

CHAPTER EIGHT:

THE BRIDGE OPENS; THE PUNT SERVICE CLOSES

The build-up in traffic volume using the punts continued apace as the years went by. According to the DMR the volume of traffic had increased from an average of 3,450 daily crossings in 1963 to an average of 4,060 in 1970. The ever-lengthening queues at peak periods meant that any occasional stoppages of the punts caused more and more havoc with the travelling public. On top of all this, the punts themselves were not exactly spring chickens, and the cost of running the punt service had risen to around \$800,000 a year by the time the bridge was opened. I wonder what Peter Callen would have made of that!

As we saw in the last chapter, the need for a bridge had become urgent well before a new bridge was even seriously mooted. In September 1957 Main Roads reported that *The Newcastle -Stockton ferry service is the most heavily trafficked ferry service operated by the Department of Main Roads; consideration is being given to the question of ultimately providing a bridge further upstream to take the place of the ferry, although any such bridge will clearly be a costly work.*

As is the way with projects of this magnitude, it took the DMR until the late 1960s to begin construction of the bridge. The exact start of construction is not easy to specify because there was a lot of reclamation work which had to be done first on either side. Prior to calling tenders, the DMR constructed the piles for the approach spans to ground level - saving costs and total project time. Construction of the concrete piles in the channel had started by June 1970 from the Kooragang end, and by October 1970 the carriageway was being constructed from both sides, and the bridge was opened in November 1971 (see later in this chapter)

Last strike

Everyone knew that once the bridge was opened the punts would be taken out of service. It would be the end of an era. About ten weeks before the bridge was due to be opened word got out that the employees who had been involved in the running of the punts were to receive no redundancy pay of any sort when the punt service stopped running - they were expected to find themselves another job somewhere after they were laid off. This was a situation not to be taken lying down, and punt skippers and engineers promptly went on strike.

The Newcastle Herald in August 1971, carried the following news item:

Vehicle ferry service stops

The Newcastle-Stockton vehicular ferry service, which stopped at 6pm yesterday, is not expected to resume before Monday afternoon. Striking ferry captains and engineers, members of the Merchant Service Guild, struck last night in protest against a decision by the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission. The Commission rejected an application by the union for a gratuity for members who would become redundant when Stockton Bridge was opened.

Mr Justice Franki, Deputy President of the Commission, said the Main Roads Department has made efforts to provide alternative employment for these employees. The Federal Secretary of the union's Coastal Branch (Captain B. Collins) said the

Commission's decision was discussed at a stopwork meeting of captains and engineers last night. It was unanimously decided not to return to work and to meet at noon on Monday to decide what further action to take, he said."



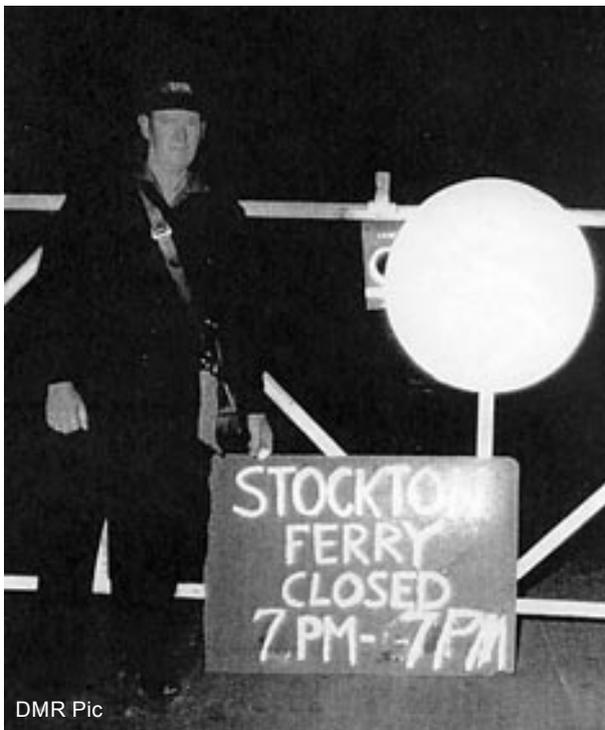
NSW State Library Pic

The car punts lie idle while the strike grinds on

The strike continued for several weeks, and stimulated some letters to the editor. Here are a couple:

Ferrymen under fire

The master and engineers of the Newcastle-Stockton vehicular ferry service have forfeited any claims they may have had to sympathy and support by their callous disregard for the interest of the travelling public. The vehicular ferry service on Newcastle Harbour operates at a substantial loss; therefore the Department of Main Roads is not losing money while the ferries are idle. Those losing money are the travelling public, who are forced to take their vehicles over much greater distances, resulting in higher costs for petrol and wear and tear. For some time no attempt has been made to observe regular timetables for the ferries, causing serious loss of time and inconvenience for those forced to use them. Of one thing



DMR Pic

You can only presume that this sign means that the ferry won't run for 24 hours

the masters and engineers can be assured: no tears will be shed when this unreliable ferry service comes to an end.

“Irate Stocktonian.”

Department blamed

It is to be hoped the long-suffering residents of Stockton, currently being inconvenienced (and endangered) by the vehicular ferry masters’ and engineers’ strike will apportion the blame for their predicament to the party responsible for it – the Department of Main Roads. In the present emotional climate it would be tempting to vilify those who have withdrawn their labour and immobilised the ferries. However, when one considers the intransigence of the Department in refusing to negotiate with the men on redundancy payments, the true culprit in this sorry affair is readily seen. The positions offered these skilled men by the Department when the Stockton Bridge is opened would be a joke if the situation were not so serious. A ferry master in his fifties who has control over a crew of men has been granted a job as a labourer. Another, having no experience of work at heights will be employed as a rigger.

It should also be pointed out that the striking ferry masters offered to man a punt to stand by for an emergency. This offer was refused by the Department. Such callous disregard for the welfare of Stockton people is not surprising when one realises the Department is saving money while the punts are not operating.

--R. Evans, Shortland.

It took till well into October 1971 to resolve the issue. On October 26th 1971 the Newcastle Morning Herald carried the following story:

Ferry Pay Claim Won

An appeal by the Merchant Service Guild against Mr Justice Franki’s decision on severance payments to workers on the Stockton ferry was allowed today in the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission. Messrs Justice Kirby, Robinson and Coldham ruled that no more than ten weeks base pay would be granted the 11 ferry masters and the 11 engineers concerned in the appeal.

The severance pay to be granted would vary from man to man, on basis of age and length of service. Men hired by the Main Roads Department after June 30, 1966 would not be eligible for severance pay. Ferry masters and engineers had known that Departmental work after November 30 would be at lower rates of pay...

...The Bench based its decision on three reasons:

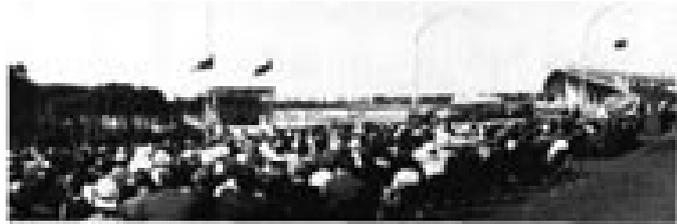
- # No work of a similar nature would be available*
- # The 22 men involved were not entitled to any superannuation upon retirement or earlier departure from the Main Roads Department, and*
- # The base rate of \$78.90 per week was supplemented by weekend work, bringing pay packets to \$100.*

Just like it’s always been: if you don’t fight for it you won’t get it.

There was another strike indirectly associated with the punts in the late 1970s, over the demolition of the punt docks. The DMR was going to use contract labour to demolish and remove the docks and the unions put bans on the operation because they held that the work should be done by the Department of Public Works. The bans lasted for some time, until the contract was terminated by agreement in 1978. The docks were finally removed in 1981.

The bridge opens

On November 1st, 1971, the long-awaited Stockton Bridge was officially opened to traffic by the Hon Robin (“Call me Bob”) Askin MLA, who was the Premier of NSW at the time. The bridge links Stockton Peninsula with Kooragang Island. In about 1926 they deepened the steelworks channel and built Kooragang Island with the mud they pumped out. Built of prestressed and reinforced concrete, the bridge has 23 spans and an overall length of 3,358ft. Over the main river channel its length is 1670ft. It was the longest bridge the DMR had built, and was the second longest road bridge in NSW after the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which is 3770ft. The new bridge cost (then) around \$6.5m.



The bridge opening ceremony

RTA Pics

The opening ceremony began at 2:30 in the afternoon with about 900 people present, including state and civic representatives and members of the general public. After the usual drone of speeches by various dignitaries and the unveiling of a commemorative plaque, Askin was driven across the bridge followed by a small motorcade. (There is an apocryphal story that after the official ceremony was completed and Askin was climbing into his official car he was heard to mutter: "OK. Let's drive over the bastard."). Premier Askin also presented the bell of the Koondooloo to the Senior Ferry Master, Captain A.P. Wilson, who had joined the service as a deckhand and had become a Master in 1939. The westbound lanes were opened first, and more than 100 cars drove across the new bridge from the Stockton side. By the time the eastbound lanes were opened about a quarter of an hour later there were some 500 cars queued up on the Kooragang Island side – all keen to try out the new bridge.

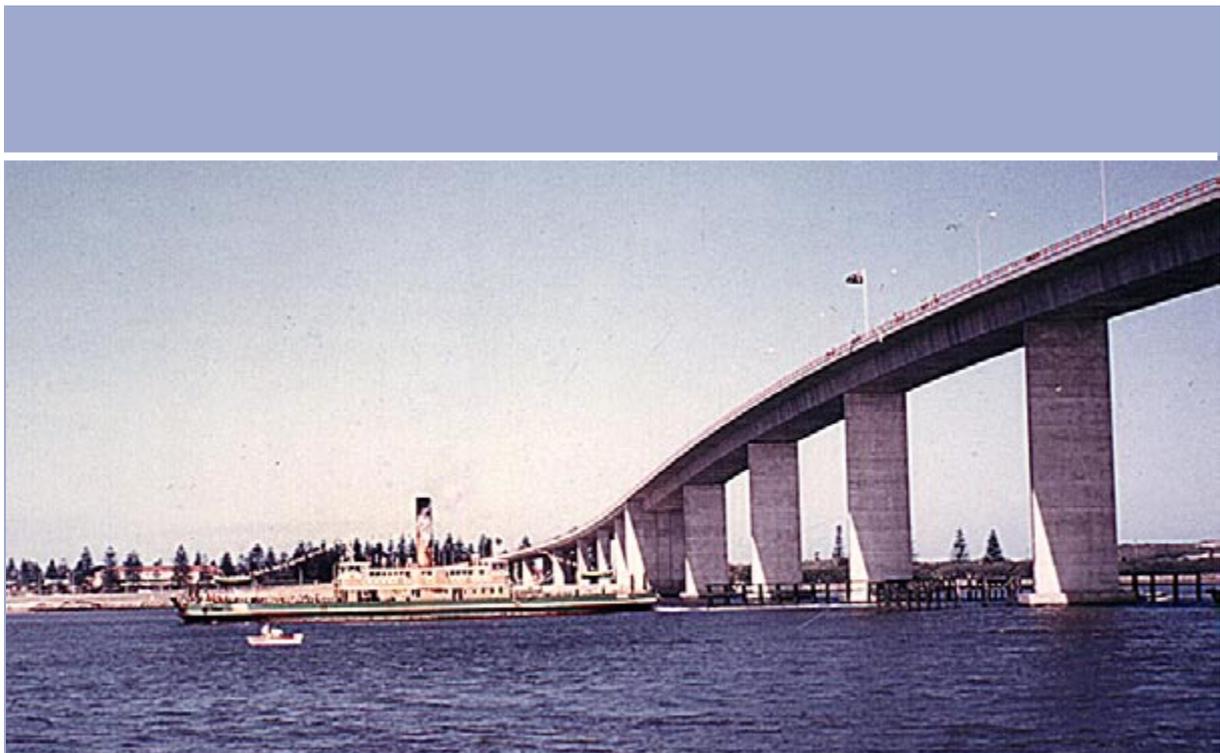


The punts commemorate the opening of the bridge and their own demise

While all this was happening the Koondooloo, having made its last run on the Stockton/Newcastle crossing at 3:30pm, steamed north to pass under the bridge (which was about 2 ½ miles upstream from the punt crossing) “in a symbolic sentimental farewell gesture on its final official voyage”, as the RTA put it. The Koondooloo had come to be looked on as the flagship of the punt fleet – possibly because it was the biggest. The Lurgurena made its last crossing from Newcastle to Stockton at 4pm the same day.

Main Roads of September 1972, in a retrospective look at the punts, reported: *After the ferries were moored at Stockton for the last time, a special function was held in a hall near the docks. The then Minister for Highways, Hon P.H.Morton MLA and the Commissioner for Main Roads, called in to say “goodbye” to a party of 65 ex-crew members, 23 of whom were to remain with the Department in different avenues of work.*

There were many people – mainly ex-crew members and their families and current crew members and their families – on the Koondooloo when it made it’s nostalgic run up and under the new bridge. On the next page is the official invitation from Mr E.M.Brown, the Divisional Engineer that was issued to the Masters of the Lurgurena and the Koondooloo.



G. Andrews pic

The Koondooloo on her farewell run under the new Stockton Bridge

N. S. W.

DEPARTMENT OF MAIN ROADS.

H. O. FILE NO 68/1427
D. O. FILE NO do.
W. O. FILE NO

MEMO TO The Senior Master,
NEWCASTLE/STOCKTON
VEHICULAR FERRY SERVICE.

MEMO FROM NEWCASTLE. (DIVISIONAL OFFICE)
25 OCT 1971 (DATE)

SUBJECT Termination of Service and Farewell Party.

REFERENCE

Normal quarter hourly service is to be maintained until 3.30 p.m. on 1st November, 1971, when the Koondooloo should depart from Newcastle and the Lurgurena from Stockton.

After unloading at Stockton at approximately 3.45 p.m. the Koondooloo is to travel to a point just upstream of Stockton Bridge, reverse and return to Stockton Mooring Berth. All ferry personnel who will have ceased duty, as well as "old hands" whom you care to nominate, will be welcome to join the Koondooloo for this trip.

The Lurgurena is to make the last trips from Newcastle to Stockton at 3.45 p.m. and from Stockton to Newcastle at 4.00 p.m.

After unloading at Newcastle at approximately 4.15 p.m. the Lurgurena is to travel directly to Stockton Mooring Berth.

All vessels are to be moored at the Stockton Mooring Berth and the engines and boilers shut down pending disposal of the vessels.

To mark the termination of the Ferry Service all personnel now in the service, as well as nominated "old hands" are invited to attend a function starting at 5.00 p.m. to be held in the Sea Scouts' Hall near the Stockton Mooring Berth.

E.M. Brown
(E.M. Brown)
Divisional Engineer.
per E.M.

Impact on Stockton of the closure of the punt service

Neil M: Now that the punts are gone they get hardly any dust around here – but BHP is also closed, and it contributed a lot of crap in the air. The closure of BHP virtually doubled the price of houses in Stockton overnight.

Ross Craig: They said the bridge would expand the suburb of Stockton, but it didn't. It killed the shopping centre because people could drive round to the bigger shopping malls. The shoe shop, several dress shops, a mens' wear shop and more couldn't

(Continued on P75)



RTA Pic





*A jolly good time was had by all on the farewell voyage of the Koondooloo.
Most of the photographs on these pages were provided by Glenys Payne.*





compete with the malls. It wasn't till years later that the little businesses started to close down and it dawned on us that it was because of the bridge. Most of the workforce on the tugs went on to get other jobs around the district, but in those days you could find jobs, it wasn't like it is today.

Joan Ireland: It was very cliquy then, but now it's much more diverse. But now Stockton doesn't have a shopping centre and you have to drive over the bridge to Newcastle for a big shop. In the days of the punts everyone knew everybody around Stockton, and it was quite a close-knit community. But now they're knocking down the houses and building new ones and Stockton's changed.

It took till the early 1980s for the bureaucracy to get around to demolishing the punt docks at both sides of the river, and during their demolition a pile of timbers built up on the shore. Denis Banks, who was living at Williamtown at the time, was about to construct a substantial shed on his property, and he took advantage of the demolition to acquire some cheap but well-seasoned timber from the timbers that had accumulated on the Stockton side.

While I was researching this book I had occasion to go to Auburn, to one of the RTA's archive repositories, where I pored over very large files of correspondence about the car punts of Newcastle. Imagine my surprise when I came across the document below – a receipt for the price that Denis paid for his second-hand wharf timbers.

Form No. 104
(Revised June 1972)

DEPARTMENT OF MAIN ROADS, N.S.W. No 112110

Office Newcastle
Date 11/11/81

Received by D. Banks from Denis Banks
of 111/111

the sum of \$4.20 Dollars

Purchase of timber from wharf
to the Dept of Main Roads

\$ 4.20

Authorized Officer

REMITTANCE ADVICE ONLY

When I was ploughing through these files at the RTA Archives, a large proportion of the correspondence was to do with minor accidents that happened during the day to day operation of the punts. A car might graze another, or knock its muffler off while negotiating the boarding ramp – fairly minor dingles by and large. In one instance a woman had contacted the RTA to recover the cost of drycleaning her coat after she'd got a sooty mark on it while travelling on one of the punts. What began to impress me as I read on was the fact that each little incident, however small, required around six or eight exchanges of letters between the DMR and the aggrieved party – sometimes more – before anything was finalised. The wheels of big bureaucracy grind exceeding small – and must be seen to do so.