

*Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.*

# **Bulletin of Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.**

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Museum and Galleries Hunter Chapter



**The 1930 Maitland Flood**

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*The Aims of the Society are to  
Discover, Record, Preserve, Advise on and Teach the History of Maitland and the District*

## *Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.*

**Cover:** Photograph from the Maitland City Library collection as reproduced in Val Rudkin's 2015 book *Who? What? Where? People of 19<sup>th</sup> Century High Street*.

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**Lecture meeting** is held on the first Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7.00pm as a forum for lectures, talks and presentations

**Business meeting** is held on the third Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7.00pm

Meetings are held at the Society's rooms, 3 Cathedral Street Maitland

Membership fees : \$20 (single) and \$30 (double / family)

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NSW Member for Maitland 1956-1980

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Sincere gratitude is owed to Judy Nicholson, the previous editor of the Bulletin, for her knowledge, technical ability, and dedication to the Society.

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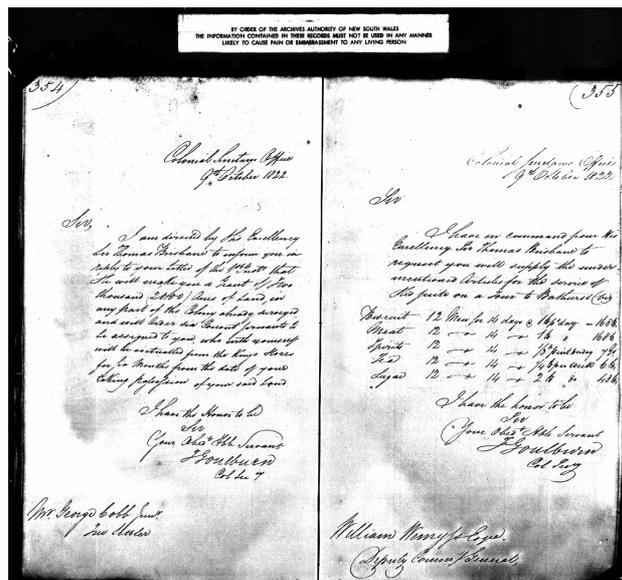
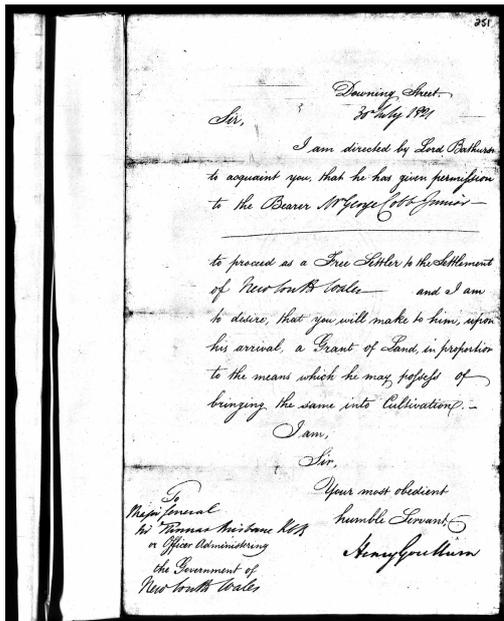
# Anambah – A Brief History 1823-2011

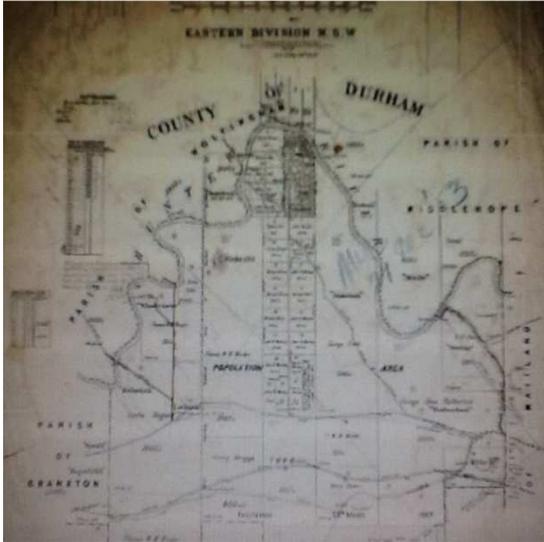
by Heather Berry



**ANAMBAH HOUSE – constructed 1890**

The history of Anambah begins in 1823 when an area of some 2100 acres, fronting the Hunter River, was granted to George Cobb, along with 21 convicts who were assigned to work the property.





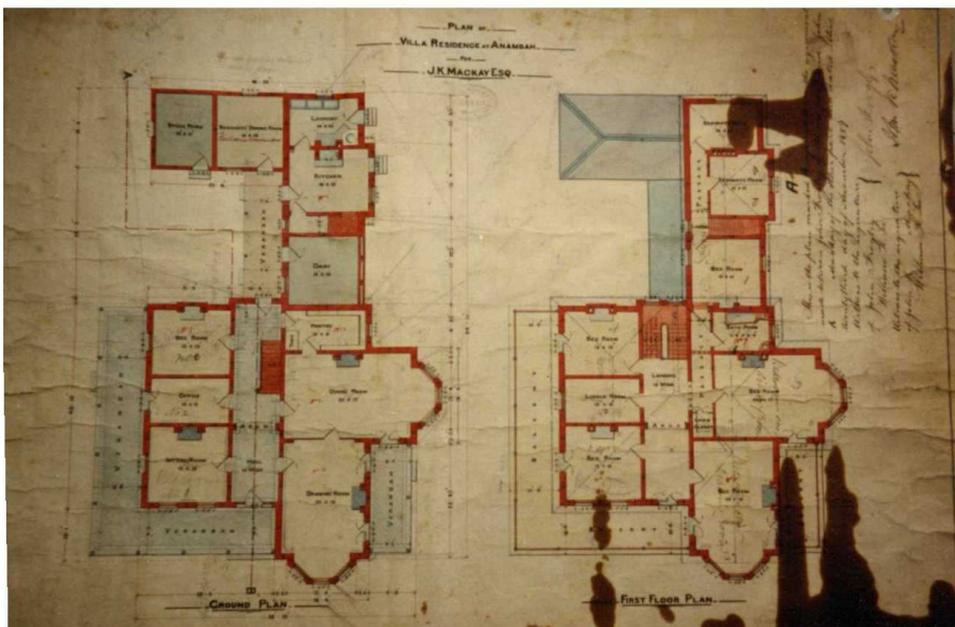
The first house to be built on the property was constructed in 1828 by John Cobb, the brother of George, George having returned to England in 1823. John Cobb worked tirelessly to improve the property. A visitor to Anambah in 1829 reported in the Australian newspaper that the prospect was “worthy of the glowing tints of Claude Lorraine” and described the beautiful forest scenery along the banks of the Hunter river much resembling an English Park.

John Cobb died in 1840 at the age of 37 and his widow advertised the Anambah property for lease in the Australian newspaper. The house was described as an eight-roomed verandah cottage, with numerous outbuildings, 100 acres under cultivation with 40 acres of wheat, along with a garden and orchard. The property was leased to Robert Pringle for a period of 7 years and Maria moved her family of six children to Swan St. Morpeth, the land there having been acquired by John Cobb shortly before his death. By 1845 Maria had returned to Anambah and it was in the garden in 1847 that she suddenly collapsed and died. Her six children continued to live at Anambah.

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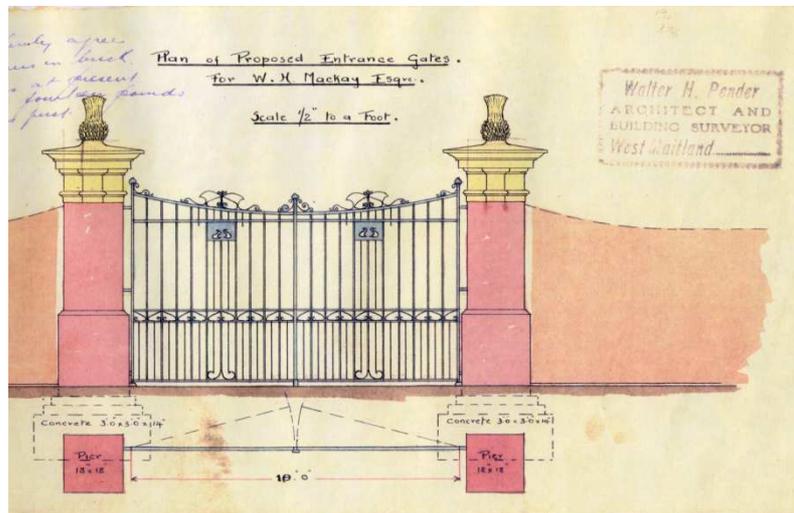
The eldest son of John and Maria, George James Cobb, was born at Anambah in 1829 and he married Jessie Johanna Mackay of Melbee, Dungog in 1854. They lived on the Anambah property until 1867 when George moved to Martindale, Denman, to work as a manager for the White family. The connection between the Cobb and the White families had already been established as two of the Cobb daughters, Mary Hannah and Adelaide, had married two of the White brothers, Francis and George, thus connecting Anambah to Edinglassie and Belltrees and the White dynasty.

In 1871 John Kenneth Mackay of Dungog, the brother of Jessie Johanna Mackay, acquired the Anambah property and over the next 20 years increased the holding to some 5000 acres. In 1889 John Wiltshire Pender, a well-established Maitland architect, was commissioned by J K Mackay to design a substantial house for his son William Hooke Mackay. Pender was responsible for several Hunter Valley homesteads including Saumarez at Armidale and Belltrees at Scone.



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Walter Pender followed in his father's footsteps and several additions at Anambah, including the billiard room, the main entrance gates and the upper floor to the service wing can be attributed to him.

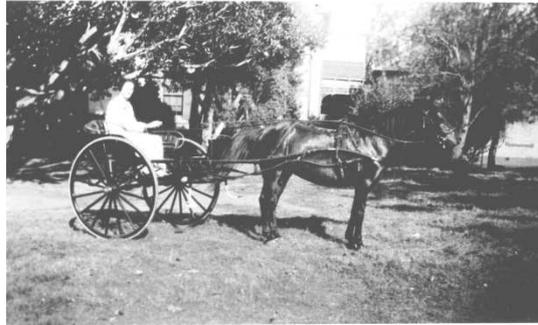


The Pender practice survived in Maitland through three generations of the Pender family until the late 1980s. It is thanks to J W Pender's grandson Ian that a large amount of the original drawings and specifications of the practice survived and are now housed at the University of Newcastle. In 1998 the Historic Houses Trust held an exhibition of the works of J W Pender at Elizabeth Bay House, the first regional architect to be so honoured.

Around 1925 W H Mackay retired to his Sydney residence, Redleaf in Double Bay, and left Anambah in charge of his son Ken Mackay. Unfortunately Ken died only a short time later and a manager, Mr Griffith, was then engaged to run the property. The grand-children of the Griffith family have provided photographs of Anambah taken during the 1930s, copies of letters kept by their grandfather and their personal recollections of the location of the Mackay furniture, which had been left in situ and was not removed until the 1960s. It is apparent from their pictures that the house

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was beginning to deteriorate and the later pictures taken in the late 1940s confirm the continuing decay.

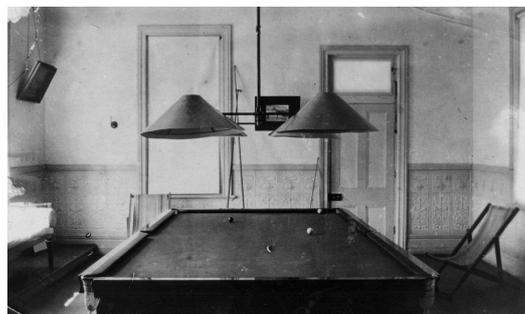
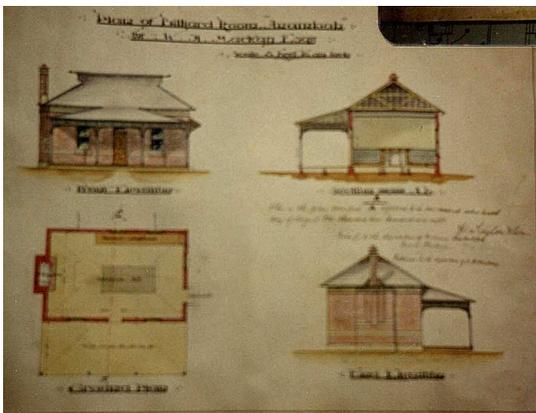


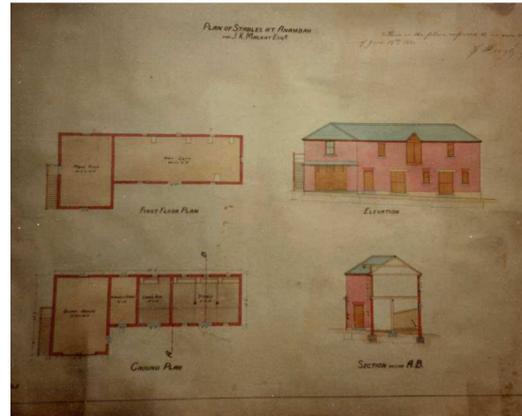
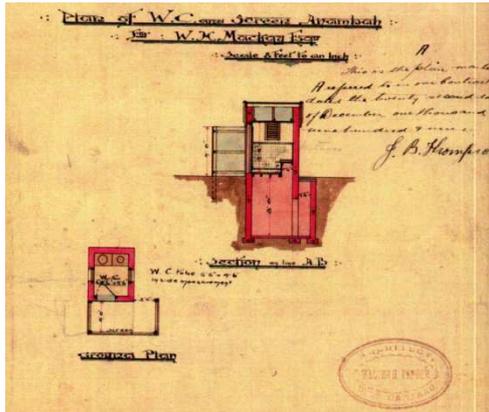
The earliest photographs of Anambah that we located were taken by Emily Mackay between 1907 and 1909. These photographs were arranged in an album, rather like a scrapbook, and it was Emily's daughter, Annie, who lent us this extremely valuable record of Anambah. From this historic album we have details of the exterior of the house and the layout of the garden. We can see the newly installed tennis court, of which there was no evidence when we first arrived at Anambah. It was only after talking with Keith Mackay, the brother of Emily, that we climbed over the fence into the area where cattle were grazing and rediscovered the brick edging which had surrounded the court.

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These early photographs, along with the architect's specifications for the original building work and many of the later improvements provided an invaluable source of information for the conservation of Anambah, its outbuildings and the garden. We learnt that the house was wallpapered, even the cost of the paper was documented, the electric light was installed in 1926 and the house was regularly painted and redecorated. A photograph of the interior of the billiard room, built in 1909, shows the newly completed free standing building replete with billiard table, gas lighting and an abundance of pressed metal.





When we moved into Anambah the original wallpaper had all been removed and some of the plaster work had been replaced. The cedar joinery was however still coated in its original Copal varnish and the Victorian fitted carpets were still present in the two main rooms. The marble fireplaces, the Minton tiles on floors, verandahs and hearths, the stained glass, the porcelain door furniture and servant's bells all remained and were in good condition.



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We have no record of the original wallpaper but reproduction paper was installed for the movie and we managed to locate and buy back some of the original furniture belonging to the house, most of which had remained in the house until it was removed by one of the previous owners in the 1960s.

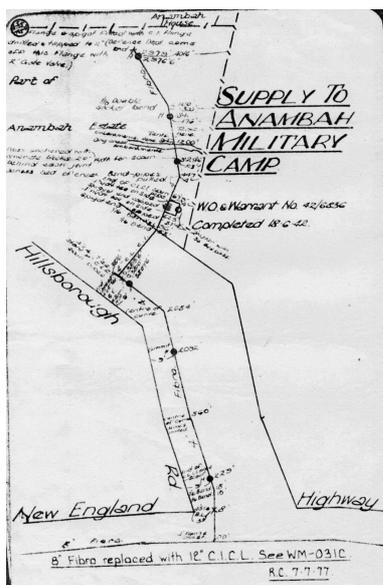


In 1909 Dame Nellie Melba stayed at Anambah whilst giving a concert in the Maitland Town Hall. On arrival at Maitland station Melba was welcomed by the Mayor of Maitland, Major Cracknell (grandfather of the late Ruth) and by Mr Mackay with his beautiful motor car. The whole visit was reported in detail by the local newspaper, the Maitland Mercury. In 1994 Anambah hosted a tribute to Melba concert in which Jennifer McGregor re-enacted Melba's visit to the house and sang some of Melba's favourite songs.



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The 1940s saw the army take over Anambah as a military camp. Prior to the army's occupation a complete inventory of the contents and survey of the buildings was carried out. The main rooms were used by the officers, the stables housed the quartermaster's stores and the troops were housed under canvas in the paddocks. The major benefit to Anambah from this period was the provision of town water. The house had originally used roof water, collected in an underground tank (which still remains). It is interesting to note that after the war there was a dispute between Mrs Mackay and the Government as to who should be responsible for the cost of the water supply. The 24<sup>th</sup> Light Horse briefly agisted its horses in the paddocks at Anambah before all the light horse brigades were disbanded, thus ending a part of Australia's war history.



TELEPHONE—  
Australian Military Forces—Eastern Command.

Please quote this Number when replying.

HQM	HC	16
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Address Keera  
Date Bingara  
28th June 1941

R.Griffiths Esq  
Manager  
Anambah  
Via Maitland.

Dear Mr Griffiths,

In case you may not remember me, I met you in the paddocks of Anambah when the 24. L. H. were in camp. I am writing to you to convey to you the thanks and appreciation of A. Sqn, of that Regiment, for the kind and considerate manner in which you treated us. Particularly do I refer to the arrangements you made to take the Sqn horses for a few days at Easter time. The spell was of great benefit to the horses and the men were able to get a few days holiday.

Thanking you again very much for the trouble ~~for the trouble~~ and inconvenience occasioned.

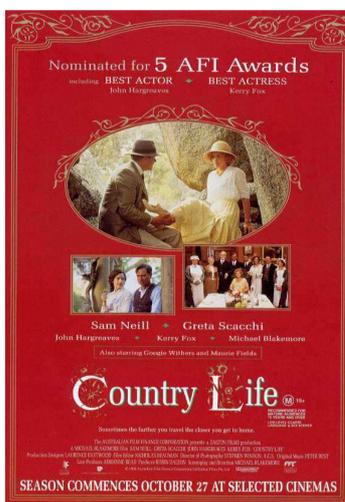
Yours sincerely  
*H. Gordon Munro*  
H. Gordon Munro Capt'  
2/c A. Sqn.

After the war Molly Mackay, the widow of Ken Mackay, moved back to Anambah along with her new husband, Hal Lashwood a star of Australian radio. During this period Anambah was visited by Roy Rene (Mo) another star of the very popular Colgate Palmolive Show.

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In 1993 the movie 'Country Life' was filmed at Anambah. An adaptation of Chekov's Uncle Vanya, the film starred Sam Neill, Greta Scacchi, Gogie Withers and John Hargraves. The house was host to a cast and crew of some 60 people and the tennis court pavilion, reproduction Victorian wallpapers and window drapery were a much appreciated legacy of this event.



In 2011, after 30 years at Anambah, we decided it was time to retire and the house has passed into very good hands and is currently undergoing a major restoration programme.

## **Floods in the Minds of Maitlanders: What Limits their Interest?**

Chas Keys

*"Those who forget the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them."*

*(George Santayana)*

In February 2015 Maitland commemorated the Great Flood of 1955, surely the single most definitive and damaging event of the City's history. As in similar commemorations in the past the populace came in numbers to the Town Hall to take in a display of flood photographs, films and videos: over the course of a weekend some 2000 people viewed what was on offer. Many of them also took the opportunity to participate in an informative 'walk and talk' stroll through areas which were badly flooded in 1955 or to tour and learn about the mitigation scheme that has kept floods out of the built-up areas for half a century. A screening of the 1978 Australian film *Newsfront*, with original footage from the 1955 flood itself, attracted more than 300 people and was booked out eight days in advance, and three flood talks organised by the Maitland & District Historical Society were well attended.

The State Emergency Service, Hunter Local Land Services, the Office of Environment and Heritage, the Maitland City Council and the Historical Society did well in putting on these events. The turnouts suggested that what they did was appreciated by an engaged community that is open to flood information.



Part of the crowd at the flood display at the Maitland Town Hall, 2015 (Hunter SES)

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They also showed that Maitlanders are interested in the flood history of their area. But there are indications that the interest only goes so far, and the limits of it are important.

As part of the commemoration, the SES organised three workshops designed to help people come to grips with what they will need to do to protect their own lives and possessions come the day that South Maitland, central Maitland, Horseshoe Bend, East Maitland, Lorn and the rural parts of the floodplain suffer inundation. But little interest was aroused, despite the fact that there was no charge for attending. Only eight people signed up, and some of them did not live or otherwise have interests in flood liable locations. The SES felt it necessary to cancel the workshops.

A few weeks later a single such meeting was organised, which nine people attended. Two were residents of the floodplain, one from central Maitland and one from Lorn. Both lived in areas protected by big levees, with none from the farms which are more exposed to floods.

What does all this say? It suggests that the interest Maitlanders show in flooding has a particular quality. It lies in history, heritage and nostalgia, and flooding can stir all these things: memories of the floods of one's childhood, or of the stories that parents and grandparents told of their own flood experiences (some of them both riveting and harrowing) long ago. It was noticeable that the attendance at the Town Hall display was heavily weighted to the over-50s: very few in their 30s and younger came along.

But regardless of age, Maitland people seem little concerned about the potential impacts of floods on their safety, their belongings and their financial futures. Beyond the historical, floods appear to exist in their minds only in an abstract, theoretical way. Floods are, perhaps, 'only' history, nothing more, with no relevance to times ahead. But there is an argument that the history of flooding should be regarded as important in the context of community safety, because floods will inevitably strike again in the future.

Maitland people are, undoubtedly, aware of flooding. But awareness, by itself, does not mean that people understand the threat and it does not ensure that they will act to protect their interests when it strikes. There is an analogy here with smoking: everybody, surely, knows that smoking can kill, but nearly 15% of Australians still smoke. There is awareness, but not all smokers have acted on that awareness by giving up the habit.

As with smoking, what is needed in the flood context is a change in people's behaviour. People need to recognise the dangers of flooding and act to protect their safety and their belongings. And acting appropriately needs to start well before a big flood arrives, with planning for that moment. Prior consideration and active preparation are needed.

About 4000 Maitlanders reside on the floodplain of the Hunter River and therefore could experience floodwater inside their dwellings. Most of these people live in the built-up areas behind substantial levees, but some are on farms with much lower levels of protection. Other people, living off the floodplain, have business and other interests in High St and in other low-lying areas.

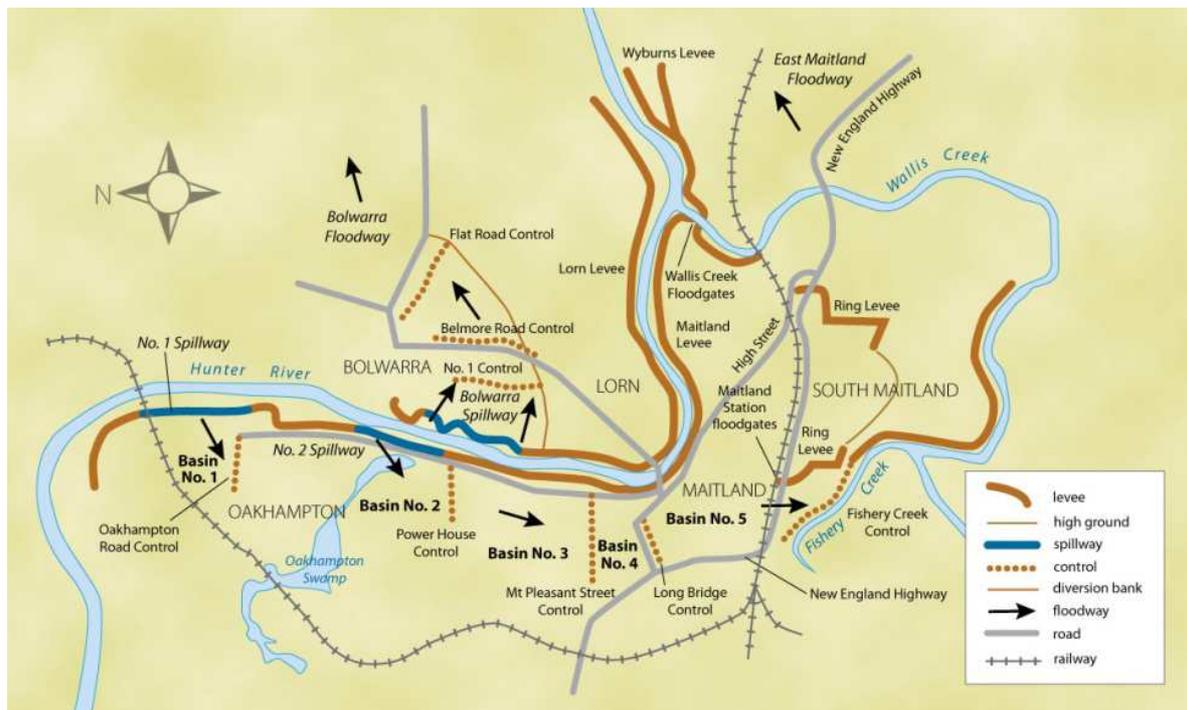
The farmers on the floodplain are aware of the threat and they frequently have to move livestock, feed and equipment as floods approach. Farmers are experienced flood managers: they get a lot of practice. Since the 2007 'Pasha Bulker' flood, some farms on the floodplain in the Maitland City Council's area have experienced seven separate flood events. Farmers

know that floods will cause them financial suffering and that a failure to act quickly and decisively as a flood approaches will bring even more.

The situation of the townsfolk is different. The well conceived and well maintained flood mitigation scheme of levees, spillways and other flood training devices gives them a significant measure of protection from floods, but it does not give them immunity. What it does is keep them safe from flooding of most magnitudes. But it does not guarantee protection from big floods, including floods substantially smaller than the flood of 1955.

Indeed, the scheme's limits, as far as the protection of the built-up areas is concerned, will begin to be felt in a flood only a little bigger than the event of 1971. That flood peaked at the Belmore Bridge almost a metre lower than the height that was reached in 1955.

In a flood not greatly bigger than the event of 1971, water will flow over the ring levee into South Maitland and across the railway line. If the flood keeps rising, more of the built-up area will become inundated. Lorn, in a big flood, will be at risk from backwater flow across Sharkies Lane on its eastern margin.



The levees and floodways of Maitland's flood mitigation scheme (Hunter SES)

If the flood should exceed by a small margin the height attained at the Belmore Bridge gauge in 1955 (12.1 metres above mean sea level), almost all of the built-up areas behind the levees will be flooded. And one day a flood will reach substantially higher than the 1955 one did, inundating even larger areas and with flood depths greater than they were in that event. Some houses will be completely submerged, not even the tips of their roofs visible. The land on which the CBD exists could be completely under water. In this context it is worth noting that the Maitland City Council's floodplain management consultants have predicted that an 'extreme flood' could reach a level of 13.3 metres at the gauge (WMA

Water, 2010, pv). The 1955 flood cannot be taken as the limit in terms of flood height attainable or damage caused.

And if a levee should fail before it is overtopped, the consequences will be dire because of the destructive, high-velocity flood flows that will occur. Maitland experienced many levee failures in times past.

Neither levee overtopping nor levee failure is unknown in Australia. Not one levee in this country is built to exclude the biggest floods that nature is capable of producing. Occasionally, as at Nyngan in 1990 and Kempsey in 2001, town-protecting levees are overtopped and inundation of built-up areas occurs.

Thousands of residents and businesspeople in the City need to comprehend what this means in their own circumstances. The levees that were constructed after 1955, some of them augmenting or modifying levees built previously, have well and truly paid for themselves in damage costs saved in the several floods of recent decades. But they do not offer ultimate protection, something that appears not to be fully comprehended in the community.

Arguably, today's Maitland places too much faith in the mitigation scheme. Some people appear to regard it as being the whole solution to the problem of flooding. But it is not. It cannot be and it was never intended to be.

Decades ago, as any reading of old issues of the *Maitland Mercury* shows, Maitlanders were fearful of flooding. Occasionally they were terrified, and some who experienced severe financial loss in flood after flood became so demoralised that they left the district. After the 1955 flood one council representative was reported in the *Maitland Mercury* as saying that the residents were living in 'mortal fear' of the Hunter River. It had, after all, flooded parts of the built-up areas of South Maitland, central Maitland, Horseshoe Bend and East Maitland time and time again over the previous six years.

Some people had had to evacuate as many as eight times between 1949 and 1955 and return repeatedly to the unpleasant task of cleaning up afterwards. No wonder there was fear and demoralisation. There was also a familiarity with flooding and much experience in protecting belongings from it.

But today things are very different. No flood has invaded the built-up areas since 1955, and people have become complacent about the risks posed by flooding. Moreover the practices by which earlier generations protected items of importance have fallen into disuse.

The levees have done such a good job that many Maitlanders have come to believe that the flood problem is no more and they no longer need to ready themselves for floods. But this is not so. The truth is that the mitigation scheme is *designed* to let water into the built-up areas in very big floods. Such floods are not likely to occur frequently: they will be rare but they are nevertheless inevitable.

None of this means that the levees have been poorly designed. To have constructed them to keep the biggest possible floods out of the built-up areas would have been prohibitively expensive.

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The day the levees are overtopped may be many decades away, or it might be very soon. It could be this year, or next century, or the century after. It could happen more than once in a short period of time. The certainty is that the 1955 flood would flood much of urban Maitland. Floods as high as the 1952 and 1971 events would get close.

It is instructive that the ring levee that protects South Maitland and much of the area to the north of the railway line is intended to keep out floods only up to the level of the so-called 2 per cent flood, which is thought likely to occur, on average, once in 50 years. A flood very slightly higher than that and causing strong flows down the Oakhampton Floodway, under the Long Bridge and over the railway line and meeting whatever floodwaters were simultaneously coming down Wallis and Fishery creeks from the south, would cause the ring levee to be overtopped.

The High St and Lorn levees would not be overtopped except in a much bigger flood than this one. But an extreme flood reaching 13 metres or higher at the gauge would certainly do this and inundate all the built-up areas on the floodplain.

It is now more than 60 years since Maitland had a flood large enough to overtop the ring levee as it exists today. Maitland has perhaps been lucky not to have experienced a 2 per cent flood, or something even bigger, in that time.

Some people understand the limits of the mitigation scheme but have decided that the risk of being flooded in their lifetimes is so low that they need not be concerned about it. They may turn out to be right or wrong. Which it is will depend on how long they live and when the next big flood strikes.

Either way they are playing a game of Russian roulette, and at some stage the inevitable price will be paid. A generation of Maitlanders, like the generation that bore the brunt of 1955, will suffer. The suffering will be amplified as a result of complacency, because complacency reduces people's readiness. In turn that reduces their ability to do what is needed to reduce the negative impacts of a flood.

As it happens the cost to individuals of preparing for the eventuality of flooding is low, especially by comparison with the potential benefits of being ready. One of the great, oft-repeated lessons of flooding in Australia is that more items of sentimental and financial value could have been saved had people understood the need to be prepared to act early and before the floodwaters hit them. Much heartache and financial pain has been caused by the loss of these things. Early, effective action takes thinking about planning, in other words.

People who live in flood-prone areas need the tools to do the planning to protect their interests. These include knowing about the workings of the flood warning system and the circumstances under which their properties might experience inundation, being able to identify which items of belongings should be protected and how to protect them, and understanding that they might on rare occasions need to evacuate. The SES can advise on these matters, and its website ([ses.nsw.gov.au](http://ses.nsw.gov.au)) provides information on how people can plan for floods.

The SES, the Council and other agencies cannot do the whole job of protecting the community when floods occur. Self-help is vital to building personal resilience against

floods. Preparing a simple household or business flood plan will help people to stay safe and protect important items, and it is not difficult to do. It involves working out what to save and how to save it (onto tables and benches, into the ceiling cavity or off the floodplain?) and what help will be needed from neighbours, friends or relatives. It also involves knowing the circumstances under which evacuation will be necessary. For some who live on the floodplain outside the levees this will be a flood-height forecast of only about 10.5 metres at the Belmore Bridge gauge; for those in the built-up areas it will probably be a forecast of something substantially above 11 metres.

For self-help to be maximally effective, advance thought and preparation are essential. Without these things, the stresses that will exist on the day flooding occurs will mean that some important actions will be overlooked. Preparing a personal flood plan might turn out to be one of the best things Maitlanders with dwellings, business premises or other interests on the floodplain could do. It will cost them nothing apart from their time. For that investment they could save money and heartache, and perhaps even their lives.

Is George Santayana, the Spanish-American philosopher, right, and could his famous saying quoted at the beginning of this article apply to Maitland? Have Maitlanders forgotten about floods except as elements of their history, and might they one day be condemned to experiencing a re-run of that often painful history as a result? Might it be more painful than it needs to be because they have not absorbed history's lessons and acted upon them?

History is not just about remembering the past. It can be highly practical, incorporating learning the lessons of the past in readiness for a future which inevitably will involve periodic repeats of what happened in times gone by. Big floods will strike again in Maitland as they frequently have in times past.

WMA Water (2010). **Hunter River: Branxton to Green Rocks Flood Study**, report commissioned by Maitland City Council, Cessnock City Council and the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water, Sydney

Chas Keys is the author of **Maitland, City on the Hunter: fighting floods or living with them?** (2008), a former Deputy Director General of the NSW SES and an Honorary Associate of Risk Frontiers at Macquarie University

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The Maitland and District Historical Society Inc. has a number of publications for sale at the rooms at 3 Cathedral Street Maitland. For details of the publications for sale, or to purchase, please visit the rooms during open hours Wednesday and Saturday between 10 AM and 3 PM. Alternatively, contact the Society on 0438 623 299 or email [maitlandhistorical@gmail.com](mailto:maitlandhistorical@gmail.com).