

Local History Research: Stringybark Creek – Part 2

This paper continues the history of Stringybark Creek – the creek opening on the left hand side just downstream from the Footbridge. In Part 1, we covered off the period from the 1832 Land Grant up until the destruction by bushfire of the Cumberland Paper Mill in October 1928. Let's see what happened after...

1928

Omitted from Part 1 was the 1926 amalgamation of Cumberland Paper Board Mills Ltd with Australian Paper and Pulp Co Ltd and their various mills were placed under the management of a new working company Australian Paper Manufacturers Limited (APM, which became Amcor in 1986). The Cumberland Paper factory on the Lane Cove River was just one of their operations. After the fire, APM activities were ramped up at other locations vs rebuilding. Despite a record insurance payout the ruined site lay dormant until 1932.

1932 Robert Corbett & Co – Chemical Manufacturer

In 1932 – chemical manufacturer Robert Corbett & Co established themselves on the site. Some details are quoted below [Source: History of North Ryde 1850-1950 George Redding. North Ryde Public School Ex-Pupils History Group]:

When Gibson Corbett, brother of Robert, made acetic acid in the backyard of a house in Gordon, he was soon made aware the neighbours were not appreciative of its characteristic vinegar odour. Operations were transferred to Balmain in 1923 and to Drummoyne in 1928 but the residents of these suburbs did not take kindly to the odour either. The availability of a site in isolated bushland together with its river transport accessibility was therefore welcomed and operations commenced there in 1932.

Working conditions in the 1930's, the Depression Years, were far from idyllic. By today's standards the work was arduous and dangerous and the mechanisation was at a minimum. One of the most demanding jobs, physically, was the handling of calcium acetate, a main raw material for the manufacture of acetic acid. The bags of calcium acetate, imported from Canada, were brought up the Lane Cove River by barge and then manhandled on the wharf, into the store and into the factory by wheelbarrow. Each bag weighed over 200lbs (~100kg).

In 1934 the products made included acetic acid, metallic soaps (both used in paint manufacture), amyl acetate (used for nail polish remover) and Eranol (used as a fumigant for dried fruits).

In 1939, the Distillers Co Ltd of England and CSR Ltd became minority shareholders in the company and provided finance for development of new processes and additional products. Production of acetone (used in the manufacture of munitions) by fermentation of molasses commenced soon afterwards. The molasses was transported by punt from the sugar refinery at Pyrmont. Other products included printing ink, brake fluids, photosensitising solutions and a wide range of organic chemicals.

The Sun – 5 June 1936

Source: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

FOR EXPLOSIVES

Chemicals Made Here

MELBOURNE, Friday.

That some products turned out by his company, Robert Corbett and Co., chemical manufacturers, of Sydney, had an important bearing on Australia's defence, was declared to the Tariff Board to-day by Mr. Campbell Corbett.

He said his company were the largest manufacturers in Australia of ethyl formate and other organic chemicals necessary for the production of explosives.

He asked for the retention of the present duties on ethyl formate.

SMH – 30 Jul 1937

Source: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

TARIFF BOARD.

Duties on Solvents.

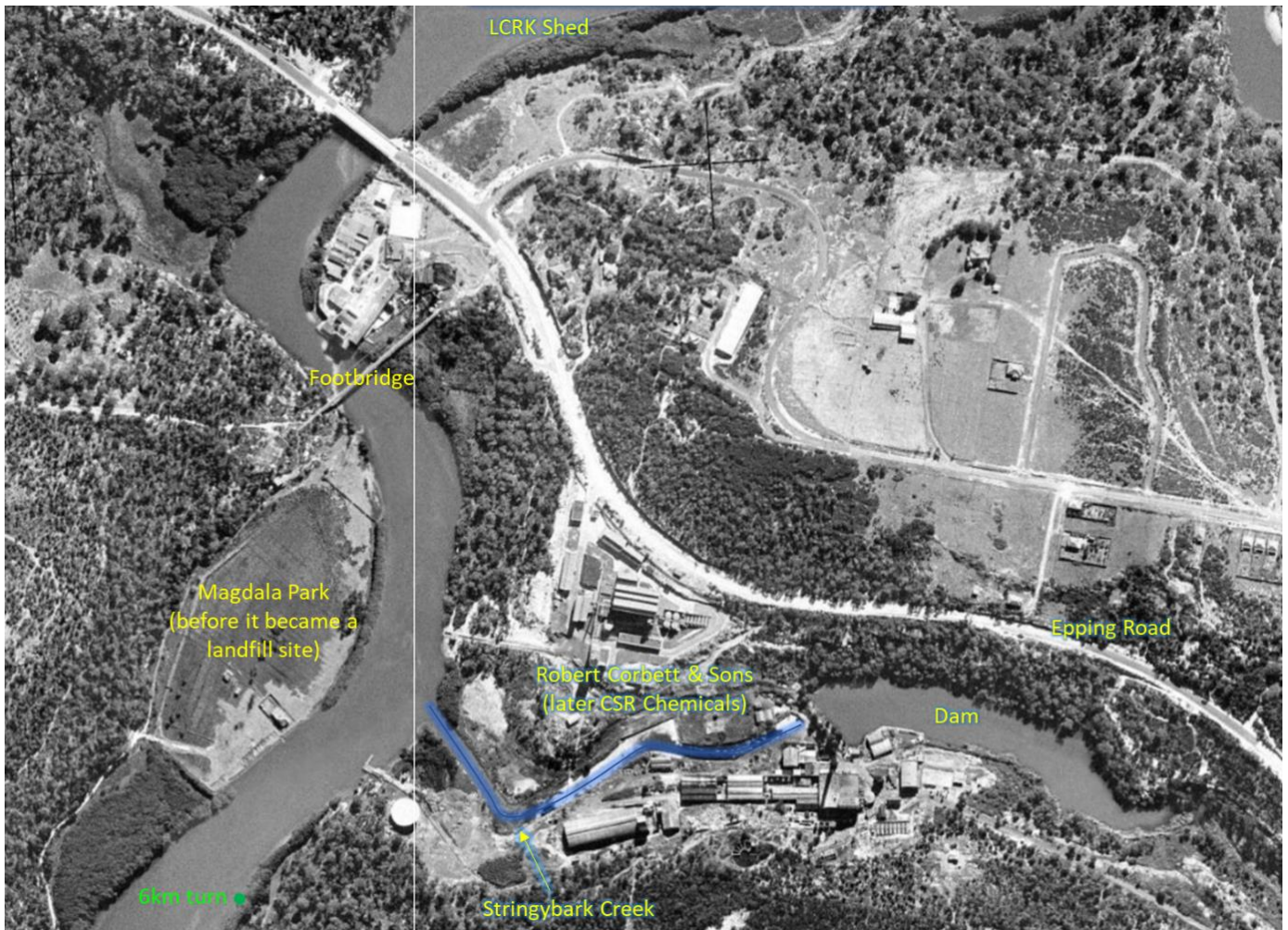
LOCAL MANUFACTURE FROM MOLASSES.

The Tariff Board yesterday considered an application for increased rates of duty on methyl ethyl ketone.

Dr. Roy W. Harman, chief chemist of the Colonial Sugar Refining Co., Ltd., supporting the application on behalf of his company, said protection was sought for what was termed an essential and vital Australian industry, against overseas competition. He said his company supplied ethyl alcohol as one of the main raw materials used in the production of ethyl acetate. That alcohol was produced by fermentation from cane molasses, and was thus wholly an Australian product. In order to meet the steady increase in demand for alcohol and methylated spirits, the company was now increasing the capacity of its distillery at Pyrmont, and also the facilities for the transport and storage of molasses.

1943

The aerial map below (Source: NSW Gov't Six Maps [copyright]) provides a perspective on the extent of the Robert Corbett works on Stringybark Creek. Location of the LCRK shed and 6km turn are as indicated. Note the Molasses Tank and wharf next to the Lane Cove River at bottom of photo.



1947 – Expansion

From the “History of Ryde”: *In 1947 CSR and Distillers became major shareholders and in 1952 the organisation became a wholly owned subsidiary of CSR Chemicals Pty Ltd.*

SMH – 13 June 1947

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

FIRM PLANS BIG EXPANSION

Plans providing for the expenditure of one million pounds, including £500,000 on additional plant at the Lane Cove works, have been drawn up by Robert Corbett Pty. Ltd.

The managing director, Mr. R. L. Corbett, announced this at a dinner attended by representatives of various organisations at the Carlton Hotel on Wednesday.

The plans include a synthetic butanol plant of sufficient capacity to satisfy, with the company's existing plant, all requirements of the Commonwealth, and allow for export.

It is expected that the additional plant will be operating in about two years' time.

Direct employment will be given to about 250 people, but indirectly thousands will benefit because organic solvents and other industrial chemicals produced will be used in many industries.

Daily Telegraph 13 June 1947

Source: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

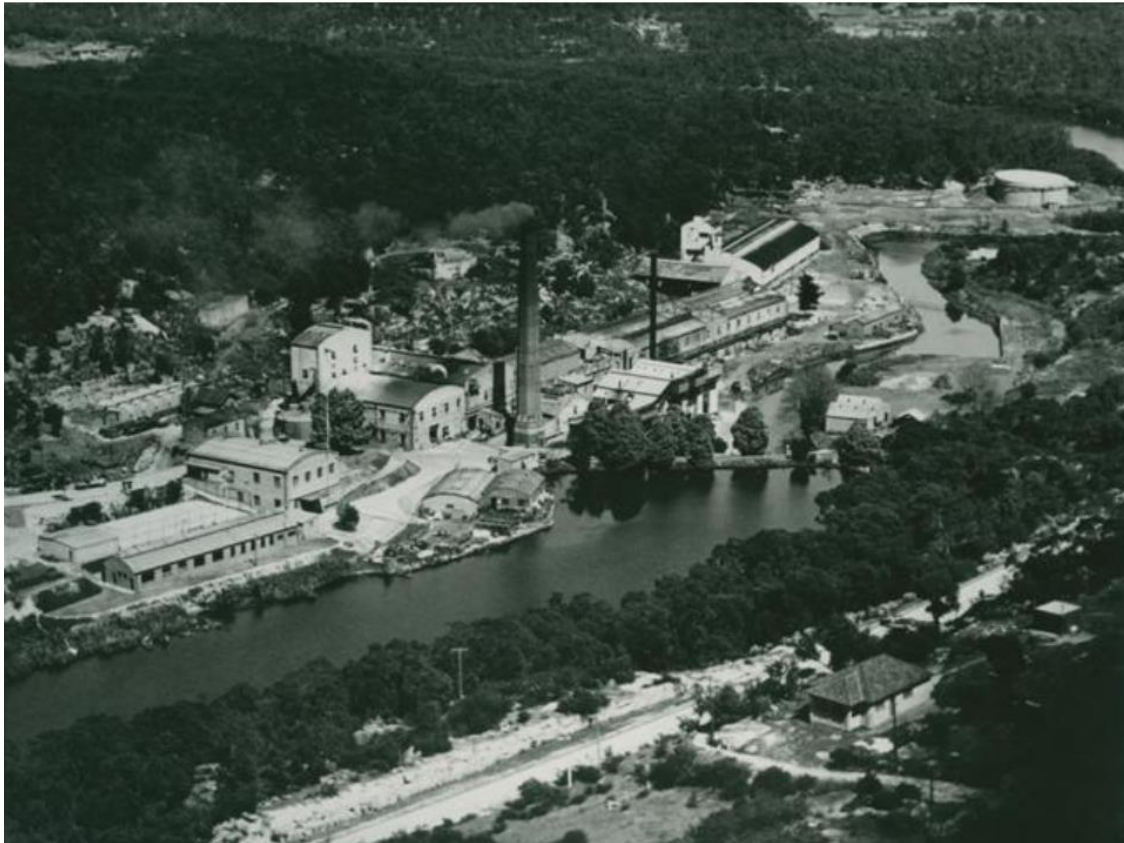
£1,000,000 FOR CHEMICAL WORKS

Robert Corbett Pty., Ltd., will invest £1,000,000 in extensions and plant at its chemical works at Lane Cove, the managing director of the firm (Mr. R. L. Corbett) said last night.

The firm makes organic solvents.

1949

The results of this investment are evidenced by the photos below. These are just a couple from a series of photographs from the collection of Alfred Nuberg, Public Relations Officer with C.S.R. Chemicals, first at Lane Cove and subsequently at Rhodes. [Source: Lane Cove Library - <https://www.aurorashore.com.au/Montage/Lanecove/>]



Above: Stringybark Creek Dam and Epping Road at bottom of shot. Looking West. Lane Cove River at top right. Molasses tank at entry to Stringybark Creek.



Above: Lane Cove River at bottom of picture. Stringybark creek leading up to dam. Molasses Tank and jetty to the right of Stringybark Creek. Water pump house to left of Stringybark Creek.

1950's style conservation

The Land – 25 Aug 1950

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/>

Plants and Trees Protect River Banks

MRS. McDONALD, in charge of the factory's restaurant for many years past, served us morning tea in the dining-room overlooking the river. Known as **Stringybark Creek**, the river is one of nature's gifts ensuring the factory's survival.

From it are drawn hourly 50,000 gallons of water for certain cooling processes that have their place in the manufacturing of chemicals. Later, the greater percentage of it is pumped back into the stream. Because of this vital service of the water, close watch is kept on the river's banks. Everywhere plants now bind the soil so that no form of erosion may creep in.

1950's CSR Chemicals picks up pace

The Sun – 1 July 1952

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>

New sales for C.S.R. Chemicals

CSR Chemicals Pty. Ltd. will take over from today the sale and distribution of all the solvents and organic chemicals produced by **Robert Corbett Pty. Ltd.**, in addition to its own cellulose acetate moulding powders, polyhydric alcohols and fine chemicals.

The two companies have been associated for some months although operated independently, 60 pc of the shares in both companies being held by the Colonial Sugar Refining Co. Ltd., and 40 pc by the Distillers Co. Ltd. of London.

CSR Chemicals will also represent the associated English company, **British Industrial Solvents Ltd.**, whose organic chemicals have previously been marketed in Australia by **Robert Corbett Pty. Ltd.**

Interstate branches are being established in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland.

The Land – 10 December 1954

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

The Land (Sydney, NSW : 1911 - 1954) / Fri 10 Dec 1954

THIS MANUFACTURE,

Owing to the growing demand for lacquer solvents, the capacity of this section of the **Lane Cove** plant is being increased and expansion of the boiler station is also in progress. At the Rhodes factory a plant for the production of polystyrene, a plastic moulding compound, is in course of erection and should be in production by the end of the year.

1975 Site Closure

<http://www.chemlink.com.au/csr.htm>

...To establish a foothold in the marketplace as a manufacturer of commodity chemicals, CSR planned to manufacture cellulose acetate resin. As a first step in 1946 anticipating the large scale manufacture of acetic acid (which began four years later in 1950), CSR began to manufacture cellulose acetate moulding powder from imported flake. The cellulose acetate plant operated for the next quarter century at their Lane Cove, New South Wales site until it closed in 1975.

...[Cellulose acetate is a plastic material principally used for moulding and fibres (rayon, for Australia's textile industry but which would soon be subject to competition from newer petroleum-sourced polymers). This resin is manufactured from acetic acid (made by oxidising ethanol) and cellulose (e.g. from its sugar cane bagasse)].

1981

The photo shows the site after closure – looking North across Stringybark Creek in the foreground – the factories at back of photo are now the site of the Aspire residential high rise. The link provided gives a whole sequence of images of the site and its demolition.

The photo commentary states: *CSR Chemical plant shortly before demolition in 1981. Buildings are the Continuous Esters & Plasticisers plant on left, and Acetaldehyde & Acetic Acid plant on right.. Note the North South Road (constructed in 1948), known as Gillgordon Avenue; the tree planting was done by Jim Gill and Bill Gordon.*

Source: Lane Cove Library - <https://www.aurorashore.com.au/Montage/Lanecove/>



1986

Even after demolition (and to this day) there were still industrial remnants visible with even a casual glance.

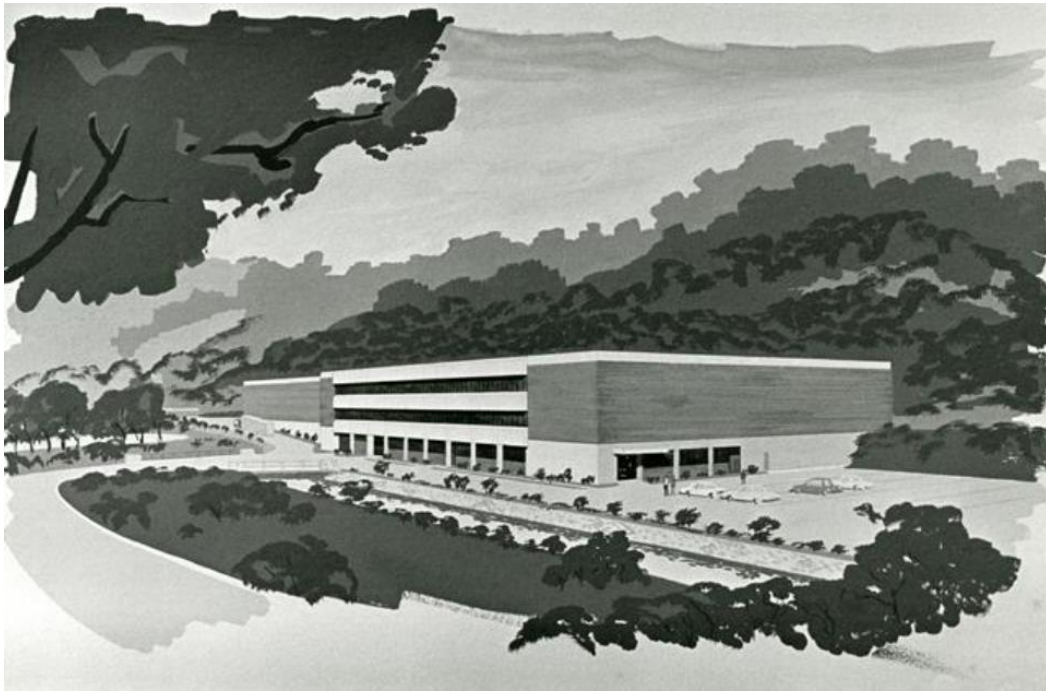
The photos below are online at Lane Cove Library (<https://www.aurorashore.com.au/Montage/Lanecove/>) and show the CSR Chemicals saltwater pumphouse and adjacent wharf



The photographs feature the CSR Chemicals saltwater pumphouse and adjacent wharf

1986

The artists impression below shows S.C Johnson offices as proposed at the time – with a picturesque Stringybark Creek in the foreground. SC Johnson is still there, and the access road to the light industrial area is named Sam Johnson Way accordingly. Source: Lane Cove Library <https://www.aurorashore.com.au/Montage/Lanecove/>



Current Day

A paddle up Stringybark Creek (mid-tide is best unless you're good at paddling backwards to get out) gives you some sense of it's history. Remnants of the old wooden wharf used by Cumberland Paper Mill (and then Corbetts) are still visible. It's not particularly pretty – but well worth a look. Alternatively you can access bush tracks round the foreshore and have a better look..

