

YVONNE EGGINS

OPEN FOUNDATION - ORAL HISTORY

WEDNESDAY EVENING CLASS

SUMMARY

and

TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Mr. Thomas Wright 6th generation,
whose family have farmed the same land at Phoenix
Park for over 150 years.

9/7/88

YVONNE EGGINS

OPEN FOUNDATION - ORAL HISTORY

WEDNESDAY EVENING CLASS

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

with

THOMAS WRIGHT

9/7/88

With the birth of his grandsons last year Tom Wright now has the 8th generation of the Wright family living on the family farm at Phoenix Park, the land which has been continuously farmed by the Wright family for over 150 years. Descendents of a convict sent out on the first fleet for a period of 7 years, this family has contributed to the local history of the Morpeth/Phoenix Park area.

As a 6th generation descendent Tom recalls tales told to him by his father of the early years in the area during his grandfather's era. His great, great grandfather John Wright was assigned convicts to clear the land of timber before the farms were established. He tells of the necessity to chain these men in sheds along the banks of the Hunter River each night, and of the problems the early farmers faced, problems not unlike those experienced today.

Tom describes the irrigation system his father devised for watering his land and the unique electrified fence he developed, the first in the area. He relates the story of his grandfather (on his mother's side), who not only worked the land but also provided the area with a travelling picture show. This was taken to towns as far afield as Bulladelah. Grandfather was assisted by his wife who was responsible for playing the piano during the show and rattling a kerosene tin for effect during a war movie. We learn of the brass band they started, complete with uniforms, which played on the hill at Raworth.

He remembers the devastation caused by the regular flooding of the Hunter River across the farms and in particular the 1955 flood. The efforts of a community to assist in times of hardship. People such as the Styman Brothers who operated a general store in Morpeth, providing almost everything the farmer would need, and who in time of flood gave those who suffered hardship credit until such time payment could be made.

Morpeth was described as a very busy river port and rail head providing the means of transporting the produce to the market in Maitland and until the rail line was built across the Hawkesbury River, by ship to Sydney. A bustling town boasting 14 hotels, bonded stores, blacksmiths and a variety of commercial ventures. The character of the town today has changed considerably from the early years around the turn of the century which the Wright family would have experienced.

We learn of the association the family had in the building of the Morpeth Bridge, and the reason his grandmother was the first woman allowed to cross the bridge by foot. Tom relates the story of how his father was the last man to drive the horse drawn carriage hearse before a motorised version replaced it. So many memories combine to make a significant contribution to the local history of the Morpeth area by the Wright family.

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH MR. THOMAS WRIGHT FARMING IN PHOENIX PARK/MORPETH AREA

- 004 * How long has your family been in Morpeth Mr. Wright?
- 005 One hundred and fifty one years as far as we know.
- 006 * Who was your first ancestor, do you know anything about him?
- 007 That would be the one who came out in the first fleet. He was Joseph Wright, he was a convict and he got 7 years for stealing lead off a church in England.
- 008 * How long was he.....did he get a pardon?
- 009 After 7 years they gave him 42 acres or something like that at Windsor and he farmed there. I think he died when he was 42 they told us.
- 012 * Then what happened? The farm went on to
- 013 We don't know a real lot about it. I think his wife married a neighbour down there and I think she had 7 children to the first husband.
- 014 * How did the farm come into the family here? Was it a land grant or was it purchased?
- 015 No, it was leased for many years off Macdonalds and then it was purchased off them. Dad's father I believe purchased it but they rented it for many years.
- 017 * In one of the local history books there is an article about John Wright and his wife Elizabeth. That would have been your great, great grandfather I suppose would it?
- 019 Well he would have been the first one to come to Phoenix Park.
- 020 * He started this farm here. What crops was he farming?
- 021 Oh I would imagine it would be corn, lucerne, broom millet and things like that. Pumpkins, watermelons, that sort of thing.
- 022 * Very different to what is being farmed today I suppose is it?
- 023 Oh no, it is much the same I think. Although a lot of them used to grow potatoes but they don't seem to grow too many of them now. I think expense has probably got the better of them.
- 025 * Yes. What problems did they face in the early days?
- 026 Well I suppose it would be droughts and floods, 'um, they couldn't irrigate like we can now 'um, I don't know, they must have had some good times here at different times.....yes.
- 028 * What stories can you remember your grandfather telling you about life in Morpeth? What do they do for entertainment?
- 030 Well I didn't really meet my grandfather. It is only what Dad.....Oh I don't know, I don't think they had much entertainment in Morpeth of a night. No I've heard him say if you were over there after dark you had to be very careful because of the different people who came on the boats. You had to get home before dark of a night.
- 033 * It was a fairly big sea port or river port wasn't it?
- 034 Yes, and I've heard Dad say his father said you had to be careful at night or you may get clubbed over the head.
- 036 * Did they basically have to walk everywhere?
- 036 I think they used to ride their horses a bit. Yes.

- 037 * ^{course} Of course Morpeth is a very different place now to what it was in those days isn't it?
- 038 'Um Dad used to say that his grandfather used to go to Morpeth on the horse. He would go to the hotel and get a bit under the weather and they would chase them home. The policeman would chase him on the horse and he would jump the horse into the river, swim it out into the middle of the river and he would pull his bottle out and give the policeman a bit of cheek.
- 042 * What was the story about your ^{great} grandmother being the first woman allowed to walk over the Morpeth Bridge?
- 043 Well that was her husband the policeman used to chase. Apparently he was riding his horse down the farm one day and they had a stick in the ground that they were using as a mark where they used to start to plough. The horse shied at it and threw him off and killed him. She was allowed to go over the bridge before it was completed to his funeral.
- 047 * How did they get him over?
- 047 I suppose they had the old ferry, they used to wind across the river by hand from one side to the other. They had 3 ferries, punts they used to call them, 3 or 4 I think it was locally at each end of Phoenix Park. One would come from Hinton to Morpeth, another from Morpeth to Wallalong, another from Morpeth to Largs and one from Phoenix Park to Morpeth.
- 052 * So it was rather a bustling town then.
- 052 Yes I would imagine, yes. It was the main port before the Hawkesbury, before the train went across the Hawkesbury. They used to take everything from Morpeth to Sydney by boat. I can remember the boats coming up but it was only a couple of old ones. They used to bring the paper and sugar up for the Mercury. (Mercury is local paper). They used to bring the paper and unload it at Morpeth.
- 056 * How did your father get his produce to town. Did he take it to Maitland?
- 057 Well Dad, when the war was on Dad couldn't get into the army because of his heart and he went to the Steel Works and worked and they didn't do much farming because there was a very bad drought at those times. 'Um after the war was over he went in for dairying which I think was a mistake because some of the milk cheques I have seen here were about 6 pence I think and it wouldn't pay the grocery bill, but he dairied for many years and he used to like it. He used to grow a few acres of broom millet, that was the only thing that would bring in a bit of extra income and it was very good, the broom millet. It was a good price, always, and you could always get the neighbours. You could hire them, it used to be 10 shillings per hour for the 4 fellows next door and they would work like horses. They would do it in no time for you but now days if you grew broom millet you wouldn't be able to get anyone that would know how to do it and the wages would be too much.....but anyhow.
- 071 * I suppose it was fairly hectic at Maitland market in the early days with all the drays.
- 072 Oh yes, from the photos you see there was hundreds of dray loads of produce and they used to get up before daylight to leave to go to the market. That would be his father, I don't think Dad.....Dad used to grow a lot of small vegetables. He put the first irrigation in about here. He used to have so many pieces of down pipe joined together with a rubber hose and little screws to screw them together and he had an old engine on the river and he used to pump water just along the river bank and grow carrots. They used to end up at the Newcastle markets.
- 078 * It must have been hard in the Depression years. Did a lot of people come up from the city who were unable to get work to the farming areas?
- 080 I have never really heard them say. I don't think they ever went hungry on the farms because they would always have enough to eat. The people in the cities would find it harder than what it was on the land I'd say.

- 083 * I believe the Government purchased some of your land to build the Morpeth Bridge.
- 084 Yes we have the document here where they bought the land off us. What was it.....about 17 pounds I think they paid for it and it is a beautiful document, how it is written out
- 085 * Rather an historical piece of paper.
- 086 Yes. I might take it over and let them use it over at the museum.
- 086 * Yes I'm sure they would be pleased to have it. Ofcourse farms are faced with droughts and floods, what is your opinion, which do you think is far more devastating?
- 089 Oh the floods are much worse here than droughts. When there is a drought you can sell the lucerne you grow and get a good price for it but when it is a good season you just have put it in your haysheds and hope you can sell it.
- 091 * Morpeth has had its fair share of floods. According to history I think there have been 60 floods in Morpeth. You must have seen water on your land fairly regularly, or your family must have.
- 093 Yes it has been over it a few times, but it used to do a good job. It used to leave a lot of good soil, top soil, but the last few big floods we had it brought down a terrible lot of sand and left it deposited on the farms. It nearly ruined some of them. It is just starting to get back alright now after 10 years. We haven't had a big flood for 10 years
- 097 * Ofcourse the flood that comes to mind, everybody's mind is the 1955 flood. Tell me of your recollections of that.
- 099 Yes that was a terrible night. We were very lucky, our house.....Dad's father, in the 1893 flood lived in a little house at the side of our house and when it was up at the top of the windows he said when he built his new house he would put it out of flood reach. So he dug a drain down through the farm and he brought the soil all up by horse and cart and sand and he built this mound where this house stands. He built it a foot higher than the 1893 flood. The night of the '55 flood some of us had gone to bed, then we would get up and have a look. The water got up to about where it normally does on a big flood. It was pouring rain and it rose, I'd say 4 to 5 feet in several hours. It came up very quickly and it was nearly under the house. I said to Dad, "we had better start packing up". He said, "go to bed you silly beggers, no flood will ever get into this house". Anyhow it wasn't long and it was coming up through the floor boards and we started packing things up on whatever we could find. We got everything up pretty well except the piano which got water in it and the lino. We were very fortunate we only had a foot of water in the house. The other people down in Phoenix Park, further around, the water was up to their guttering and some of them it was up to the ceiling and some of them had never been in a flood before.
- There were some families, two in particular were new, they had never seen a flood like it before, well nobody had seen one like it. They had to swim from their house to their hay sheds and get up on the haystacks. There was a chap in Morpeth his name was Noel Edwards and he used to be always on the river with a little boat, a wooden boat with a 3 outboard motor on it. Through the night he rescued a lot of people and the next day he spent all day going around the farms bringing them up to the bridge in his little boat because he knew the area real well and he rescued a lot. Down the other end of Morpeth one family was coming out in their boat to milk their cows up on the hill and the boat overturned, I just can't remember whether it was one or two of them got drowned. They had a terrible ordeal, they had to get the helicopter I believe to rescue them.....(Very frightening).....That was a terrible night, we were lucky but in Maitland there were whole streets of houses got washed away. When the water went down I drove up one street in Maitland and all you could see were the taps sticking out of the ground and the brick steps where the houses had been. Two rows of them completely gone. The big bridge they call the long bridge near the hospital had a row of big trees on one side of it. When the houses were floating down they hit the trees, knocked them over and they knocked this cement bridge down and it was devastating. They rebuilt it after and after that they put the trees on the opposite side of it so if the flood ever goes through it it doesn't hurt.
- 133 * The Morpeth Bridge here has withstood flood ^{AFTER} and flood.

- 134 Oh yes it has withstood flood after flood. The first Morpeth Bridge, well when they started to build it I was told, they had all the material on the side of the river bank. They got a big flood and it washed all their material they had to build it into the river and they had to start again. It's been a terribly good bridge but the loads that over it now on semi-trailers, they are always putting new girders under it.
- 139 * Tell me about the Land Army.
- 139 Well I didn't know much about it until last year when we had some people come here wanting to do a film on it about the ladies. When the war was on, they used to work on the farm and so they called them the Land Army. They brought these ladies here that used to work about.....ofcourse they are quite elderly now and a film crew came from Melbourne I think and they made a film of it. They were going to show it on T.V. I believe. They were going to let us know when it is on but they haven't told us yet.
- 145 * Your father went to school in Morpeth I take it and you went to school in Morpeth?
- 147 Yes, and his father went to school in Morpeth. Dad's father went for a fortnight, I don't know how long Dad went. Dad went to 6th Class in Morpeth then he went to carpentry at the Tech. I believe for awhile after that. I went to Morpeth School and 'um, the last year at Morpeth School we were unloading a load of hay and Dad fell off the horse drawn dray it was, fell through the frame and broke his leg. He was hung up and we had to get 2 or 3 men who happened to be shovelling mud off the road after one of the floods and they had to come and lift him up and get him out of it. He was in plaster 18 months. I had to leave school then, I didn't get to High School which I wasn't sorry about. I hated school.
- 156 * So your started very early.....
- Yes, when I was 12.
- *running the farm when your Dad was sick.
- 158 Yes Dad had to go to Sydney and have a bone graft and it was 2 or 3 months after he had a bone graft before he was able to walk again. He took a stroke in 1948, no when he was 4 and he wasn't much good ever after, like he couldn't work very much. He used to do a bit on the tractor but he wasn't very good. We got a tractor in 1948 which we thought was heaven.
- 164 * Yes, you mentioned you didn't like working with horses, was that right?
- 165 It wasn't too bad but our old horses had been here as long as I had been here and when you put them on the plough they would do an hour or two and you would get hoarse from singing out to them to try to get them to go because they were so old and it was terrible. But they did a terrific job in their day. There was nothing like them. They worked these places pulled terrific loads and everything but when we got a tractor that was a different thing altogether. The ground was that hard when we first got a tractor, we tried to get it to go into the ground. The ground was like concrete after the cows tramping it and you just couldn't work it it was so hard. But now after we have got all this flood deposit which is about 5 feet in my time it is nice and loamy and it ploughs very easily.
- 176 * All this land initially, was it covered in trees, was it a heavily wooded area?
- 177 So they tell us. I believe the first Wright that came here used to look after so many convicts that cleared Phoenix Park. They had sheds down along the river bank where they used to chain them up at night, run a great chain through their shackles from one end of the shed to another. They used to clear the land by day, but it was all cedar they tell me.
- 181 * These 5 convicts were assigned to your great great grandfather?
- 182 I suppose they must have been. I never heard a real lot about it until one time a woman came here from down around the lakes. She said she was born here on this place and she was about 80, that was about 40 years ago. She said she was one of their daughters and she was born here. She told us how they used to chain the convicts up.....That is interesting.
- I believe Mr. Macdonald owned the Phoenix Park at first but I don't know whether there was someone else before them. They tell us they stocked it with cattle and there was a flood and they all got washed away so they didn't stock it with cattle much ever after.
- 192 * You say you are not particularly fond of cows either.
- 193 No not really, 'um we had the dairy here when we were young and we had to get up early for school and milk cows by hand. I can remember Dad going to see the school teacher and

instead of me stopping home from school could I get out at 3pm instead of 3.30pm so I could get home to help with the cows. I didn't particularly like them but when Dad died smartly sold the cows and the shed full of hay we had. We haven't done too bad since I suppose. Why I didn't particularly like them you would have to go down on the farm and m them on a patch of lucerne.

202 * This ofcause was when you were very young.

203 Yes when I was 10 or 12. Lucerne is notorious here for bloat and in those days they did have oil to spray on the lucerne to stop the bloat. You would have to mind them for 15m on this particular patch of lucerne. They were terrible things, one would go one way the other would go another way. You would have to chase them. You would be in terrible strife, if you left them for more than 15 mins. and if you put them back in the paddock a there was a southerly wind blowing they would bloat and you would have them up in the ba you would have to get a 3 ft. length of wire with a stock of tar rag on the end and you would have to put it down their necks and get them to burp and it would go all over you, smell, you have no idea what it used to be like.

214 * Is this why you don't like cows?

215 You used to have a special implement that was like a round knife with a sheath on it. They would bloat up that much they would die. You could get this trowcar, they called it, into their side in the right place and tap their stomach and let all this gas out or they would die. This used to happen very often. It used to be the best cow that gave the most milk that.....be in the most trouble I suppose..... One afternoon I fed them along the fence with some hay, it was half green, half dry. That was the worst you could do because the two bully cows, pushed the others out of the road and next morning we went down and the two best ones were dead in the paddock. That would often happen. If they happened to get out during the night you would lose them. Nowadays it is different. Dad made the first electric fence I think that was about here. He put some wire pegs and he had an old T-Model Ford coil and it used to sit at the end. You put the pegs across a bit of the wire, you would sit at the end and when you saw a cow go near this fence you would put this Ford coil on the battery and would give out a terrific shock. The cow would touch it, she would bellow and go back, it was the greatest thing out. You could mind them on the lucerne then.

236 * Your Dad was the first one to.....

236 He was the first one around here I'd say that had one of those. A few years later you could buy one that worked on a battery with a pendulum in it that used to tick and it would only give out a current now and again.

238 * Morpeth has obviously changed a lot, the town, from what your grandfather has told your father to what it is today.

239 Yes.

239 * I think you said there were 14 hotels.

240 They used to tell us there was 14, now there is 2.

241 * A lot of the old stores ofcause are being revamped into gift stores.

243 Yes, the old store of Styman Bros., they were the main big grocery shop in Morpeth and they used to stock everything. They had their own bakehouse. I can remember they used to deliver. They would bring bread around every second day, groceries when you ordered it and they were a terrific firm. When you would get a flood they would let you 'book up'. It might be 6 months, they would keep all these farmers around this area. When farmers got their cheques they would pay them. Only for Styman Bros. I think a lot of people around here would have starved. Shops are not like that now.

251 * I suppose people combined their occupations. I remember reading about a Mr. White who was not only a furniture and cabinet maker but he was also the undertaker for the town.

255 Yes that's right. My Uncle used to drive the hearse for him at different times that I can remember.

257 * Was this the horse-drawn hearse?

257 No it was a motorised one. He was coming back from the cemetery one day and it was a terribly heavy storm and he pulled up and gave these 2 young chaps a ride. He said, "I hope you don't mind I only have room in the hearse". They said, "no we don't mind". When he pulled up in Morpeth and let them out he said, "how was the ride?" "Oh gee", they said "it was rough". "Well you are the first blokes I have ever heard complain about it!".

262 * They had a rather ornate hearse years ago, glass sided, tasseles and horse drawn.

265 Yes, Dad's father was the last one that Whites buried in the horse drawn coach. After that they got a motorised one.....Mum's father was one of the local people, they had a farm but he also had a travelling picture theatre and he used to show pictures here in Morpeth in what was Searles Blacksmiths Shop one time. He used to go as far as Bulladelah and I have heard Mum say that they used to practically crawl along in the car at night with a kerosene light on the front of the car. My grandmother used to play the piano and rattle a kerosene tin when a war picture was on they used to show to make the noise. They had their own band and they used to sit up on the hill at Raworth. Had their own uniforms too.

269 When Roma and I got married my grandmother had moved out of her old house at Raworth up into a new house with her son and we had the idea if we went up and saw grandmother perhaps she would sell us the old house. So we went up and we suggested to her to sell the old house. She said yes she would sell it to us and we asked her what would she want for it. She said she wanted 280 pounds. It was a beautiful block of ground but the house was very dilapidated, you couldn't see it for lantana. When we went to the solicitor to buy it off her she said it was too much to pay and charged 240 pounds for it. 240 pounds then was a fair bit of money but it was still cheap. The day after we signed we went up into this old house, into the yard. I climbed under this lantana with a reaping hook and tried to clear some of it. I had no way of doing it so I came home and got the tractor. I climbed under with a big chain which I hooked onto the tractor and kept pulling it out. When we finally cleared this place, on the front verandah covered up were these musical instruments which they used to play in their band. An old drum, old cornet, trumpet and different things and there was also an old gramophone which you used to put a cylinder in it to play. There was a terrible lot of old things there..... Dad's father used to grow the broom millet, of course every farmer around here used to grow broom millet, say 5 - 10 acres, which they used to get a good cheque for it. Dad's father had a patch of it once and they were.....there was a lot of work in it. You used to have to put it into the hay shed and dry it. They were doing what you used to call hackle the millet which was taking the seed off it with a machine. In those days they used to drive it with what they would call a horse power and the horse would wind the power and give the millet hackler power. The heads used to fall through the hackler sometimes. His daughter went around picking these loose millet heads up and she bent down...she had long hair down to her waist. Some of her hair got caught in this universal joint on the millet hackle and within a few seconds it scalped her. She got over it but she never grew broom millet after. Dad said that is when it was a good price after that. He used to grow corn and got nothing for it. That's how it went.

326 I've heard them say years ago when they used to take the produce to Morpeth in the horse and dray, they used to have to back the horse down close to the boat and as they were backing it they would wind the hand break on. This chap was backing it down one day and apparently his hand brake didn't go on too good and the horse, dray and fellow went back into the river. Of course the horse was drowned. They were searching for this fellow and the wharf had like a big platform and underneath it the river bank. Well they heard him sing out and they got him. He was sitting up in the mud under the wharf. They said how did he get up here. Well he said he couldn't swim so I had to pull him out. Apparently he went out under the boat and up under the old wharf.

341 * He was lucky to be alive!

341 Yes

342 * Tell me a little about the rail service in Morpeth?

343 Well I can remember a bit when I was young, of course there wasn't trucks about much in those days and everything used to be taken to the rail head at Morpeth. They would have long lines of railway trucks and they would load them all with lucerne hay, not the little bales they have now but big half-ton bales. You had to be pretty good to handle them.

The whole train would be lined up from the station at Morpeth and the engine would be up near the bridge. They would always have 2 or 3 big milk wagons on. I don't know whether they used to take the milk to Sydney or not but it used to go away in these big refrigerated rail trucks and the train ended up.....the factory here at Morpeth and the wharf stopped so the train stopped. It used to be an hourly service to Morpeth up to 11.30pm at night so it used to be very good when we went to the pictures. It would blow its whistle at Morpeth Station, you would run out the door here and catch it at Queens Wharf. By the time it got enough steam up you would be able to run over the bridge and along to the next station to catch it. It used to be 2 pence return to go to East Maitland and back. One night I had a 10 shilling note and the old guard said, "I can't change that, pay me next time you come". The next time I gave him the 2 pence and he said, "by gee I must have been drunk that night!" They used to get drunk on the old train and one night he walked straight off the back of it.

373 * How big was the original farm?

374 I think it was 33 acres and later on they bought another 14 acres next to it which is joined on to it now.

377 * Were most of the lots cut up into that size when the land was sold?

378 I think the biggest acreage in Phoenix Park would be 48 acres which would be.....I think there were 3 or 4 farms that size but some of them were 20, 23, 29, 30 acres, that sort of thing .

383 * Is this the oldest farm in the district that has been in the same family?

384 Well it would be as old as any. There is still a lot of descendants of the original one around here and there is still 2 or 3 lots of them on the farms. A lot of the farms around here weren't big enough for brothers usually. They have bought extra farms next door to them and made them bigger farms. I'd say the last 2 - 3 years has been the worst around here for a long time because things are so expensive. Tractors are so expensive to buy and diesel fuel is so dear. All the machinery, anything you want has just gone out of proportion.

393 They tell me years ago one of the Wrights down on the Paterson river had a small farm and he sold it for a keg of rum. Which I don't know if it is the gospel truth or not but that is the story.

395 * That would have been in what year? How long ago would that have been?

396 Oh I wouldn't know, could be 70-80 maybe 100 years ago. I've heard Dad say they did so I don't know whether it is right or not. I wouldn't know. The first one that came here I believe was a John Wright, but from then on there has been a Tom in each family. We've got a son Tom, don't know whether he is going to have any sons or not or whether I will be to get one of my daughters to call one Tom. The first chap that came out was a Joseph Wright then the first chap that was on these farms was a John Wright and after that there have all been Tom Wright. It's the 8th generation living here in this house, our grandsons, from the first fleet. Their names are not Wright, it is Burg, but they are the daughter's children so they are the 8th generation from when they first came out.

406 * That is something to be very proud of isn't it.

405 I would imagine, yes. They are beautiful boys, they are twins. We have two other beautiful grandchildren too.

407 * So plenty to carry on the name.

407 More than likely some of them, unless we retire and go up the lake somewhere and sell

* Thank you Mr. Wright.

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

I, THOMAS WRIGHT give my

permission to Yvonne Eggen

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for
research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of
these if required) and for copies to be lodged in
the Oral History Department

..... Newcastle University

for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed T H Wright

Date 9. 7. 88

Interviewer Yvonne Eggen

YVONNE EGGINS

OPEN FOUNDATION

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Wednesday Evening Class

5/9/88

Morpeth and its History

Summary

The largest town outside Sydney in its early colonial days, Morpeth developed into the major river port for the vast expanding hinterland and the outlet for the developing industries in the town in 1828.

Its character has changed from the exciting days of sail and steam ships which provided a link between Sydney and the Hunter Valley prior to the opening of the Hawkesbury Bridge in 1889. Commercial outlets developed along its river banks and the many inns and hotels provided comfort for travellers and settlers to the area.

That scene can only be imagined today as one walks along the quiet streets of Morpeth, a hint of the past reflected in some buildings which have been carefully restored to their original splendour.

The remaining permanent link with early colonial days is in the Anglican institutions which today still give considerable importance to the area.

A HISTORY OF MORPETH

To gain a true perspective of Morpeth and Phoenix Park as it was in 1801 one would need to superimpose a landscape of dense bush over what is now the rich alluvial farm lands of Phoenix Park and change the ridge on which the quiet township of Morpeth now rests into one covered with gum and cedar trees. Little did Lt. Paterson realise when he sailed his ship up the Hunter River the importance this area was to achieve, one that was equal to Newcastle, if not exceeding it between 1830 - 1880 and at one point in its history was the largest town in the colony outside Sydney.

Although 'convict cedar - cutting gangs had been at work along the river from 1804' settlement wasn't established until 1817 when Governor Macquarie allowed trusted convicts to farm an area known as Patersons Plains and Wallis Plains. The Government, reserving the area because of its coal and timber resources and the close proximity of the penal settlement at Newcastle, disallowed free settlers taking up land. However with the removal of the penal settlement to Port Macquarie in 1819 this rule was lifted.

Much of Morpeth's early history must be credited to Lt. Edward Close, known as the founder of Morpeth. Educated in England he had a view to take Holy Orders but eventually was to join the Army. Resigning his commission in 1821, he settled as a land owner at Green Hills the original name of the area.

The gift of a '3000 acre grant from Governor Brisbane along with 10 convicts and a loan of 10 government cows'¹ saw Close set about clearing the dense scrub and trees. With convict labour he also built Closebourne House and lived there until 1848 when he sold it to Bishop Tyrrell, the Bishop of Newcastle. 'Bishop Tyrrell decided to make Morpeth, rather than Newcastle, the seat of the Newcastle Diocese'.³

The first step to forming a town resulted when Close sold 9 allotments of his land at Illalaung, the Aboriginal name for Green Hills. He later disposed of further portions of his grant on building leases and a skeleton of a town began to appear.

1. Royal Australian Historical Society, Journal and Proceedings Vol XXVL Sydney 1941
2. C.J. MITCHELL, Hunters River, P25, Par 3, 1973, 1984, Sydney
3. Sydney Morning Herald 5.9.1947

The name Morpeth was given because the locality resembled the Morpeth in England.

There would seem to be little relationship to the foundation of St. James Church and an incident 30 years prior in the Peninsular War. At the Battle of Albuera, the 45th Regiment of which Close was assigned suffered severely. Close, the only survivor, 'made a vow that someday he would build a church "to God's honour and glory"',⁴ the foundation stone of which was laid by his 13 year old son on 2/1/1837. In addition to Closebourne House, St. James Church and the Rectory, Edward Close built Morpeth House which today forms part of St. John Theological College. 'In this little group of buildings Morpeth possesses unbroken and treasured links with the church life of the diocese in the first days of Dr. Tyrrell's episcopate.'⁵

'A description of Morpeth described in a Geographical Dictionary or Gazette of the Australian Colonies, published in Sydney by W.H. Wells, surveyor on 1/1/1848 read: "It at present contains about 635 inhabitants an Episcopalian Church and parsonage a Wesleyan Chapel, a ladies school, and two day schools, fine inns, one steam flour mill, a soap and candle manufactory, five large stores, some excellent shops, 37 stone and brick buildings and about 117 wooden dwellings"'.⁶

One reads of the congestion on a Saturday's shopping night with horses, drays and carriages taking space along the main street. It was asserted that 'after 6pm visitors to the town had to take their horses and vehicles to the back street and run the danger of having a maneless and tailless horse to drive home. Horse hair was in demand and a saleable commodity for the youth'.⁷

Morpeth developed as an inland port in 1828, the river being its only commercial outlet. Navigable for about 40 miles of its course 'it was the port for a vast, expanding hinterland and was the location for extensive factories and stores for traders at the head of navigation of the Hunter River'.⁸ Most of the new settlers travelled from Sydney by sea and landed at Morpeth.

4. Sydney Morning Herald. 5.9. 1947

5. Ibid.

6. A.P. ELKIN, Morpeth and I, P157, Par1, Sydney 1937

7. Maitland Mercury 17.9.1985

8. Maritime Services Board of N.S.W., When Morpeth Was A Port, Port of Sydney Vol 5, 1957

With the increasing trade 8 wharves were erected providing large efficient wharfage facilities for the many solidly built stone-houses, some 4 stories high holding wool and produce for shipment. Queen's Wharf was constructed by the Government whilst the many other private wharves served passengers and freight alike. The river, home to many sailing and steam-driven paddle ships, saw the arrival of the Sophia Jane, the first steam driven vessel to make the voyage between Port Jackson and the Hunter River in 1831. She was followed a year later by William the Fourth (Puffing Billy), the first sea going steamer to be built in Australia at Clarencetown. These two vessels were the pioneers in the Morpeth - Sydney service. 'In the Sydney Herald it was stated that freight from Sydney to Morpeth was greater than freight from Sydney to Britain'.⁹

The bridging of the Hawkesbury River in 1889 brought rail as a competitor and the once thriving river port ultimately suffered, with the last shipping service being discontinued in 1931. 'Although it is no longer a shipping centre, the township still provides us with a picturesque glimpse of our early colonial history'.¹⁰

Man, by his actions over many years has changed and controlled the landscape to his particular requirements. However he has not been able to control the river itself by the virtue of the fact that Morpeth has seen 60 floods spread across the Phoenix Park farmlands. The devastation to person and property over the years has been enormous but the rich soil deposits left behind in the wake of the flood have contributed to the success of the area's farming industry.

A town is colourless without its local identities contributing to the development of its character. They speak of Margaret Ryan, the first woman pound-keeper in the colony in 1862, the bakery run by William Arnott of Arnott biscuit fame, and of John Portus who 'supplied not only the surrounding district with flour and bread but Sydney too'.¹¹ Mr. Campbell of Campbells Store, who coined penny tokens when money was scarce and Caleb Soul, father of Washington Soul, manufactured violet (talcum) powder. There was Joseph White, cabinet maker who was also the town's undertaker, providing the tasselled, glass sided horse drawn hearse carriage.

9. Maitland Mercury, 17.9.1985

10. Port of Sydney, Maritime Services Board of N.S.W. Vol 5, 1957

11. Maitland Mercury, 17.4.1987

Tom Wright, local farmer who after a riotous night at the local inn, jumped his horse into the middle of the river to escape the policeman trying to apprehend him. The Styman brothers who ran a general store and but for their generosity in providing credit many farming families would have starved during the numerous floods, and the bravery of Noel Edwards who, in his small wooden boat saved many families stranded during the 1955 flood.

Today Morpeth has lost most of its former glory, but the Anglican Church institution there and the rich district around the town still give it considerable importance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BELL R., Editor, Morpeth Reflections.

ELKIN A.P., Morpeth and I, Sydney 1937, Australian Medical Publishing Co.

ELKIN A.P. The Diocese of Newcastle, Glebe N.S.W. 1955

MULLER P, RICHARDS T & S, WILLIAMS S., Compiled, A Pictorial History of Morpeth
1985, Dobson & McEwan, Adamstown N.S.W.

MITCHELL C.J., Hunters River, 1973 1984, Sydney

Royal Australian Historical Society, Journal and Proceedings, Vol. xxVL, Sydney 1941

Port of Sydney - Maritime Services Board of N.S.W., Vol 5, No.7, 1957

Maitland Mercury, 18.11.1971

Maitland Mercury, 13.8.1979

Maitland Mercury, 17.9.1985

Maitland Mercury, 17.4.1987

Sydney Morning Herald, 5.9.1947