

Saving Lane Cove River

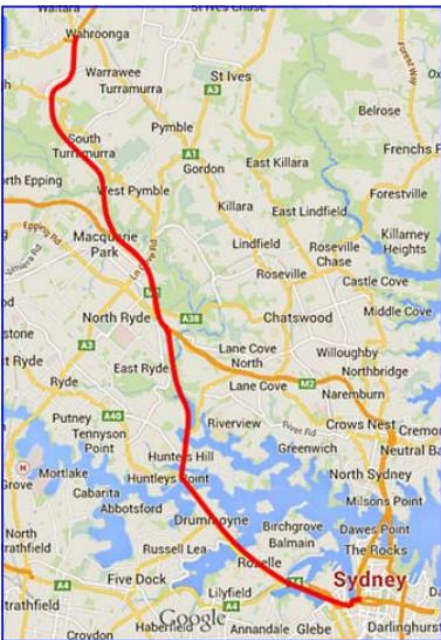
by Tom Holloway

Our river is a natural treasure right in the heart of suburban Sydney. The banks are lined with bushland, wildlife, mangrove habitats and sandstone cliffs. The water quality is improving, and there are relatively few signs of civilisation for much of the course. Compared to the rest of Parramatta River it's a virtual wilderness!

Yet it almost wasn't the case. For much of the 20th century there were plans under way to construct a major freeway through the valley – and they even started building it!

Freeway planning begins Back in the 1950s the then mighty Department of Main Roads (DMR, now RTA/RMS) was planning to link Sydney's CBD and Newcastle with a continuous freeway. This grand vision was known as the *North Western Expressway*, also known as the *F3 Freeway*.

Most of us are familiar with the F3 route north of Wahroonga. However the original F3 plan ran all the way between Sydney CBD and Newcastle. The proposed route



started in the city, continued over Glebe Island, then across Rozelle and Drummoyne via new elevated roadways, up through Hunters Hill and the Lane Cove River, along the M2 route through Turramurra and Wahroonga, and finally on to Newcastle.

The graphic at left shows the route. Note the portion running straight through our time trial course.

You might think this was a bold and unrealistic plan;

however it wasn't out of reach in the 1950s and 1960s. Back then the DMR had clout, and governments were willing to invest in infrastructure. They didn't build wimpy commercial motorways like the M2 and M5 which needed widening after a few years; they built 6 and 8 lane expressways with 100-year visions in mind. Community and environmental concerns took a back seat and road builders got on with business.

Work begins The first stage of the Sydney-Newcastle *North Western Expressway* began construction in the 1950s and was fully opened to traffic in 1965. You'll all have driven across it countless times, perhaps not knowing its true purpose. It is of course the Gladesville Bridge, the Tarban Creek Bridge, the Hunters Hill Overpass and Figtree Bridge. This block of roads, bridges and overpasses was actually the first stage of the F3 Sydney-Newcastle link, which explains why it's so massive compared to the surrounding roads.

This early stage was not without controversy, as the Hunters Hill Overpass cut a large chunk out of old Hunters Hill, including several famous heritage landmarks. That battle is a story in itself and helped pave the way for heritage preservation across Sydney.

Lane Cove Valley Expressway The next leg of the *North Western Expressway* project was to extend from Figtree Bridge up through our time trial course to Epping Road. This was to be the mighty *Lane Cove Valley Expressway* – an elevated concrete roadway cutting through the river, the mangroves and the escarpments. The extract from the DMR journal at the foot of this page shows an artist's impression.

This wasn't a pre-election pipe-dream like we see these days; it was going to happen, as demonstrated by the route finding its way into street directories of the time. See the UBD from the 1970s on the next page with the ominous freeway, overpasses and bridges dotted along the river. Note all the elevated roadways crisscrossing near Blackman Park, plus another large overpass near the pontoon.

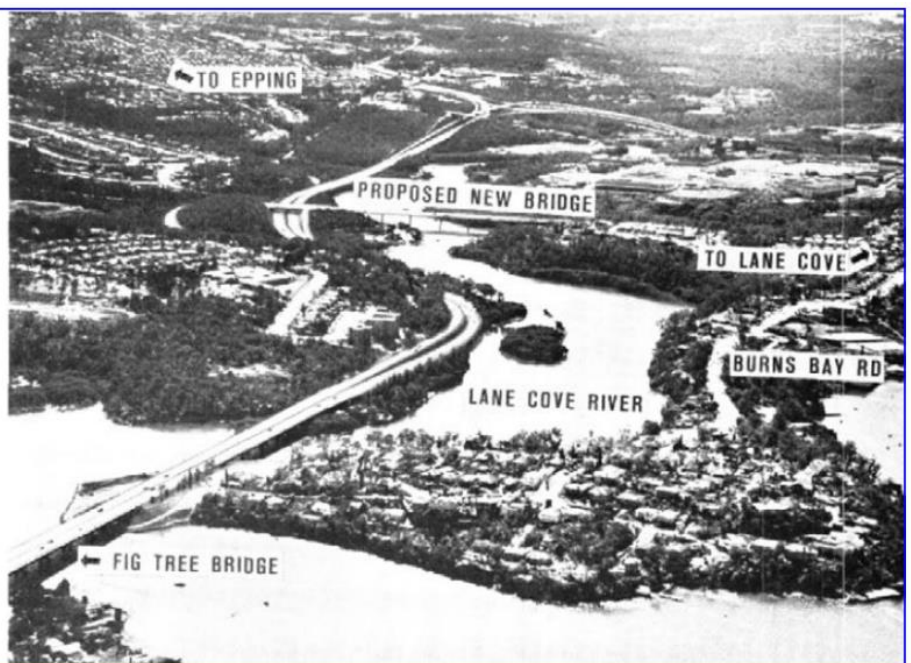
Protests Shortly before the *Lane Cove Valley Expressway* entered major construction, various community and environmental protests began to emerge. This opposition culminated in 1972 when an armada of boats, rowers, paddlers and sailors headed up the river with politicians in tow. Sympathetic State Ministers were there, and also the up and coming Gough Whitlam, who was still federal Opposition leader. The *Sydney Morning Herald* headlines of the time tell the story

LANE COVE VALLEY EXPRESSWAY

The proposed route of this Expressway extends north from Fig Tree Bridge along the west side of the Lane Cove River to North Ryde, then to West Pymble and from there to Wahroonga where it will link with the Sydney-Newcastle Expressway near Pearce's Corner.

At its southern end this Expressway will join the North Western Expressway at Fig Tree Bridge to provide fast and convenient access from the city to the north western and northernmost suburbs of Sydney.

The artist's impression (at right) is looking north from Fig Tree Bridge, along the Lane Cove River, towards North Ryde.





of these protests.

Similar protests were held in the inner city around Ultimo, where the city sections of the *North Western Expressway* project threatened local residents. Thus the first major cracks started to appear in this mega project.

The project struggles After Gough Whitlam came to power in 1972 he halted the *North Western Expressway* project, and in 1977 the NSW Wran government poured cold water on it at a state level. However by this stage another large section of the Sydney-Newcastle project was almost completed – the Western Distributor – the huge overpasses that wrap around Darling Harbour and Pyrmont. The Western Distributor was completed in 1980, but by that stage the overall *North Western Expressway* project had lost further political momentum and the remaining sections remained on the backburner.

In 1988 the state government officially abandoned the *Lane Cove Valley Expressway* segment, at which point the dotted lines vanished from street directories.

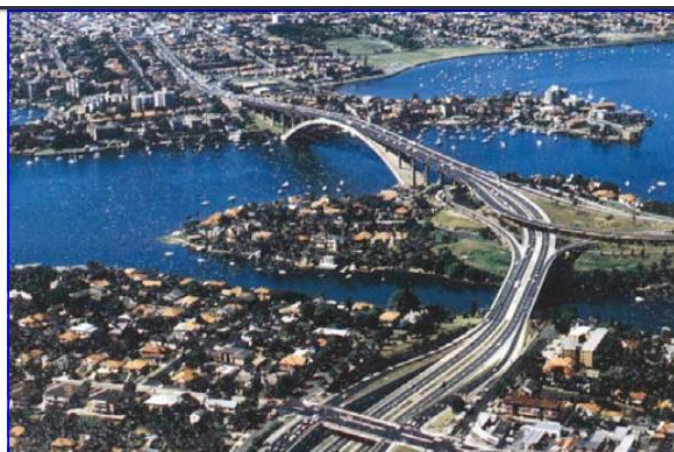
The Greiner government then sold much of the remaining *North Western Freeway* route to the M2 developers in the early 1990s. This transaction was one of the first examples of public-private partnerships that are now commonplace in road and tunnel development. In 1996 – less than 20 years ago - the state government officially degazetted all remaining sections of the *North Western Expressway* route, which proved the final nail in the coffin for the

North Western and *Lane Cove Valley Expressways*.

What if? The *Lane Cove Valley Expressway* may not have eventuated, but it came very close, as evidenced by some interesting remnants of the plan. Take a look at the Figtree Bridge – notice how the concrete supports extend out much wider than the road deck. The bridge was built this way to support enough lanes to feed the *Lane Cove Valley Expressway*.

These concrete supports were the only part of the *Lane Cove Expressway* that was ever built. Never fulfilling their original purpose, they now serve as mere historical artifacts marking an unfulfilled vision.

Next time you're



Stage 1 of the Sydney-Newcastle F3 North Western Expressway: Gladesville Bridge, Tarban Creek Bridge, Hunters Hill Overpass and Figtree Bridge (not shown)



Figtree Bridge: Redundant concrete supports for the Lane Cove Valley Expressway

paddling take a look at Figtree Bridge and imagine it the full width and continuing straight down the river. That's what almost came to be.

What would have happened if the *Lane Cove Valley Expressway* came to fruition? Would a canoe club have formed? Would there have been Lane Cove River Kayakers? Maybe we'd all be racing every Wednesday night alongside a noisy concrete expressway! Or maybe the impact of it would have spoiled the paddling experience too much for our vibrant club to form. One can only wonder.

Transport in Sydney is a real a basket case, and in many ways a proper Sydney-Newcastle link would have been a great thing for our city. Battling your way north to Newcastle certainly takes longer than it should, and the resultant congestion isn't good for the city, the environment and our blood pressure! For these reasons many people regret that the *North Western* and *Lane Cove Valley Expressway* never came to be.

The flipside of course is that is that we have a lovely undeveloped river to paddle week-in week-out!



Note the dotted lines showing the proposed freeway, overpasses and bridges

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