

SKETCHES by BEACH HISTORIANS
THE ROADS THAT WOULD NOT COME



KEN GRAY

THE ROADS THAT WOULD NOT COME

I have used Constance Mackness's Chapter 18 title from her 1959 publication for this history. It was with much frustration that Miss Mackness shared the story of the district's long wait for roads. Up until 1939, newspapers constantly reported on the lack of roads to access Mission Beach.

The first gravel road constructed was from El Arish to Bingil Bay. It wasn't finished until 1936, which was 51 years after the Cuttens arrived. There was much anxiety about roads with good reason, yet if you look at the image below of an Innisfail street in 1925 during the wet season, our desire for good roads was not exclusive to us. We must also remember that cars were not commonplace until the late 20s, and while dray tracks were urgently needed, for the first 40 years after the first settlers came, there was no great need for gravel roads.



Left: Innisfail 1925.



Right: Early roads were poor in the wet season, unknown location.

The anguish caused by a perceived inequity in funding for public infrastructure in the district was shrill, but in the 1930s, the population of Mission Beach was small; under 50. The case was not compelling. However, when our population climbed quickly to more than 3,000 in the 1980s, funding inequity was a harsh reality and outcomes were slow to come for essential infrastructure like boating and swimming pool facilities.

Dray Tracks

From 1885 until 1921, there were no significant tracks to allow access to nearby towns. The Cuttens had to cut tracks to bring horses into Bingil Bay. The only way to export produce, or import supplies, was by boat. People either owned boats or hired them. By 1916, there was a cattle track from Banyan to Innisfail following a telegraph line, but it was hideously steep, and a block and tackle were required to move forward with a dray.

A Djiru track existed from Bingil Bay to Clump Point before Europeans arrived, and the settlers reopened it and used it to visit each other. They had to wait for the tide to recede, which meant a long wait both ways. The settlers built a bridle path from Bingil Bay to Mission Beach and the beach was used to travel south from Clump Point. That required care when crossing the sinking sands at Porters Creek. Later, a bridle track was made from Bingil Bay to Garners Beach along the coastline, but a landslide at Ninney Point rendered it impassable. Despite being destroyed by the 1918 cyclone; the bridle tracks were restored.

The Mackness family started building a dray track around the coastline from Narragon Beach to Bingil Bay in 1921 and they built a bridge over Mackness Creek (the northern creek on Narragon). The Alexanders and Garners joined in and Council provided explosives and a truck. They then built a dray track to Silkwood. They had to build bridges over Muff and Maria Creeks and, according to Len Cutten, all the Council contributed was bolts for the bridges. Council had a different view and said they had a contract in 1922 for the bridges for £600 and most of that was taken from rates arrears. That is, the residents built it to pay off their overdue rates. Ted Garner built a bridge over Muff Creek for Council in 1924 and when that was finished, many went to Silkwood for supplies and trucks could get through when the road was dry.

In the 20s, Silkwood was the link to civilization for Clump Point residents unless they ventured further afield by ship. The first movie theatre was built there by Ted Jackson and they had a butchers shop and store. However, as the roads improved, the traffic started to bypass Silkwood on the way to Innisfail.

That dray track followed an old Djiru route, located north of the current Bingil Bay to El Arish road. Edith Garner was planning to open accommodation for tourists and in 1922, she wrote to *The Townsville Daily Bulletin* appealing to governments for a good road with a bridge over Maria Creek. Edith was not the first to advocate roads and bridges for the district. Herb Cutten wrote to the *Bulletin* in 1912 after the first meeting of the Clump Point Progress Association, making a strong case for the road. He chastised the Shire (Johnstone) for taking rates for eons and building no roads to Clump Point. Len Cutten was still agitating for roads in 1926 when he demanded severance from Council because they levied rates and did not build roads. In his usual colourful language, Len called the Council at Innisfail, the *Octopus Council*.

A lady visited Bingil Bay from Brisbane in 1924 on the second train that ran and Constance Mackness in her district history published an anecdote from the lady's chat with Leonard Cutten. He sat looking out to sea and answered her question about the dray track and the railway:

'Yes; it has come at long last', he said, then added, with a wry smile, 'but thirty years too late for Cutten Brothers. It will make all the land on all these beaches valuable some day, but not in my time. I have to be content to sit and look at things.' 'And you have a lovely green picture spread out around you to look at', she commented. 'Lovely? Yes, indeed', he agreed. 'Did I ever tell you that we came here on an April Fools' Day? We have had some bad setbacks, but that doesn't make us fools to have come here: Bicton was a grand place to work for, and it is a grand place to sit and look at when you are past working.'

By 1926, there were bridges over Maria, Muff and Cedar Creeks, and the two new tourism accommodation ventures were busy at Garners Beach and Bingil Bay. A party of 10 visitors from Maryborough wrote to the papers about their trip to Bingil Bay in 1926, saying it took six hours to drive the journey of 12 miles and they had to walk the last mile. It was no highway.

George Webb at Wongaling Beach (today's place name) rowed to Dunk Island weekly to obtain his mail and supplies. There were regular steamships servicing Dunk while Ted Banfield was alive, but they stopped coming when he died in 1923. George then had to rely on the Garners and rode to Narragon Beach to collect goods at the Mackness home. By 1932, after the Dunlop family settled in the district, the Webbs and Dunlops took it in turns to ride to Narragon to pick up mail and goods brought in along the northern track.



Left: Alexander Drive dray track in the 1920s. Image from Veronica Moriarty.

Right: Tully-Mission Beach dray track 1932 (or maybe Silkwood-Bingil Bay track). Image from Deb Woodfield.

By that time, they also had the option of taking a dray to Tully because the timber getters, the Bunting and Wildsoet families, had built a bridle track that way. These bridle tracks, north to Silkwood and south to Tully as well as from Bingil Bay to Mission Beach, were rough and unsealed and unusable in wet periods, but trucks and some cars were able to get through when it was dry.

We can understand the frustration of the residents who took almost a day to drive to a nearby town on boggy or bone-shaking tracks with few functional bridges – tides and floods continually intervened and raised the level of difficulty for all, especially the fruit farmers.

As cars became more common, demand for roads escalated. The first car in the district was owned by Charles and Gertrude Alexander, who used it to bring people to Alexanders Inn. Ted Garner owned a 1925 T Model Ford, so he was also a proud, early car owner.



Left: Alexanders Inn, Bingil Bay, built in 1926.



Right: Ted Garner and family with flash jalopies: foreground is Ted's 1925 Model T Ford.

Made Roads

Bingil Bay to El Arish

There were several priority roads to build to make the district accessible. The road from El Arish to Bingil Bay and Garners Beach, where most residents were living at the time, was the highest priority. The railway was through to Cairns by 1924, so the pressure was on to provide access to rail goods to southern markets.

Other priority roads were from Mission Beach to Tully and from Maria Creek through Fenby Gap to Mission Beach, as well as a continuation of that road to Bingil Bay. The road from El Arish to Tully was not built until after those roads were completed, as it presented a higher challenge crossing the Walter Hill Range.

In late 1934, the State Government had agreed to allocate £2,000 to start constructing the road to El Arish. The surveyors started work on the El Arish to Bingil Bay road in 1935. By mid-1935 there were 100 men working on the project. When the Deputy Premier, Percy Pease officially opened the Bingil Bay to El Arish road on 10 July 1936, he claimed that the trip would now take half an hour whereas it previously took almost a day to get to El Arish or Silkwood. The road stopped at a point just north of where the Cutten jetty had been.

Of the 12 Cuttens who migrated in 1871-2, only one remained living in Bingil Bay when the road was opened. That was the resilient and highly regarded Florence Alexander, still living at *Bicton*. Deputy Premier, Percy Pease, visited Flo to pay his respects. A good crowd attended the opening, all dressed in their Sunday best.

Mission Beach to Tully

Mrs A J Bolton who lived on Lot 114 at Wongaling Beach, previously owned by the Reids, constantly attended Cardwell Shire Council meetings for six months in 1933. She was ever polite and positive about Council, yet doggedly persistent in her unrelenting advocacy for an all-weather road. Council was slowly worn down, and in 1934, they agreed to start survey work. The pressure was building and Council received a petition with 200 signatures in 1935. The Depression was deepening, and men were desperate for road work. Percy Pease agreed

to fund the first sections of the road from Banyan to Feluga in 1935. However, as ever, while there was much talk at Cardwell Shire, there was little action and the project was slow to start.

Tenders were let for sections of the road to be built in 1937 and Cardwell Councillors were motivated by Hugo Brassey's effective promotions of his new Dunk Island resort. They were also stung by the loss of Mission Beach land to Johnstone Shire. By mid-1937 the pace had lifted and the sections up to the North Hull River were completed, but the bridge was yet to be started. In September, Cr White of Cardwell Shire persuaded the Council to change the name of the Tully-Clump Point Road to the Tully-Mission Beach Road. His reasons were that Clump Point was now in Johnstone Shire. The loss of land to Johnstone was clearly irksome.

By Christmas 1938, the Tully to Mission Beach Road was still far from completion, but several sections were constructed and the road was already popular. At a Protestant Labour Party Picnic held on Mission Beach after Xmas, some newspapers reported that more than 800 people attended. In June 1939, there was just one mile left to be gravelled and the road was completed by the start of 1940. In November 1939, Alex Dunlop, donated part of his land (Lot 111 at Wongaling) to enable shortening of the road to Mission Beach.

Maria Creek to Mission Beach & Bingil Bay

A proposal to build the road from Bingil Bay to Mission Beach, later named Alexander Drive, was passed by Council in October 1936. Main Roads inspected the route and estimated the cost of the project. In March 1937, the Government Gazette announced that this would be a Development Road, so its priority rose. The tender to build the Wongaling Creek bridge was let July 1937.

In April 1938, they metalled the road around the rocks (Alexander Drive). The road from Maria Creek to Bingil Bay was completed by March 1939, before the Tully-Mission Beach Road was finished. The time to travel the 15 miles was estimated at 40 minutes, a vast improvement for the district's settlers.

This road was always difficult to maintain and still is. It was named 'Landslide Hill' by some (Bicton Hill) because of the rock falls and stone walls have been recently built to protect the road from such events.

Politics of Change

There was a convergence of forces driving governments to build the roads at Mission Beach in the 1930s. Councils could see the writing on the wall with tourism in Mission Beach district beginning to bloom. In November 1926, Tully people were regularly travelling on lorries on Sundays to South Mission Beach (known then as *Hull Beach*). They sometimes took cars and boasted that they could drive on the hard sand at up to 40 miles per hour. A Tully Ambulance Brigade picnic in 1927 reported 40 vehicles on South Mission Beach with 300 people attending. However, when an emergency arose in March 1928, the ambulance from Tully was bogged 12 times and the trip took 23 hours, so access depended on the tracks being dry and the tides low.

By 1928, Bingil Bay was seeing 14 vehicles a day with about 100 visitors each weekend. In 1936, after the new road was opened the *bottle-O* took three lorry loads of bottles off the beach in a week. The Councils' views of tourism changed most dramatically when Hugo and Christa Brassey set up a resort on Dunk Island in 1936 amid much international fanfare. Both Councils wanted a share of that and saw the need for road access to Mission Beach to cash in on the assumed bonanza.

The politics of local government were a large factor early on. The Council that built a road to the district first would hold a big advantage. When Johnstone Shire convinced the State Government to fund the Bingil Bay to El Arish Road, Johnstone made hay while the sun shone. The Johnstone Division of Local Government was created in 1885 when land north of Narragon Beach to Mourilyan was excised from Cardwell Division. Just after Johnstone built the road to Bingil Bay, they capitalised on the goodwill of Mission Beach people who were then travelling to Innisfail rather than Tully.

The area from north Mission Beach to Narragon was known as the *culpa lands* (ie neglected), and Percy Pease was the Minister for Lands who made the road possible. He was a popular ALP politician, who had been the Member for Herbert for four terms and became Deputy Premier. Percy supported local Johnstone Councillor, Eric Alexander (Florence's son) in his move to take these lands from Cardwell and place them in Johnstone. Eric was an ALP man as well. There was a huge spat at the time between the Councils and Johnstone prevailed. Cardwell objected, but the residents, went with Johnstone and the excision occurred in February 1937.

This was rather robust politics, and Councillors at Cardwell Shire Council were incensed, particularly fellow Clump Point farmer, Councillor, Peter White. Eric Alexander reached the pinnacle of his minor political career at that point when he poured a bucket of petrol on this simmering fire by stating at a Council meeting ...

Probably I should not say it but it is a fact that Tully is but a parasite on the southern end of the Johnstone Shire. They should not be attracting business out of the El Arish end of this district. They will not be taking it when there is a better road. It is only a matter of time when the Culpa lands will be cut out of the Cardwell Shire ...

The *Cairns Post* was delighted with the sparks caused by Eric and after a feisty meeting in Tully they wrote:

Braying in Wilderness 'Like an ass braying in the wilderness,' observed Cr. Peter White, with some feeling, in referring to some remarks allegedly uttered by Cr. S. A. E. Alexander and reported in to-day's Cairns Post. I have been a councillor for a very long time, and I can tell you straight, that I very strongly object to such a reference.

All that became irrelevant in time of course when the two Shires were merged in 2008 to become Cassowary Coast Regional Council. At a Council meeting in 1936, Cr Mullins of Cardwell Shire had wailed, *Soon they will have right down to Tully if we don't look out!* Accurate forecasting by Cr Mullins.

Don Wheatley came with his family to Wongaling Beach (Wheatley Road) in May 1940 and recalls the shocking roads at the time. He remembers there being two dirt ruts with grass in the middle and they had to use chains on the tyres to cross hill sections. These may have been the roads off the main ones but even by the time his first child, Gregory, started school in 1960, the roads were so difficult and unreliable that Don's family relocated to live near the school. Inez Campbell, who came in 1958, remarked in the School's 50th Anniversary book on how bad the roads still were.

Sealing the Roads



Narrow sealed road towards El Arish.



Tully-Mission Beach Road. Images taken 1976, from Diane Bull.

It was in 1958 that roads started to be rebuilt and sealed. The first major section to be upgraded was the low lying road at the north end of Mission Beach. The district's road sealing program took decades to complete.

Diane Bull of Wongaling Beach spoke to her friends about the roads as they recall them in earlier days and said:

It was one lane of bitumen to El Arish after the Maria Creek Bridge, which meant you had to get half off the road and onto the dirt when oncoming traffic approached. That could be tricky, especially when it was wet or large trucks passed. It was the same on the road to Tully and the edges were often eroded badly as seen in the photos (above).

The bridges were usually one lane, which meant giving way to oncoming traffic and many roads were still only dirt with severe corrugations – very bumpy and often muddy. The road to Innisfail at the time went through Silkwood.

In the school anniversary book that Diane Bull co-authored, there are a few interesting anecdotes about the roads. Rob Donkin explained how poor roads were in the early 1950s when he was at school:

Many of us had bikes. They were of limited use on much of the sandy tracks that masqueraded as roads in the early days. I remember when the first bit of tarred road was laid in Mission Beach, 50 metres in all on the corner of Porters Promenade and Central Avenue as it is now named. We thought it was great to ride on.

Oddly enough, the last section of the road to have its sealing completed was part of the first road built – Bingil Bay to Maria Creek. That road was used less often when the population expanded in the southern villages of the district where residential land was freely available. Bingil Bay Road was badly rutted and grading only reduced the ruts momentarily, so it was a terrible bone shaker. Johnstone Shire Council no longer led the way with Mission Beach roadmaking and did not finish sealing that section of road until 2005. Oddly enough the speed limit on that road was 100 kph prior to sealing and is now 70 kph when it is sealed and so much safer. It would have been tricky driving on that gravel road at anything above 70 kph.



Left: El Arish-Bingil Bay Road after 1936. Images from Deb Woodfield. Right: Bingil Bay-El Arish made road, 1936. Image from Deb Woodfield.

Were the Delays Bad News?

This story paints a picture of the struggles of residents to obtain roads. Tempers flared. The turnout at the opening shows the level of interest with 33 people showing in the picture and no doubt more were there, but not captured in the viewfinder. That was most of the population of the district.

It would be folly to assume that the road delays were entirely bad news for the district. Long-term perhaps, it was quite the opposite. The focus of newspaper articles at the time was on the plight of farmers who were encouraged by the governments to select land in the district then left stranded with no facilities to successfully farm their land. The articles continually stated the high potential of the district for farming. On the face of it, the delays were somewhat unjust and put the hand brake on the district's development.



Left: 16 men at a road quarry in the 1930s. Image from Deb Woodfield. Right: Percy Pease, Minister for Lands, opening Bingil Bay-El Arish Road, 09 July 1936. Image from Sylvia Martin (nee Garner). The caption on the photo suggests that Edith Fay Garner is holding the tape at left and Ms Alexander at right. However, Edith Fay Garner was born in 1941 and Edith Garner died in 1935. Gertrude Alexander died in 1934 so I am unsure which Ms Alexander is holding the ribbon.



Left: Bridge and sign, Bingil Bay, 1936 - State Library of Queensland. The bridge was later replaced with culverts. Right: Old sign, image from Chris Forbes.

Some would argue, with the usual benefit of hindsight, that the delays actually aided this district. Mission Beach was never to become a successful banana and sugar economy like Tully and Innisfail. There were some outstanding farm soils here, especially those on the basalt country nearby Clump Point. That remains quality banana farmland. However, much of the land was of lower quality and while banana farming was widespread here in the 1950s, much of that farmland reverted to bush or became residential land.

Of the 3,200 acres of land that the Cuttens selected in Bingil Bay, only 400 acres was cleared. It was nearly all under bananas later, yet today almost none of that land is farmed. By 1930, everyone was seeing that the future of the district was more in tourism than farming. Indeed, the reason that Percy Pease funded the roads here was the tourism potential. From the images below, we can see what happened over the next 90 years: the land was settled (not seen among the trees), but not by farmers. The land reverted to its attractive former rainforest self. The hopes of sugar farming never eventuated and much of the land was set aside as World Heritage forest or National Parks ... ideal if your future is in tourism rather than agriculture.



Left: Bicton beachfront lands at Bingil Bay circa 1930. Right: Bingil Bay 2022, image courtesy Susan Kelly, *Natural Images*.

Perhaps the road delays were meant to be... and our forests and future are stronger for it.

Today

Mission Beach roads in 2024 are far from being wonderful highways that visitors would admire, yet looking back, at least we can travel around relatively safely without getting bogged. There is little kerb and channel but it is no big city, so maybe that is not a bad thing. The wet season creates a many giant potholes that take forever to fix and the drainage in places remains abysmal, and when it rains heavily we merely slow down and go through the streams and ponds carefully.

Landslides that have always occurred in Alexander Drive where it meanders around Bicton Hill by the sea and this causes road closures periodically and cyclones lift the surfaces and create a mountain of work for Council. We get by for all that and are thankful for what we have.



March 2018 landslides on Alexander Drive causing road closure for some days. Images by Paul Toogood.

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The histories published by the Mission Beach Historical Society are as accurate as we can make them. Few accounts of history are 100% correct and there are going to be more errors when we recall events of many years ago. We always welcome suggested edits and additions or deletions and where possible we will edit where we find we are in error.

Cover Image

Top: The Hon. Percy Pease, MLA, Minister for Lands, opens the "Bingil Bay-El Arish Road" (now that scene is on Alexander Drive) on 09 July 1936.

Bottom: The small bridge at the beach with the Bingil Bay Road sign and (behind) the changing sheds. This bridge has been replaced with culverts and Bingil Bay Road was later renamed Alexander Drive after it reached the beachfront.