

Walls That Talk – River Stories

Introduction

The rivers of the Hunter Region are connected physically, fed by the same mountains and meeting on fertile plains before rushing towards the mouth of the port of Newcastle. They have been used for food, transport, agriculture - for both exploration and exploitation of the land. The rivers are the spiritual heart and lifeblood of the Hunter. In *River Stories*, the exhibition uses original artworks and photographs from the Maitland Library Collection as inspiration to find and tell stories about the Hunter River and its confluences the Paterson and Williams Rivers.

1. First Look

Lake Patterson, Near Patterson's Plains, Hunters River, New South Wales, Joseph Lycett 1824 (LIB2022.068)

This is Bolwarra Lagoon ('Patterson Lake') before the roads and farms came. Through their paintings and stories, we see how the Hunter Region was seen and perceived by the Europeans as they pushed deeper into Wonnarua country. They found a place that was beautiful, dangerous, and potentially profitable. Explorer Francis Barrallier tells something of the tale in his first impression, mainly, his disbelief that the region could be settled:

"As to [the Hunter] it is a stream which will never be of use to a new settlement, if I may estimate the degree in which floods rise by traces on trees of above 40 feet high. ...[the Hunter] has 14 banks of sand...which render its navigation by the smallest boat dangerous three miles above [Morpeth]". *Blue Mountains to Bridgetown: the life and journeys of Barrallier, 1773-1853*

Visionary artist and convict forger Joseph Lycett painted this scene in 1824.

2. Willows

Photograph of Paterson River George Chambers, year unknown (LIB2023.117.031)

East Maitland photographer George Chambers left us a rare document of life in the late 19th century, such as this photo of the Paterson River showing large, graceful willow trees lining the banks. Now considered Weeds of National Significance and a threat to the health of rivers, they were originally planted for their beauty and ironically, to strengthen the riverbank. These photographs capture a moment in time – when the river was beginning to be 'managed' as part of a concerted effort to control flow direction and flood.

A note in the 1946 Journal of the Soil Conservation Service of New South Wales reads:

Control Measures Adopted

Tree Planting

*A few trees were planted at the wide intervals in the pasture furrows throughout the whole area. Trees planted...along the main watercourses were...weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*)*

-Journal of the Soil Conservation Service of New South Wales Sydney: Govt. Printer, 1945

3. Beautiful River

Photograph of Hunter River above Aberglasslyn George Chambers, year unknown (LIB2023.117.072)

A long boat is visible on the water's surface, holding one man sitting upright holding an oar. Along the bank an interspersed row of willows and gum trees. Another of George Chamber's photographs, this one depicts a calm still day on the Hunter River. The rivers of the Hunter, while being transit lanes and industrial throughways, were also delightful places to visit.

“...while we unloaded what cargo we had for Newcastle, we went on up the river, calling at Raymond Terrace...we went on, past the junction of the Williams River, to Morpeth, passing through some of the best of those magnificent lucerne flats which have made the lands of the Lower Hunter famous more than anything else...”

“the ship approached the end of her voyage, the river became more and more beautiful.”

Newcastle Packets and the Hunter Valley, J.H.M. Abbott 1943

4. Milk Run

Photograph of a Milk Boat, Unknown Photographer, Cynthia Hunter Collection

A small boat on a wide river, approaching a verdant green bank. On top of the roof of the boat, are four blurred pale shapes: these are milk jugs. The little boat, rather than being for pleasure or sight-seeing is a milk boat – also called a cream, dairy, or butter boat. These small but swift vessels visited the milk factories, the butter factories, and the resellers and exporters – creating a thriving milk selling industry. Dairy became a premium export alongside coal and wood to as far afield as New Zealand from as early as 1850.

From the Raymond Terrace Examiner, 11th September 1947, comes this note:

“Creameries were set up in various parts of the district...[in 1904] the Raymond Terrace Dairy Co. commenced ...This factory now operates at Hexham and is said to be the largest milk factory in the State”

5. An Early Map

Plan of West Maitland, 1858 (LIB2022.021)

This map, created in 1828 and one of our earliest existing maps, shows the Hunter River as a pale blue snake in an empty landscape, surrounded by the nascent High Street and its radiating tributaries. It shows a river that is fixed in place and hemmed in by those streets. Famously, the river would flood and sometimes change course entirely, spreading its rich soil to feed the forests of the famous red cedars. This map shows a Hunter River with a bend that no longer exists, curving around Horseshoe Bend sharply, before returning to the meander of the river.

A map is a guide for travellers, but it's also a declaration. We've declared where we think a river will always be found. From our records and our objects we learn that huge changes can happen over time, with only our stories - and sometimes maps - to show us how far the tide has shifted.

6. Unkind River

PS Hunter John Alcott c.1942

The Hunter can be dangerous with its powerful currents and hidden underwater objects. It holds many sad stories of lives lost – not from flood, but from the incidents of daily life. From the Newcastle Chronicle and Hunter River District News 24th January 1863:

Death by Drowning

On Saturday, an inquest was held at the Globe Inn, Morpeth, on the body of John Thompson, aged 24 years. From the evidence, it appeared the deceased was one of the firemen on board the Illalong steamer; on Friday he undressed...and leaped into the river from the [steamer]...and went down head foremost...it is supposed that he struck his head against the bottom...[he] was a good swimmer, and of very temperate habits. The jury returned a verdict of "accidentally drowned while bathing"

This image shows the PS Hunter – a similar boat to PS Illalong. Both arrived in 1854 and ran on steam power, requiring strong firemen to haul coal and power their engines.

7. River Picnic

Photograph of a boat on the Williams River George Chambers (LIB2023.117.004)

A pleasant place to rest, a calming lapping river, surrounded by deep greenery and weeping willows. This George Chambers photograph shows three well-dressed gentlemen fishing. The banks of the rivers of the hunter were an ideal site for leisure activities for those who lived nearby. A story from the 1912 Maitland Daily Mercury paints the picture of a lovely day out on the water:

River Excursion Picnic.

The annual excursion and picnic...Three boats have been engaged

to leave Morpeth at 9.30a.m...a brass band and refreshment on board. The Market Reserve at Raymond Terrace has been secured, and plenty of shelter, etc., is afforded for picnickers, refreshments and hot and cold water being available on the ground. A programme of sports for adults and children has been arranged, and everything will be done for the comfort and enjoyment of visitors.

8. The Regatta

Photograph [W.M. Regatta Jan 27th 1908, firms Race won by Compton & Sheedy's crew (LIB2024.090)

On the 27th of January 1908, a flood boat race was held on the Hunter, with first place won by a crew of workers from Compton & Sheedy, Maitland High Street drapers. This photograph encapsulates many classic Maitland tropes – a popular luxury High Street company, regattas on the Hunter, and Water Brigades that would train for boat races and for flood rescues – whichever happened first. Competition between regional water brigades was fierce.

On this day the young men in the boat entered into the Shop Assistants and Officers Handicap race, and the victors were photographed and honoured with a presentation frame to hold it. The race was documented the following day in the Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate:

"The Maitland Regatta under...unfavourable weather conditions, the thermometer showing [40 degrees] in the shade, the fixture was such a success that the committee should not hesitate to make it an annual one."

9. River Science

Lower Hunter River Flood Plain Atlas Public Works Department N.S.W. ©1982

Marked in pink, blue, and green, this map of central Maitland tells a story of a city intensely and minutely studied by cartographers, climatologists, meteorologists, and soil scientists. This image is from the 1982 Maitland Flood Plain Atlas, which detailed the flood levels of the region using data acquired from several surveys.

Today we know the stories of past floods and their effects on our city, perched on the banks of the Hunter. We each have our own stories and those inherited from our families and friends. Central Maitland Resident Jane remembers a recent flood:

During my first flood experience in Maitland, I watched from my veranda as flood waters rose slowly from the bottom of the street, creeping towards our house. I saw a car drive past and then straight into the floodwater. The water had reached their windows before it was abandoned by the saturated occupants. They walked past me, dropping their car keys in my letterbox in case the water receded and emergency services needed to move it...[after the second flood], I drove high up on Yango Creek Road and noticed little beaches of bright yellow sand had sprung up along the creeks. A local told me it was the sandstone which had been washed down the mountain in the downpour. Along Maitland River, trees that had stood strong in the previous flood were turned upside down, with their tangle of massive roots facing the sky. - Jane



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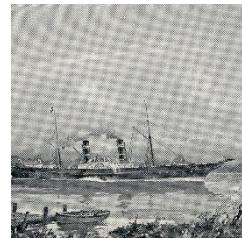
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