



A BRIDGE TO FREEDOM

by Tomas Lipps

SEVERE ECONOMIC DISTRESS troubled England in the first half of the 19th century. Work was scarce, particularly in the building trades. Sir John Summerson, the notable English architectural historian, said that “State expenditure on buildings was absolutely withdrawn, except for those of military or naval purpose.” Private enterprise was similarly affected. It is reported that one stonemason/artist at that time, walking the roads through thirty-four counties for six months, managed to find employment for only three weeks.

In desperation, many people resorted to criminal behavior, from petty theft to highway robbery. There were more convicted criminals than the prisons could contain and sailing ships that were no longer seaworthy were refitted as floating gaols. The need for labor in the new colonies and the lack of space in the prisons resulted in thousands of criminals being transported to Australia and the neighboring islands. For stealing an overcoat or a piece of lace a man or woman could be imprisoned and transported to a life of servitude in the new colonies.

In the British penal colony of Van Damien’s Land (later named Tasmania after the Dutch sea captain, Abel Tasman, who first encountered it in 1642) the most important road was the Midland Highway, connecting the administrative center in Hobart Town in the south and Launceston, the island’s second largest municipality, in the north. The road crossed the Macquarie River at the township of Ross.



leg irons

It was necessary to ford the river there until 1822 when the first bridge was built, a rough affair comprised of dry stone piers spanned by logs on which dirt was piled. Six years later it was in such a ruinous state that the Lieutenant Governor, George Arthur, in response to the entreaties of townspeople and settlers living in and around Ross, directed the Royal Staff Corps to commence repair of the bridge. A party of six convict laborers in the charge of an army lieutenant was dispatched to Ross, but because the winter of 1829 was just beginning there was little to do.

They were but loosely supervised and left largely to their own devices. “They rose in the morning and went openly to work for the settlers like any free men, and spent their evenings at the Angel or the Sherwood Castle (pubs) more freely than most men. They were, in many ways, model citizens; they earned their money and spent it promptly on the spot. But they did not repair the bridge, which became more dilapidated each week.”¹ Finally, on the 20th of March 1831, it collapsed.

Response was immediate, or nearly so. In May a contractor was dispatched from Hobart with a crew of forty men. Within two days the bridge was repaired enough to use again and the men were put to work setting up a brick kiln, transporting wood to fire it and cutting stone from the quarries close to the town for a new bridge—a bridge about which no decision had yet been made—either where it would be sited or of what material it would be constructed.