

Connections

The First Bridge



Growth in visitation from 13,000 holiday makers in the summer of 1923 to almost double in 1926 with 25,000.

In the early days of European settlement on Phillip Island, sailing vessels and steam ships were the mainstay in the transportation of supplies and passengers into Western Port. Horses and cattle were moved on to and off the Island by swimming them across the narrow waterway between San Remo and Newhaven – behind a boat being rowed, when the tidal influence was at its weakest intensity. This process was nevertheless incredibly dangerous and arduous. Sheep and cattle were moved by punt, towed behind a ferry which proved to be a very slow and onerous process.

There were various ferry services which served the Island's population and visitors well dating back to 1872.

Visitors to the Island and locals would arrive in Cowes by ferry from Hastings on the Mornington Peninsular having been transported there by horse drawn coach from Melbourne - but the motor car was to change the dominance of the passage to the Island by sea.

As ownership of automobiles grew exponentially, changes to the landscape were also beginning to take place. Roads were being improved and by 1916 'convenient' kerbside petrol pumps were replacing the need to purchase your four-gallon tin of petrol from the grocers or hardware shop. Safety concerns with the kerbside pumps saw the introduction of the drive-in service station starting in 1926.

It was also in 1926 that the *Frankston & Somerville Standard* reported that the Island had seen exponential growth in visitation from 13,000 holiday makers in the summer of 1923 to almost double in 1926 with 25,000. Visitors arrived at Stony Point either by train or by

automobile and then the ferries such as the s.s. *Genista* or s.s. *Alvina* would complete the journey.

In 1928 a two-car punt was introduced to allow automobiles to cross to the Island between San Remo and Newhaven and also served to transport stock for farmers. The following year a six-car punt was introduced in the same location.

The backdrop to this hive of activity of getting automobiles on to Phillip Island was the running of the first motorcar road race comprising 26 competitors racing over a distance of 100 miles. Scheduled to run on the Sunday – but postponed due to heavy rain until the following day, Monday March 26, 1928 – it attracted 1,000 people – reportedly the largest crowd ever to visit the island in one day - flocking to Phillip Island to witness the first Grand Prix held on Australian soil.

“Violent northerly gale smashed the Cowes jetty on Easter Sunday in 1938, rendering it unusable for the car ferry”

The demand for easier transport for automobile access on the Island was very evident and although a number of ferries were able to offer vehicular transport, with the vehicle being hoisted by crane on to the deck, the capacity was limited and the process slow. In 1931 the roll-on/roll-off vehicular ferry *Killara*, capable of carrying 36 cars and 600 passengers, made its last trip on Sydney Harbour. It was later purchased by Mr. A.T.K. Sambell of Phillip Island for the Western Port service.



By 1932 the Shire of Phillip Island supported the construction of a dock at Cowes for a roll-on/roll-off vehicular ferry operation and by the end of 1933 the *Killara*, after a major refit, commenced work on the Stony Point to Cowes vehicular ferry service.

It was in 1936 when local resident Richard Grayden who held the position of President of the local branch of the Country Party, who were in Government at that time, that practical moves to investigate the possibility of a bridge linking the Island to the mainland took hold.

Richard, who harboured dreams of a bridge connecting Phillip Island to the mainland for many years, formed the ‘Bridge League’, an association committed to accelerating the progress of the bridge. This group, which soon boasted some 300 members, proved to be strong and continued to lobby the Government of the day as to the economic and social merits of building a bridge.

The violent northerly gale which smashed the jetty ramp in Cowes on Easter Sunday in April 1938, rendering it unusable for the car ferry, *Killara* during this very busy tourist season which may possibly have been the catalyst for an accelerated decision by the Government of the day. The damage left some 400 passengers stranded. Six months later during a weekend visit to Phillip Island in November 1938 the Premier Albert Dunstan announced that the Phillip Island bridge would be built at a cost of £ 30,000.

The very next day, engineers from the Country Roads Board surveyed the site and the first pile was driven in April 1939.



With limited funds, the engineers faced the challenges of bridging the raging tidal waters between San Remo and Phillip Island. The bridge also had to be of a height allowing for the clearance of commercial fishing and other vessels to pass underneath without interference. Consequently, it was decided that the construction of a suspension bridge spanning almost 1,800 feet (approx. 540m) in length and 18 feet (approx. 5.5m) wide which would cater for loads up to six tons would be built. There was no provision for a pedestrian footpath, but there were six refuges dotted along the length of the bridge, which pedestrians could use as protection from traffic when crossing the bridge.

Due to the restrictive budget, much of the materials used for the bridge were second hand. The main cables were from the North Shore Bridge in Sydney and the suspender cables running vertically, which supported the wooden roadway, were from the cable car system in Melbourne.

The first Phillip Island bridge costing £ 62,000, twice what was originally anticipated, was opened by Premier Dunstan on Friday 29 November 1940, which was declared a public holiday on Phillip Island.

