

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1989

I, William VERNON give my  
permission to MARK STEPHEN NOLAN

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Signed William Vernon

Date 8<sup>th</sup> August 1989.

Interviewer Mark Nolan

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS OF TAPE

Following fifteen seconds of silence you will hear the sounds of a pastoral setting full of insects, delicate breezes and a distant creek. You gradually draw closer to the creek and its accompanying chorus of cicadas. Off in the distance the sound of a jet plane becomes audible. The jet approaches and passes directly overhead.

You have been transported to the present when I conducted an interview with Mr Bill Vernon, Secretary of the Caves Beach Progress Association. Mr Vernon was chief researcher for the Swansea Bridge Committee during the controversial lead up to the construction of the new opening span bridge at Swansea which has been operational since May 1989.

This recording is an edited version of a longer interview conducted with Mr Vernon on the 23rd July 1989. My questions have been voiced over the original recording. Only material relevant to the topic has been included. Mr Vernon has heard and approved of this edited version.

During the interview Mr Vernon confirms the existence of the railway line from the stone quarry at Caves Beach down to the original Swansea Bridge. He describes how the stone was transported across the bridge by little steam "loco's" and tipped the stone over the side of the trolleys onto the site of the existing Swansea/Blacksmiths breakwater.

Mr Vernon remembers the second wooden bridge, built in 1908, as being a rather shaky structure that needed regular emergency repairs to keep it open to traffic until the official opening of the third bridge in 1955. He goes onto describe the various incidents surrounding this bridge; including the time a man was passed across the slightly jammed open bridge in 1984. Mr Vernon vividly describes the longest delay due to

this regular occurrence of jamming when in May 1985 the bridge seized open for one and a half hours.

The Swansea Bridge Committee was formed in that year. Mr Vernon relates his involvement with that Committee and the history behind the building of the fourth bridge at Swansea. It was a duplication of the third bridge and they are both in use today. The plan for this arrangement will hopefully last to the year 2010 when it will be interesting to see what will be in use as a means of crossing the Swansea Channel.

At the end of the formal interview the sounds you hear are from an airport where another jet prepares for take off. A jet landing follows, culminating in an explosive low rumble as the plane contacts the runway and comes to a stop. The roaring bass dissolves into the sound of the ocean. Out of the waves grows the climatic chord and the final jet take off.

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

QUESTIONS - MR MARK STEPHEN NOLAN

ANSWERS - MR BILL VERNON

(Words in brackets) - Mark Nolan

Q. What can you tell me about the history of the original Swansea Bridge Bill?

A. The photograph I have here Mark was - shows you a steam loco on that bridge. (Oh) Yeh a little steam loco. (And these were the) Kevin (the drivers for). Kevin Hitchins grandfather used to be one of the drivers. An old Swansea family. (Ah right) And [Kevin Hitchins would know - Mrs Vernon] his mothers still alive. Her father, her father, No! No it wouldn't be her father. But Kevin's grandfather - was - drove one of the steam locos. (Ah, okay - and those locos drew, the what skips for car carrying the quarry stones). The rock trolley, the rock trolleys from the quarry at Caves Beach out here. And the line passed just down here. (so - and where was the quarry, situated?) South of Caves Beach (near the breakwater) Near the breakwater (Ah, okay).

Both of us here, when we first came here the part of the cuttin that went through the little park there was the cuttin and there was old railway sleepers and everything still laying there (What down here?) Yeh, down near the breakwater you can still some evidence of I think probably some old railways wheels and that. (Yeh) Must have been - use to follow just a narrow rail track down to the breakwater and they used to load rock onto these trolleys and the trolleys were probably side tippers - you know - go out on the breakwater and tip over the side.

Q. So is the present Swansea/Blacksmiths breakwater the original breakwater, Bill?

A. No, upgraded (has it?) hmm (Ah) the section from Granny's pool, out to the out, oh from the, you know where the Highway comes close near the fish shop there (Yeh, yeh, just past the all-nighter) from that section up to the Grannys Pool was upgraded there about four or five years ago. (Yeh) By the public works. (Yeh it looked too) but that rock I think came from Raymond Terrace (Ah) it didn't come, it wasn't local rock.

Q. What do you remember about the old wooden bridge built in 1908?

A. In 1950 and fifty nine I lived at Lithgow and would travel about one a Month to Cessnock and pass over the old wooden bridge and it was in a bad state of repairs. Some pillons had sunk, the bridge was tipping and leaning and planks and a lot of emergency repair work was carried out to keep it opened to traffic and traffic had to pass single lane at very low speeds over the bridge and subsequently work was commenced in early fifties on the (Number three bridge) Yes, the number three bridge which was opened in 1955.

Q. How were the bridges opened?

A. The old bridge and the early two wooden bridges were both opening type bridges and from reports from locals the opening mechanism didn't operate very successfully and usually a call went out to a number of locals, fisherman, bridge fisherman included and they would lend a hand and give manual assistance to the bridge opening and closing. (Fair dinkum).

Q. What sought of Mechanism was it?

A. Hand wound, hand wound winch to, plus manual assistance. There was a hand winch there ti wind the span open but also manual assistance was given by, whoever, whatever labour was available to assist. (What just with rope?) Yeh pulling and pushing to help (Ah - okay!)

Q. Are the two opening halves of the '55 bridge interlocked?

A. I,m not sure of the pceedure but it's essential that one section close before the other, because, so the latching arrangement, there is a latching arrangement between the two halves of the bridge that mechanically latch them together and it's necessary for one to be down first of all so that this latching can take place.

Q. What are the opening arrangements for the bridge?

A. The bridge has standard opening hours but outside of these hours it's necessary to ring the operator and the bridge will only open on the hour and it's necessary to ring the operator and give a certain amount of notice that they need the bridge open on certain hour (Okay) but there's certain prohibited times such as Saturday mornings when the bridge is maybe open at six o'clock and may not be able to open again till midday.

Q. Has the opening span of the '55 bridge ever caused any serious delays?

A. On one occasion a man at the Bowling Club had taken a heart attack and he had to and an Ambulance attended to him but he, the Ambulance had to, because the bridge had jammed - it failed to close after an opening - the man had to be hand carried across the span of the bridge which was partly jammed and transferred to another waiting ambulance on the northern side so he could be transported off to hospital.

The gap was fairly narrow so he to be transported, consequently the Ambulance the Belmont Ambulance became very concerned about the delays and it says reading - just reading from a letter from the Superintendent of Belmont Ambulance;

"just to mention a couple of recent incidents; approximately two months ago the current bridge was jammed open for at least forty minutes, on Swansea side was Doyalson Ambulance transporting a seriously injured patient from an M.V.A. while Belmont car sat on Belmont side of the bridge. On another occasion recently a collapse in Swansea Workers Club, the Belmont sat on the Belmont side of the bridge, notified our control centre they in turn phoned Workers Club telling them of the delay.

Even when the Newcastle bypass has been constructed there will still be a lot more traffic on Swansea Channel than what uses Stockton Bridge. The Ambulance, Police and Fire Brigade support a non-opening type bridge".



Q. Do you remember the day the '55 bridge jammed open?

A. Yeh, yeh I went in and saw that. (How long was it jammed for? - Can you remember) An hour and a half I believe (Hmm - it must have caused) Yeh the bridge has opened and it was an occurrence that happened now and then and the bridge was open particularly on a hot day and due to expansion the bridge wouldn't close and it was necessary to get the fire brigade there to pump water onto the metal to cool the bridge down (Hmm) and there had been several delays and that one in particular went on for about an hour and a half. (Hmm) and a matter of fact they had to drive the heavy fire brigade vehicle over the bridge to help so that the weight of the vehicle would help cause the bridge to fully close. (Yeh).

There was traffic backed up everywhere that particular day (incredible) but the longest opening I've recorded, I've recorded myself; I was there fishing, it was about twenty minutes.

When you look at twenty minutes, I worked it out that a car, the highway out here was a hundred mile an hour, a hundred kilometres an hour for some sections, eighty for some. If you were averaging it out at ninety and I worked it out that a car could have been somewhere between Gosford and Wyong, thirty kilometres out, away travelling at an average speed of ninety kilometres an hour and in that twenty minutes they would have travelled that thirty kilometres and would have arrived at Swansea to join the queue. You know, you could imagine they travelled thirty kilometres while the bridge was open for that thirty minutes (Hmm).

Q. Were there any other spectacular incidents involving the '55 bridge?

A. On this occasion Paul and I was prawning in the channel about one o'clock in the morning. The bridge started to, the traffic lights came on to stop the traffic and the bridge started to lift to let a cruiser through to go out through the heads and the bridge had only just started to lift and the span started to open when a

motorist came from Sydney at very high speed went through the red lights and then bounced his way over the bridge now starting to open. (Tch, tch, tch, tch, tch, tch - so he was coming from the south) Yeh at very high speed and bounced his way over the opening bridge and managed to, managed to get over safely, fortunately for him. If he had of been one second late I think we would have been fishing him out of the channel.

Q. Who was in the car advertisement filmed on the '55 bridge?

A. That was Colin, Colin Bond the racing car driver? (Were they advertising the car or the tyres? I can't remember now) Yeh, he was, there was some, a bit of controversy about that. About who gave permission, for that (Ahah) and there was quite a controversy about that.

Q. Is high diving from the bridge sanctioned?

A. No it's illegal, illegal. Some of the boys I've noticed have hung onto the ends of the opening span and they get a lift, a high lift to give them a high dive as the bridge goes up (Ah right) Overlooking the danger of course of dropping onto a boat passing through (true, yeh)

Q. What's the fishing like off the bridge?

A. (You reckon its - what is it the best - what is it) Yeh I would regard the bridge as being the best fishing boat in the channel and it's yielded enormous catches over the years that the various bridges been there. (Whats the local constabulary think about that?) Generally turn a blind eye to it eh, eh, eh! (That's good)

Q. How did you get involved with the Swansea Bridge Committee?

A. I became involved in. In seventy four the DMR announced its plan to put the expressway through on the eastern corridor, in seventy four (Yeh) But there was a protest movement setup opposing it and requesting that the highway or fighting to have the highway taken on the transferred to the western side of the lake and that decision was made by the

Department of Main Roads, the DMR, in 1976. But in 1979 a series of public meetings was held to deal with the Swansea to Doyalson, Doyalson to Swansea section of the Pacific Highway to upgrade the Pacific Highway to four lanes. When the decision was made - now here's something you ought to jot down - when the decision was made in 1976 to put the route of the freeway, the National Highway on the western side of the lake. A decision was also made to upgrade the highway from Doyalson through to Newcastle, the Pacific Highway to a four lane highway. But the actual route through Swansea, a series of public meetings was held in 1979 to gather the public opinion and because it was intended at that stage that a new crossing of the Swansea channel had to be built and debates took place as to the route and what type of bridge. (Hmm)

(When was it formerly called the Swansea Bridge Committee and when was that officially inaugurated?) The Swansea Highway Committee was formed in February 1980 and for and functioned during the three public meetings that was held at that time. But in 1985 a new committee was formed called the Swansea Bridge Committee (Right) Originally it was the Highway Committee now became the Bridge Committee (Okay) Right (Yeh).

Q. Who supported the low level bridge?

A. The Chamber of Commerce supported the duplicate of the existing bridge (Yeh!).

Q. What did the boating fraternity want?

A. They supported the high level bridge for obvious reasons but they did not want to be held up when the bridge was opening for road traffic and they supported the high level bridge concept.

Well of course there's been a large increase in boating traffic as there has been in highway traffic and this increase has enabled to see many more demands on the bridge for opening and consequently the boating fraternity, particularly boats big enough that the bridge has to lift for well they became supportive of a high level bridge or a non - that would give clearance for boat traffic (Hmm)

Q. What did the Swansea Bridge Committee want?

A. They wanted the (the high level?) something different (and would also) a bypass!

Q. Is the present twin bridge arrangement adequate?

A. The plan, the plan for Swansea will last till about 2010 and then the traffic flow will be such, that's if it increases at the present rate, well, they'll have to think of something else.

There's already thinking - there's a Roads and Traffic Authority have had a firm of consultants doing a study on the Newcastle, on the highways through Newcastle, through here and there've even made a suggestion, come up with an idea that from Charlestown through to Newcastle should be upgraded to six lanes - you know (must be expecting big things) Yeh eventually it's going to have to be it. But the Herald naturally they weren't in favour, they were in favour of the Bypass, Bypasses you know (Yeh)

Q. Are the present bridges synchronised for opening and closing?

A. No the one operator does both but they can be individually operated as well (Yeh) you know. If you had a failure of one bridge it is possible to, well they could divert the traffic with Police directing traffic over one. But they can be, the one operator operates both now, all the controls go over to the one.

Q. What new features has the well now number four bridge got?

A. Yeh, they've got closed circuit television there too.

Q. Where is that located?

A. You know where the operator is in the new tower. He, you see the camera facing upstream on the old bridge.

I struck a case there one day, the old bridge lifted, two boats went through and a third one was head for the bridge and the bridge started to come down. (Tch, tch, tch, tch, tch) and they had to shout and sing and pip and go on.

He'd only seen two boats he hadn't seen the third one.

Q. In conclusion Bill, What does the future hold for Swansea Bridge?

A. Well, the only thing is, is there going to be enough fuel to power the automobile as we know it going into the next century and will the growth of traffic be the same as what it is now. If it is well they're going to have to do, there's going to be problems everywhere aren't they. Like this area is going to carry a lot more people, they'll be a lot more people passing through and the traffic on the highway has been increasing three or four percent a year. Some highways its even higher than that. What's going to happen, I don't know!

MARK STEPHEN NOLAN

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE - AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

WEDNESDAY 7-9 PM

SWANSEA BRIDGE/S

25TH AUGUST 1989

Swansea is situated at the entrance to Lake Macquarie. The area was formerly called Galgabba by the Awabakal Aborigines. In 1800 Captain William Reid mistakenly claimed the entrance to the Lake as being the mouth of the Hunter River due to the similar geography of the two harbours being described as;

"...a river mouth having a small island opposite its entrance and a seam of exposed coal on its southern side..."<sup>1</sup>.

While the headland continued to be known as Reid's Mistake the major part of the surrounding area was generally known as Pelican Flats. Robert Talbot, a local businessman, remarked on the resemblance of the Flats to Glamorganshire in Wales. Due to his standing in the local community he was able to bring about the changing of the name Pelican Flats to that of Swansea. Swansea was proclaimed a township on November 1st, 1887.<sup>2</sup>

The Government of the day were constantly being asked for the channel to be deepened and made safer for the cargo shipping. The requests resulted in the building of a breakwater on either side of the channel and the deepening of the channel itself. To facilitate the construction of the walls meant the need to build a bridge across the channel.<sup>3</sup>

1. Swansea Chamber of Commerce., The Centenary of Swansea - Pg 5  
Swansea 1988
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., Pg 17

In June of 1864 a deputation of local mining interests urged the Minister for Works in Sydney that steps should be taken to improve navigation in Swansea channel.<sup>4</sup> The promised dredge arrived in 1876 to clear sand and mud from the channel.<sup>5</sup>

The plan for the harbour works was to begin by constructing breakwaters on either side of the entrance to the channel. This required the establishment of three major works; a stone quarry at the southern extremity of Pelican Flats, a railway and a bridge over the channel.<sup>6</sup>

This first bridge was built in 1881 by A & R Amos. It was used to transport the stone from the quarry on the southern shore to the breakwater and training wall on the northern side of the entrance to the channel. According to Mr Vernon at Caves Beach there was still some remnants of railway line and rolling stock evident just down from his home when he arrived there in 1964.<sup>7</sup>

Built mainly of timber with a draw span, the original ~~brid~~ bridge was two hundred metres long and carried a light rail track on which trucks carried the stone. The bridge was transferred to the Public Works Department for use as a public road traffic bridge in 1895.

4. K. Clouten., Reid's Mistake., Adelaide, 1967., Pg 184

5. Ibid., Pg 187

6. Ibid., Pg 202

7. Extract from Tape., Swansea Bridge - Mr Bill Vernon., Caves Beach., 1989



A second bridge was built in 1908 by the contractors Peter Cullen and Sons who constructed a timber beam bridge with a steel girder bascule opening span. It comprised fifteen spans and was opened to traffic in 1909. This bridge carried road traffic for more than forty years. It rattled notoriously as heavy vehicles crossed with their tyres thumping the wooden planking.<sup>8</sup> By the late forties the condition of the bridge was deteriorating part and constant replacement of the piles was required. The speed and weight of traffic was taking its toll.<sup>9</sup>

Mr Vernon remembers travelling over this bridge back in 1950 on his way from Lithgow to Cessnock. He relates how the bridge was in a bad state of repair. "Some pillons had sunk, the bridge was tipping and leaning...traffic had to pass single lane at very low speeds".<sup>10</sup>

Even the opening mechanism for the span didn't operate very successfully as frequent calls went out to the locals to lend a hand to assist winding the hand winch.<sup>11</sup> A photograph detailing the lifting arrangement is shown in "Down to the Hunter" by John Turner. The locals lived with this until 1955 when the third bridge was built by the Department of Main Roads.<sup>12</sup>

8. Swansea Chamber of Commerce., The Centenary of Swansea., Pg 17

9. Newcastle Division of Institute of Engineers Australia., Shaping the Hunter., Pg 72

10. Refer Taped Interview

11. Ibid

12. N.D.I.E.A., Shaping....., Pg 72

This replacement bridge, still in use today, featured a number of firsts for the Department of Main Roads. It has a double leaf bascule span, underneath counterweights and a light weight grid deck.<sup>13</sup> For many years this bridge was the object of general community approval. It provides quite a spectacle when the two opening spans sit majestically at attention as a salute to the tall masted yachts as they pass through.

However, it was these very same opening spans that caused long delays when they jammed open. Mr Vernon recalls the incident in May 1985 when the temperature of the day caused the steelwork on the bridge to expand, resulting in the two opening halves failing to close completely. The local fire brigade was called to pump water over the bridge to assist it to cool down. The delay lasted one and a half hours.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years this bridge has become the focus of sometimes bitter controversy; not wide enough to cope with the ever increasing road traffic and not high enough to accommodate the passage of large vessels using the lake, it increasingly became the subject for name calling derision.<sup>15</sup> As a result a duplicate bridge was built alongside.

13. N.D.I.E.A., Shaping...., Pg 72

14. Refer Tape

15. S.C.C., The Centenary...., Pg 17

This new \$12.3 million low-level bridge is the fourth to be built at Swansea, funded by the Federal Government under the Australian Bicentennial Road Development Program and by the State Government. The new bridge will double the traffic capacity of the Pacific Highway through Swansea, carrying two lanes of southbound traffic, with the old bridge carrying two lanes of northbound traffic.

As far as the opening of both bridges go now, Mr Vernon describes how one operator can control both but in the event of failure of one, they can be operated individually. The operators vision is assisted by closed circuit television camera's to avoid closing the spans onto otherwise hidden vessel's passing underneath.<sup>16</sup>. Hopefully along with further roadworks that are planned for the notorious S-bends, the addition of the new bridge will bring an end to Swansea's long term bottle-neck.

The plan for Swansea will last until approximately 2010 and then the traffic flow will be such, that is if it increases at the present rate, then they will have to think of something else. When asked what he thinks the future holds for the Swansea Bridges, Mr Vernon reflected by saying, "Is there going to be enough fuel to power the automobile as we know it, going into the next century? What's going to happen? I don't know!".<sup>17</sup>.

16. Refer Taped Interview

17. Ibid

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