

Moruya's "Golden Years" About to Begin

By Shirley Jurmann

So Moruya granite had been chosen for the pylons of the new North Shore Bridge, soon to be known as the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge or affectionately, as "The Coathanger".

Why Moruya granite?

The reasons were many and all added up to it being the most suitable. Moruya granite had been known in Sydney from the mid-1860s but John Ross at the Pilot Station at South Heads also sent samples to Mr James Barnet, Colonial Architect. John Ross had very early begun to sing the praises of Moruya granite. On 5th August 1866 he wrote to the editor of The Empire newspaper suggesting that Moruya granite would make an excellent paving material for the streets of Sydney. It had been used in buildings, the pillars of the Sydney GPO, the pedestal of the Captain Cook Statue and the pedestal of the Queen Victoria Statue. There was plenty of it, it was of good quality, it had passed various tests, it had a good rock face and was in an ideal position close to the river to make loading of ships to transport the granite to Sydney easier. The Government would provide a quarry free of royalties.

The decision was made and contracts signed with Dorman, Long and Company. The area of the quarry would never be the same again but what was it like before work commenced? On 19th March 1924, several months before work commenced, the Sydney Morning Herald published an article by R. Dawson. He said that the splendid quarry from which the stone for the North Shore Bridge would be obtained was at Pomphey Point, two miles east of the township of Moruya. To reach it, turn at the bridge and travel along the north side of the river to Malabar Creek and cross the old timber bridge. Granite outcrops would then become visible. The quarry was five or six chains from the river bank. A quarry had been opened much earlier, about 30 or 40 chains to the east of the present one, to provide stone for the breakwater works in the river. A tram line was constructed to the North Heads. The stone was not proving suitable and a new and far better quarry was opened up at Pomphey Point. The tram line was extended. Horse drawn trucks carried large and heavy stones to the breakwater. When close to the point where the stone was needed the team would be unhitched and a single horse would haul the truck to the unloading place.

The tram line had been abandoned and fallen into disrepair. About 18 or 19 years prior to 1924 it had been converted into a narrow roadway. The breakwater took many years to complete and up until the beginning of the Great War of 1914-18 the big quarry had been occasionally worked. Considerable quantities of stone had been taken from it for extensions to the breakwater and training walls.

The entrance to the quarry itself was narrow but soon widened to a semi-circular shape, much overgrown, but sloping gently upwards and backwards, meaning that storm water would drain easily and provide a dry base. The granite face was almost vertical at the back and sides. For about a chain in length it was from 72 to 75 feet in height. It then sloped towards the entrance to a height of between 30 and 40 feet. On top of the granite face was soil no more than a couple of feet deep. The inside dimensions of the excavation were about 30 by 40 yards. On rough estimates this meant that at least 30,000 cubic yards of stone had already been taken out, but the actual measurement could well have exceeded this by four or five cubic yards.

Close by, to the west and separated from the big quarry by large granite boulders, was a smaller quarry. About eight to ten thousand cubic yards of granite had already been removed from this quarry. When the Dorman, Long and Company operations started the two quarries would be merged into one. The irregular face of the hill would be straightened to allow the laying of a railway line to carry the output to the water's edge for loading onto ships.

A little further westwards still, there was yet another small quarry. It had been worked off and on in days gone by, although not very much of late years. From this quarry had come stone for monumental works, local and otherwise, and for the Pitt Street frontage of the Sydney GPO. The pillars for the George Street frontage of the GPO had however been obtained from an excellent little quarry on the south bank of the river, not quite opposite but nearer to the Heads. An estimated 50,000 cubic yards had been removed from this small quarry. It was thought that the five acres of the big quarry, plus its smaller neighbour and the hill behind contained several times that quantity and would be more than enough for the bridge project. There were other hills in the vicinity buttressed by granite outcrops which could easily be accessed if needed. All of this granite was above ground. In Aberdeen, Scotland, the granite was found to extend 300 to 400 feet below ground and there were indications that it would be similar in Moruya.

So there was plenty of granite. What about the quality?

The grey granite was not perfect. There were slight imperfections and blemishes visible to the eye of the expert. It was not equal in appearance to the beautiful black and grey granites of Central Tilba, about 10 miles further south, but it had the strength and quality sufficient to stand up for ages in its future work on the Bridge pylons. The journalist predicted that the bridge would become “one of the greatest structures of its kind in the world, a structure of which the ‘Sons of Martha’ who conceived, designed it, and all true Australians, will be justly proud”. (“Sons of Martha” was a term sometimes used for engineers. It came from a biblical story. Martha was not polite to Jesus and so her sons had to serve others).

Prior to final approval the granite for both the dimension stone and concrete aggregate had been submitted to exhaustive tests by the engineer in chief, Mr Bradfield. Apart from the earth stripping there would be no quarry waste. Any stones too small or unsuitable for cutting and dressing would be passed through Hadfield crushers. The crushed material would be used as concrete aggregate of which a large quantity was required.

The area was an attractive spot. From the cleared top of the quarry hill, a hundred or so feet above sea level, there was an entrancing scene. The sparkling river was fringed by fields of flourishing maize and sacaline. The picturesque township of Moruya was situated on alternate flat and rising ground. In the background were shapely hills which were spurs and offshoots of the coastal range. At sunset the play of shade and light upon these hills was exquisitely beautiful.

All this peace and tranquillity was about to come to an end. Bob Colefax who worked in the quarry office, described the period to come as Moruya’s “Golden Years”. The first sod was turned on 18th September 1924. In a few months the clearing and levelling of the site was in full swing. Soon a manager, Mr J. Gilmore, would arrive from Scotland, local men, then masons from Scotland and Italy would be employed, houses would be built for families, bachelor quarters for single men, quarters for Italians with their own cook, machinery and crushers would arrive from Sydney, sheds for workshops, machinery, would be erected, a wharf built, a railway line for transportation of the stone to ships, a whole township complete with school, post office, recreation hall would appear. The whole area became a very busy, noisy place and remained so until 1931 until the contract for the pylons of the Bridge was fulfilled.

References:

Article Sydney Morning Herald 19th March 1924
[“Not Forgotten”](#) by Christine Greig