

BONG BONG COMMON

*Site of the first European settlement
in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales
1821*

A RARE AND SPECIAL PLACE

The first European settlement in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales was established beside a pebbly ford across the Wingecarribee River on the old Argyle Road, which ran from the newly settled land south of Camden through Bong Bong to Sutton Forest then on to Goulburn. A military station and township was ordered by Governor Macquarie on 14th November 1821 and the township of Bong Bong sprang up in 1822. But when Surveyor Mitchell commenced construction of a new line of road from Mittagong to the south in 1831, travellers were diverted to the new administrative centre five miles downstream at Berrima, leaving the Bong Bong township to quietly wither away.

The entire site of this settlement has now been preserved for the future as public land within the Bong Bong Common and is considered worthy of state significance for its unique heritage values.

Apart from the heritage importance of the site, Bong Bong Common serves as a valued public green space between Bowral and Moss Vale for everyone to enjoy, be they walkers or cyclists using the Bong Bong Track, or people just wanting some quiet time in the natural world beside the river.





BEFORE EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

Before the first Europeans settled at Bong Bong, this land beside the Wingecarribee River was a very important place for the Aboriginal people who had occupied the area for thousands of years.

This is Gundungurra country and these river flats provided a rich source of food - fish, frogs and waterbirds, with reptiles, bird's eggs and other edible animals, in abundance.

What must these original inhabitants have thought when they first saw pale Europeans carrying guns, wearing strange clothing and building huts where they were going to be inundated in the next big flood? A flood they knew would come. It always did.

THE ORIGINAL LANDSCAPE

The floodplain on which the Bong Bong township was built has always been subject to regular inundation, even though the Wingecarribee River was once little more than a chain of ponds disappearing into swamp land during dry weather.

It is thought that the English parkland look of the land around Bong Bong, with grassy patches, pathways, open woodland and abundant wildlife, was not a freak of nature, but the result of Aboriginal people managing the land in a systematic and planned way to ensure they had abundant food and shelter. One of the objectives of the Bong Bong Common Management committee is to preserve and improve the landscape by removing inappropriate plantings to ensure these once open vistas are retained.



This view of Throsby Park by Conrad Martens, c1836, provides an indication of how the original landscape around the Bong Bong township may have looked.

Image kindly supplied by Sydney Living Museums (from the Caroline Simpson Collection).

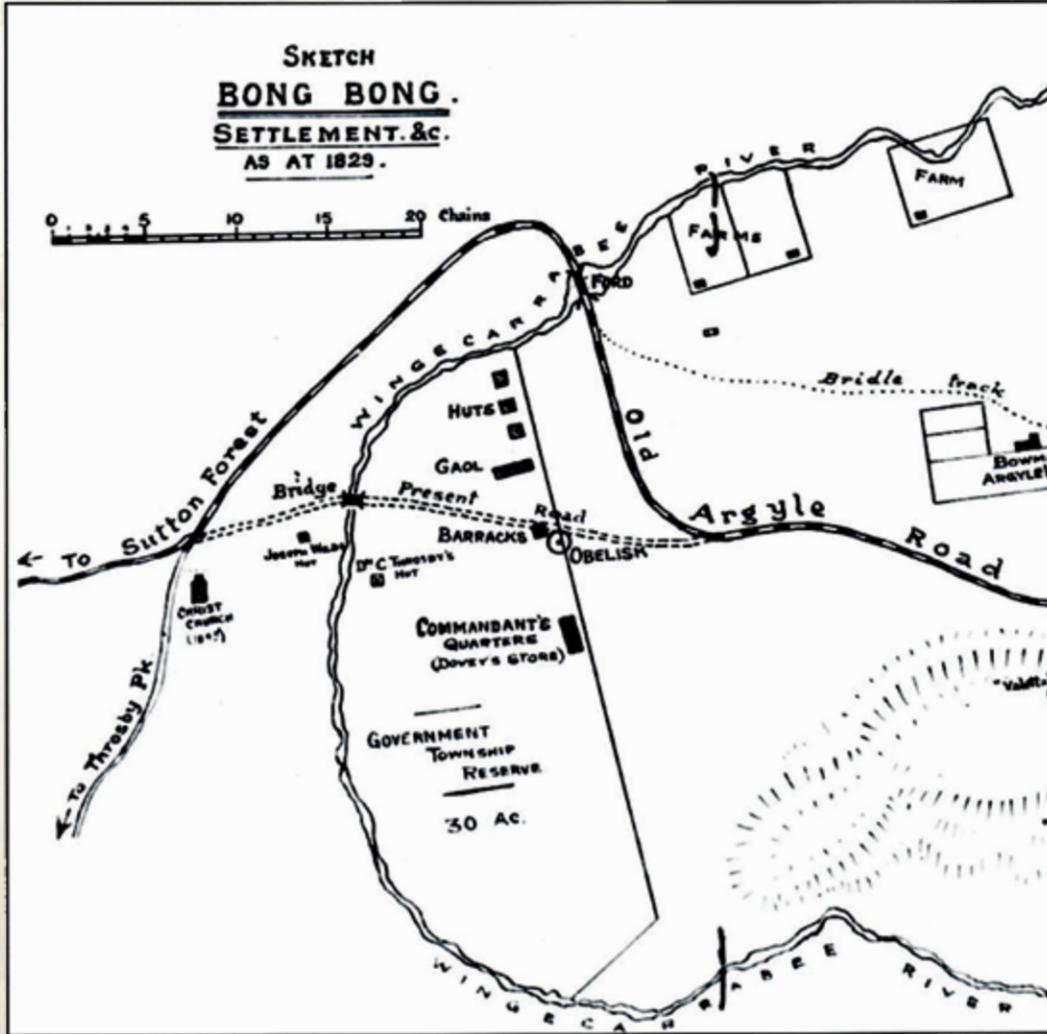
THE RISE AND DEMISE OF BONG BONG TOWNSHIP

From 1817, explorer and pastoralist Dr Charles Throsby was grazing his cattle on both sides of the great bend in the Wingecarribee River. Under instructions from Governor Lachlan Macquarie, the Old Argyle Road, leading south from the Cumberland Plain, was commenced in 1819, providing access to the newly settled land south of Camden to Bong Bong, Sutton Forest and beyond.

In 1820, the Governor passed through the area on a journey to the south, camping on the banks of the river near Throsby's hut. Macquarie thought the country on the northern bank of the river was "really beautiful, being fit for both cultivation and grazing," and on 14 November 1821 signed an order to lay out the official village of Bong Bong there following a request from Dr Charles Throsby. Incidentally there were two men called Charles Throsby - Charles Throsby Jnr. was son of Dr. Charles Throsby's brother John. The village developed as the first centre for law and order in the Southern Highlands, with a row of government buildings erected between 1822 and 1832, close to the Old Argyle Road where the road curved westwards to cross the river by the causeway. A hut for the first gaoler, Bryan Bagnall, on conditional pardon from his life sentence, was erected beside a simple bark-roofed lock-up in 1822, and soldiers were initially housed in huts until barracks were erected by 1829. In the same year postal facilities were established. A school for the children of settlers on the numerous small mixed farms in the district had already opened in 1827, a blacksmith's shop was built opposite the lock-up and an animal pound was built in 1832. The neat, rough-cast commissariat store was built between 1829 and 1831 at the east end of the government row.

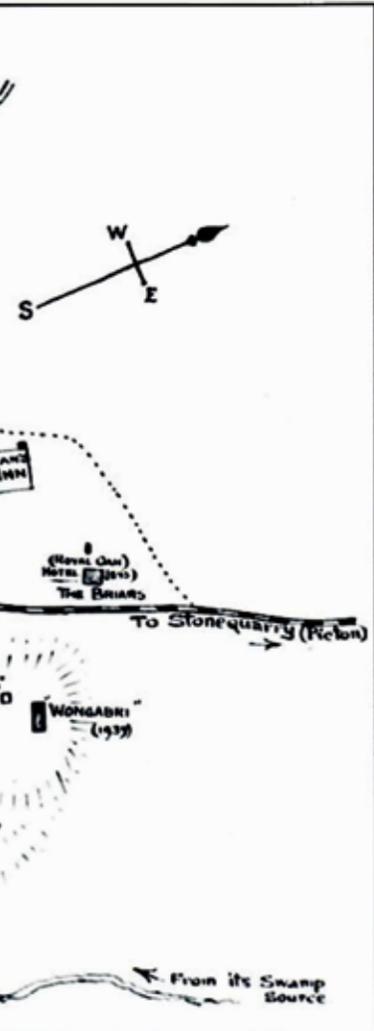
The magistrates, among them, Charles Throsby and James Atkinson, supervised the two or three constables and lock-up keeper and scourger, as well as the clerk servicing their courts, while the soldiers were under military command. There was need of accommodation for travellers and those attending the courts. In 1827, William Bowman opened the Argyle Inn on the high land just to the north, above the village and looking across to Throsby Park on the south side of the river.

THE RISE AND DEMISE OF BONG BONG TOWNSHIP



This sketch is based on the memory of Miss Sarah Gregg Loseby, who was born at nearby 'Harby Farm' on 4 September 1847 and still had a "clear memory" in her 100th year when the commemoration ceremony was held on 18 January 1947.

Bong Bong was not a residential settlement, but a centre to administer law and order, with some basic services for the scattered rural population.



Bong Bong was bypassed by Surveyor General Thomas Mitchell's new road to the south, known as the Great South Road, which road gangs constructed in the early 1830s. This road ran through the new town of Berrima, where a court house was opened in 1838. As a direct result, Bong Bong ceased to be significant. The post office moved to Berrima in 1837, the Argyle Inn closed and the police and military buildings at Bong Bong were in disrepair when the entire government site was sold to Charles Throsby Jnr. in 1844. The old commissariat store remained as a general store. This prospered under its proprietor Dovey in the later 1860s when the Argyle Road was redirected past the store, cutting the site of old Bong Bong into two parts. Soon afterwards the new railway from Mittagong bypassed Berrima. The consequent growth of Moss Vale at the expense of Berrima did not restore Bong Bong but gave a modest prosperity for a while to its surviving store. In the later nineteenth century the other official buildings at Bong Bong simply decayed and disappeared.

RIVER CROSSINGS



There was just a pebbly ford across the Wingecarribee River, when Governor Macquarie passed along the new road in 1820. Surprisingly, despite years of floods in the river, remnants the original river crossing, or Macquarie's pebbly ford, are still visible. This rare old causeway is one of the most significant historical elements worthy of preservation on the Bong Bong Common.



In 1865 a more substantial bridge was built.

The 1865 bridge was replaced in 1916 by a concrete bridge (pictured here during demolition).



This bridge lasted until 1975, when a new bridge was constructed above the flood level to overcome problems when the road was regularly inundated, cutting off traffic moving between Moss Vale and Bowral. At this time, the 1916 bridge was demolished and removed.



The current bridge was opened in 1975.

THE OBELISK



In 1947, an obelisk, made from polished trachyte mined from Mount Gibraltar, was erected to mark the significance of the site as the location of the first surveyed township in the Southern Highlands.

The obelisk and land were both donated by the owner of the adjoining Wongebri property, Mr H Talbot Sanderson.

This commemorative obelisk was unveiled by the Governor of New South Wales, Sir John Northcott, on 18 January 1947.

The next day, two Lombardy Poplar trees were planted on either side of the obelisk by the two young sons of the Governor General, Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, the third son of King George V.

The two boys were, His Royal Highness Prince William of Gloucester (then aged 5) and his young brother Prince Richard (aged 2). Prince William died in a plane crash in 1972. Richard is the current Duke of Gloucester.

This obelisk, marking the former Bong Bong Military site, is listed on the Registry of War Memorials in New South Wales.

LIFE AFTER THE TOWNSHIP

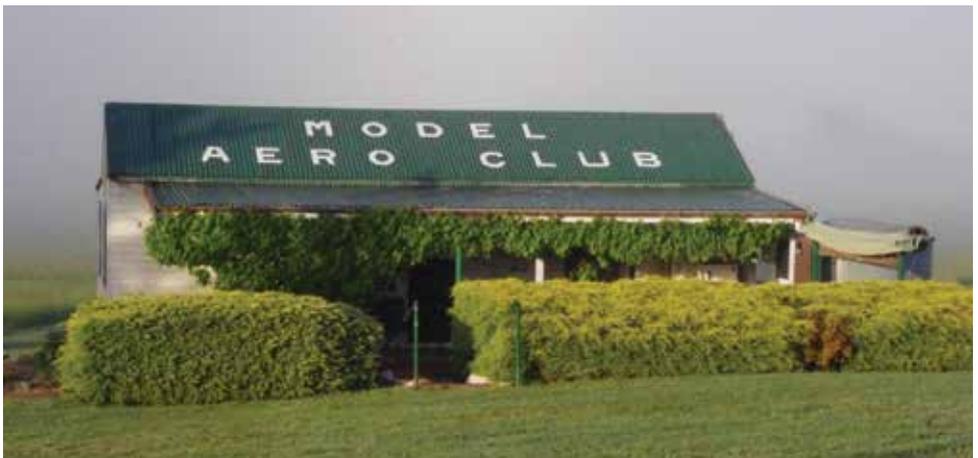
When the former township reverted to the Throsby family in 1844, the land was used for grazing cattle up until 1978, when Eric (Ted) von Nida began operating the Bowral Flight Centre on the site. Soon after the airfield operations ceased, the land reverted to cattle grazing once again.



In 1986, Wingecarribee Shire Council acquired the site and after being briefly used as an adult day care centre during 1988, the Berrima District Model Aero Club has occupied the building since 1989, reminding us of the earlier aviation use on this land.

The land was dedicated as Bong Bong Common in 1994.

Hay is cut during summer, providing some income for the Bong Bong Common Management Committee to use on improvements, while the Model Aero Club continues to do a valuable job mowing and maintaining the grounds.



CENTENARY OF FEDERATION TREES



In 2000, Wingecarribee Shire Council, marked the centenary of Australia's Federation with a tree planting project. Boosted by a Centenary of Federation grant from the Federal Government, the council matched that contribution and asked the community to also get involved by donating money or assistance with planting. The plan aimed to link Mittagong, Bowral and Moss Vale with a continuous avenue of deciduous and native trees, as well as planting trees in sixteen Wingecarribee Shire villages. The project was launched at Bong Bong Common by Deputy Mayor Philip Yeo on 9 July 2000 - the same day in 1900 on which Queen Victoria made the proclamation leading to Federation in 1901. Bong Bong Common was the location chosen to plant the first 70 trees because this was the site of the first European settlement in Wingecarribee Shire.

THE BONG BONG TRACK

The idea to create a simple bridle path between Moss Vale and Berrima, following the Wingecarribee River, was first suggested in the 1980s.

This idea eventually evolved into a popular public 4.6 kilometre pathway linking Moss Vale with Burradoo, used by people of all ages in all sorts of weather - cyclists, walkers, people pushing prams, children on roller blades and dog owners taking their pets for a walk.

The Bong Bong Track runs through the Common and was officially opened in 2003.





ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

From 1996, various groups including local Landcare, Conservation Volunteers Australia, Wingecarribee Council's Bushcare team, school groups and the Green Army, have undertaken revegetation projects.

Native trees, shrubs and grasses have been planted along the riverbank, largely using seed collected from remnant bushland in the area.

These trees and other vegetation are helping to create a really useful wildlife corridor, while the riparian zone beside the Wingecarribee River provides valuable habitat for a variety of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates.

THE FUTURE



In January 2017, Wingecarribee Shire Council acquired the land on which the Commissariat, Dovey's Store and Throsby's hut were situated. This means that all of the land comprising the original settlement is now in public ownership. Apart from bringing all of the land in the old Bong Bong township into the Common, this has consolidated a stronger link with the adjoining Cecil Hoskins Nature Reserve, creating a larger area of public space along the Wingecarribee River for future generations to enjoy.

Planning is underway to have the Bong Bong Common listed as an item of State Significance and a new management plan will be prepared incorporating the additional land.

Because any remains of the old township would have been buried by successive floods, it is hoped that one day, archaeologists will work on the site, to determine and record the exact locations of the various features of the old township.

KEY DATES

1788

and before For perhaps 50,000 years, what is now the Bong Bong Common was a place on which Australia's first inhabitants camped, fished and hunted.

1819

Steps taken by Governor Macquarie to establish settlement at Bong Bong and Old Argyle Road commenced.

1820

Governor Macquarie passed along the new road, commenting on the pebbly ford. He decided to lay out the new settlement at Bong Bong.

1821

The township of Bong Bong planned on a 30 acre site.

1822

A row of government buildings was erected between 1822 and 1832

1826

Bowman built the Argyle Inn.

1827

A school was opened for the children of settlers in the surrounding area.

1829

Accommodation erected for soldiers, police and prisoners, replacing their old huts. A commissariat store was built between 1829 and 1831 and a blacksmiths shop opened in Throsby's old hut. A post office was established.

1831

Surveyor General Mitchell commenced construction of a new line of road from Mittagong to Berrima - the Great South Road - diverting through traffic away from Bong Bong to the new township at Berrima.

1837

Bong Bong post office moved to Berrima.

1838

Berrima Court House opened, removing the magistrate's functions from Bong Bong. Berrima gaol was completed by 1839.

1844

The land on which Bong Bong township existed was transferred to Charles Throsby Jnr.

1916

The 1865 bridge replaced with a new concrete bridge.

1947

Bong Bong Obelisk erected

1975

The 1916 bridge was replaced. Throsby Park acquired by the state government and Cecil Hoskins Nature Reserve was gazetted.

1978

Bowral Flight Centre established by Eric von Nida

1986

Wingecarribee Shire Council acquired the property.

1994

Bong Bong Common designated.

1995

Bong Bong Management Committee formed

1998

Archaeological assessment prepared (later revised in 2002)

2000

Centenary of Federation tree planting.

2003

Bong Bong Track officially opened.

2008

Conservation Management Plan adopted for the Common.

2011

Plan of management adopted for the Bong Bong Common

2017

Council acquired the remaining land covered by the original settlement site.



This booklet was produced in 2017.
The Bong Bong Common is managed by Wingecarribee Shire Council,
assisted by the Bong Bong Common Management Committee.

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You can contact Wingecarribee Shire Council at the Civic
Centre in Moss Vale, or by mail at PO Box 141, Moss Vale 2577