

**ESTABLISHING THE  
OATLEY-COMO  
BIKEWAY/WALKWAY**

**ALAN FAIRLEY**

**for  
OATLEY FLORA AND FAUNA  
CONSERVATION SOCIETY INC.**

in its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year 2005

## **ESTABLISHING THE OATLEY-COMO BIKEWAY/WALKWAY**

**Based on documentation held by Graham and Janet Austin**

On 22 August 1979, a small group of Oatley residents got together to discuss an Action Plan which would develop a proposal for the utilisation of the old Como Railway Bridge for bicycle and pedestrian traffic. Milton Hill initiated the meeting and got together a small group of friends, Graham Austin, Janet Austin (both members of Oatley Flora and Fauna Conservation Society), Noreen Whittaker and Brian Langton. Their idea was to establish a path linking Oatley and Como over the Georges River using the disused bridge, thus providing a direct link between Sutherland Shire and St George for bicycle riders and walkers. The newly formed committee faced a number of immediate difficulties and questions, not the least was who owned the bridge and its approaches, what would be the attitudes of Kogarah and Sutherland Councils and what would be the reaction of the Water Board which had a major water pipe over the bridge.

Within a month, an interview had been obtained with Sid Miller, Distribution Engineer for Metropolitan Water Sewage and Drainage Board (MWS&DB, the Water Board) who stated that ownership of the bridge was soon to be transferred to the Water Board but the Public Transport Commission (PTC, the Railways) was to retain ownership of the approaches. He pointed out that corrosion had weakened the bridge and funds for maintenance and fencing would not likely be provided by the Board. Any public walkway would require a legal agreement between the Board, the Railways and the two Councils concerned. Added to these issues were the unresolved questions of how to approach the Railways about leasing land for the right of way, who owned the power lines in the area, what was to be the exact route of the bikeway and how the proposal was to be funded.

The rail bridge over the Georges River at Como was built in the early 1880s. A double lined railway had reached Hurstville from the City on 15 October 1884. The contract to build the line further south to Waterfall was signed with Millar Bros. Construction Co. on 12 September 1882 and in the same year the piers for the bridge were ordered from England. They arrived in 1883. In the following year, the iron components for the bridge superstructure arrived from England. These were brought to the

bridge site on barges towed by steam tug boats from Cooks River across Botany Bay, then up the Georges River. The first train crossed the single line bridge to Sutherland on 16 December 1885.

The bridge is the longest lattice girder bridge in New South Wales. Its total length is 954 feet (291 m) and there are six spans each of 159 feet (48.5 m). The spans are supported on concrete-filled iron cylinders. At the north end of the bridge a handsome stone abutment and fascia was erected. Soon after the single track was opened, it became apparent that duplication of the line was an urgent necessity. However, the bridge could not carry two separate tracks. The solution was a unique “gauntlet” system where two tracks on either side of the bridge converged and overlapped each other on the bridge itself. By this means the bridge carried two sets of rails for 83 of its 88 years working life. Nevertheless, it remained a bottleneck because two trains could not pass each other, hence the need for its eventual replacement. In 1935, water pipes from Woronora Dam were installed on both sides of the bridge. It also carries a small gas line. The bridge remained in service until 1973 when a new double track high level concrete railway bridge was opened.

By December 1979, the committee had clarified its proposal, decided on the best route for the walkway/bikeway and, using an old set of plans acquired from the Railways, had drawn on it the proposed plan. An approach was then made to the Mayor of Kogarah, Brian Langton. He had been at the first meeting of the bikeway committee but was no longer on the committee. However, he was still very enthusiastic about the scheme and invited the committee to give a presentation to the full Council. Prior to the presentation, a visit was made to three Councillors to explain the details of the scheme. A paper entitled *Proposed Bikeway Utilization of the Old Como Railbridge* was produced in January 1980 and submitted to Kogarah Council. On March 2, the Municipal Engineer recommended to Council that the proposal should be agreed to in principle, that an inspection take place, that Councillors walk the proposed bikeway route and that estimates of costs be prepared.

A meeting on 15 July 1980 brought all interested parties together to discuss the proposed bikeway. In attendance were delegates from State Rail Authority, Dept of Motor Registration, Water Board, Traffic Police, Sutherland Shire Council and Kogarah Council. Janet Austin and Milton Hill represented the committee. At this meeting it emerged that the

Water Board was not in favour of the idea and intended to dismantle some structural iron and timber from the bridge. This raised the urgency to decide on the bikeway but made the saving of the historic bridge from demolition a priority.

The committee decide to approach Kevin Ryan, MP for Hurstville, to clarify what the Water Board planned, and the National Trust to place the bridge on the Heritage Council's list of classified structures. If the bridge was on the Heritage list, it would be more difficult to alter. The "Old Como Lattice Girder Rail Bridge" with adjacent approaches at either end was classified by the National Trust on 27 April 1981. As this classification carried no legal weight, the Trust asked the Heritage Council (NSW) to issue a protective order to stop the demolition of the bridge.

Another obstacle emerged at the July meeting. Representatives of the Dept of Main Roads (DMR) Bicycle Advisory Committee suggested that to save money the bike route would not commence until almost at the bridge at the top of a set of 100 steps to be located at the lower end of Wyong Street. Also, in 1981, a firm of consultants employed by Sutherland Council to advise on bike plans for the Shire rejected the Como Bridge scheme as not being "cost effective" and said that "the Old Como bridge bikeway should be given low priority".

An article in the *Leader* newspaper (18-11-'81) suggested that the SRA planned to demolish the bridge, but this was not correct. Rather it was the prospective new owner, the MWS&DB who wished to remove certain steel work, including the track supports which would be necessary for a future bikeway deck. In late 1981, Wal Whittaker (Noreen's husband), an engineer and a National Trust committee member, worked on having the Heritage Council list the bridge. The bridge committee urged a speed up in the transfer of ownership of the bridge from the Railways to the Water Board and expressed concern about the need for maintenance of the deteriorating steelwork.

Two years elapsed with little progress. The Committee of Four (Milton Hill, Graham Austin, Janet Austin and Noreen Whittaker) was still actively promoting the bikeway proposal with the Water Board, but now focused more strongly on getting relevant politicians involved. Both Frank Walker, MP for Georges River, and Brian Langton, MP for

Kogarah, made representations on behalf of the committee to the Minister for Water Resources. By late 1983, the Water Board had come to “agreeing to the proposal in principle” but would not pay for it. The success of the proposal now hinged on who would bear the cost of construction, estimated by Kogarah Council at \$300,000, the cost of continued maintenance and the substantial cost of bridge repair.

In March 1984, in an election publicity newsletter, Labor candidate Kevin Ryan made a commitment to fund sport and recreation in the St George district and claimed that he had “recently negotiated a \$500,000 scheme involving the Water Board, Employment Minister and Kogarah Council which will transform the original Como Railway Bridge into a cycle path and walkway”. Paul Whelan, Minister for Water Resources, visited the site on 15 March 1984 with Kevin Ryan (Member for Hurstville), Maurie Keane (Member for Woronora) and a number of Water Board personnel. Ownership of the bridge had at last passed to the Water Board on 17 January 1984. Paul Whelan was keen to set up a small action committee and mentioned that there was \$400,000 available for restoration and decking work on the bridge. He expressed the hope that the bikeway could be opened for the bridge centenary (16 Dec 1985). His subsequent press release recognised the work of Kevin Ryan and noted that “considerable work is required to make the bridge safe for public use”.

Committee discussion now concentrated on construction details, such as decking, fencing, access for Water Board workers and the labour requirements. At a meeting at the National Trust Centre on 19 June 1984, S. Miller of the Water Board announced that the Board was now happy to be involved and outlined the Board’s current intentions which included restoration, painting of the structure and repair of the lattice beams, but he also expressed the Board’s desire to have a financial contribution towards the substantial costs. At a follow up meeting in August, Kogarah Council’s Brian Peebles tabled drawings of a design for the cycleway and approaches. He estimated the costs as (1) for replacement of decking : \$285,000. (2) for the approaches on the Kogarah side : \$134,000. (3) for the approaches on the Sutherland side : \$35,000. Total. \$454,000. There was to be an application for funding under the Commonwealth Employment Programme (CEP) through the Bicycle Advisory Committee.

Funding became available in May 1985. The Councils received a CEP grant of \$329,043 (70% of the costs) and the State Government contributed \$141,018. The Water Board was also to spend \$1 million in restoring the bridge. The CEP was expected to give work to 25 unemployed people. Construction work began on May 20 with Sutherland Council commencing their side of the access track.

A Sod-turning Ceremony was held on 27 May 1985 to mark the beginning of the work. The Minister for Natural Resources, Janice Crosio, shovelled the first dirt. Politicians and Council officers turned out in force. Three State MPs were there – Maurie Keane (Woronora), Guy Yeomans (Hurstville) and Brian Langton (Kogarah) – and two Federal MPs – Robert Tickner (Hughes) and Gary Punch (Barton). Also present were the Kogarah Mayor, Fred Cavanagh, and Sutherland Shire President, Kevin Skinner. Filling in as extras were pupils from Oyster Bay Primary School on their bikes. The *Leader* newspaper reported the event (30 May 1985) but also highlighted the “quiet effort” of the local residents who had brought the event to fruition. Pictured were Graham Austin and Milton Hill who had “planted the seed of the idea”. Wal and Noreen Whittaker were also mentioned as residents who had worked energetically on the plan and were instrumental in having the bridge classified by the National Trust (Janet Austin did not receive a mention even though she had been an important part of the committee).

Work progressed slowly and as early as September 1985 the project was behind schedule because the SRA was changing its fencing requirements, there was difficulty in finding suitable CEP scheme workers and vandalism was a problem. However, Sutherland Council workers had almost completed the 300 metres long decking over the bridge by October. Committee thoughts turned to the landscaping, the opening ceremony and a suitable name for the bikeway, perhaps recognition of a local sportsperson or Olympian. One suggestion was to name it after the cyclist Hubert Opperman.

The Oatley-Como Cycleway was officially opened on Sunday, 15 December 1985. The Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations, Ralph Willis was programmed to officiate but did not turn up. Cutting the official ribbon were Gary Punch, Member for Barton, and Robert Tickner, Member for Hughes. A fancy dress bike ride competition was held in conjunction with the opening. A minor controversy developed

when the Kogarah Mayor, Fred Cavanagh, criticised the opening ceremony saying that “the two Councils that did all the work were given the cold shoulder. Politicians had taken over...and proper recognition was not given to the part people played over a period of many years in planning this project” (*Leader*, 26-12-'85).

A post-script to the opening was that within 5 weeks the cycleway was closed during weekdays for more than a year to allow the Water Board to sand-blast and repaint the bridge at a cost of about \$1 million. The sand-blasting caused boat owners moored at Como Marina to claim that their boats were damaged by particles of iron and rust from the work and for oyster farmers to fear contamination of their leases from the paint particles. This resulted in the stopping of work on the repainting while more effective devices were delivered to stop the debris escaping the work site.

The six year fight for the Oatley-Como bikeway and the preservation of the 100 year old rail bridge was a tribute to the farsightedness and dogged perseverance of a small group of Oatley residents. They overcame many difficulties and negative attitudes and in so doing not only saved the historic bridge but also obtained a bike and walkway which is greatly appreciated by the many people. The route is used every day to shorten trips to work or study, by families teaching their children to ride a push bike safely and by those who just to walk and enjoy the picturesque scenery of this section of the Georges River. It also encouraged Sutherland Council to restore Como Pleasure Grounds and Kogarah Council to carry out bushland restoration in the corridor beside the walkway.