

**Submission
No 255**

INQUIRY INTO WINDSOR BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT

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SUBMISSION TO
Portfolio Committee Number 5
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SUMMARY

The proposed Windsor Bridge Replacement Project is flawed in every aspect from its justification, its functionality, its environmental effects and its heritage impacts. I am sure the Committee will be supplied with submissions on all of these aspects from Community groups, heritage organisations, experts in bridge design and construction, indigenous groups and members of the public, such is the broad ranging concern about this project. This submission focuses on the destruction of listed and other heritage, and how the protections that should rightly be afforded such structures and places are circumvented. The protections that exist are overridden by the declaration of the project as State Significant Infrastructure. An important task for the Committee is to investigate whether this declaration is within the intent of the SSI legislation, or whether the declaration is a convenient way to switch off protections that interfere with projects of a more minor nature. About the destruction there can be no doubt. The existing Windsor Bridge is on the State Heritage Register and is to be demolished as part of the project. The recently uncovered brick barrel drains doubtless would be protected, had their existence been substantiated before now. A large part of them sit within area required to be excavated to construct the southern bridge abutment and will consequently be destroyed should the project proceed. They are but two components that contribute to Thompson Square and its surrounds being one of the most significant and intact colonial sites in Australia. If there is to be any declaration of State Significance, it should be for this site.

THE HUMAN ASPECT OF HERITAGE

Heritage preservation and value are mostly based on the physical. Buildings and other civil structures are valued, protected and admired for their design, engineering, construction methods and materials, and their finishings. In the case of Windsor Bridge, its foundations are among the earliest examples of construction of support piers using Caissons, and its superstructure a very early example of the use of prestressed concrete. The fact that it still functions for vehicles that never would have been envisaged at its conception, is testament to strength and longevity of those techniques. The brick barrel drains are not only one of the earliest examples of public infrastructure in the colony, but their construction methods reflect an optimism about the permanency of the fledgling colony.

While many of the structural elements remain, the stories and aspirations of those that built them went with them to their graves. We are all taught to respect the views of our fellow Australians. That respect should extend to our previous generations and how we judge their efforts and their sacrifices. Too infrequently do we stop to remember the human foundations upon which our modern lifestyle depends.

Imagine for a moment if some of those early Australians could submit their stories to the committee.

June 4th 1873, Windsor

My name is Elisabeth Campbell. My husband John works in the Caissons, anchoring the piers for the new bridge over the Hawkesbury River. Every day except the Sabbath he is lowered into the narrow cast iron cylinders and shut off from the world in a cramped candlelit cocoon. The only sounds are

the muffled throb of the steam driven pump which pressurises his world against the river outside. Each day he reports the slow progress through the accumulated yards of sand and rocks and sunken logs in search of the solid bedrock of the river deep below. Once there, the task is not yet finished as the bedrock is chipped away to a depth of four feet. All the while the debris is raised to the open top of the extending pier where it juts above the river surface. Only on these short occasions is there a glimpse of a small circle of light far above. Once seated in the rock the lowest section is anchored through a framework and into the rock by means of nine foot long, four inch diameter bolts whose longitudinal split is expanded by a wedge as it is driven down into the rock, thus anchoring the structure securely. How proud he is as each one is finished. "Stand for a thousand years or more" he'll often say, followed by "My sons and daughters for generations to come will cross that great river secure in the strength of that bridge"

And strong it certainly is, stronger he is certain than all the rail bridges he had helped build back in England as a boy. Great rail bridges that carry steam locomotives and their loaded carriages, often two abreast. I can see in his eyes as he gazes over the moonlit river and the bridge emerging from it, the satisfaction that this new land can equal and even better the engineering achievements of the land of his youth.

The fierce determination in his heart to lay a foundation for those future generations through the next thousand years comes with a cost however. His body is often wracked by a cough that brings forth the blackness of the candle smoke from his lungs. His back is increasingly stooped by the manual labour in the confined space. He seems increasingly withdrawn due to the long periods of solitude, and will often sit silent for extended periods, his mind seemingly elsewhere. So used is he to the darkness being accompanied by that reassuring muffled machinery rumble, that he often wakes in the night, panicked by the silence in the dark. It takes a while to realise that the river is not about to come rushing in to claim him, and that he is safe in his bed. And I'm sure his thoughts each morning as he leaves for the works reflect my unspoken fear that this time could be the last, and on his return at night the relief can be felt in our embrace.

For certainly there are other jobs for anyone willing to bend their back. Work free of the stale air, the loneliness, the nightmares and the uncertainty. But not one with the knowledge that the deprivations, the sweat and the toil will leave an enduring functional legacy, a pillar on which a young country can build. It seems as though,

through that bridge, he is building a sort of immortality and a purpose for his life. I fear that if the bridge were to be destroyed by any act of man or nature that his life would be for nothing. All that sacrifice never to be appreciated by those generations to come. So I give thanks that the bridge is superior to the forces of nature and beyond destruction by men of good will and sound reason.

Windsor, 22nd November 1814

On the orders of His Excellency Gov Lachlan Macquarie, a drainage system for the town of Windsor (until recently Green Hills) is being built, and I Samuel O'Connor am labouring on its construction. No ordinary drainage system either, but one whose design and quality of material would make it fit to grace any of the finest cities in Europe or the Americas. Here in the furthest outpost of the most distant colony in the empire, a project to be built by the rejects from a civilisation on the other side of the world. Barrel drains built with sufficient scarce bricks to erect a substantial building and outhouses. We laugh that the sewer rats and other vermin will have the most magnificent home in the colony while some of us take shelter from the scorching heat and sudden driving storms in the most meagre huts.

But it's not the threat of the British lash that spurs us in our labours. It's the wish to show that we are all more than petty criminals. Together we want to show that we have the skills needed to build a nation, the abilities to equal anything from our former homeland. May there never be the machine capable of undoing what blistered hands and aching muscles have created. The skills and determination learned here in the face of extremes of weather will serve us well in our coming freedom as we make our lives in this new land.

Returning here one day I hope to see a great city flourishing on the banks of the river and to know that unseen beneath its streets is the first drainage system that made it possible.

HERITAGE VS STATE SIGNIFICANT INFRASTRUCTURE

The heritage values of the Thompson Square precinct are beyond doubt and acknowledged by every major heritage organisation in NSW. In addition many interstate and overseas heritage groups and experts recognise its importance in Australian colonial history. What is not so clear is the significance to the State of the Windsor Bridge Replacement Project. It is important to understand this, because aside from all the arguments about the project, the one thing that is certain, is that without the SSI legislation the construction of the new bridge could not proceed.

The first clue to the perceived significance comes from the RMS itself in the naming of the project. The new bridge is a "replacement". Nowhere in the supporting documentation are there any claims of a quantum increase in functionality. In the area of traffic management, it is freely admitted by the RMS that the bridge is not a traffic management solution. There will only ever be one lane for northbound traffic as there is now. The future compounding loss of time and production of trucks, trades people and other commuters will more than outweigh the extra expense of an integrated traffic solution based around a bypass located outside Thompson Square. Based on recent traffic counts, the surrounding roads and intersections are already at capacity. Flood immunity will see only a marginal (1 in 2 years to 1 in <3 years) but not significant improvement. Human health, safety and amenity will be impacted by the dangerous mix of heavy vehicle and other traffic with pedestrians, as well as the visual, noise and air pollution from that through traffic in a town centre. Lastly, the impact on the oldest surviving Georgian square in Australia, the existing Windsor Bridge and the greater surrounding colonial locality is well documented, and universally condemned by every heritage organisation in the State.

The difference in significance to the State of the replacement bridge project could not be starker. On one hand there is the imposition of a modern concrete structure that is totally out of scale with the square through which it cuts a swathe. As well as reducing the usable park area by its footprint, it further compromises the amenity of the remaining park by overshadowing and visual noise and air pollution. And all for no improvement in functionality. Contrast that with the potential tourism economy that is only enhanced by the recent discovery of the brick barrel drains, the educational benefits that flow from standing on the site where colonial history happened, the recreational value of usable open space and the contemplation of the

Struggles and hardships early settlers endured to forge what they imagined would be a legacy that would last for generations.

Clearly any declaration of State significance should be for Thompson Square itself, and not as a means to clear a path for a destructive, replacement bridge project. To subvert the intent and spirit of the State Significant Infrastructure Legislation is the greatest insult to Thompson Square the proponents of the project could deliver.

David Hope