

Bushranger Jimmy Governor may save Upper Hunter towns

By LINDA DOHERTY,
Staff Reporter

THE towns where Jimmy Governor roamed could become Upper Hunter tourist attractions if Merriwa Shire Council adopts an environmental consultancy report next month.

Governor, the Aboriginal bushranger, was the inspiration for Thomas Keneally's novel *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, which was made into a film in 1978.

At one stage, he worked as black tracker for police at Cassilis but later turned against the law.

In 1900, Governor murdered two of his seven victims at a spot near Merriwa.

Ninety years after Governor's notoriety in the Upper Hunter, the towns of Merriwa and Cassilis are hoping he can help to halt the decline of their commercial centres.

Merriwa council commissioned a Newcastle firm, Envirosiences, to conduct Main Steet Studies in Merriwa, population 1150, and Cassilis, which has 100 residents. The report will be presented to the council next month for discussion and adoption.

Headed by the senior environmental planner for Envirosiences, Mr Alan Wells, the study's focus is on upgrading the towns by landscaping and renovating heri-

tage buildings to capture tourist dollars.

In recent times, history has been a source of tourist income for towns such as Morpeth, Berrima and Central Tilba, on the NSW south coast, which were previously declining like many in rural Australia.

'We want to encourage tourists to stop for an ice-cream or a newspaper and linger a little longer,' Mr John Cree, the council's health and building surveyor/planner, said.

'The population has increased slightly in the last few years, but the towns are declining and we want to reverse the trend.'

The towns date back to the beginnings of the Hunter Region and have sandstone buildings from the late 19th century.

Land grants were taken up in Merriwa in 1831 and in later years the area was an important wool- and wheat-growing region. By 1866 the population had reached 200 and the town's numbers peaked with the arrival of the railway in 1917.

Cassilis, 45km from Merriwa, is a rare example of a private town that has survived into the 20th century with its character intact.

Originally known as Dalkeith, notable buildings include the courthouse group, built between 1860 and 1890, and the Royal Hotel, erected in 1889.