



THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

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The Reverend Mr Sharpe Robert Burns

The Reverend Mr Charles Sharpe was an Anglican minister who came to the colony in the late 1820s and was appointed to minister to the people in the Lower Hawkesbury region, including Wiseman's Ferry, in the years 1831-7. This area was then known as Lower Portland Head. His mode of transport on land was by horse or foot and on the river by boat. It is not known just how big the area was he had to administer, but it would certainly be large, many places accessible only by bridle tracks through the bush, with little water for horse or man.

Mr Sharpe had a modest chapel in the Wisemans Ferry area to conduct his services and it may have also been a school. Governor Macquarie had made it known that he favoured using chapels as schools. It may also have been used as his living quarter until he was able to move to a better house. The chapel was located in Singleton Road, about 3 kilometres from what is now the Post Office and situated on the 8 acre block where the big house called The Lodge now stands. It was built of stone with probably a shingle roof. When The Lodge was built in 1928, the builders incorporated parts of the old chapel into the new house. Subsequent renovations since then have destroyed what had survived but some of the original foundation stones of the old chapel or parsonage may still be seen as part of the foundations for the patio in front of the house.

Although designated officially as the "incumbent" at Wiseman's Ferry, Mr Sharpe conducted funeral services there prior to burials in the established cemetery about a kilometre to the east along the river. An earlier wattle and daub chapel had been located in the burying ground. He officiated at the funeral of at least one convict in 1831. There was also at least one baptism, verified to have taken place in March 1832 (1). He would also have held the usual religious services attended by settlers and convicts alike, although whether the little chapel could hold them all is open to conjecture. Maybe the convicts were made to sit outside in the sun!

Singleton Road was nothing more than a bridle track and access was difficult for all. It was more so for our Mr Sharpe who had moved to a little house close to what is known as Walker's Beach on the River. It is not known whether he owned it or rented it. That house is in River Road today but, of course, the road didn't exist then.

His house was accessible only by foot by leaving the western side of the Old Northern Road, south of Wiseman's Ferry and walking down the escarpment through the bush to the river. It would be



difficult for a horse and he may not have had one. Nothing was easy. Consider him, struggling up the mountain on a hot summer Sunday morning, walking several kilometres to the chapel, soaked in his own sweat, preaching a sermon to a largely disinterested and hot congregation in the tiny chapel about the good things to come in the afterlife. It might have been enough to make him disinterested himself, under the circumstances.

It is possible that he attracted the sympathy of one of the surveyors, either White or Finch, who were in charge of the local road building operations. The road to the Hunter Valley was the big priority. Maybe the question was asked, would it be possible to divert a few convicts to building a road, only a little one, down to the Reverend's house on the river, so that he didn't exhaust himself so much while climbing up? After all, the convicts do need to have sermons delivered to them in a strong vigorous voice, don't they?

It is not known whether official permission was given by Colonial Secretary Macleay who controlled just about everything in those days, but nothing has been found in the records which mentioned a road being built down the escarpment to where Mr Sharpe lived (2). But the road was built and built well because most of it is there today, minus a few convict-cut sandstone blocks. (Ask and you will receive!). It starts from the Old Northern Road on the property now known as Tobruk, a tourist sheep station about five kilometres south of Wiseman's Ferry.

The exact spot where it left the road is now occupied by an electricity substation and the ground surface in the vicinity has been altered by the digging or drains for water catchment but further to the west the old road can be seen and may be followed all the way down to River Road. It is constructed in a similar manner to the big road being cut into the sides of the mountain but is a simpler construction with less attention paid to drainage than the Old Northern Road. It is narrower and didn't need buttressing.

No doubt our minister appreciated this governmental freebee of the time. As he rode his horse up the mountain to the convict-built main road, he would have found another bridle track further south in the area called Weavers. This track served several farms nearby, running to the east as it does and passing along the top of the escarpment above his chapel. It may have been the preferred way for Mr Sharpe. There were several tracks down to the river and one of them eventually served a small public school established there about 50 years later in what became Singleton Road. It is a lot shorter than the road down through Wiseman's to the chapel.

About 1831, Surveyor White made a survey sketch of the ranges of Lower Portland Head (3) which included part of the range and the river where Mr Sharpe lived. Having diverted the money and convict labour which normally would have been spent on the building of the main road to the Hunter Valley, Surveyor White would be at least careful. Probably being aware of the difficulties that could be made for him in his career in the colony, he made no mention of this branch road while sketching the main road on his map. Diplomatic to the end, he drew it in but named it euphemistically "Mr Sharpes Pathway". Of course it was no pathway. By the standards of the day it was a road.

The "pathway" was lost to our local history for years: people who lived nearby knew of its existence but nothing of its history. Recently some of the land through which it passes has been sold and clearing has been done. Some of the road has been damaged. Baulkham Hills Council has issued a stop work order, but not so much because of the road's historic value but because a Development Application (DA) had not been made. All of this road is now on private land. However, we must not allow the slow leaching away of our national heritage to continue unabated



without making some effort to preserve it. The owners of Tobruk are favourable to the preservation of this road. What the other owners think is not known. The starting point is to have the road recognised as a national historic relic.

Relative to the parsonage established on land on which The Lodge now stands, Bishop Broughton, in his report of 1847, gave some details of his visit to Wiseman's Ferry by boat in order to consecrate the church of St Mary Magdelene. This was the original church, built across the road from the present one, and standing on the land where the public school now stands:

On the Monday ... we landed about the time of sunset at the jetty belonging to the parsonage of the Lower Hawkesbury, the residence of the Rev. W.W. Simpson, minister of the district. The house, which had been completed since m last visit to this spot, stands upon a bank rising steeply from the river. The level spot on which the house and adjoining buildings are erected is so limited that rocks, rising behind to a height almost to be called stupendous, seem to overhang te roof, and it is time alone, and familiarity with the place, which can create a confidence that they will not roll down some vast fragment to overwhelm the dwelling and the inhabitants.

On Wednesday, the 3rd (February) the consecration of the church took place... and afterwards proceeded to the burial ground which lies considerably lower down the river. The appointed service was solemnised and the Act of Consecration was read and executed in the midst of heavy rain. Afterwards, the party was hospitably entertained by Mrs Simpson at the parsonage. On the following day... we re-embarked on our return to Windsor.

He makes it clear where the Parsonage stood, and anyone familiar with the area will recognise his description of the land as being that where The Lodge stands. But the interesting bit is that the Parsonage was no small building it was big enough to sleep five adult visitors as well the "incumbent" and his wife and children for three nights.

Mr Sharpe's humble chapel had been replaced by the much bigger Parsonage after he left in 1837. It is not known how long he lived in each one of his houses, but at a guess the longest stay would be at the house at the end of his "pathway" because it would be the most comfortable. It is interesting to speculate that the stone remnants built into The Lodge were from the older building as well as the newer ones on the site.

I am grateful for the generous help I have received from Diana Wood, our Secretary and Jenny Vargassoff, resident of Singleton Road, during the preparation of this paper. I have also quoted from "St James Anglican Church, Pitt Town, NSW – a Short History", attachment 2, St. Mary Magdelene's Wiseman's Ferry.

1. Diocese of Newcastle records, Wismana Ferry Cemetery and Chapel
2. Correspondence between Col Sec MacLeay and Finch
3. State Records Map AO5073 White 1831; noted on map at "Pathway to Mr Sharpe's"

