

The Convict Road Station Site at Wisemans Ferry: an Historical and Archaeological Investigation

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In examining the contribution of the convicts to Australia's early material history, archaeologists and architectural historians usually focus on impressive, durable structures such as public buildings and bridges. The convict road station site at Wisemans Ferry presents an alternative record. It comprises the remains of the temporary, rough dwellings of the convict gangs which constructed the Great North Road between 1826 and 1836, and it is particularly valuable because of the absence of detailed written records dealing with such accommodation. The site was recently acquired by the New South Wales State Government, and arrangements are being made for its protection and eventual public presentation. In this paper Grace Karskens, Historic Buildings Research Officer for the National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.), examines the development of road-gang accommodation in the 1820s and 1830s and seeks to interpret the above-ground remains in the essential historical context.

INTRODUCTION

Most travellers easing their vehicles down the precipitous zig-zagged descent to Wisemans Ferry (Fig. 1) today do not notice the massive curved and battered retaining wall supporting the road below (Fig. 9), the extensive benched quarries, scattered with drill marks, cut into the cliffs on the uphill side, or the carefully constructed stone slab culverts beneath the modern sealed surface. Much less obvious are the remains of rough, heavily overgrown stone structures high above the road overlooking the Hawkesbury and MacDonalld Rivers and the cultivated valley floor (Figs. 2-4). These remains represent a complex of buildings which sheltered the various convict gangs employed between 1827 and 1832 in constructing the Great North Road in this area. First surveyed in 1825 by Heneage Finch, this road was intended to link Sydney with the 'garden of the colony', the Hunter Valley.¹ While the initial planning and construction (begun in 1826) were modest enough, from 1828 the road became the focus of the colony's road-building activity. Contemporary writers confidently predicted that it would be a great thoroughfare, matching any in England for scale and grandeur, and cited the road as an example of the colony's 'civilization' and technological sophistication.²

The line runs along two ridges north and south of the Hawkesbury River at Wisemans Ferry, originally officially called Lower Portland Head. The precipitous termination of the ridges there necessitated five years of convict labour to open the road for travellers, and the ascent and descent to the river became the focal point of construction work where most of the gangs were concentrated.

In accordance with his instructions to 'revive the threat of transportation', Darling's initial plan was to 'work all convicts in irons on the public works for a certain period after their arrival'.³ This proposal was, however, abandoned in the face of the general demand for suitable convict labour by settlers. Although the end of the Napoleonic Wars had resulted in a great influx of convicts to New South Wales,⁴ a correspondingly large proportion of these inevitably became second and third offenders after their arrival in the colony. These were dealt with first by removal to penal

settlements isolated from the population centre of Sydney, and, after 1826, also by banishment to Darling's 'distant road gangs'. Several contemporary observers were exultant that such a neat solution had been devised—the gangs kept undesirables out of sight and mind, the latter were suitably punished and, at the same time, performed useful work in cutting the roads of civilization through the wilderness.⁵

In response to the various difficulties posed by placing hundreds of 'incorrigibles' at isolated stations in the bush, the road gang system and its administration, like most aspects of the colony's establishment, underwent an evolutionary process between 1826 and the 1840s. The site at Wisemans Ferry is one of the best surviving material records of one important aspect of this process—the accommodation of the gangs. Its meaning and significance can only be gauged in relation to its historical context. It is therefore necessary to sketch out the development of road-gang accommodation generally in order to locate this site in its historical framework.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The subject has not drawn much attention from historians or archaeologists. Historians such as Shaw mention the stockades only in passing,⁶ and while James Backhouse's grim 1835 description of the 'prisoners' boxes', or caravans used to house prisoners is widely cited, the study of other more common and extensive structures is limited.⁷ Kerr briefly discusses a range of structures, including huts, stockades and prisoners' boxes used during road construction and other projects, and implies some sort of development pattern from one to the next:

'As the size of stockades grew and regulations regarding the security and health of convicts were introduced, more time and labour was expended on ... [the] construction [of stockades]. To reduce this some form of reusable or mobile stockade was needed and in fact "moveable caravans on block wheels" had been introduced ... in September 1835.'⁸

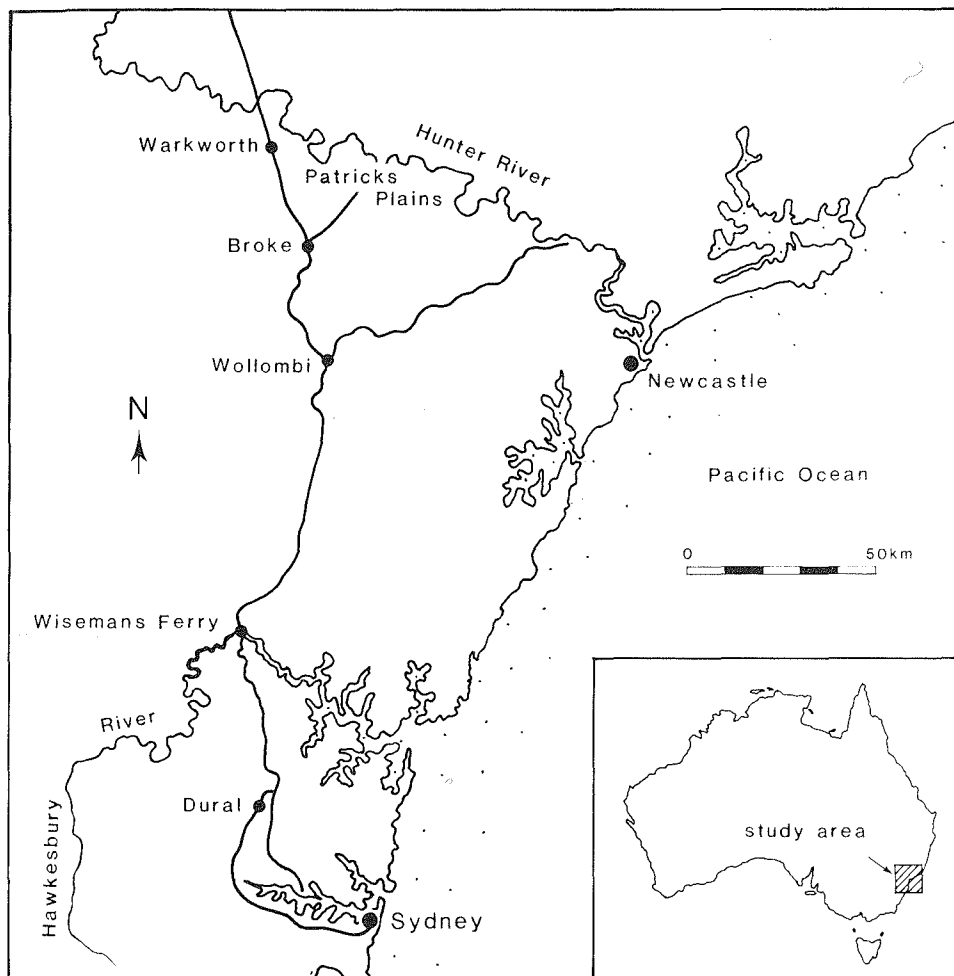


Fig. 1: Location of Wisemans Ferry and the original line of the Great North Road, N.S.W.

No further attention has so far been given to the development process or to the factors which gave rise to the various adaptations made over the road-building period. Interestingly, the pattern emerging from a closer examination of these accommodation phases is not really covered by this model of simple huts to complex stockades to mobile huts. In some areas, the construction methods actually devolved from the early huts to even simpler tents, in response to the widely diverse conditions in which the numerous gangs worked, as will be discussed.

In the earliest years of the road-gang system (1826–27) the convicts' first operation was to put up their own temporary slab and bark huts in random groups at convenient intervals along the road, which became known as stations.⁹ Darling in 1828 was quick to point out, with some pride, to his superiors that the men were '... lodged in Huts constructed by themselves, without costing the government even a nail in erecting'.¹⁰ Although there is no record of the actual construction or design of these transient, rude structures, it is likely that they resembled the huts described by Robert Dawson in 1828, which were erected by convicts assigned to settlers:

'As soon as a party of convicts arrives at a settlers station, their first employment is to build huts for themselves which is done by forming the sides with split logs placed in an upright direction with a covering of bark upon a roof of poles. These are considered to be the more permanent kinds of buildings for convicts, but in the hurry of the moment, they are sometimes preceded by others of a more temporary nature, consisting only of a framework of poles tied together with narrow strips of young bark with a view to saving nails, while the sides are enclosed with sheets of thick strong bark.'¹¹

Several contemporary accounts, such as those of James Backhouse and Alexander Harris describe the road-gang huts as cold and draughty. Harris, mistakenly arrested as a bushranger and shut for a night in the lock-up of a road-gang station on the Great North Road, found it to be a '... little roofed enclosure of a few feet square, very strong, but having the slabs in many places half an inch apart...'.¹² At the Devines Hill stockade, opposite Wisemans Ferry, the gang's superintendent reported in 1831 that 'many complaints have been made of the extreme coldness of the sheds under which they sleep', while in the valleys of the Wollombi the men were 'exposed to cold and damp'.¹³

The gangs assigned to the Great North Road arrived at Wisemans Ferry in March 1827 under the supervision of Lieutenant Jonathon Warner, and the station was probably established then.¹⁴ The site high above the road was convenient, because while it was close to the major works on the road in this area (Fig. 2), it was also removed from the properties of the few settlers in the vicinity and virtually invisible to travellers passing on the road below. The latter were thus able to contemplate the fine views of the works of nature, in conjunction with those of man, unsullied by the presence of the crude huts and their connotations of the conditions under which the men worked. The number of gangs stationed at Wisemans during the period 1827 to 1832 is shown in Table 1.¹⁵ Thomas Hale, the contractor supplying rations to the gangs in 1832, mentioned the specific location of the station in July that year when he wrote to the New South Wales Colonial Secretary: '... I beg leave to inform you there is still one Road Party in that neighbourhood, viz on the hill above Wisemans'.¹⁶ The stone remains on the site (Figs. 3 & 4) are similar in style and construction to

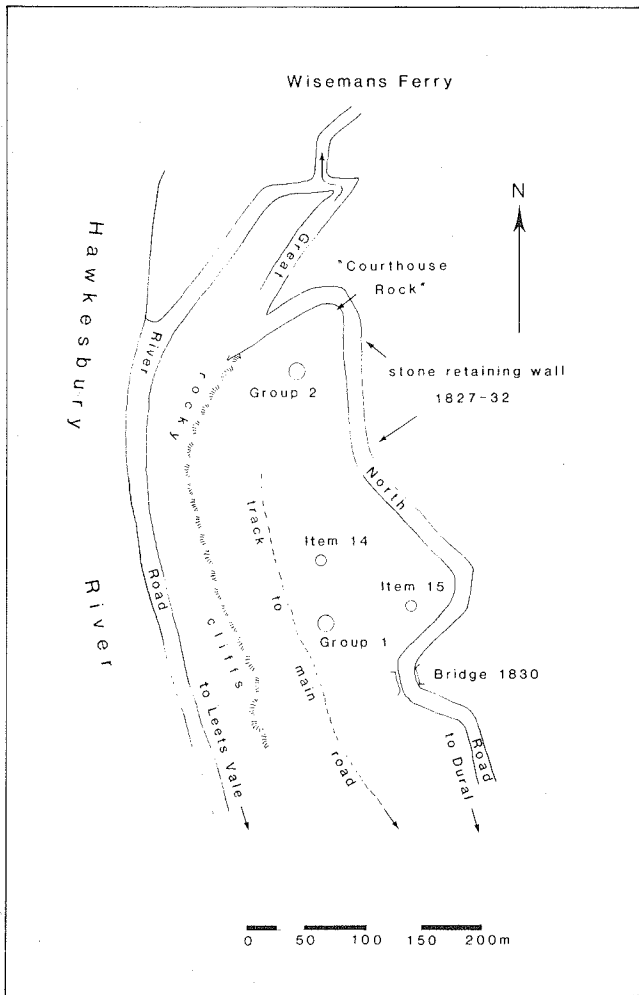


Fig. 2: Convict Road Station Site, Wisemans Ferry.

another contemporary stockade site on the Great North Road (Devines Hill) and also to the remains of two huts built for Solomon Wiseman at Frog Hollow for the storage of rations.¹⁷ In August 1828 Warner was replaced by Lieutenant Percy Simpson, who began to tackle the construction of the road on a far more ambitious scale than his predecessor.¹⁸ It was not finally complete in his area until 1832 and in July that year the gangs were removed and the station dismantled. The reusable timber parts were sold to local settlers and Simpson submitted a 'Return of Materials composing the stockade and other public buildings at Lower Portland Head—River Hawkesbury' which listed the following items:

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> '150 yards of ground plates 150 yards of floor plates | } | with a groove in each end for receiving the ends of slabs. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 31 large posts 12 feet long ea: good for fencing 1850 slabs—say 9 feet long ea: good for fencing A large paled gate with hooks and hinges, and several hundred sheets of old bark.¹⁹ | | |

The terms 'station' and 'stockade' were by 1832 interchangeable, although the latter referred to large semi-permanent establishments rather than the camps of small isolated gangs scattered along the roads.

Hirst has pointed out that, in contrast to other aspects of Darling's period of governorship, in the establishment of road gangs, 'the government fostered disorder on a large scale'. As the system became more entrenched and the isolation and strangeness of the bush diminished in

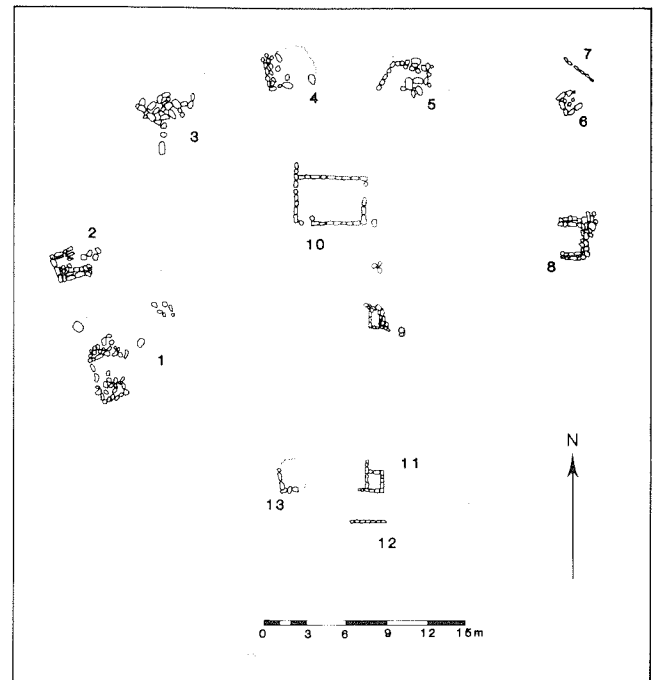


Fig. 3: Group 1 comprising Items 1-13.

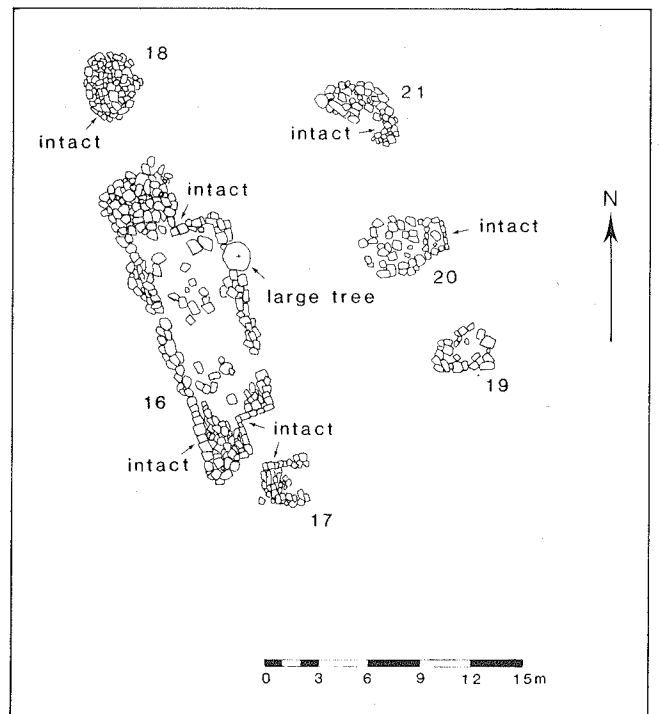


Fig. 4: Group 2 comprising Items 16-21.

effectiveness as a prison, the number of escapes and subsequent bushranging incidents rose alarmingly.²⁰ The number of men in each gang was increased to 50 by the Surveyor of Roads and Bridges, Lockyer, in 1828 and in the following years as many as 70 men made up each gang. In areas of heavy construction such as Devines Hill, up to four gangs were stationed together at one time, a labour force made necessary by the increasingly ambitious plans of such men as Simpson and Sir Thomas Mitchell. The largest number of the worst offenders, including those who had run from other gangs, were stationed at Wisemans Ferry. After receiving a 'Report on the No. of convicts Escaped' in October 1830 and finding that about a third of the total number had absconded from Simpson's gangs at Wisemans Ferry,²¹ Darling placed a military guard there and also issued

Table 1: Number of gangs stationed at Wisemans Ferry 1827–1832. Each gang comprised an average of 50 men.

| Year | Gang | Months |
|------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1827 | No. 4 Iron Gang | January – December |
| | No. 3 Iron Gang | March – December |
| | No. 25 Road Party | August – December |
| 1828 | No. 4 Iron Gang | January – December |
| | No. 3 Iron Gang | January – December |
| | No. 25 Road Party | January – March |
| 1829 | No. 4 Iron Gang | January – December |
| 1830 | No. 4 Iron Gang | January – December |
| 1831 | No. 4 Iron Gang | January – December |
| 1832 | No. 4 Iron Gang | January – May |
| | No. 25 Road Party | January – July |

the first official instructions regulating the layout of road-gang stations:

‘The camp or huts of the iron gangs are to be constructed in a square having only one entrance. A fire should be kept in the centre of the square and a lamp similar to those used in the streets of Sydney be burnt at each angle of it. The sides of the square exposed to the wind may be protected by screens [*sic*] or by a frame covered in hide made to rest against the sheds under which the convicts are to sleep.’²²

These instructions were the forerunners of a series of increasingly detailed plans for stockades devised by Bourke in the following years. It is not clear when the high staked fence usually associated with the term ‘stockade’ was introduced. Apart from one reference to a convict who ‘escaped over the enclosure’ at Wisemans there is no mention of such a fence, although both the Wisemans Ferry and Devines Hill encampments were both occasionally referred to as ‘stockades.’²³ The ‘enclosure’ may refer to the ‘large paled gate’ included in the ‘Return of Materials’. According to Macle hose, however, the convicts’ station at the foot of Mt Victoria in the Blue Mountains, another large-scale construction site, was enclosed ‘by a high fence, so as to form a stockade to prevent their escape’, in 1830.²⁴ By 1832, during Bourke’s governorship, the fence was standard for all large stockades, and they were made still more secure by the arrangement of the buildings in such a way as to allow continual surveillance. A sketch map of the unfinished stockade at Cox’s River (Fig. 5) dated August 1832, shows the convicts’ huts arranged, as Darling ordered, in a square with one entrance, but with a lockup hut, rather than a fire, in the centre. The whole was enclosed by a fence ‘12 feet high’, again with one entrance, with one overseer’s hut on either side of this enclosure. Almost directly in front of the gateway was a guard house, adjacent to soldiers’ barracks, sergeants’ quarters and store. The military officers’ quarters were quite removed from the complex. A note adds that ‘Kitchens to the Military Officers quarters’, ‘A hospital, 30 feet by 15 feet, Stockaded’ and a ‘store and quarter for the Commissariat Officer’ were yet to be added.²⁵ This sketch was sent to the New South Wales Colonial Secretary, no doubt for Governor Bourke’s examination, and the latter issued his stockade instructions shortly thereafter. These specified a slightly different plan:

‘The superintendent’s hut and store should be combined and placed outside the stockade facing the gate, and the constables hut should overlook the opposite side . . . The stockade itself . . . to be a high fence containing the mens huts, a hospital hut and sometimes a mess shed . . .’²⁶

The staked fence must have proven ineffectual in preventing escapes, because only two years later its use was abandoned

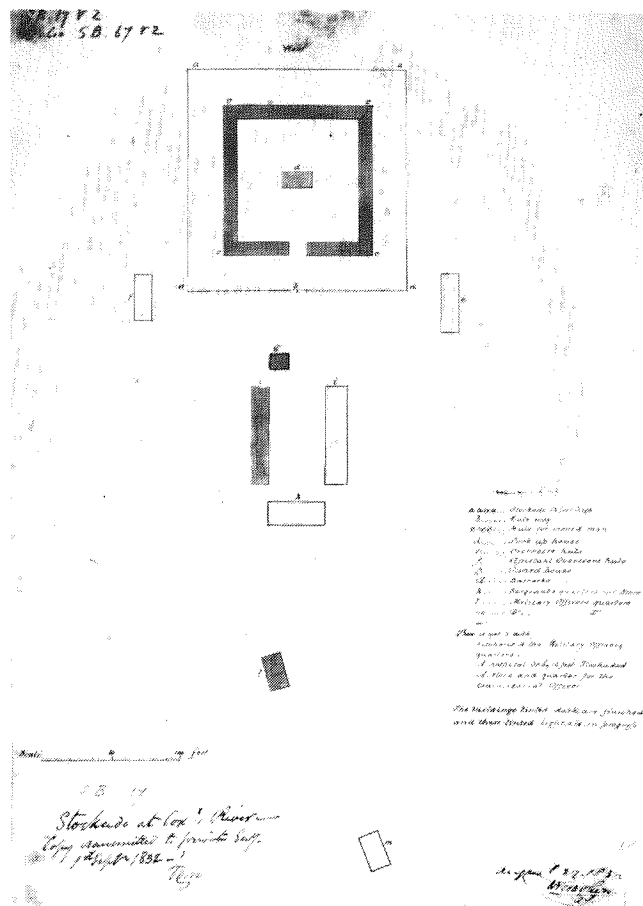


Fig. 5: ‘Stockade at Cox’s River’, J. Nicholson, 27 August 1832. (The outlines of structures shown at e, f, i, k, m, have been retouched to make them show more clearly.)

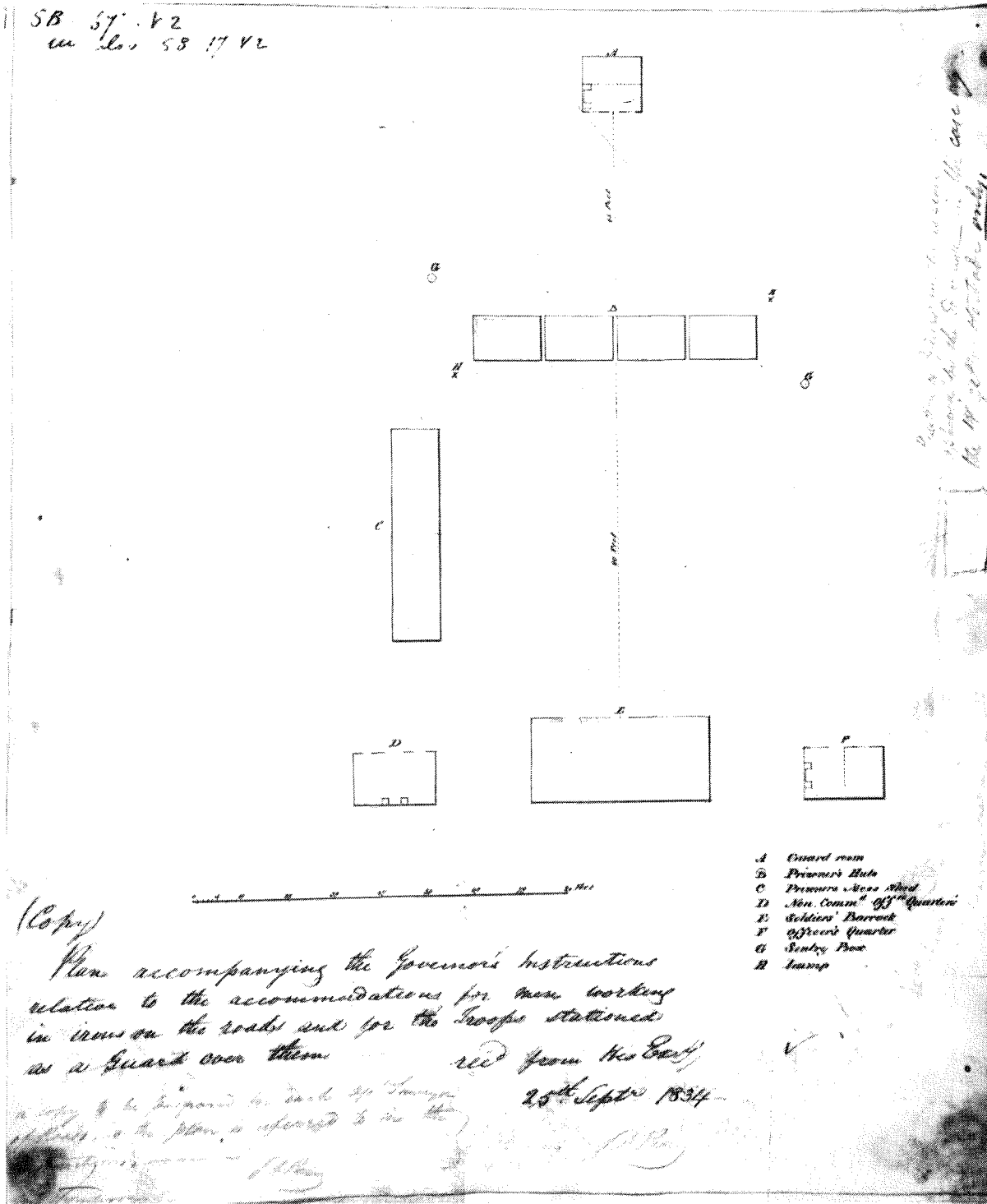
and the plan of stockades was again rearranged in an effort to strengthen security. Instructions were circulated to all assistant surveyors in September 1834 together with the ‘Plan accompanying the Governor’s Instructions relative to the accommodations of men working in irons on the roads and for the Troops stationed as a Guard over them’ (Fig. 6). The prisoners’ huts, now unenclosed, were arranged in a row rather than a square, with a sentry box or a lamp at each corner. The row, comprising four huts, was faced on one side by the soldiers’ barracks and on the other by a guard room with the distance between them specified in the plan. On either side of the soldiers’ barracks were the officers’ quarters, and a large, long mess shed stood between the prisoners’ and soldiers’ huts, though not obstructing the view.²⁷

The process of increasingly strict regulation of convict stockade design, and their general behaviour, culminated in the ‘Instructions to the Royal Engineers Corps’ of 1837. These were issued after responsibility for road making was transferred from the Surveyor General’s Department to George Barney, the Commanding Royal Engineer.²⁸ Reference to the abandonment of the fence was made and the stockade plan specified generally concurred with the 1834 plan:

‘These buildings having been formerly surrounded with a stake fence, but which has been discontinued as it is found the convicts are more securely guarded by placed sentries at the angles of wooden houses, and leaving a space all around open to their fire.’²⁹

Convicts were divided into groups of 80 men each and this number occupied the four wooden huts. The officers’ and soldiers’ barracks, guard room, store and mess shed again completed the stockade. When the convicts were locked in their huts:

SB 57.42
in loc SB 17 V2



(Copy)

Plan accompanying the Governor's Instructions
relative to the accommodations for men working
in irons on the roads and for the Troops stationed
as a Guard over them

rec'd from His Excellency
25th Sept 1834

- A Guard room
- B Prisoner's Huts
- C Prisoner's Mess Shed
- D Non-Comm. Off's Quarters
- E Soldiers' Barrack
- F Officer's Quarters
- G Sentry Post
- H Lamp

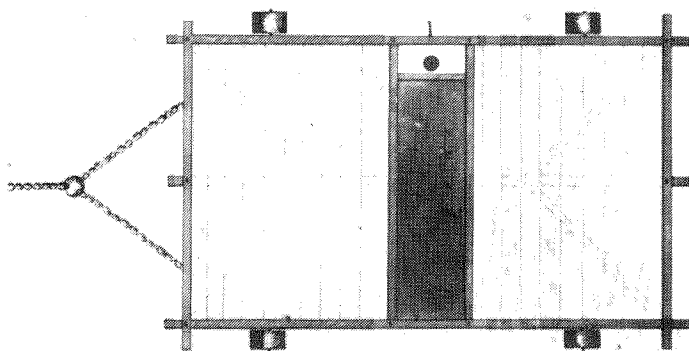
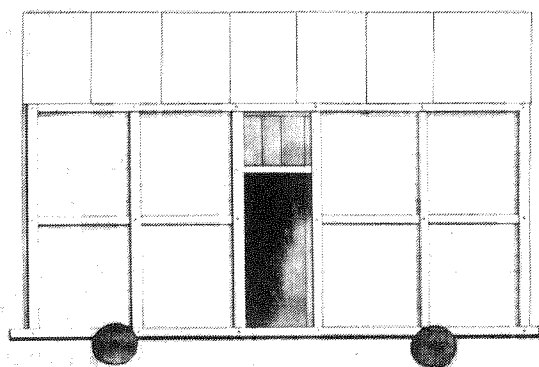
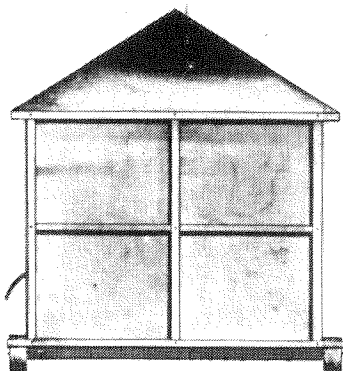
'... the officer will direct sentries to be posted at the wooden houses and to be so placed as to have every part of those buildings at all times in view of one or other of the officers.'³⁰

Fig. 6: 'Plan accompanying the Governor's Instructions relative to the accommodations for men working in irons on the roads ...', 25 September 1834.

Attached to the document were detailed instructions strictly regulating every aspect of the convicts' activities including their work, sleep and leisure periods, while less than ten years earlier convicts had put up their own huts wherever convenient, and the single convict or ticket-of-leave man who acted as their overseer had no official written instruction regarding their behaviour at all. The number and variety of buildings attached to the station/stockade also increased rapidly with the growing entrenchment of the road-gang system. Apart from the numerous buildings specified above, dating from Bourke's period, reference was also made in the

earlier period to huts for distributing rations, hospitals, barracks for soldiers, a dispensary for a medical attendant, stables, storehouses, and stockyards where the bullocks could be kept and slaughtered for food.³¹

While the stations and stockades thus became increasingly complex and officially regulated in areas of large-scale and long-term projects, where smaller groups of men worked over large, isolated sections of easily-constructed road, mobility and the ready availability of building materials became higher priorities than security and durability of accommodation. In 1828, Lockyer pointed out that the men



SKETCH of a Portable Wooden House, to contain Twenty Iron'd Ganged Convicts

wasted time searching for bark on the barren ridges, such as those between Wisemans and Mt Manning and in erecting huts which were only to be abandoned in a few weeks or months. His suggestion that tents be used for accommodation instead of huts was approved and adopted. These were to be constructed with:

'Three forked uprights eight feet clear of the ground, a ridge pole thirty feet long, to stretch sixteen feet on the ground in width within the tent—that part of it that lays on the ridge pole to be doubled, the outside to be painted white, to be shut in at one end and open at the other.'³²

Subsequently, 580 hides were ordered for the gangs on the roads to Bathurst and Hunters River.³³ Where mobility and materials were not a problem simple groups of huts continued to be built on the Great North Road until 1836, the end of the construction period. Small semi-permanent stations where the Assistant Surveyors resided were established first at Wollombi (1830–1834) and then at Warkworth (Cockfighter's Creek) (1834–1837), and contemporary maps of the newly made road show small groups of huts dotted along the line towards and beyond the Wollombi Valley.³⁴

The disadvantage of the tents was, of course, the lack of security. When Bourke arrived in 1832, he overcame both problems of mobility and security by introducing the 'prisoners boxes'—small houses on wheels which could be drawn by bullocks and in which prisoners could be locked up at night. The nature and dimensions of these boxes are shown in an undated 'Sketch of a Portable Wooden House to contain Twenty Iron'd Ganged Convicts'³⁵ (Fig. 7). Bourke had no doubt imported the idea from the experience of road builders on roads in the Scottish Highlands during the 1810s

Fig. 7: 'Sketch of a Portable Wooden House to contain Twenty Iron'd Ganged Convicts', n.d. (The roof and the right-hand edge of the wall in the side elevation have been retouched to make them show more clearly.)

and 1820s. Thomas Telford, the renowned road builder who supervised the work, later described the same progression from huts to tents to movable boxes in his autobiography:

'... the workmen, for lodging or imperfect shelter were obliged to construct temporary huts, the frequent removal of which created trouble and expense, and the going to and from them occupied much time ... To remedy this, military canvas tents were purchased, which were indeed easily removable ... but were found too hot when each was occupied by ten or twelve men ... Nor was it until the roads had been made generally passable by wheel carriages in 1824 that an effectual remedy could be introduced ... a large caravan on wheels, capable of containing sixteen or eighteen men with a fire place, it is movable from place to place ... and being always close at hand much time is saved, fatigue avoided and health uninjured ...'³⁶

In New South Wales the caravans had the added advantage of being lockable, although, as Telford pointed out, they presupposed roads already made and easily traversable. Dulhunty was issued with three in 1833 when stationed at Wollombi and these were covered in with 'tarpaulings'.³⁷

Thus, while the large stations and stockades grew increasingly complex, accommodation for small numbers of men scattered along the roads at the same time devolved along the same lines as had occurred in Scotland a decade earlier, becoming increasingly better adapted to both road-building and to the nature of the labour-force.



Fig. 8: Item 16 (Group 2) view of eastern corner.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

By the early 1900s all that remained of the road station at Wisemans Ferry, according to Frank Walker, were 'tumbled heaps of stone' and this more or less describes the site today.³⁸ It comprises two groups of rubble stone ruins, some with clearly discernible shape, others either loose arrangements of field stones or mounds of blocks which have collapsed. Group 1 comprises thirteen items of cut and uncut stone while Group 2, approximately 200 metres north, comprises six items, the intact sections of which indicate that the stone was set in earth mortar. The site also has one isolated structure (Item 14), a series of steps, or footholds, carved into a rockface (Item 15), numerous examples of wedge pits used in quarrying operations cut in the natural stone and an access road with rough retaining wall at the southern end. The ruins are densely overgrown, which to some extent protects the site from vandals but also reduces visibility and hinders examination. A brief description of each item is included as a basis for the discussion of the site:

Group 1 (Figs 2 & 3)

Item 1: An irregular, three-sided grouping of stones which are either uncut or roughly squared. Two courses are still intact on the south-west side, and three courses on the north-west side. The remainder has collapsed and stones are scattered about.

Item 2: A smaller three-sided structure 6.2m north-north-west of Item 1 and on the same alignment. This has a much more clearly defined shape. The stones are all at least roughly squared and remain from one to four courses high with the walls one to two courses wide. A section of wall on the north-east side is displaced but the stones are still stacked. Flat slabs line part of the inside of the structure.

Item 3: A very loose arrangement of both faced and uncut stones which on the north-west and south-west sides retain some shape, forming a right angle one course high. Other stones have collapsed and are scattered around the item.

Item 4: A heavily overgrown mound of earth and stones which appears to have had three sides, although only the

south-west side and a single stone at the end of the north-east side are visible. The south-west side appears to have been two courses wide and is now one course high of rubble.

Item 5: A loose arrangement of mainly uncut or partly cut stones forming an obtuse angle on the west and north sides. The north wall is the most distinct, two courses in width and one course high. Numerous stones have collapsed into the centre of the structure.

Item 6: A small group of rectangular, cut stones one course high forming a square.

Item 7: A single row of small, squared stones, 2.2m in length, one course high, located 2m north of Item 6, running in a north-west direction.

Item 8: A well-defined three-sided structure of roughly dressed rectangular stones, up to four courses high with walls two courses wide. There is some stack bonding at the base and the walls become increasingly loose towards the top. A tree has fallen into the centre of the structure. The south side is the most deteriorated, with many stones dislodged.

Item 9: A four-sided structure of stone hewn to relatively regular shapes, although irregular in sizes. Chisel marks are visible on the stones. It is the highest surviving structure, with up to six fairly narrow courses which are relatively closely jointed. The structure is most intact on the south side and most deteriorated on the north.

Item 10: The foundations of a relatively large room 3.5m × 5m of regularly cut stones up to three courses high and laid neatly. An opening in the wall on the east side suggests a doorway. The west wall projects approximately 60cm from the corner with the north wall.

Item 11: A square structure infilled with earth, rubble and vegetation, with west and north sides projecting beyond the square, suggesting that this was part of a larger structure, possibly linked with Item 13. It is up to three courses high



Fig. 9: Stone retaining wall on the descent to Wisemans Ferry.

(approximately 30cm to 1m) and like Items 9 and 10, the stones are more neatly cut than are those of Items 1–8. The stone has collapsed into a heap of rubble on the north side. A large rectangular block which is chiselled flat is located 1m from the north-east corner.

Item 12: A single row of stones, one course high, 2m south of Item 11, 2.5m in length and running in an east to west direction.

Item 13: A heavily overgrown mound of earth and rubble in which a few cut stones are visible forming a rough right angle.

Item 14 (Fig. 2): This loose arrangement of stones is set apart from the group comprising Items 1–13. It is located 50m north of Item 6. The uncut stones are arranged in a horseshoe shape with a large natural boulder at the south forming a type of foundation.

Item 15 (Fig. 2): A series of four small steps or footholds, square in shape, cut into a section of rockface 70m east of Item 6. They are approximately 15–20cm wide and about 10cm high. Chisel marks are visible on the vertical faces.

Group 2 (Figs 2 & 4)

Item 16 (Fig. 8): The remains of a large, long building (approximately 15m × 5m) evidently originally of stone bedded in mud mortar, with a fireplace at either end. An opening 85cm wide in the north-east wall suggests a doorway. The southern end of the south-east wall is the most intact section and indicates that the thickness of the walls was 77cm. This section is at present 1.13m high. The centre of the structure is slightly depressed and where not covered and filled by the large quantity of stone from the walls, has an earthen floor. The south-east fireplace is fairly distinct, measuring 2.8m × 2m, but the one to the north-west is only a large mass of collapsed stone, with one corner intact. The stones are generally fairly neatly cut, though of widely varying dimensions.

Item 17: A three-sided structure opening towards the north-east, built of fairly neatly cut stones with the coursing intact on the north-west side and at the base of the south-west side. The remainder has collapsed and the centre is partly infilled.

Item 18: A large mound of collapsed, cut stone of large dimensions with only one discernible intact wall 1.3m long, two to three courses high on the south side.

Items 19, 20 and 21: A series of three ruins located roughly in a row, 5–6m apart and comprising heaps of collapsed stone of no particular shape although with an occasional intact section. All three are of cut stone of varying sizes.

INTERPRETATION

A conclusive interpretation of the site is, at least at this stage, not possible. As discussed, the early road-gang stations (from 1826–1830) such as this were as random and as undocumented as the later stockades were regulated and minutely recorded. Because the buildings themselves were not intended to last more than a few years, the visible remains are today incomplete, in a state of collapse and obscured by vegetation (Fig. 8). However, several broad conclusions may be drawn from this preliminary investigation. The layout of Group 1, as shown in Figure 3, suggests an arrangement of buildings, probably slab, with numerous stone fireplaces and ovens around a central structure. The lack of a fireplace in the latter building suggests that it was a storage room for tools, supplies and rations, and possibly a room for distributing victuals. Until 1828 the convicts received a weekly allowance of rations and, as Bigge reported in 1822, each cooked and consumed his own food in the huts.³⁹ After 1828 the food was distributed daily to cooks appointed from the gangs, and, in the case of large encampments, the meals were consumed in mess huts or

sheds.⁴⁰ The large number of fireplaces in Group 1 could thus be explained by the pre-1828 victualling methods, since this station was established in 1827. Many of the items are three-sided, with walls two courses thick, while Items 9 and 11 are fully enclosed squares up to a metre in height. It is interesting to note that, after 1832, no fireplaces are shown for convict huts at all. From their similar alignment, some Group 1 items appear to have been structurally related, such as Items 1 and 2, Items 11, 12 and 13, possibly with Item 9. The particularly poor quality and irregular construction and layout of Items 3, 4 and 5 suggest a very haphazard collection of small, rough buildings.

The items comprising Group 1 vary a great deal in integrity and in the quality of both stone cutting and coursing. Items 2, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11 have distinct shapes and show some attempt at regular dressing and coursing. The remainder range in quality and style from very roughly cut, matched and laid stones to loose arrangements of field stones. The variation in quality and style indicates that some buildings were constructed with some care while others, perhaps of a lesser function, were put up hurriedly, with little thought to layout and durability. This may reflect not only the diverse function of the buildings that were added to the stations, as discussed, but also the development of the station over a period of five years, its use by up to 150 men at one time (Table 1) and the different approaches of the two Assistant Surveyors, Warner and Simpson.

While Group 1 has only an indication of some sort of grouping of buildings around a central structure, Group 2, comprising only six items appears much more regular in layout. The major item, Item 16, a stone room with two fireplaces, was probably the most substantial structure and was perhaps the cottage of the gang's overseers. The remaining five items are most likely to be collapsed fireplaces and chimneys, one at each end of Item 16, close to it but clearly separate, and three roughly in a row approximately 10m north-east of Item 16. The stones comprising the items in this group are, unlike those of Group 1, generally of the same standard of shaping, although not well-matched in size, suggesting that, in this case, the structures were all built at the same time.

The distance between the two groups (approximately 200m) indicates that the two were separate encampments, and the contrast in regularity of plan and construction thus suggests different building histories and possibly construction dates. Several reasonable hypotheses are possible. As shown in Table 1, the number of gangs stationed at Wisemans Ferry decreased in 1829 to only one, No. 4 Iron Gang, whereas up to three gangs had occupied the site during 1827 and 1828. Possibly a smaller station, more easily surveyed and more secure, was established for No. 4 Iron Gang during Percy Simpson's supervision. It is also possible that the Group 2 structures represent Simpson's response to Darling's 1830 instructions detailing that the layout of the station was to be in a square with one entrance and a fire in the centre. In this case the contrast between Group 1 and Group 2 becomes still more significant, the former representing an early, irregular, roughly built assortment of structures typical of the beginning of the road-gang system, while the latter forms the remains of the first attempts to regulate the accommodation and tighten up the security of the gangs.

A great deal of information throwing light on the meaning of the structures and their layout would no doubt be gained by careful clearing and excavation.⁴¹ Yet whatever further details such investigative work reveals must be studied in the context discussed here. The establishment and occupation dates, the historical data concerning stations and road gangs and the present layout of the site indicate that it probably represents the transitional stage of convict road-gang accommodation from the totally random phase towards the escalating regulation of the later years.

Unlike the Great North Road itself (Fig. 9), the convicts' stations were never intended to endure for the benefit of posterity. Towards the close of the construction period in

1832 the gangs were removed one by one to other roads and the station was finally dismantled. The materials were sold and whatever remained was left to be quickly obliterated and, along with the undesirables who had inhabited the station, forgotten. By a fortunate chance, however, the site has survived and stands as a record of the hundreds of men banished to this outpost of the colony.

NOTES

1. The map of Finch's original survey survives in the Archives Office of N.S.W. (hereafter A.O.N.S.W.), Map Nos. 4987A and 4987B; Dumaresq 1827.
2. Karskens 1982; *Historical Records of Australia* (hereafter *H.R.A.*) 16: 125, Darling to Murray, 28/3/1831; A.O.N.S.W., Colonial Secretary to Surveyor of Roads and Bridges (hereafter C.S. to S.R.B.), Macleay to Lockyer, 26/10/1829, Vol. 4/3934; Surveyors to Surveyor General (hereafter S. to S.G.), Simpson to Mitchell, 18/2/1830, Box 2/1579.
3. Shaw 1966: 194.
4. For a discussion on the effect of the Napoleonic Wars on transportation to N.S.W. see *ibid.*: 127.
5. *H.R.A.* 14: 303, Oxley to Darling, 20/9/1827; Mitchell 1839: 5; Dumaresq 1827: Letter IV.
6. Shaw 1966: 214.
7. Backhouse 1843: 390; Weidenhofer 1973: 66; Shaw 1966: 215; Kerr 1977.
8. Kerr 1977: 99-106.
9. A.O.N.S.W., Colonial Secretary's In Letters (hereafter C.S.I.L.), Warner to Dumaresq, 28/4/1828, Box 4/1966; C.S.I.L., Lockyer to Macleay, 4/11/1829, Box 4/2051; C.S. to S.R.B., Macleay to Lockyer, 20/11/1828, Vol. 4/3934; *H.R.A.* 14: 69, Darling to Huskisson, 28/3/1828.
10. *H.R.A.* 14: 69, Darling to Huskisson, 28/3/1828.
11. Dawson 1830: 631; Atkinson 1826: 29 describes similar construction methods.
12. Harris 1847: 145; Backhouse 1843: 390.
13. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Ensign Henry Reynolds to Macleay, 6/5/1831, Box 4/2108; S. to S.G., Finch to Mitchell, 28/5/1830, Box 2/1535.
14. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Warner to Macleay, 25/1/1827, Box 4/1920; C.S.I.L., Warner to Macleay, 12/3/1827, Box 4/1925.
15. These gang locations have been compiled from various sources in A.O.N.S.W., but were mainly drawn from 'Weekly and Monthly Road Gang Reports', 1 Volume, 1827-1830, Vol. 9/2689, and correspondence between the Assistant Surveyors and the Surveyor General/Surveyor of Roads and Bridges.
16. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., T. Hale to Macleay, 10/7/1832, Box 4/2148.
17. These huts are mentioned in the *N.S.W. Calendar and Directory*, 1832 and are shown on G.B. White's 'Survey of the New North Road from the Hawkesbury River to the Reserve of Wollombi', April 1831, A.O.N.S.W. Map No. 5036.
18. A.O.N.S.W., C.S. to S.R.B., Macleay to Lockyer, 18/6/1828, Vol. 4/3934; C.S.I.L., Memorial of Lieutenant Percy Simpson to Governor Darling, 3/10/1829, Box 4/2140.
19. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Mitchell to Macleay, 1/8/1832 (enclosure), Box 4/2149.
20. Hirst 1983: 94.
21. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Nicholson to Macleay, 'Report of no. of convicts escaped', October 1830, Box 4/2083.
22. A.O.N.S.W., Colonial Secretary to Surveyor General (hereafter C.S. to S.G.), Macleay to Mitchell, 27/9/1830, 4/3908.
23. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Ensign Henry Reynolds to Macleay, 6/5/1831, Box 4/2108; C.S.I.L., Nicholson to Macleay, 17/2/1832, Box 4/2135; S. to S.G., Simpson to Mitchell, 10/4/1832, Box 2/1579.

24. Maclehoose 1839: 172.
25. A.O.N.S.W., Sketch Book, Vol. 2, No. 17, 'Stockade at Cox's River', J. Nicholson, 27/8/1832.
26. Cited in Kerr 1977: 101.
27. A.O.N.S.W., Sketch Book, Vol. 2, No. 67, 'Plan accompanying the Governor's Instructions relative to the accommodations for men working in irons on the roads and for the Troops stationed as a Guard over them', Bourke to S.A. Perry, 25/9/1834.
28. McNicoll 1977: 5.
29. Royal Engineers Corps 1837.
30. *ibid.*
31. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Laidley (Commissariat) to Macleay, 5/10/1830, Box 4/2083; C.S.I.L., Ensign Henry Reynolds to Macleay, 6/5/1831, Box 4/2108; S. to S.G., Finch to Mitchell, 25/9/1830, Box 2/1535; Surveyor General to Colonial Secretary (hereafter S.G. to C.S.), Mitchell to Macleay, 14/7/1834, Vol. 4/5400; C.S.I.L., Special Bundles, Lockyer to Deputy Commissary General, 24/9/1828, Box 4/1984; C.S.I.L., Wiseman to Macleay, 2/7/1829, Box 4/2037.
32. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Lockyer to Macleay, 16/11/1829, Box 4/2067.
33. A.O.N.S.W., C.S. to S.G., Macleay to Mitchell, 12/11/1830, Vol. 4/3909.
34. A.O.N.S.W., S.G. to C.S., Mitchell to Macleay, 14/7/1834, 4/5400. A sketch map accompanying this letter shows a surveyor's cottage, kitchen, stable and store, and marks, although does not show, the 'huts' of the convicts in the adjacent allotments, Sketch Book, Vol. 2, No. 56 'Sketch Showing the Allotment at the village of Wolombi applied for by P. Doolan and the Local Station Huts', 17/6/1834. For maps showing other groups of huts see 'Survey of the New North Road from the Hawkesbury River to the Reserve of Wollombi', G.B. White, April 1831, A.O.N.S.W. Map No. 5036; and 'North Road from the Reserve of Wollombi to Broke as marked by Major Mitchell', G.B. White, 1833, A.O.N.S.W. Map No. 5092.
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35. Anon., held in Mitchell Collection, $\overline{\text{conv.}}$. This may
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have been the original sketch of the boxes introduced by Bourke.
36. Telford 1838: 177.
37. A.O.N.S.W., S. to S.G., Dulhunty to Mitchell, 17/6/1833, Box 2/1532.
38. Walker 1915.
39. Cited in Department of Main Roads, N.S.W. 1976: 10.
40. A.O.N.S.W., C.S.I.L., Lockyer to Macleay, 15/8/1828, Box 4/1989.
41. Preliminary surveys by E. Stenning and T. Brooks in 1979 and 1980 located five pennies (1826), a pottery fragment, animal bones, a leg iron, spikes, wedges, a broad-axe blade and two hoe blades. See Stenning 1980 and a submission made to the National Trust of Australia (N.S.W.) on the site by Hawkesbury Historical Society, 1980.

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