. Dawn in the Valley by Alan Wood
4. Major Mitchell's Field Book, July 1829
5. Wollombi Pub by Wollombi Progress Association
6. Parish of Yango map
7. Australian Dictionary of Biography; Maitland Mercury, various articles 1843/4
8. Maitland Mercury annual report on Hunter exports, 1844
9. Fordwych Cemetery headstones