

<i>Month & Year of Topic</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Written & Spoken Presenters</i>
May 2006	The Oatley – Como, Walkway/Cycleway	Alec Leach

The history
of
Acquiring the original Como Rail Bridge
for
a pedestrian and cycleway.

Presented to the Oatley Heritage Group's quarterly meeting 26th May 2006 by Alec Leach.

Compiled by Alec Leach.



Film Clip Courtesy: The late Ken Richardson.

The original Como Bridge was opened in 1885 and served the Illawarra until 1972. It was a gauntlet system of rail lines. The dual lines narrowed to act as a single lane crossing the bridge without the requirement to have points. By the late sixties the single lane bridge had developed into a bottleneck. It was decided to build a new dual rail bridge. The new bridge was opened on 27th November 1972

See November 2004 Oatley Heritage Group "History of Oatley – Como Bridges"

After the bridge became operational, the old bridge stood idle.

One Political party strongly advocated that it be turned into a road bridge.

A small band of local citizens could see the potential to utilise the old bridge as a Pedestrian/ Cycleway.

In August 1979 this group formed themselves into a committee. They were Janet & Graham Austin, Noreen Whittaker, Milton Hill and Brian Langton was in attendance.

Photo: State Records.

They had a task in front of them, firstly setting themselves an object and that was:-

"To press for the utilisation of the old Como Rail Bridge & Approaches for bicycle & pedestrian traffic"

From there they set about finding out who owned the bridge. Each was given a task to seek information from the Water Board; the water pipes from Woronora Dam to Penshurst use the bridge. The then Public Transport Commission now RTA, Australian Gas Light Company, gas lines have access to the bridge. Kogarah, Hurstville & Sutherland Councils were contacted and made aware of the committees aim and sought their cooperation in the project.

Initially, it appeared there was going to be some conflict over the ownership of the bridge. PTC still owned it, saying that the eventual ownership would be transferred to the Water Board.

The committee decided to map a route together with photographs for the Cycle/ Walkway; this would be needed firstly before making their formal submissions with Kogarah Council and in future negotiations.

The draft map began in Neville Street, taking the pre 1905 railway line route. The water Board's pipeline hugs the eastern side of the cutting, leaving room for the Cycle/Walkway. It would traverse for approximately 450 yards; there the pipe line begins its drop down into Neverfail Bay. The Cycle/ Walkway would continue along the higher ground following the PTC's power lines for another 500yards before picking up the bed of the original rail line. It would cross the old Bridge, through the old Como Station platforms before winding down to Cremona Road, Como.



Photo courtesy: Old Como Rail Group

Committee was advised by PTC that Kogarah & Sutherland Council's would have to lease PTC land that would be traversed by the Cycle/Walkway and that the ownership of the bridge was being transferred to the Water Board early in 1980.

It was apparent that the co-operation of both Kogarah and Sutherland Council's, the PTC, and M.W.S. & D.B. would be required to make the project successful. In January 1980 a formal proposal sent by Milton Hill, Janet Austin, Graham Austin, and Noreen Whittaker was sent to Kogarah Council detailing the Group's plans.

The Municipal Engineer/ Town Planner, D.R. Cafe submitted a nine page report. On the 24th March 1980 the proposal was presented to Kogarah Council.

It read.

"We are a group of citizens of the Kogarah Municipality who wish to promote the greater use of Bicycles and walking as a means of transport. We believe the opening of the old Como Rail Bridge to non-motorised traffic would be of great benefit to our community."

Resulting from that meeting, it was resolved to refer the proposal to the works & Planning Committee, make it the subject of a special Council's Inspection Committee and have Engineer/Town Planner prepare preliminary estimates etc. Basically Council had accepted the Group's proposal. The Mayor, Brian Langton who had been at the inaugural meeting of the Group was enthusiastic towards the project at all times. Alderman Arthur Hardiman was another supporter of the scheme.

On the 9th April 1980, The St George & Sutherland Shire Leader headed a story "Bikeway Across the River Plan" together with a map of the Group's suggested route. It detailed the Group's actions and a summary of Council's meeting of the 24th March. This was the first time the public was aware of the project.

The Committee kept up their research into other aspects; mainly they had to establish contacts in relevant departments and bodies. Examples, the State Bicycle Advisory Committee, The Water Board and the Public Transport Commission to mention a few.

Kogarah Council held a meeting on the 15th July 1980. Together with Jan Austin & Milton Hill, Council had invited representatives from Sutherland Shire Council, Police Traffic Department, State Rail Authority, Bicycle Advisory Committee, and Department of Main Roads. Although the Water Board was not represented, they had indicated that they were not in favour of the idea, indicating that they intended to remove part of the superstructure when they acquired ownership of the bridge from the SRA.

The Committee continued throughout 1980, answering queries from Council on possible alternative routes, such as channelling the path to link up with Wyong Street.

In February 1981 the first break through began with the National Trust Bridge's Committee recommending to the Council of the National Trust that the bridge be classified. Noreen Whittaker's husband Wal. drafted the proposal and steered it through. With that, the bridge would be added to the Heritage Council's list of

classified structures. Towards the end of 1981 the National Trust had classified the Como Railway Bridge and in turn was passed to the Heritage Council for listing. By this action the bridge was saved from demolition or part thereof.

During 1982 the main obstacle was the transfer of the old Como Bridge's ownership from PTC to the Water Board and in the meantime no one was interested in maintaining it.

In 1983 it was decided to name the group "Old Como Rail Group" Working through the State Member for Hurstville, Kevin Ryan they kept the Walkway/Cycleway project alive. It wasn't until September 1983 that interest was shown by our Politicians. The member for Georges River, Frank Walker who was the then Minister for Youth and Community Services, pledged his support for the scheme and referred the proposal to the Minister for Water Resources, Honourable P.F. Whelan.

. Tirelessly the "Old Como Rail Group forwarded another of the many letters to the Water Board suggesting ways of preserving the bridge. Copies were forwarded to Kevin Ryan. M.P. Gary Punch M.P. Frank Walker M.P. Paul Whelan M.P. and Brian Langton.M.P.

The now State Rail Authority (SRA) on the 17th January 1984, signed off with the final documentation for the sale of Como Bridge to the Water Board.

With a good nudge by Paul Whelan, together with Kevin Ryan M.L.A. the project began to move. Paul Whelan assigned \$400,000 for restoration work and a tentative target date to coincide with the Bridge Centenary of the 16th December 1985. (Actually 26th December 1885) The National Trust became interested and added their input and there was liaison with Ministers within the Government.

By mid 1984 a detailed estimate had been prepared. The route had been changed from using the old pre 1905 rail corridor adjacent to the Scout and Guide Halls, to it beginning from Myra Place.

The detailed estimate was prepared itemising the decking and fencing of the Bridge, constructing the 1000 metres track from Myra Place to the Bridge and fencing between the Bridge and Cremona Road Como. It totalled \$454,000.

Work began on the 27th May 1985; with an official turning of the first sod. There were two Federal members, Robert Tickner and Gary Punch. Three State Politicians Maurie Keane, Guy Yeomans and Brian Langton together with Kevin Skinner, Sutherland Shire President & Fred Cavanagh , Mayor Kogarah Council in attendance. Children from Oyster Bay Primary School were on hand with their bikes.

Funding was on a 70% Federal Government's Community Employment Programme (\$329,043), 30% State Government (\$141,018) The Water Board to spend \$1,000,000 to restore the bridge.

It was agreed that Sutherland Council would supervise work on the bridge and the pathway to Cremona Road, whilst Kogarah Council would supervise the section from the bridge to Myra Place.

The Old Como Rail Group monitored the progress of the project.

SRA and Kogarah Council constantly met to alleviate problems to accommodate an access maintenance road for SRA workmen and to fulfil the requirements of the Walkway/Cycleway.

Vandalism was rife in the early stages. Because of this, the worksite had to be moved from the Como site off Cremona Road to Myra Place.

Labour sent on site by the Commonwealth Employment Service, expected gardening jobs and was not suitable for hard pick and shovel work.

Despite these problems, new decking and surfacing were laid where the rails were, fencing, and the construction of the Walkway/ Cycleway and approaches were completed on time.

On Sunday 15th December 1985 the Oatley – Como Walkway/Cycleway was officially opened. The opening of the original rail bridge was held on the 26th December 1885. Completion of the Walkway/Cycleway in time for the centenary of the old rail bridge was a major accomplishment.

The Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations, The Hon. Ralph Willis was to perform the opening ceremony, however in his absence the bridge was opened jointly by Federal MP's Gary Punch (Barton), member for the northern side of the river and Robert Tickner (Hughes) member for the southern.

The "Old Como Rail Group" stood in the background and watched with satisfaction.

Janet & Graham Austin, Noreen Whittaker and Milton Hill, the four Oatley citizens who instigated the Oatley - Como Walkway – Cycleway were not duly recognised.

Without me being able to thoroughly analyse their records which are meticulously kept, one would never have brought to light the work, heartbreaks and joy of seeing their efforts materialise.

Thank you to each member of the Group for allowing me to use their records and cooperation in compiling this report.



Photo courtesy: Dorothy & Len Rootes.

Alec Leach.



Photo courtesy: Alec leach.