

# Back then ...

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## The bushrangers of Menangle

By Laura Egan-Burt

**L**egends of bushrangers have flourished since European settlement. Over time, Ned Kelly has been depicted as Australia's answer to Robin Hood. During his short life, he and his 'gang' attracted press interest and his career ended in a deadly siege in Glenrowan. He was later executed in Melbourne Gaol.

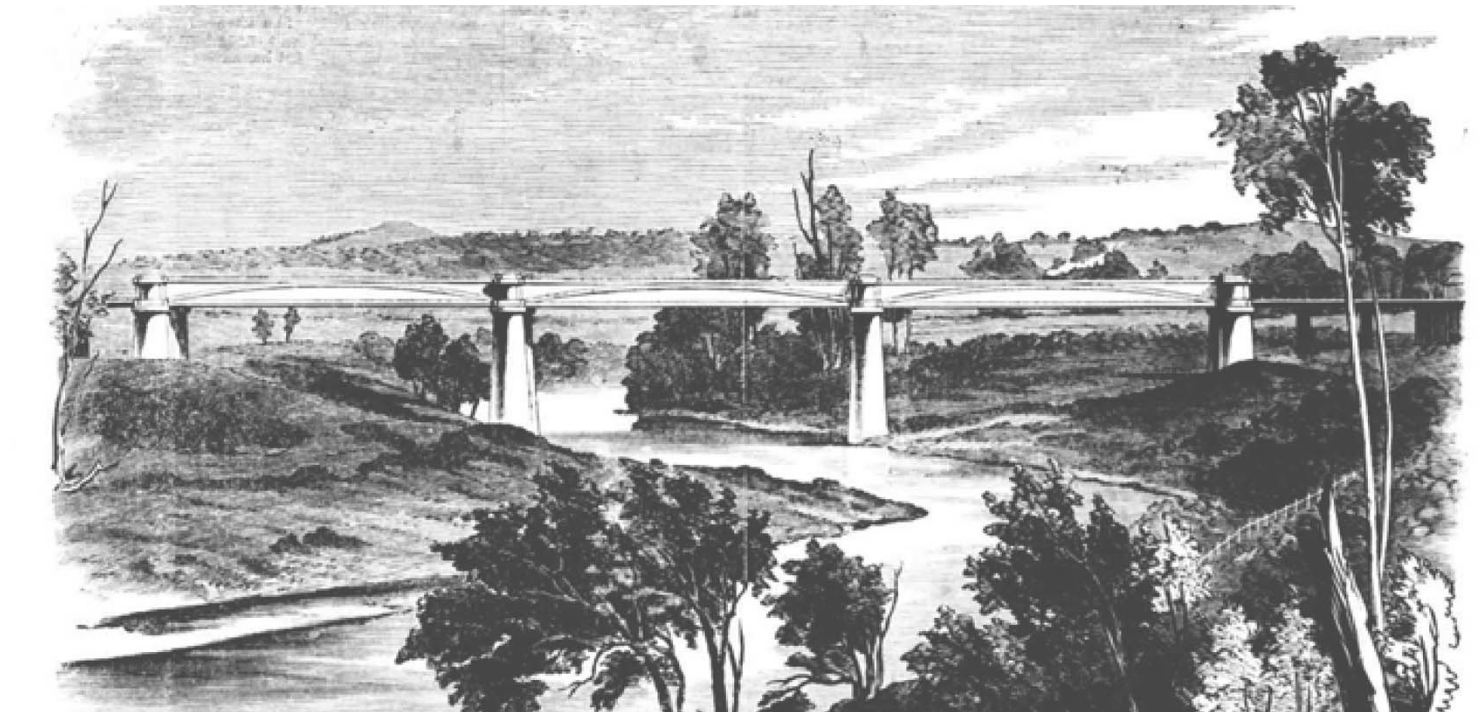
Also infamously, many Northern New South Wales place names owe their existence to the stories of Thunderbolt - also a bushranger - hiding in a cave and amongst rocks along the New England Highway. Thunderbolt too was executed, but this time in a shooting by police. Despite the nostalgic sepia this popular history is painted in, bushrangers were a very real danger to everyday people, especially, according to multifarious and gleeful newspaper accounts, to people unfortunate enough passing through Menangle.

Before the bridge was built at Menangle, people who wanted to cross the Nepean at Menangle Ford had to catch a ferry. Ferrymen were invited to apply for tender through the government gazette announcements in the Sydney Herald. This same newspaper reported on Monday, October 26, 1825 that on October 17:

*"Mrs Atkinson, of O'dbury, was stopped on Razor Back by three armed men, and robbed, even in sight of the house of the Police Magistrate and of the Goal. The marauders robbed Mrs. A. of the sum of £10. Mr Hurley, of Campbell town, and a body of carters and draymen proceeding with their teams, were robbed by this gang- near the Menangle Ford, a few days subsequently. These marauders, who appear to be perfectly organized in their nefarious avocations, are frequently to be met with in this district, sometimes in large bodies of four or five, and in small parties of two."*

Once the bridge was built, it became a favoured haunt of bushrangers who could retreat with safety and anonymity to the slopes of the Razorback Mountain. Some of the newspaper articles from the 1830s could be considered comical if they were not so violent. This humorous account in the Sydney Herald on Monday, January 25, 1836 points out at least one reason behind the level of lawlessness in and around Menangle.

On a Friday night "a Gentleman was stopped on the Menangle Bridge, by three fellows who supposed him to be a Mounted



Menangle Bridge, 1864. Image uncredited.

*Police man; but discovering their mistake, they permitted him to pass after insisting upon his taking some rum with them. When allowed to proceed, the Gentleman made the best of his way to Campbelltown, to state what had occurred to the person in charge of the Police there, but found nine of the Police men asleep, instead of patrolling the roads in that neighbourhood, which are now most dangerous to travel on account of the depredations of bushrangers. We are told that Police men, who may have been on duty during several days, draw the whole of their arrears of rum, consume it at a sitting, and thus frequently render themselves unfit for active duty, if suddenly called upon. If this be the case, it ought to be looked into and remedied."*

Bushrangers were not averse to using public transport either. The Illawarra Mercury records a Douglas Park Highway robbery in the Friday, July 6, 1883 edition. Bushrangers Samuel Egan, described as "probably 33 or 34, with a thin haggard face, and rough straggling beard" and Daniel Scanlan described as "a rather good-looking well built fellow, about 27 years of age, swarthy complexioned with a dark beard" were tried for having "stuck up and robbed"

Mr Topham a contractor. Mr Topham's horse was startled and "suddenly shied" when its head grabbed by a masked man at the top of the ridge who had sprung out of a bush. Simultaneously, the other bushranger aimed a revolver at Mr Topham's head. Mr Topham told the police he had tried to negotiate with the bushrangers, however Egan and Scanlan proceeded to blindfold Mr Topham and his groom, Mr Johnson and then led them to trees that had previously been selected. Mr Topham was made to sit atop a large stone at the base of a tree whilst his torso was bound to the tree behind him. He cleverly feigned the ropes around his chest being too tight by expanding his chest and pretending to choke. The Bushrangers loosened the bindings, this later enabled Mr Topham's escape, as he was able to gnaw through the ropes on his wrist, reach a penknife and cut himself and his groom free. The Bushrangers had alleviated Mr Topham of £1447 cash with which he intended to remunerate the men employed on the Nepean waterworks near Cataract City. Mr Topham informed his 120 workers of the robbery of their wages and a hunt for Scanlan and Egan ensued by the disgruntled workers who were displeased at their month's pay being stolen. Hunted, the bushrangers at some stage crossed the Nepean and caught

the train from Menangle to Campbelltown to avoid the pursuit. The guard on the train became suspicious of the two and informed the presumably sober police of his suspicions. Joyously, Egan and Scanlan had made straight for Atkinson's Hotel, "where they shouted for the publican and the bystanders, and then took a bottle of brandy, appearing very careless about the change". Unsurprisingly, the pair aroused suspicion and were arrested, with both their clothing and loot soaked from the waters of the Nepean.

The frequency of newspaper reports about Menangle bushrangers peters out after the Douglas Park Highway robbery, until The Campbelltown Herald recorded a large scale, but futile hunt for bushrangers in 1901, including 60 horseman, inclusive of volunteers from Menangle joining the chase.

### The Camden Historical Society

meets for lively discussions and guest speakers on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm at the Camden Museum on John Street Camden. Interested persons and new members are most welcome. For further information call John on 4655 9210.

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