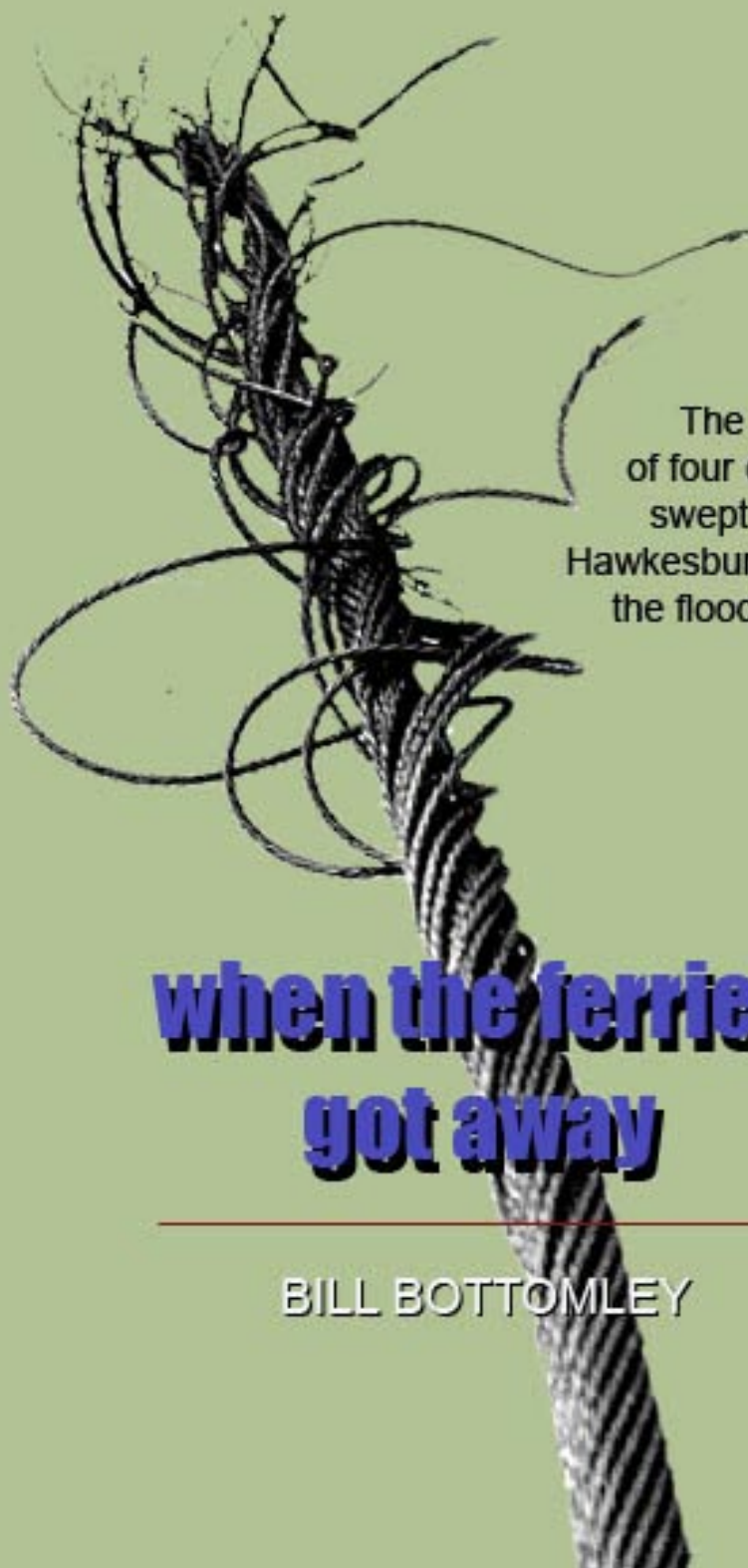




The true story
of four car ferries
swept down the
Hawkesbury River in
the floods of 1978

when the ferries got away

BILL BOTTOMLEY



The week before Easter 1978 saw torrential rain and widespread flooding along the coast of NSW. The floodwaters rose so quickly that at Wisemans Ferry council workers were unable to get the vehicular ferries off their cables in time, and after a series of freak mishaps four ferries, lashed together, were swept down-river with three men on board. One of them soon sank, another broke free and was eventually secured, while the remaining two continued in tandem down the Hawkesbury at the mercy of the flood waters.

The next two days were packed with incident, danger and surprises, as the runaway ferries proved to be virtually unstoppable. The drama reached its climax when the floating island of ferries and flood debris threatened to ram into the road bridges at Brooklyn and disaster was only averted at the last minute.

When the Ferries Got Away is the story of this wild 40 km ride down the river, told by the people who were the main players in the drama.

*(A discussion of some of the methodological issues of this oral history is available on this website. See **On the Record and Off the Record: The case of the Runaway Ferries** in "Other Words".)*





Acknowledgments

Many people helped with getting this book together, and to detail the part played by each would be a complex task. Following is a list of people who contributed to its production in one way or another. I am grateful to them all.

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Wisemans Ferry Vehicular Ferries No 55 ▲ and No 8 ▼

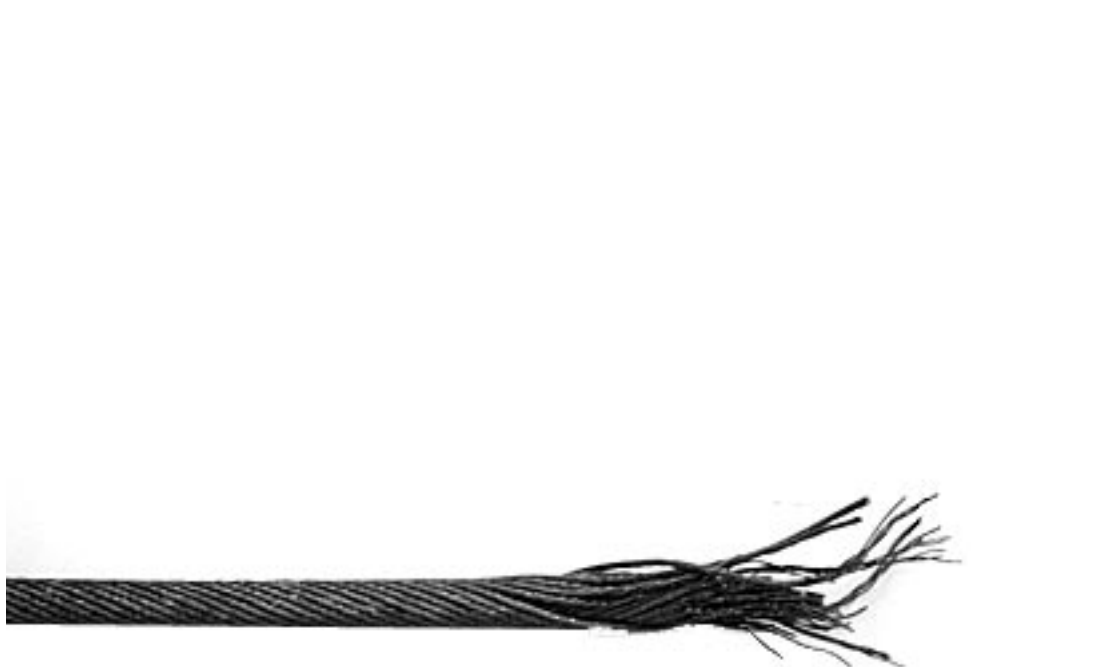


Webbs Creek Vehicular Ferry No 26 ▼





Location of vehicular ferries on the Upper Hawkesbury



PROLOGUE

Setting the Scene

Solomon Wiseman began the first ferry service across the Hawkesbury River in 1827. It is actually the oldest ferry service still operating in the country. The early ferries were little more than rowing boats to begin with, though they soon got more elaborate - well, big enough to carry a horse and cart, anyway. For quite some years they were rowed across by hand - no small feat when the tide was running fast, and before the advent of the internal combustion engine passengers were often called upon to assist the ferryman to row them across, in addition to paying for their passage. By late in the nineteenth century they were being pulled across on cables, but still by human muscle power.

As time passed and the traffic increased the ferries became larger, and by the time motor cars were common they were purpose-built ferries capable of carrying several cars and the occasional truck or bus. Even now the modern ferries still run on cables - they have no propulsion of their own, and no rudders or other steering mechanism.

By the 1970s there were two ferry crossings at Wisemans Ferry - as there still are at time of writing. One is adjacent to Webbs Creek, about 1½ kms upstream from the Wisemans Ferry crossing. It was served then, as it still is, by Ferry No 26. The other is the crossing at Wisemans itself, about a mile upriver from where Solomon's first ferry originally plied. This crossing is served by the big main ferry, No 8, together with a smaller spare one, No 55, which is used in rush periods and when the main one is out of service. There are also crossings at Lower Portland and Sackville, further upstream towards Windsor. (More information about the vehicular ferries currently in service is in Appendix One).

The Hawkesbury is subject to periodic severe flooding, and ever since Solomon Wiseman's time floods have presented a challenge to the operation of the ferries. During the week before the Easter holidays in March 1978 about 350 mm of rain fell over the Hawkesbury/Nepean catchment in the three days from March 17, causing a considerable rise in the river level at the Wisemans ferry crossings. This rise in the river level was further increased by full flood flow from other rivers and creeks in the system such as the Colo, the Grose and the Macdonald. The storms accompanying the rain that year were so fierce that late in the evening of Monday March 20 waves were two to three metres high in the usually sheltered waters of Broken Bay. Although there have been bigger floods recorded in the Hawkesbury system over the years, the one of the week before Easter in 1978 still qualified as a biggie.

But it wasn't only the Hawkesbury that was affected by the heavy rains preceding Easter 1978. The torrential rain at that time was widespread, and dramatic reports of flooding came from all up and down the NSW seaboard. Almost lost in the media coverage of the many stories associated with this disastrous natural event were some brief mentions of an incident involving the vehicular ferries at Wisemans. One was in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Tuesday March 21 1978:

"Three Hawkesbury River vehicular ferries broke loose from their moorings about 3 pm and drifted downstream. Police and local fishermen who gave chase managed to rope them together and secured them to the bank." (p3)

The other one was in the *Daily Telegraph* of the same date:

"Three big car ferries were swept down the Hawkesbury River from

Wisemans Ferry 15 km to Laughtondale where two were secured by water police and the other went aground. Three workers aboard the ferries were uninjured.” (p1)

The only other mention of the incident in the media at the time was a couple of lines in the *Hawkesbury/Richmond Gazette* of Tuesday, March 21, which ran:

“The ferries from Wisemans which drifted away from their moorings downstream on Monday towards Spencer have now been recovered and moored at Spencer.”

Not only are these reports woefully brief, they are also almost entirely inaccurate. There was actually very much more to the event than anyone would suspect from reading them. Some radio stations mentioned the incident in their news broadcasts, but by and large the story of what happened to the Wisemans ferries wasn't reported very widely, and where it was mentioned the reports were anything but factual. Some months afterwards a fairly comprehensive account of the incident was published in the (then) DMR magazine *Main Roads*,¹ and a story also appeared in the *Hawkesbury/Richmond Gazette* about the same time². But the details of what really happened were restricted mainly to the people who had been directly involved.

If the media had let the story slip by them, not so the informal social network of the Wisemans Ferry district. The runaway ferries were a hot topic of conversation for some time afterwards in the bars, the clubs, and at the various social gatherings in the area. The main players in the drama were repeatedly called upon to regale a spellbound audience with some of the more memorable aspects of their adventure, and this was especially the case for the three men who stayed on the ferries all the way on their wild ride down the river. What actually happened started out as a relatively minor mishap, but an unforeseeable set of chance events transformed it into a full-blown drama. It made an ideal pub yarn.

But local interest waned, inevitably, and the story of the runaway ferries passed into local folklore. Years passed, and memories blurred. In 1983 the Dharug and Lower Hawkesbury Historical Society was founded. Although this was an unrelated event, there turned out to be a connection: one of the Society's activities is to invite speakers to their meetings to address them on matters of local historical interest, and in 1990 one of the people they asked to come and talk to them was Russ Mitchell, one of the men who

had stayed on board the ferries on their rampage down the river. Russ had worked on the ferries for many years and the Society was interested to hear about his experiences and what he knew about the ferries in general, given that they are such a characteristic feature of the Wisemans Ferry district.

Russ was happy to oblige. He talked about vehicular ferries in the district in general; he showed a number of slides he had collected over the years; filled in technical details about each ferry; and gave a brief historical overview of ferries on the Hawkesbury from Solomon Wiseman to modern times, including some descriptions of memorable things that had happened while he'd been working on the ferries over the years. He saved his account of the runaway ride in 1978 till last.

Somebody in the Society had the foresight to tape Russ' address, and seven years later, when I was browsing through the archives of the Historical Society, I happened to come across the tape. It turned out to be a rather indistinct recording, but with a bit of perseverance I was able to decipher most of it.

I was living in Sydney in 1978, but I had never heard anything about the runaway ferries. (Mind you, I had only a hazy recollection of the floods, for that matter - though I must have known about them, since the inundation of the eastern seaboard had been widely, even hysterically, reported.) I found listening to the tape of Russ' account of the time the ferries got away to be a real edge-of-the-seat experience. Things just kept happening. The whole business kept escalating and getting more complicated and more challenging as event piled on unexpected event, culminating in the realisation that there was a very real chance that the runaway ferries could do serious damage to the bridges across the Hawkesbury at Brooklyn if they weren't stopped. And the outcome was a real minute-to-midnight cliffhanger.

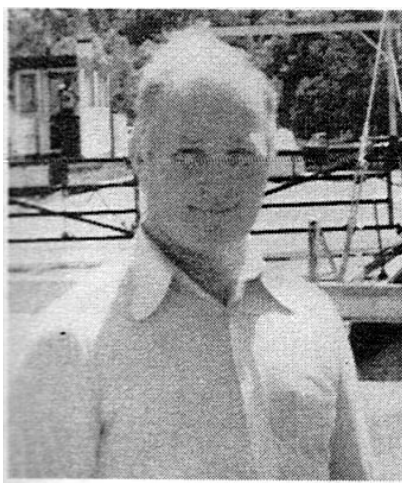
After I'd heard it right through I thought it was a bloody good yarn that was worth resuscitating. There had been no really comprehensive coverage of the event, and it seemed to be a story well worth the retelling. I decided to try to trace as many of the major players involved in the incident as I could, talk to them about their memories of what happened when the ferries got away, and try to piece together the full story incorporating their various different perspectives. I was especially keen to document the human interest aspects of the adventure - the little things that happened that wouldn't get a mention in the dry, factual context of an official

report - and there were plenty of them, as it turned out. (There are some minor discrepancies of detail in the various accounts, but this is not surprising given that it all happened twenty years ago. Memory is only ever approximate.)

Local social networks are a wonderful thing. The people of the Wisemans Ferry district who remembered the event were helpful and co-operative in helping me track down as many of the cast in the drama as were still around. I felt that I discerned a general feeling among local people that an event of some community significance had occurred in 1978 that had never been sufficiently acknowledged, and most of those that I talked to seemed glad that someone was going to get it all down for the record.

Perhaps what I should do at this stage is list the main characters in the drama that developed, together with a bit of background for each, so you'll have an idea of who's who when their names keep cropping up as the drama is played out:

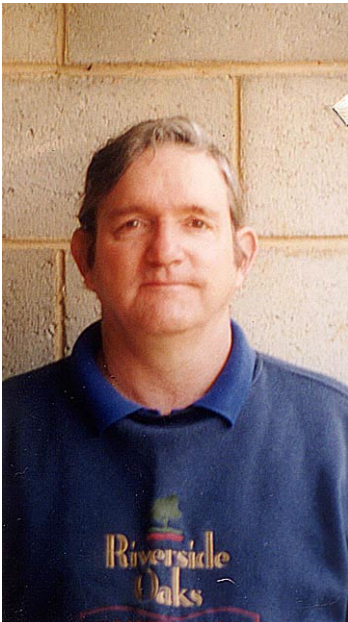
Occupying centre stage were the three men who rode the runaway ferries all the way. They were Robin Pawsey, Russ Mitchell and Allen Curran. In the twenty years since the drama happened, both Robin and Russ have taken the Final Ferry Ride, but Allen Curran still lives at Cattai and was glad to have the chance to relive the experience once more when I asked him for an interview.



Robin Pawsey was a local resident who used to own Summer Hill Farm just below St Albans, and for a number of years he held the contract to run the ferries at Wisemans. A few years after the ferries got away his involvement with the ferries ceased, and in the 1980s he died of cancer. He was in his fifties.



Russ Mitchell's roots in the district go back a long way - the Mitchell family came to the Colony in 1842 and Russ' forebears were part of the settlements at Sackville and Mangrove Creek. Russ was the foreman of the two-man team employed by Colo Shire Council to look after the day-to-day maintenance and repair of the ferries. When flood emergency procedures were called for it was his job to see that the procedures were carried out properly. From all accounts he was a very popular man - a natural leader and the one who took charge when things started to go awry. He retired from the Council at age 60. In 1992 he went into hospital for a hip replacement, but during his convalescence he developed a clot, and died suddenly.



Allen Curran was 32 years old at the time of the ferry breakaway. He was the other council employee aboard. He lived at Cattai at the time, and he still does, where he is active in the Bush Fire Brigade and works on the land. He left the Council in 1992. He has been awarded the National Medal for Service and Bar for his contribution to the community.

Russ and Allen's immediate boss in the Council in those days was the Engineer and Town Planner **Garry McCully**. At the time Garry was the Council person who was responsible for anything to do with the ferries, and throughout the drama he stayed camped in his office, keeping up with events and co-ordinating responses to them by phone. (In 1978 the Council was still known as Colo Shire Council. Colo and Windsor Councils were combined in 1981 to form Hawkesbury Shire and Garry is now the General Manager of Hawkesbury City Council.)

Brian McKinlay was a Surveyor with the Council at the time and was also Captain of the Berowra Bushfire Brigade and Deputy Group Captain of Hornsby Shire Bushfire Brigade. He has left the Council and now has a surveying business in Windsor. He is still active in the Rural Fire Service, serving as Group Captain with the Hawkesbury Brigades.



Lawry Duff was the skipper of one of the tugboats that played a large part in the drama. His father, **Jim Duff**, skippered the other one, which later was converted to a trawler and operates out of the Clarence River. Lawry now runs the Clarence River Ferry Service at Iluka, near Grafton.



One of his deckhands was **Chris Cowper**. Chris was 25 at the time. He's now a Ferrymaster with the Sydney Harbour Ferry Service.

Because the operation of the ferries was a shared responsibility between the Council and the DMR (now the RTA), there was an employee of the DMR that became involved in the incident, mainly in the role of observer from above in a helicopter. He kept everyone up to date on what was happening, and took the aerial photographs of the ferries in full flight that appear in this book. We'll call this bloke **Hal Gregge**, because when I talked to him about his memories of the ferry incident he was happy to recount his recollections of the event, but keen that he be kept anonymous. In his words: "I'm a true government officer. I don't have my name published. I've been around the government long enough to know that you don't put your name to anything."

Hal Gregge and Garry McCully were in close contact throughout the emergency with **Bill McIntyre**. Bill was the Supervising Engineer at the DMR Central Workshop at Granville at the time, which meant he was second in charge of the whole shebang. These days the workshop is no more, but it was a very big operation in 1978. Bill's role was to organise everything once the strategic decisions had been taken, like contracting the tugs to try to stop the ferries, and supplying equipment needs like mooring ropes, steel cables and the like.

Also involved in trying to control the runaway ferries were the Water Police from Brooklyn. I managed to track down and talk to **Ron Evers**, one of the officers who was aboard the police launch at the time. He is still on the Force, and lives at Wyoming.

As well as direct participants in the drama, I also talked to some of the people who were peripherally involved, like Russ' wife **Elma** (now Elma Free), and Russ' brother **Denis Mitchell**, who still works on the ferries at Wisemans. To round things out I talked with **Albie Ballantyne** about what it all looked like from the shore. Albie lives at Gunderman and was helping to save a neighbour's house from a mud slide caused by the torrential rain at the time the runaway ferries sailed past.

So... that's the cast introduced. Now... on with the drama.

¹ "Runaway Ferries", in *Main Roads*, June 1978.

² "The man who rode out the storm on a runaway ferry", *Hawkesbury/Richmond Gazette*, (n.d.)