



THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

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Bushwalkers on the Great North Road Greg Powell



Bushwalking on the Sandstone ridges. (Photo: G. Powell)

My first bushwalk along part of the Great North Road was in Easter 1969, when Keith Clouten's book "Reid's Mistake" – a history of Lake Macquarie, inspired me and a Kotara Scouting friend to retrace the route of Simpson's Track from Wiseman's Ferry to Cooranbong. At that time, the Ghost House on Mangrove Creek was still being lived in and the high level house at their weir site was still standing. That four day trip started a long association with this wonderful historic road, as a bushwalking and exploration venue.

In November 1972, nine members of Kotara Scout Group, surveyed the section between Wiseman's Ferry and Ten Mile Hollow, measuring walls and counting culverts. This survey was carried out on the request of the Northern Parks and Playgrounds Movement in Newcastle, with the view to having the road included in Dharug National Park. We drove a beach buggy along the road on that weekend to carry our gear and camped at Ten Mile Hollow. We counted 35 drains under the road, most were on Devine's Hill. We discovered what we thought to be many broken pick heads, but they turned out to be metal insulator holders from the recently removed pole line.

In August 1973, under the direction of Selby Alley, we surprised a large National Trust field party



excursion by providing a re-enactment at the high retaining walls on Devine's Hill. As the party rounded a bend, the members were confronted with convicts hauling blocks with tripods and rope tackle, military guards on the cliffs above the surveyors going about their work with a 90 year old antique theodolite. This re-enactment was once again carried out by Kotara Venturer Scouts. On this weekend we camped at the stockade site behind the Hanging Rock.

It was on this day that I met John Luff, who had carried out extensive field work on the road. He showed us many interesting things, as well as using the names "Devine's Hill" and Clare's Bridge".

This was the first time I had heard these names. I had not come across them on any maps or in any other source. I published some articles on the Road in various publications soon after and used these two names. They came into common usage and are of course used today. Perhaps that National Trust Field Day in 1973 gave birth to these two names.

The Ghost House on Mangrove Creek was a popular base for bushwalks. We would spend many weekends doing maintenance on the old house and removing other people's rubbish. It became a venue for the film "Inn of the Damned" released in 1975. We camped in the house many times and on one memorable night the house lived up to its name and we encountered strange lights that we still cannot explain. A few years later the house was sadly burnt down. The stone remains can still be seen on the grassy flat beside Simpson's Track before reaching the weir.

The road was becoming more and more popular as a venue for short or long bushwalks. It was handy to Sydney and Newcastle and bushwalking and conservation groups started programming many walks along the route. A standard two day walk would start at Wiseman's Ferry and finish at Mangrove Creek weir, with an overnight camp at Ten Mile Hollow. A longer walk of three or four days could cover the whole of the route from Wiseman's Ferry to Bucketty with time for taking in the scenic and historic sites. Joan Robinson from the Newcastle Ramblers Bushwalking Club led many walks in the area and knows the region as well as anyone. Through her, many young Duke of Edinburgh Award trainees became familiar with the road as an expedition area.

The Scout Association in Newcastle also uses the road as a training area for leaders. A classic weekend walk for novice leaders would begin at the Mangrove Creek weir and continue up to Ten Mile Hollow, taking in the falls and the sandstone cave along the way. Clare's Bridge would create interest on an afternoon ramble before settling down around the campfire at night. On the second day, the party would walk up to the old cemetery and church site on Mangrove Creek. The creek track would then be followed back to the cars at the weir to complete a satisfying and educational round trip.

Tougher walks in the area would use the road as a safety line but divert outwards from it to explore the wild country on either side. This technique could be used with older teenagers who needed the challenge of wild places but also the reassurance of a known route nearby. The road is ideal for this type of walk and can be used as the central feature while diversions could be made to explore features such as the Aboriginal engravings and Black Trig, the pinnacle near the Commission track (Ian Webb's Mitchell's Rock), the falls, Croft Trig, the pink cave, My McLeod, upper Wright Creek, Frog Hollow, Hungry Flat, upper Little Mogo Creek, Mt Lockyer and Mt Manning cave.

The chance to walk and camp with history is a strong attraction of the Road. Historic campsites, usually with water, can be found at Ten Mile Hollow, Frog Hollow, Hungry Flat and Mogo Creek. There is a strong sense of history that permeates these sites as darkness falls and the mists descend.



Historic signboards along the route help to heighten this historical awareness. Bushwalkers walk of the road as a moody place, filled with the atmosphere of time. The Aborigines recorded their Dreamtime figures, engraved and painted into the caves and rock platforms. The convicts, explorers and surveyors left their carved marks in the sandstone ledges and the spirits of the pioneers linger in the little cemeteries and the ghost house site by the creek. Very few bushwalkers visit The Great North Road only once. Many reasons bring them back time and time again.



A sandstone wind cave. (Photo: G. Powell)

Greg Powell is a member of The Convict Trail and Newcastle Ramblers Bushwalking Club. He spent 37 years as a member of the Scout Association. He specialises in historic bushwalks, following explorers routes. He is the author of 10 books on bushwalking and Bushrangers. His latest book is “Hunter Valley Bushwalks” published by Kingsclear 2003. RRP \$21.95. It contains walks along The Great North Road.