

# **The Cobb & Co story: trails and tales**

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## **The Cobb & Co Heritage Trail**

Five years ago a meeting was held in the backyard workshop of Narromine based coachbuilder, Don Burns. This was the start of the Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co Heritage Trail Working Party, a small group of dedicated people drawn from local government and private enterprise. The aim of the group was to record the history of Cobb & Co in New South Wales, particularly the history of the central west and western division of the state - from Bathurst to Bourke. For Cobb & Co is part of the Australian legend – renowned in the field of transport and communication as a Victorian era coaching firm that contributed to the frontier development of the nation.

The Cobb & Co Heritage Trail project is an opportunity for rural New South Wales to record and promote its heritage. The Cobb & Co heritage trail from Bathurst to Bourke weaves the story of the development of the towns, villages and pastoral settlements along the way. What started as an ambitious idea evolved into a program that recorded the Cobb & Co history before it was lost; established a heritage trail across eleven local government areas; developed community partnerships; launched a cultural tourism strategy that encompassed local government areas and the local communities; developed a tourist brochure, mud maps promoting local self drive discovery tours, travelogue book, education kit, web site, interpretive signage, events and re-enactments, as well as establishing business opportunities for private enterprise.

Cultural tourism, education and conservation are the central issues of the program. Much of the program has focussed on recording the history of the business firm of Cobb & Co and the trails that forged the transport and communication links across the country. However there is more to the story, including the individual contributions of the men and women who worked for Cobb & Co, the coach drivers, grooms, inn keepers, booking office managers, road managers, blacksmiths and coachbuilders to name a few. There is a technology layer – the coaches used by Cobb & Co were the most scientifically advanced designs of their time – the designs also reflected adaptation to accommodate the harsh Australian climate. An increased community awareness of the Cobb & Co story may also lead to conservation opportunities of historic sites. Rural property owners have tended to become more conscious of conservation practice once they are aware of the role, function and history of their buildings. This at least has been the case for a number of rural landowners of Cobb & Co sites.

## **The Cobb & Co history**

Thanks to television, most people today are familiar with the American stories of the Wild West, the Pony Express and the coaching firm of Wells Fargo. However the Pony Express operated for a mere 18 months, while Wells Fargo operated as a coaching service for approximately nine years. Now consider the Australian story - Cobb & Co was established in 1853, operated across much of Australia – particularly

the eastern states, with the last coach service travelling from Yeulba to Surat, Queensland, in August 1924. The story of Cobb & Co covered 70 years, thousands of miles and touched the lives of many Australians.

A brief account of the Cobb & Co history touches on the diversity of this part of Australian history. With the discovery of gold in 1851 there was urgency for people to travel to and from the goldfields. This opportunity had been recognised by a group of Americans, including Freeman Cobb, who were based in Melbourne and formed the firm of Cobb & Co. The company was to become legendary within Australia as the most efficient transport firm of its time. Eventually the company would extend its coach lines to New Zealand, Japan and South Africa. The story of Cobb & Co incorporates all the colour and flare that Australian history can create. It calls on human endeavour and ingenuity, tales of bushrangers, drought, flood, bushfire, trust and mateship, technology, bush characters and the special relationship and understanding between the coach drivers and their horse teams.

The original partnership sold the company and it under went several more ownership changes until 1861 when a partnership of American and Canadian men, headed by James Rutherford, purchased the coach business. These men developed Cobb & Co into a legend of Australian achievement. Rutherford decided to follow the gold rush and relocated the Cobb & Co headquarters to Bathurst, NSW in 1862. Within days they were operating a gold escort and passenger service to the Forbes gold fields.

Cobb & Co provided gold escorts, royal mail services, passenger and freight services across the land. They connected settlements and towns, pastoral outposts and isolated gold fields. Their coaches conveyed royalty, gold miners, actresses, salesmen, farmers, and schoolteachers – in fact anyone who could afford the fare. It represented a classless society. Well almost, for there was a distinction – first class passengers were considered to be those who rode outside the coach, on the box seat beside the driver. Second class passengers were those who rode inside the coach and were subject to confined spaces and close contact with fellow passengers. However if the road was steep or boggy, or the coach broke down, everyone was expected to help, or walk, or push the coach.

One of the main reasons for Cobb & Co.s success was the fact that they changed their horse teams every 12 to 15 miles, depending on topography. This meant that the teams could maintain a fast pace. There were any number of coach operators, however many were small business concerns, without the infrastructure such as horses, stockfeed, stables, grooms and harness to have the luxury of changing the teams so frequently. Hence the horses were required to travel further and invariably more slowly than the Cobb & Co teams.

This alludes to another interesting point. Consider the topographic maps of Victoria, NSW or Queensland. Many of the towns and localities are spaced at regular intervals – every 12 to 15 miles in fact. A coach changing station or a teamsters stop quite often became the nucleus for a settlement. There was a need for stables and accommodation for the groom. The passengers needed food and overnight accommodation. An inn or shanty frequently accompanied a changing station. From this quite often a settlement grew. The evidence for this is found within official records, local and family histories,

from the relics of buildings and the existence of towns and localities that form part of our landscape. A relationship between environment and built heritage emerges.

While many of the towns and localities from the coaching days still exist, quite a few have disappeared. The Cobb & Co mail schedules provide windows to the past – to towns and localities that came and went – each with a story to tell – names such as Pink Hills, Three-legs-of-man and Timbreebongie.

Given that the coaches made regular stops at inns or stables to change horse teams, it is possible to interpret the landscape, to look for remnants of early settlement. Much of the history remains, some buildings still in use, others merely relics of the past. Sometimes it may be part of a fence, or a lone chimney, or a cluster of trees that provides the clue. In western NSW the changing stations were spaced regularly and were often associated with bores or permanent water holes. Introduced vegetation was often used for food or medicinal purposes. At Enngonia, out from Bourke, the changing station is marked by a tall date palm (used by the Afghan teamsters for food).

There is a relationship between the landscape and the location of the roads, inns and changing stations. There is also likely to be a link to Aboriginal history with some of these early tracks following the paths of the Aboriginal tribes who frequented the area. There would be common elements – the easiest path to move through the countryside, and the need for water, food and shelter. There was also a commercial optimism to the location of some of the inns. An inn located beside a creek or river was likely to attract considerable custom when the waterway was in flood, isolating teamsters and travellers.

The Cobb & Co story provides links to many aspects of Australian history. There are links to landscape, geography and topography. Some of these areas of interest are summarised as follows:

- Architecture. The inns, shanties, changing stations and settlers cottages provide evidence of vernacular Australian architecture and show unique features of building ingenuity with limited building materials.
- Landscape elements. Vegetation may be the sole reminder of a former landuse. Yucca plants, peppercorn trees and date palms provide evidence of occupation of sites. Features such as marked gravesites also add to the details of the people and the customs of the Victorian era.
- Environmental factors – the seasonal climatic variation and the diverse variation in landscape from the mountains of the Great Dividing Range westwards towards the plains of Bourke had an impact on the location of tracks, the type of horse best suited to each climatic zone and the need for dependable sources of stockfeed and water.
- Economic, social and political history. To understand the relevance of the coaching story it is necessary to be aware of the events that were shaping the colony as it headed towards a national identity and Federation.

- **Business management.** The individuals who were the Directors of Cobb & Co have a special place in the story. Not only did two of the key people live in the Orange and Bathurst districts, but their ability as business men who turned the coaching company of Cobb & Co into the most efficient coaching business of its time is noteworthy. Another named linked to Cobb & Co was that of the Sidney Kidman who held a franchise on many of the western district coach services and who took Cobb & Co coaches to Western Australia.
- **Technology.** The evolution of the construction process of the road network through to the development of the railway network. Cobb & Co owned one of Australia's first steelworks, Eskbank at Lithgow, and fabricated railway line and water tanks as well as holding the contract for the construction of the railway line from Glen Innes to Tenterfield.
- **Trade skills.** The craft of coach building incorporated some eleven different trades, as well as the harness makers and associated trades. The evolution of the design of coaches to suit the Australian climatic conditions was also part of the Cobb & Co success story.
- **Local and family history.** The stories of the individuals associated with this colourful part of history. Folklore especially relating to the activities of bushrangers during the coaching era requires attention to separate fact from fiction.

## **The project partnership**

Of the eleven local government areas that are located from Bathurst to Bourke, only five Councils became financial stakeholders in the project. Several rural based Councils have assisted with 'in kind' support throughout the project stages, particularly showing strong community support during events and promotions. Dubbo City Council however has not seen worth in the project to date; yet because of its central location on a road transport corridor crossroads, the City cannot be excluded from the trail. In fact the City is to gain from the success of the project with minimum input from the local Council.

To further develop the program it is considered vitally important that the local communities have a sense of involvement and ownership in the Trail. The Committee has guided the establishment of the trail, but does not see it's future role as an entrepreneur, rather as project manger. By development of a business plan and marketing strategy it is proposed to target shortfalls in the program, particularly in developing market product, and attracting local business opportunities.

Already strong interest in the program has been established by local businesses such as hotels, motels, bed & breakfast establishments. Interest is either as promotion of business sites that have a Cobb & Co history, or as base to explore the area using the Cobb & Co history as a theme and therefore a cultural landscape experience. Events and re-enactments have been well patronised by a wide cross section of the local community. While it was expected that the target audience would be the retiree set, coach re-enactment trips generate interest from all age groups. The Great Cobb & Co Coach Run 2000 attracted a number of family groups who indicated the unique

experience was enhanced by being able to participate as a family – generally involving three generations.

By developing local community partnerships it is envisaged that local interest and awareness of the program will have a direct influence on cultural tourism potential in the domestic market (in particular the visiting family and friends market). The program also encourages business opportunities based on tourism promotion, the hospitality industry and regional economic development.

The Cobb & Co Heritage Trail program is currently focussing its marketing emphasis on the domestic market. International visitation is not identified as the focus market at present. There is a point to be raised here though – the Cobb & Co story is unique to Australia. A criticism levelled at this project and many others is the perceived use of American language in promotion of an Australian story. In particular there is some opposition to the use of the word ‘Trail’ as it is considered an American terminology utilised extensively by television and screen movies during the 1970s and 80s.

## **The Cobb & Co Heritage Trail and the future**

So what is the future of the Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co Heritage Trail project? There is still a huge amount of history to be collected – particularly the social history of the people who worked for the firm. The challenge ahead will be to maintain the direction of the project. The main aims will be to continue promoting the heritage trail – to develop the concept into tourism product. The project has a strong focus on encouraging community ownership of the Heritage Trail. Already a number of businesses have incorporated their Cobb & Co links as part of their promotional activities. The Committee is considering involvement in the 2002 Year of the Outback celebrations as another opportunity to raise awareness of Australian history as well as promoting the Cobb & Co Heritage Trail. It is becoming apparent that the image of Cobb & Co is considered an outback icon, the extent of its story however is largely untold.

The Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co Heritage Trail program has been administered with financial assistance of NSW Heritage Office and five local government councils. There has been initial reluctance from NSW Tourism to be involved in the program as it was considered that the project had a concept but not a product. In part this is fair comment and the challenge has been to develop a business plan, identify opportunities and to pursue marketing potential. This also requires a partnership between local government and private enterprise. The project has developed into a business enterprise with need for strategic planning and marketing.

History and a colourful story are not sufficient to create a tourism experience in this instance. There is a need to develop a cultural tourism package that relates to the region and its heritage (including the Cobb & Co history). To entice visitors, and local residents, to explore the region there needs to be a range of experiences. This includes indigenous heritage, natural environment such as the Macquarie Marshes wetlands, as well as the built environment. Overall visitors must be aware that they are exploring the Cobb & Co Trail – hence interpretive signage and promotional material must reinforce the Cobb & Co image.

The appeal for the Cobb & Co project covers a wide audience, from those interested in Australian history to people wanting to experience part of a unique environment and landscape. The Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co Heritage Trail project has gone beyond the initial aim of recording the regions Cobb & Co history. It has developed potential for cultural tourism, conservation, education and community awareness of a colourful part of Australia's heritage. It is hoped that through the Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co Heritage Trail project that the spirit of Cobb & Co will continue to be recognised for many years to come.