



Nobbys Coal River Historic Precinct Workshop Prelude to a Heritage Masterplan

Workshop held at Newcastle Regional Museum on 5 April 2003

**200th Anniversary of the founding
of Newcastle 30th March 1804**

Workshop Deliberations and Recommendations
National Trust Festival of Heritage 2003





Nobbys Coal River Historic Precinct



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1. INTRODUCTION

a) Background

Lieutenant John Shortland noted the coal seams visible in the cliff faces at Nobbys Island and on the mainland when he visited the area and camped overnight in September 1797. He described the river as a 'very fine coal river' and named it the Hunter River in honour of the Governor, John Hunter.

The settlement at Newcastle was founded in 1804 principally to exploit the easily available coal and cedar.

Since 1804 coal has fueled the region's economy. The coal industry has largely shaped the history and culture of Newcastle.

An earlier outpost was made at Coal River in June 1801 to mine coal and cut timber but was withdrawn following conflict between soldiers and the commandant.

Following the insurrection of Irish convicts at Castle Hill on 4 March 1804, which was brutally put down at Vinegar Hill, the ringleaders were hanged and 34 of the rebels sent to Coal River.



Menzies Commission 1804 signed by Philip Gidley King, Governor of the Colony of NSW
Newcastle Regional Library

Governor King decided to make a permanent settlement at Coal River and announced that the settlement would be named Newcastle and the county would be named Northumberland.

Lieutenant Charles Menzies was given a commission to establish the settlement and in his dispatch to the Governor dated 19 April 1804 he reported that:

we arrived here on Friday the 30th of March at noon. Previous to the vessels entering the harbour I went in a small boat to examine the situation of the mines, and fix on a place the most suitable for the settlement which I found to be a most delightful valley, about a quarter of a mile from the entrance and south head, and close to the mines. I immediately ordered a disembarkation to take place, and began to unload the vessels.



b) Nobbys Coal River Historic Precinct Workshop

As part of the 2003 National Trust Heritage Festival, the Newcastle Permanent Building Society sponsored the Nobbys Coal River Historic Precinct Workshop the objectives of which were to discuss and plan a strategy for the identification documentation and presentation of the precinct to mark the 200th anniversary of the founding of Newcastle.

Two hundred years ago the geological and natural history of Coal River was opened to a world at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution and the land and the way of life of the Awabakal people began an irreversible shift.

In the ensuing two hundred years natural resources, trade and industry have created the second largest city of NSW, one of the major urban cities of Australia and one of the great port cities of the world – Newcastle.

The participants at the Workshop recognised and endorsed the urgency of action needed to acknowledge and promote this historical beginning, which underpins not only the cultural history of Newcastle but also the region's contribution to many themes of national heritage. One participant at the Workshop expressed this circumstance thus:

There is now a pressing need one year before the bicentenary of Newcastle's settlement to identify and express the historical and cultural themes that have woven together to form the identity of Newcastle and the Hunter Region. A city that understands its past and its cultural origins has a unique capacity to offer meaning for its young and a future for its citizens

Workshop participants were also unanimous in their concern that the unique sites that symbolise the origin, history and character of Newcastle are not physically identified, not acknowledged, not preserved, poorly presented and virtually unknown to fellow Australians. Another participant acknowledged that:

The soul of the city of Newcastle and its culture is in the Coal River Precinct. Local people have left it buried and unacknowledged. People must be able to walk there, to touch the past and understand the city's beginnings. This is an area where people should walk on Sunday afternoons relaxing with family amid evidence of the city's origins.

c) Prelude to a Heritage Masterplan

The Nobbys Coal River Historic Precinct workshop was held to engage the Newcastle community in its shared heritage and plan for the identification, documentation and presentation of the precinct.

The Workshop endorsed a call for immediate action on:

- **the scholarly investigation of the Nobbys Coal River Historic Precinct**
- **site conservation and promotion of the historical and cultural values associated with the Precinct.**



The Workshop recognized that advancement would require the collaborative involvement of Commonwealth State and Local Government.

The Workshop also agreed that the anniversary of the founding of Newcastle provides the opportunity for decisive leadership from Newcastle City Council, local business groups and the community to fund the mechanisms necessary to mobilise the project.

The Workshop expressed concern that the level of funding provided by Newcastle City Council to celebrate the 200th anniversary was restricted. Furthermore the workshop expressed support for the funding of a comprehensive professional history of Newcastle and a major bicentennial history conference next year.

The Workshop also resolved that the Newcastle City Council be formally briefed on the recommendations of the Workshop and the proposed Masterplan for the precinct. The Workshop recognised the pivotal importance of the Newcastle City Council in facilitating Commonwealth and State input into the identification and development of the precinct.

The Workshop resolved unanimously that the Newcastle University's 'Coal River Working Party' be charged with the task to advance the Nobbys Coal River Precinct concept.

The Precinct is regionally and nationally significant and the 200th anniversary next year is an appropriate milestone for achieving an outcome but there is a real urgency for action. The recommendations are listed in Section 5.

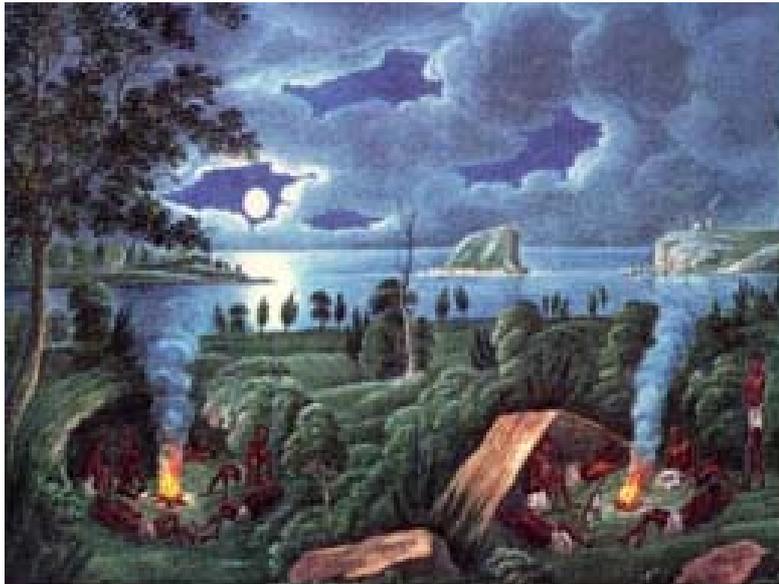
2. HERITAGE & CULTURAL THEMES

The first part of the Workshop featured speakers who identified historical themes linked to Nobbys Coal River Precinct and to the early settlement that have had a profound influence on the life and culture of the city.

- **Aboriginal Heritage** by *Gionni Di Gravio*
- **Geology of the Coal Measures** by *Robin Offler*
- **Convict Coalmining** by *Jim Comerford*
- **Heritage Conservation** by *Bruce Baskerville*

a) Aboriginal Heritage

Aboriginal stories about the region remain as oral tradition among Aboriginal communities. The following story about Nobbys was published in the Christian Herald February 1855.



Joseph Lycett *National Library Australia - Aboriginal camp, Nobbys in the background*

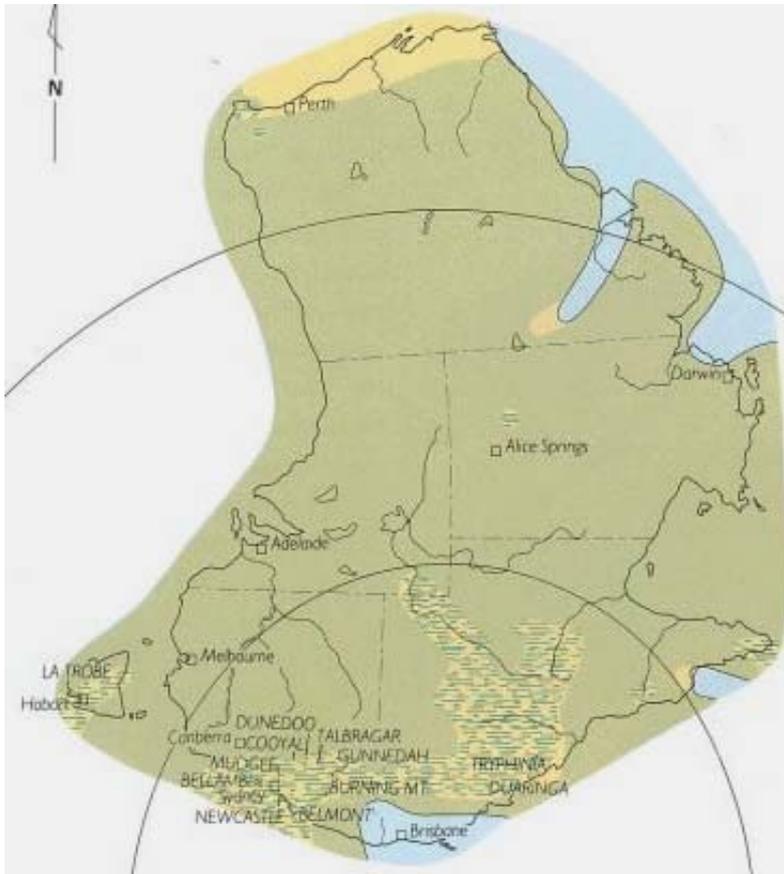
At the entrance of Newcastle there is a small high island, called by the English Nobbys Island. The blacks have a tradition that it is the abode of an immensely large Kangaroo which resides within the centre of the high rock, that occasionally he shakes himself, which causes the Island to tremble and large pieces to fall down, as any one can perceive has been, and still continues to be the case, on the eastern side of the Island. It is evident on the slightest inspection, that at some early period the Island formed part of the main land, the strata correspond with the similar ones of coal, sand, and other stone to those on the opposite shore, nothing but a general convulsion of nature could have affected such a change. Manual labour is now employed to fill up the space betwixt the Island and the main land so as to form a breakwater for the protection of the harbour at Newcastle, and a great part of the top of Nobbys Island has been taken down without reaching the monster kangaroo said to dwell within the rock!

Perce Haslam, scholar of Aboriginal lore, wrote further of the giant kangaroo, which assailed a female wallaby. Such an act conflicted with the laws governing the kinship pattern of survival based on the purity of blood lines thereby destroying the totemic structure so strongly emphasized in the Bora teaching. After the deed became known, flocks of wallabies gave chase to the perpetrator, who fled over the hills and through the bush. Although he kept ahead by superior leaping he knew that capture and death were inevitable because the sea offered no escape. But as he neared the sea a mist intervened and he was lost to the sight of his pursuers. He took advantage of this respite by swimming to Nobbys Island, which he entered and shut himself away from sight. The wallabies gave up the chase believing the sea had claimed the kangaroo. But, according to tradition, the kangaroo was never certain of his safety. Now and then he would jump up and down in his island and cause the cliff to tremble and break away as a warning to any wallabies and other animals not to come too close to his island refuge.

The story of the giant kangaroo is a part of the Newcastle tribal story. The Awabakal clan of Muloobinba (Newcastle) mainly lived around Merewether and the river entrance and foreshore. The clan had good hunting and fishing grounds and was reasonably close to neighbouring clans at Port Stephens, Lake Macquarie and the Lower Hunter. Large middens that have survived at Honeysuckle (site of corroborees), Wickham, Carrington and Port Waratah, are evidence of their long period of occupation.



b) Geology of the Coal Measures



The geology of the Newcastle Coal Measures was shaped by the massive geological changes of the Late Permian age. Temperatures at Coal River were much lower than today and during this geological age deep seams of coal were laid down throughout the region. At this time the whole continent was closer to the Southern polar region.

Palaeomagnetic data indicate that during the Late Permian the Australian continent was much further to the south (60-75 degrees S) than it is now. The climate was cold and the peat from which the coal formed developed in waterlogged swamps on the plains in front of ice capped

mountain ranges. Alpine glaciers were common and at the foot of the mountains, rivers deposited boulders and further away sands. These sediments were buried and formed the conglomerates and sandstones that are now exposed in road cuts throughout Newcastle. Rich flora dominated by Glossopteris plants was abundant. At this time, Australia was part of the super-continent Gondwana and to the east of the present margin, volcanoes dropped large quantities of ash that is now preserved as tuffs intercalated with the coal seams.

c) Convict Coalmining

The British interest in Australia was initially as a repository for convicts. However, for economic reason Britain quickly became interested in the new colony's resources. In this context, coal was vital.

In the century 1690 to 1790 (the year of James Cook's death), British coal production soared from 3 million to 10 million tonnes. It was a century of great industrial change in Britain. Coke became extensively used in iron production, a substantial chemical industry grew up largely based on coal, steam power came into use in 84 cotton mills, 9 wool and worsted mills, 30 coalmines, 28 canals and 17 breweries.

Those who directed the establishment and development of Newcastle thought in terms of these industries and this production, as well as in terms of exchange and trade. The development of a coalmining industry was a priority for the early governors.

Newcastle benefited from the advanced industrial technology in England. John Platt, an experienced miner managed the first convict coal mine at Newcastle in 1801 and adopted the



'Bord and Pillar' mining technology that was just being introduced in Britain. Governor King ordered that private working of mines be banned, because their mining techniques were hasty and made much of the coal inaccessible. This regulatory approach was an indicator of social responsibility for public resources and public infrastructure and demonstrated the high value put on coal at this time in history.

With the development of the coalfield came a wage earning class of largely British miners, many of who were determined to prevent the abuses, which they had seen in British industry. Some had been convicts themselves. Coal River 'pit unionism' was arguably the strongest in the world and because of the dominance of mining and heavy industry it has had far reaching impacts on popular thinking in the city and the region. Understanding these traditions and their influence on Hunter thinking today will take the community on a significant journey of self-discovery.

Coalmining, the industrial revolution and the Newcastle working class union movement are themes, which can be linked to distinct Coal River sites that should become a focus for public discussion and cultural understanding.

d) Heritage Conservation

Heritage is something that belongs to a population and a place - something that is passed on as an inheritance, a bequest to younger generations who will value it in the search for their own identity.

Newcastle and particularly the Coal River Precinct bring together at least eight key themes which have shaped two centuries of life in Australia and in particular life in the Hunter Region.

There are two important and very ancient themes:

- **Geology and prehistorical change**, which shaped the landscape of the Hunter Valley and laid down the massive coal resources that have sustained the city's development in the last two centuries.
- **Dreaming**, or the stories of people who lived in the Hunter for many thousands of years that convey a timeless perception and understanding of the landscape and their social organization.

Other themes, which are layered into the Coal River Precinct, are:

- **Industrialisation**: the industrial revolution in England made Australia's resources attractive in a way which was not relevant to earlier trading societies
- **Maritime**: the river was a centre of cultural, social and trade life for Aboriginal people. Newcastle was later colonised by white settlers from the sea. The port has had national significance from that time
- **Labour and Trade Unionism**: Newcastle and the Hunter Region have been formed around coal and the industries which grew from it. Behaviour and social attitudes are deeply influenced by the interactions between industry and labour, which in turn have shaped Australian government, business and community attitudes.
- **Trade and Commerce**: Newcastle, because of its coal, its industry and its port has always been at the centre of trade and commerce in Australia. The city has shipping links to major Australian cities and to cities around the world



- **Defence:** the early convict settlement was guarded by British military whose presence in Newcastle lasted until c1850. Local fortifications were to prevent escapes and piracy by the convicts. As the coal resources became more valuable and external military threats a possibility, the national importance of Newcastle, its coal and later its steel industry merited substantial defences. Military fortifications around Nobbys Coal River Precinct are of national significance.
- **Migration and Ethnic Diversity:** economic demand and lifestyle opportunities have attracted settlers from around the world.

3. NOBBYS COAL RIVER HISTORIC PRECINCT

Nobbys Coal River Precinct includes the remains of Nobbys Island, Macquarie Pier, Signal Hill, convict coalmines, military works, port and navigation works and the Convict Lumber Yard.

The Precinct comprises publicly owned lands situated at the mouth of the Hunter River within the boundary of the Newcastle Conservation Area and with Nobbys headland as the principal focal point.

The Precinct is a unique place for the presentation of significant historical events and heritage themes associated with the founding and establishment of Newcastle and the development of the port infrastructure.

a) Nobbys

Nobbys is a distinctive landmark at the mouth of the river, noted by Captain James Cook during his voyage of discovery up the east coast of Australia. On 10 May 1770 Cook wrote in the ship's log that the Endeavour passed by a 'small clump of an island lying close in shore'. Shortland named the island Hacking Island, in his 'Eye Sketch'. Paterson named it Coal Island presumably because of the visible coal seams. The Aboriginal name was Whybaygamba.

Nobbys Island was used as a place of confinement for the worst convicts before the island was joined to the mainland. The entrance to a tunnel shelter in the northern cliff face has been covered by rock falls.

A meeting was held in Newcastle in June 1854 to protest against a perceived threat to remove the island in the interests of navigation. However Nobbys was cut down from 62 metres to 28 metres instead and the lighthouse established there in 1857 replacing the coal-fired beacon that had been operating at Signal Hill.

Nobbys is a Newcastle icon that was depicted on the Newcastle City Coat of Arms until 1968.



b) Colliers Point Mines

Lieutenant Colonel Paterson writing to Governor King named the headland Colliers' Point and explained that:

the point is composed of two strata in sight and one, which is bare at low-water mark only. This is by much the best coal, which you will see by the specimen I desired might be kept apart from the other, which is the middle strata, about 16 inches deep; that below is 22 inches; the distance between them is about 20 feet.

In 1801 and 1804 John Platt, a skilled coalminer set out the mines in what was clearly the method at the forefront of mining technology - the bord and pillar system. He advised Governor King of the damage done when the mines were not properly regulated and timbered. Colliers' Point was the site of the first coalmining in Australia, which continued at that location until 1814. Dr D F Branagan has identified the lower seam as the Yard seam and the middle seam as the Dirty or Dudley seam.

The Newcastle Morning Herald 29 January 1885 reported on the old convict coal workings and the wall then being built around the fort:

All necessary precautions having been taken by filling in or roofing the many underground chambers their entrances were finally blotted out of sight for ever by a deep thick wall of concrete and masonry.

c) Macquarie Pier

Governor Lachlan Macquarie laid the foundation stone for 'Macquarie Pier' on 5 May 1818. The pier was the most ambitious harbour improvement project of the convict era.

The connection to Nobbys Island was completed in June 1846. Heavy seas in subsequent years breached the pier, which was later strengthened on the seaward side by using huge sandstone blocks transported by rail from a quarry at Waratah. The work was completed by 1872. A sand dune system and the popular Nobbys Beach have formed on the ocean side of Macquarie Pier. In 1957 the harbour side of the breakwater was cement rendered except for a small stairway near Nobbys

d) Convict Stockade Lumber Yard

The stockade was once enclosed by a 3.4-metre high log wall. Here convicts both lived and worked. They were also employed outside the stockade at timber cutting, lime burning, coalmining and breakwater-building. In 1820 there were about 1000 convicts working in the area.

The stockade ceased to be a convict workplace by about 1850 and much of the fabric from this era remains buried beneath the sand drifts that subsequently covered the site.

The Berthing Master's Office and the Stationmaster's Cottage on the stockade site are evidence



of the association of the area with Newcastle's port and railway history, as are the Customs House and Sailors Home adjoining to west and east, beneath which extend the archaeological remains of the stockade's fabric.

The stockade is already a nationally significant archaeological site marking the beginnings of industry at Newcastle.

e) Harbour Works and Reclamation

Harbour works and reclamation started in the convict era. They are important historic themes of the Nobbys Coal River Precinct.

The first wharf was built west of the stockade, and a lagoon embayment to the east provided a harbour for the small craft used to convey convicts for cedar getting and lime burning tasks. A ballast wharf was constructed east of the main wharf (Watt Street) and a stone boat dock was built within the reclaimed area about 1860, for the use of pilots and port boatmen. Slipways were added in 1870. The dock and the boat sheds were part of the Pilot Station.

The space between the ballast wharf and the shoreline was reclaimed and used for railway marshalling yards. A rail extension was provided to carry Waratah sandstone to reinforce the breakwater.

The Commissioners for Railways built Zaara Street Power House at the eastern end of the yards in 1915. Most of the area is now part of the Foreshore Park.

f) Signal Hill

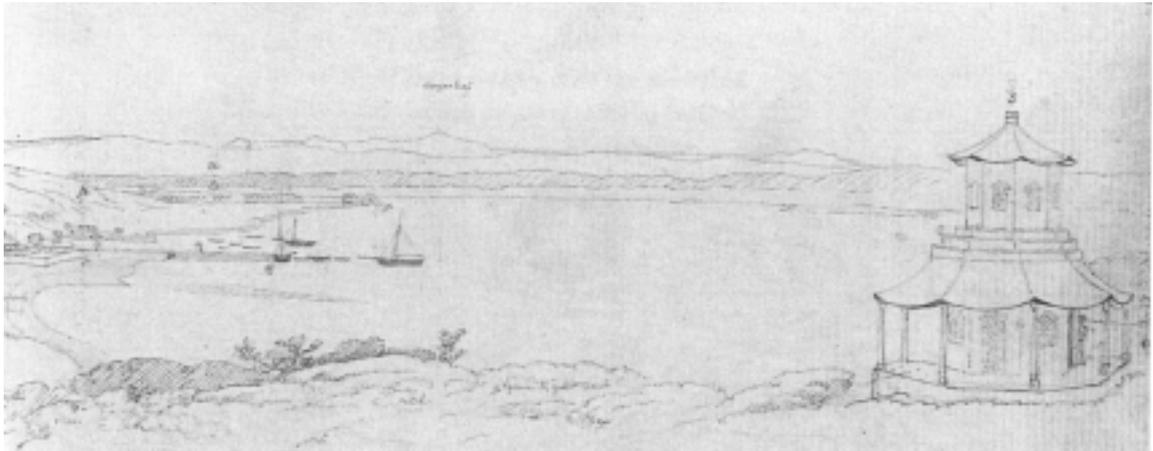
Signal Hill is an important and historic landmark with a commanding position overlooking the river entrance. The northern extremity was Colliers' Point.

Lieutenant Shortland camped at the base of the hill when he entered and surveyed the river in 1797 and noted the coal seams in the cliff face.

Fresh water was available from a small watercourse at the base of the hill.

The coal-fired beacon erected on Signal Hill to guide and warn mariners was probably the first light on the Australian coast. It was extinguished in December 1857 when the new lighthouse at Nobbys commenced operation. On the hill were also erected a signal station, a distinctive pagoda like building as a residence for the stoker and signalman, and about 1860, a house for the harbourmaster (Captain Allan).

Signal Hill was also known as Beacon Hill, Captain Allan's Hill and Flagstaff Hill and was fortified at an early date as a deterrent to convicts escaping. Seven guns were in place on the hill by 1840. Due to a perceived threat from Britain's enemies in the 1870s, substantial fortification were erected at key outposts in British colonies, such as Fort Scratchley in 1880.



Sketch from Signal Hill by Thomas Mitchell 1828-Pagoda built c1818, Wharf and Convict Stockade mid-distance
Mitchell Library

Extensive quarrying to gain material for Macquarie Pier and other purposes has dramatically altered the shape of Signal Hill and the old convict coal workings beneath the hill were sealed up with a thick wall of concrete in 1885.

4. WORKSHOP DELIBERATIONS

General discussion followed the outline of the principal details and themes of the Coal River Precinct that has supported the nomination of the precinct for listing on the State Heritage Register.

The stockade (Convict Stockade Lumber Yard) was listed on the State Register in September 1988.

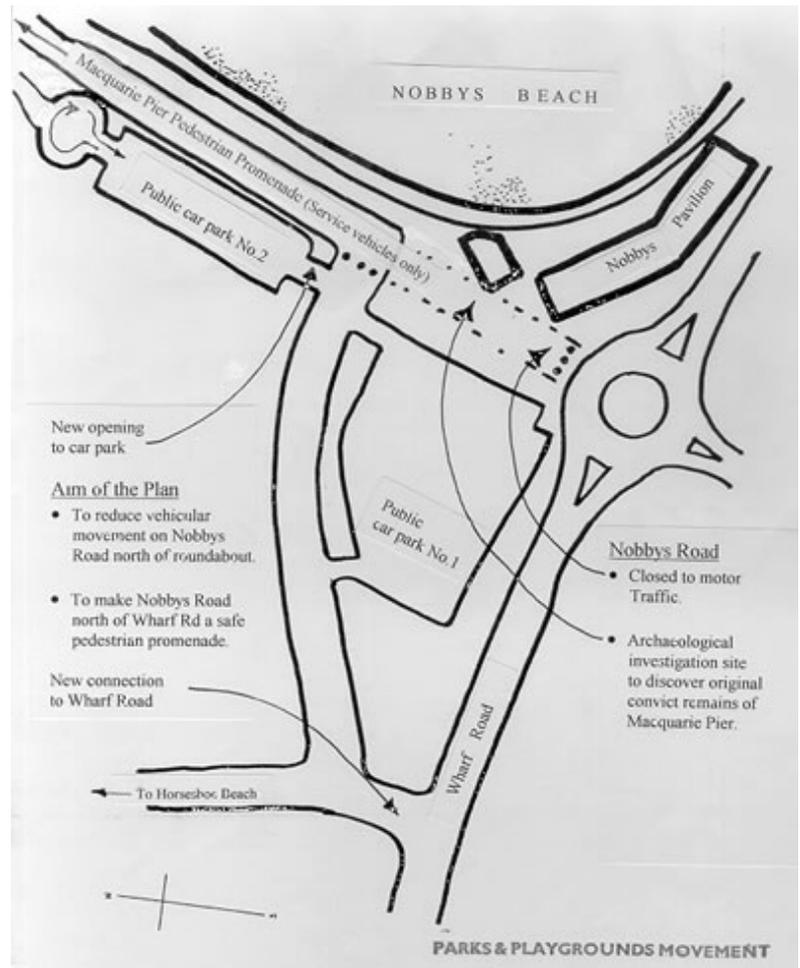
Some of the Workshop participants expressed the view that there were many other convict-era sites that deserve listing on the Register.

It was argued that the Coal River Precinct and the Convict Stockade Lumber Yard should be brought together in one precinct, which would provide a more holistic understanding of the founding of Newcastle.

The two areas are in close proximity and their development and conservation should be the subject of a Heritage Masterplan.



A presentation by the Parks and Playgrounds Movement envisaged ten actions needed to achieve the integrated Heritage Masterplan. A copy of a diagram illustrating the relationship of the Masterplan to other planning initiatives was distributed. A suggested traffic arrangement for Nobbys carpark that would release the full length of the Macquarie Pier as a pedestrian promenade and provide for an archaeological investigation of the original convict building techniques was also shown.

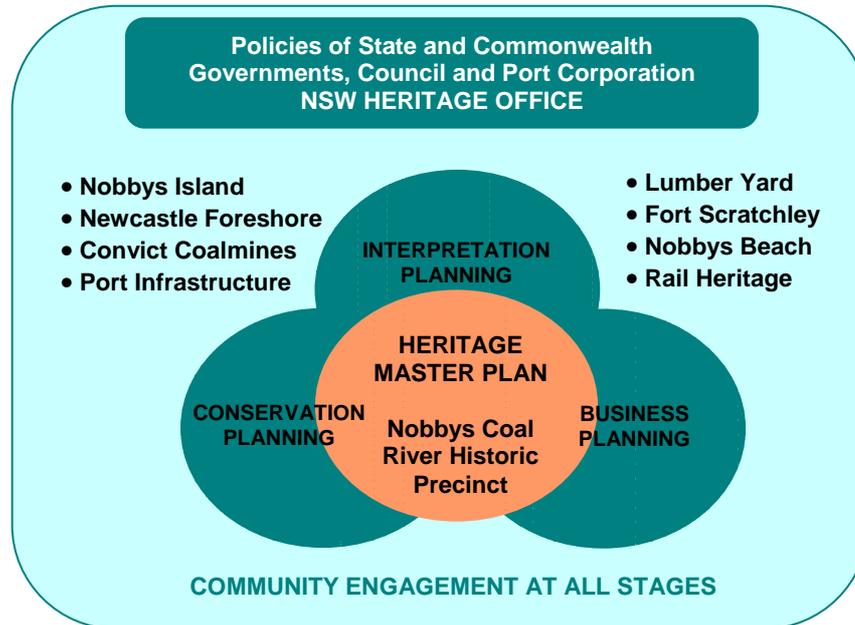


Ten actions suggested to make the masterplan:

1. Review all historical material pertaining to the area.
2. Identify existing authorities or groups with interest in the Coal River Precinct and Convict Stockade Lumber Yard, and their official policies and activities.
3. Assemble and summarise all existing studies and other relevant materials.
4. Describe current controls and policies with regard to the site.
5. Integrate the policies of those authorities with current responsibilities for the area.
6. Investigate the management of other historic sites or precincts in NSW and elsewhere.
7. Identify the principle historic features, issues and problems relating to conservation, interpretation and effective preservation of the site.
8. Indicate gaps in current knowledge and identify where further investigation should be undertaken.
9. Carry out the necessary archaeological investigations of the convict coal workings beneath Signal Hill and prepare a design for the establishment of a world class Coal River Interpretation Centre.
10. Compile the Masterplan for the Coal River Precinct.



Elements of the Masterplan



5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Further discussion led to a set of recommendations to complement resolutions adopted by the workshop participants.

Recommendation 1: That Newcastle City Council should address identification, preservation and exhibition of the sites in the Coal River Precinct as a tangible expression of its unique convict, coalmining, maritime and industrial heritage.

Recommendation 2: That action be taken to make the Coal River Precinct part of the 200th anniversary in March 2004 of the foundation of Newcastle.

Recommendation 3: The University Coal River Working Party take forward the proposals from the workshop and present them to city, state and commonwealth government in a way that encourages joint financial contributions.

Recommendation 4: The Coal River Precinct should be developed as an unique part of the city with recreation, education and tourism features which express the city's heritage themes.

Recommendation 5: The University Coal River Working Party and the Newcastle City Council should take whatever action is necessary to have the Precinct placed on the state heritage register.

Recommendation 6: The Coal River Working Party should liaise with Council to create a structure to manage and promote the precinct.

Recommendation 7: As soon as possible and no latter than October 2003 a Heritage Masterplan for the precinct should be commissioned and be available by 2004.

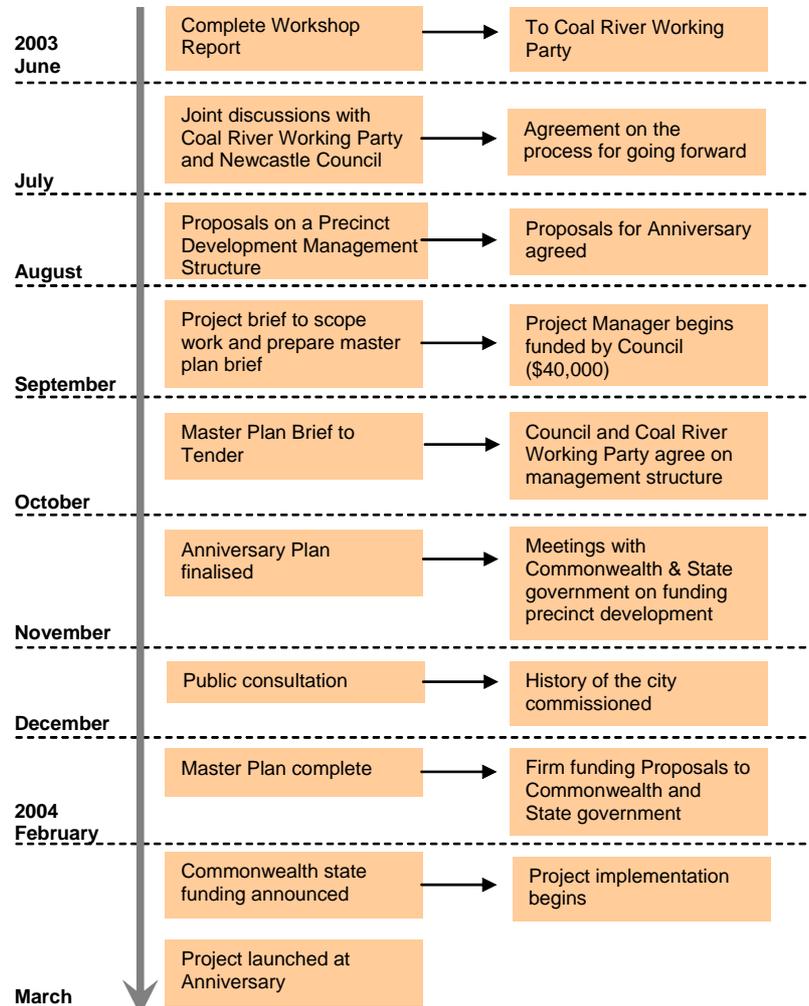
Recommendation 8: The University Coal River Working Party and the Newcastle City Council should seek joint State and Commonwealth commitment of a minimum of \$500,000 for the masterplan and its stage one implementation.

Recommendation 9: The Coal River Working Party and Newcastle City Council should seek to address the key issues in the masterplan to ensure that an effective plan is created that can be of long term value to the city.



6. TIMEFRAME FOR ACTION

The workshop emphasised that the anniversary of the founding of Newcastle was an important milestone in the maturity of the city and an opportunity for the development of community, and cultural awareness and with government support the planning and presentation of the Nobbys Coal River historic precinct.



Newcastle has a unique opportunity to present Australia's convict and industrial heritage to the world within an attractive tourist and recreational setting at the Nobbys Coal River Historic Precinct.

It is appropriate for State and Commonwealth Governments to recognise the significance of the founding of Newcastle and the City's importance as the place where Australia's coalmining industry began and the contribution its people have made to the wealth and prosperity of the nation.

The funding of the research and planning needed to make the Heritage Masterplan for the historic precinct and the professional interpretation, conservation and promotion that will flow from the masterplan will require cooperation and financial support from Government and all sections of the community.



Painting 1820 Dixon Galleries,
State Library NSW



Nobby Island from Mullumbimba Cottage, Newcastle
From the John Turner Papers Newcastle University Library

Workshop Participants

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