BRO. JAMES BOCKING
(1853-1926)

Do you remember when country roads were corrugated gravel and creeks and rivers were crossed by timber bridges with loose decking boards? Musical bridges we called them. Many still exist on the back roads.

This is a story of a man who built many of them.

James Bocking was born at Bancaster in the English county of Norfolk and, in August 1853, he arrived in the *Niagara* at Campbell's Wharf on the western side of Sydney Cove. [1]

A few months later, he was employed by the New South Wales Government in the building of a bridge at Yass.

During his stay in Yass, he became associated with the explorer, Bro. Hamilton Hume.

The bridge-building party then moved across country to Bathurst where they erected a bridge over the Macquarie River.

Bocking became foreman of works and he and his team built several bridges in the Western Districts.

On his return to Sydney, he was foreman of works at the building of the original timber Pyrmont Bridge.

In 1855, Bocking began work on a bridge over the Nepean River at Menangle. It was a low timber truss bridge 8 m. wide on four piers with three 17m. spans. It was opened in 1856. [2]

The bridge had a significant impact on Campbelltown by ensuring that the road to the Southern Highlands, later named the Hume Highway, would pass through the small rural village.

James Bocking, then a young man of about 25 years of age, was presented with a watch in July 1856 by the grateful residents of Campbelltown, Menangle and Appin.

The bridge was destroyed by the flood of 1875 and subsequently rebuilt.

In 1861, Bocking built a bridge over the Nepean River at Camden. This bridge was replaced in 1901 with a more substantial structure.

Perhaps it was the presentation watch but, more likely, James Bocking saw his

opportunity with the arrival of the railway in 1857. He became a railway contractor and, using Campbelltown as his base, he settled into a stone cottage in Queen Street.

Just like the bridge he built, he had a significant impact on the town.

Bocking became a building contractor in partnership with James Cobb and in the 1860's they obtained several contracts for renovations to the Campbelltown Court House including the jury box, the gaoler's room, repairs to the chimney, improved security and improvements to the drainage.

James Bocking and James Cobb were both Congregationalists and they introduced the movement to Campbelltown. In 1857, land was purchased in Allman Street and Bocking and Cobb designed and built a Congregational Chapel which was opened in 1859. Funds had been provided by the Sydney congregation and Pastor Edward Robinson who married his daughter to James Bocking.

The firm of Bocking and Cobb also built the Temperance Hall in Campbelltown in 1862 and the Congregational Manse in 1870.

Bocking, seeking to diversify his activities, opened a general store and, by the 1870's, it had become one of the largest in Campbelltown.

He also acquired in 1870, the grinding rights to the windmill owned by Edward Larkin and situated 1.5 km south of Appin. The mill had begun operation in 1845 but, due to the reduction in the local wheat crop, it is likely that Bocking never operated it and by 1873 it was at a standstill.

James Bocking, typical of many leading citizens of his day, did not neglect his civil duties.

In 1874, he was a member of a fund-raising committee to establish a new State school.

In 1878, he was one of a bench of five local magistrates who tried unsuccessfully to extend the boundaries of the Campbelltown District. Their proposal was soundly defeated by the adjoining districts of Camden and Wollongong.

On 14 March 1879, he attended a meeting of the Campbelltown Progress Committee in the Temperance Hall and was elected to a committee to prepare a petition to the Governor to create a municipal district.

In February 1882, James Bocking was elected an original member of Campbelltown Council. He served as Mayor in 1890 and he made a significant contribution to the transformation of Campbelltown from a pioneering village to a prosperous country town.

He shared in that prosperity and, on a number of occasions, he was a guarantor for local tradesmen who had obtained small government contracts to a value of up to £1300.

On 6 October 1887, the Town Clerk, Thomas Jenner Winton suddenly died aged 41. Some idea of James Bocking's philosophy of life can be gleaned from his remark that, 'although it might seem a small matter that Council had lost its Clerk, in a small community like theirs it was a great matter . . . . . A prince in Campbelltown has fallen today.'

At the official opening of the new Campbelltown Court House in January 1889 he said that 'he hoped that colonial-born young men would participate in the official life of the country.'

Do you remember the old-style country and outer-suburban general store which was usually a two-storey brick, and sometimes weatherboard building, with living quarters upstairs for the storekeeper and his family and the shop downstairs crammed with all kinds of items now found only in museums? At the front was a covered verandah where popular non-perishable items would be taken from the shop to be put on display each day. At the rear of the building was a yard, stables and storage sheds.

By the 1890's *Commerce House* at Campbelltown was the premises of James Bocking and Sons, grocers, drapers, bakers and general store-keepers.

Bockings sold general ironmongery, galvanised iron, ridge capping and spouting, crockery, furniture, bedding and boots and shoes.

They were also produce and timber merchants and agents for the *Bulletin*, the *Evening News*, the *Town and Country Journal* and the New Zealand Fire Insurance Company.

In addition, the store offered dressmaking and millinery services and mourning clothes were available 'at the shortest notice.'

Perhaps with the exception of the butchery, there was little retail specialisation and customers were not required to traverse several floors of large department stores or cover seemingly endless kilometres in a modern suburban shopping complex. One wonders what James Bocking would think of those they now have at Campbelltown.

In 1810, the governor, Bro. Lachlan Macquarie proclaimed that the area was 'to be called Airds in honour of my dear good Elizabeth's family estate.' (His wife's family in Scotland).

In visiting the site in 1820, he said, 'I name the new township Campbelltown in honour of Mrs Macquarie's maiden name.' (She had been Miss Henrietta Elizabeth Campbell). [3]

Macquarie set Bro. Francis Greenway to work to design St. Peter's Church of England which opened on 29 June 1823. [4]

Once part of the Dharawal Aboriginal land, the area is now part of the Macarthur urban development region which includes the Macarthur campus of the University of Western Sydney. [5]

No doubt the old-timer would have been impressed.

A man of many parts, James Bocking was also a Freemason. He was initiated in Sydney on 3 May 1859 in the Lodge of Australia No. 548 (No. 390 from 1863), United Grand Lodge of England. The Lodge is now No. 3, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.

He was raised a Master Mason in 1861 and was one of the first candidates in the then newly opened Freemasons' Hall in York Street, Sydney. The meeting was held in the cellar where the low ceiling could be touched by an upraised arm.

He took his Freemasonry to Campbelltown where he became a foundation member of The Lodge Federation at its consecration on 29 August 1890 in the Town Hall Council Chamber.

He became an Honorary Member of The Lodge Federation where his three sons, James G.R., Campbell W. and Norman K. and grandson Murray, all became members. James G.R. Bocking was also a signatory to the Petition for The Lodge Federation and he was the foundation Junior Deacon. None of the Bocking family served as Master of the Lodge. 6.

At the celebrations held in 1920 to mark the centenary of the founding of Campbelltown, Bro. James Bocking was feted as one of the oldest residents. He certainly was the oldest resident at his death on 25 March 1926 aged 96 years. His wife had pre-deceased him some eight years earlier.

Bro. Bocking was accorded what was then known as a Masonic Funeral Service (now called a Masonic Tribute). A Lodge of Sorrow was opened at Campbelltown Masonic Hall after which the brethren proceeded to the Bocking residence and carried his remains to the hearse. His three sons and grandson were the pall-bearers at the Campbelltown cemetery where the service was conducted by Bro. Revd. C.H. Palmer.

The Municipal Council was represented by Wor. Bro. P.C. Marlow.

An obituary published in the May 1926 issue of the New South Wales Freemason included:

> The writer (un-named) well remembers hearing the late Bro. Bocking speaking in Lodge Federation only a year or two ago, with the vigour and clearness of a man 20 or 30 years his junior. In fact, he enjoyed life to the full up to nine months ago, being in possession of all his faculties. On the Sunday before his death, he was singing a song for a Brother Mason.

Our Bro. James Bocking was one migrant who became a true pioneer and made an outstanding contribution to his adopted home in the land of opportunity.
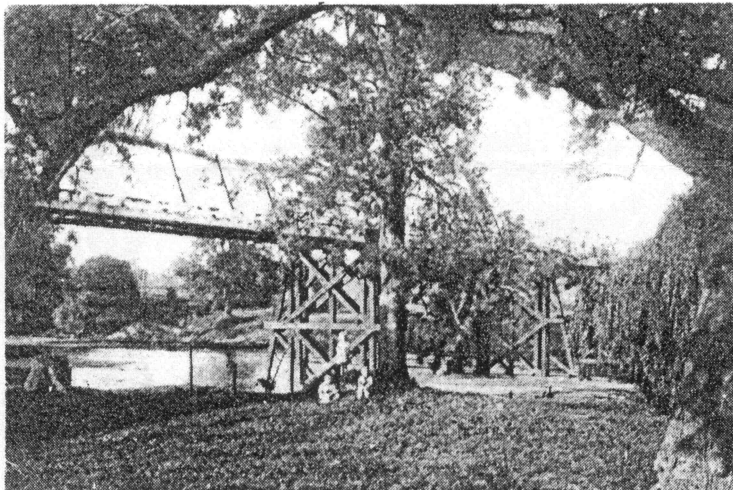

NOTES

1.   *The New South Wales Freemason*, 1 May 1926, p 280.

2.   Carol Liston, *Campbelltown, The Bicentenial History*, Allen and Unwin Australia Pty. Ltd., North Sydney, 1988.

3.   A.W. Read, *Place Names of New South Wales*, A.H. and A.W. Read, Sydney, 1969.

4.   Frances Pollon (Compiler and Editor), *The Book of Sydney Suburbs*, Collins Angus and Robertson Publishers Pty. Ltd., Sydney, Revised Edition 1991.

5.   Richard and Barbara Appleton, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Australian Places*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992.

6.   L.N. Sharp, *History of The Lodge Federation*, privately published, 1965.

James and Mary Bocking with their children, around 1890. *Left to right*, Edie, George, Campbell, James, Mary Charlotte (nee Robinson), May and Norman.
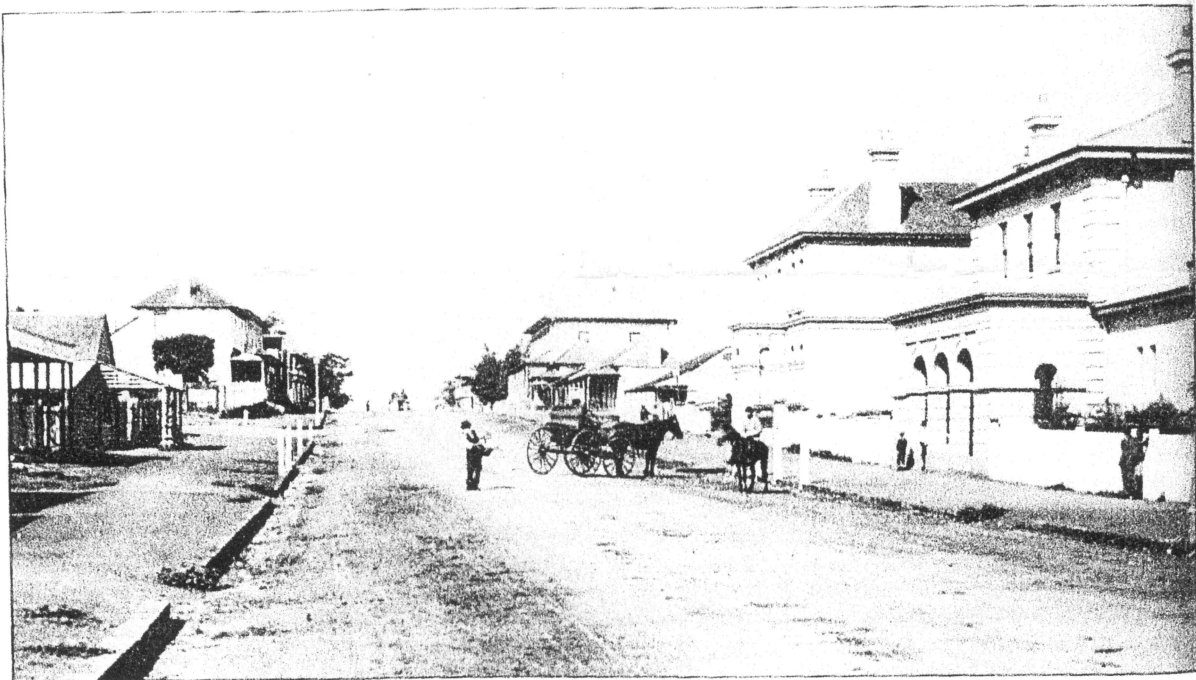
Bocking's mill, bakery and store, around 1880. Built by Kendall and Orr in 1844, this was the first steam flour mill in Campbelltown and dominated the southern end of Queen Street for many decades.

A typacal Bocking bridge.

The Pyrmont approach to the old Pyrmont Bridge. circa. 1890.

Queen Street, Campbelltown looking south. circa. 1886.