

# Coomera River Bridge (1930)

LHR0077

## Place details

Address/location	Coomera River
Title details	
Principle period(s)	1930
City of Gold Coast division	2, 3
Other known names	
Area for protection	Bridge plus 5 metre heritage buffer
Place components	Bridge including abutments, plaque
Place category	Bridge
Context	In situ
Other listings	
Register entry date	5 June 2018

## Statement of heritage significance

The Coomera River Bridge, opened in 1930, is a place of local heritage significance for its historic importance, rarity, potential to yield information and class characteristics as evidenced by, but not exclusive to, the following statement of heritage significance, based on criteria (a), (b), (c), and (d) of the Gold Coast Local Heritage Register.

### Criterion (a) Historic importance

The Coomera River Bridge, opened in 1930, is historically significant for the role it played in the consolidation of the South Coast Road from Brisbane to the New South Wales border. Prior to the bridge construction, the river had to be crossed by ferry which was inefficient and unreliable particularly when the river was in flood. The construction of the state funded high-level bridge created a reliable transport route during river inundation and relieved the congestion experienced by motorists during holiday periods at the old ferry crossing.

Hailed as a 'milestone in South Coast progress' and an 'important link', the bridge was influential in opening up transport routes into the district. It stimulated tourist traffic to Southport and the southern beaches and provided new opportunities for economic development throughout the South Coast, (now known as the Gold Coast).

### Criterion (b) Rarity

The Coomera River Bridge is the first public road bridge crossing the Coomera River. The bridge's design, incorporating steel girder support for the concrete deck, makes it a rare example of a variation on a Main Roads Commission high-level, first-class reinforced concrete and steel bridge and the only of its type remaining on the Gold Coast.

### **Criterion (c) Potential information**

Examined in conjunction with other historical sources, the Coomera River Bridge has the potential to yield information that will contribute to a greater understanding of inter-war reinforced concrete and steel bridge construction. The bridge is highly intact and demonstrates the design, form, materials and engineering features typical of Main Roads Commission high-level, first class concrete bridges as well as logistical matters of sourcing essential materials. While much of the material used in construction of the bridge was local, the steel bars came from Lithgow, New South Wales and the girders were manufactured in Belgium and brought to Australia. At the time the girders were the largest solid girders ever imported into Australia.

### **Criterion (d) Class Characteristics**

The Coomera River Bridge is important in illustrating the principal characteristics of a class of Main Roads Commission concrete bridges used to span major rivers on the Gold Coast and throughout the region. The construction of this class of bridge followed a standard plan developed by the Main Roads Commission and this enabled an efficient upgrade of the South Coast Road. The bridge is highly intact and remains in use today.

## **Image**



Coomera River Bridge 2016, view looking south. Image courtesy of City of Gold Coast.

## **History**

The Coomera River Bridge was opened with much aplomb on a rainy day on 14 June 1930. It replaced a much maligned ferry punt service and was one of a number of bridges being constructed at the time on the South Coast Road from the Logan River down to the border with New South Wales by the Main Roads Commission. With the construction of bridges such as the Coomera River Bridge, the South Coast Road became influential in opening up transport routes into the district, improving travel between Brisbane and Sydney and stimulated tourist traffic to the South Coast, (now known as the Gold Coast).

Prior to the construction of bridges the crossing of rivers and creeks along the main route from Brisbane to the South Coast was done by ferry. Initially used for, horse and cart transport, and later motor vehicles, users were required to queue along the road and wait to be taken across the waterways. Delays due to weather and flooding were common.

During the 1920s the Main Roads Board began the task to upgrade the southern road from Brisbane to the New South Wales border, including installation of bridges across the many rivers and creeks.<sup>i</sup> The emergence of the South Coast Road as the preferred route of transport between Brisbane and the South Coast was eventually to play an important role in the demise of the South Coast Railway in the early 1960s.<sup>ii</sup>

Local community calls for a bridge to replace the existing ferry service across the Coomera River begun as early as 1887 with a deputation and petition to the Minister of Works asking that the proposed railway bridge across the river be constructed to carry passenger and vehicular as well as railway traffic. These requests were quickly rejected by the Minister who responded that the railways were for carrying produce to and fro and that he was not about to saddle the Railways Department with the additional costs of building a bridge for wheeled traffic.<sup>iii</sup>

In February 1926 the Coomera Shire Council formed a deputation to wait on the Minister of Lands for the purpose of requesting that a Commonwealth grant be made available for the construction of a bridge over the Coomera River.<sup>iv</sup> A party to this deputation was the R.A.C.Q.<sup>v</sup> who were, by this time, becoming a significant and well respected advocate for better and safer road infrastructure in Queensland.

Delays in crossing the Coomera River were regularly experienced during holiday periods and an accepted part of using the road however the rapid increase in the number of motorists using the South Coast Road soon led to excessive delays and inefficiency. The need for a road bridge across the Coomera River was demonstrated during Easter 1926 when 700 cars used the ferry service during the four day period.<sup>vi</sup> On Easter Monday of that year up to 150 vehicles were waiting to use the Coomera River ferry to return to Brisbane from Southport with the ferry taking 10 minutes to cross the river and only capable of carrying four vehicles resulting in a wait of up to 3 or more hours for some motorists!<sup>vii</sup>

In late May 1926 it was announced that plans for a road bridge over the Coomera River were now in preparation.<sup>viii</sup> The Chairman of the Main Roads Commission however advised the Coomera Shire Council that road work at Southport had greater priority and the Shire Council should arrange for at least a three year lease for the ferry. Other suggestions put forward by the Chairman to the Shire Council to help alleviate issues associated with the Coomera River ferry included motorising the ferry and putting two ferries on during holidays and the weekends.<sup>ix</sup> A further suggestion was the use of a pontoon bridge arrangement until a more substantive bridge was forthcoming.<sup>x</sup>

Issues with long waits required to cross the Coomera River again surfaced during the 1927 Christmas – New Year period. Even with improvements to the ferry service, which included joining two ferries to carry twelve cars, it was estimated that at one stage 300 motor vehicles were lined up to cross the river with a waiting time of four hours for the last vehicle.<sup>xi</sup> The Chairman of the Main Roads Commission would not be drawn into expressing an opinion about the matter of a bridge over the Coomera River, simply stating that no doubt a bridge would be built when money was available.<sup>xii</sup>

The urgent need for a road bridge across the Coomera River was reinforced in early February 1927 when all motor traffic between Brisbane and Southport was cut off due to the ferry being taken off service due to heavy flooding of the river.<sup>xiii</sup> A similar event occurred again in March although the ferry was only out of service for a few hours this time.<sup>xiv</sup> By the middle of the year the Southport Branch of the R.A.C.Q. was advocating the construction of a toll bridge to replace what was being described as the “time-wasting and temper-blasting” ferry system.<sup>xv</sup>

By August 1927 soundings of the Coomera River were being taken in preparation for a bridge. This was seen by the Coomera Shire Council as progress towards construction of a state road bridge and that it would not be wise to press on with support for the R.A.C.Q.'s proposal for a toll bridge.<sup>xvi</sup>

In mid-October 1927 the Minister of Lands announced that survey for a bridge site, including boring for foundations, over the Coomera River had been completed and designs were at hand.<sup>xvii</sup> Money was available for the work through the Federal Roads Aid Scheme and the Main Roads Commission intended to immediately proceed with construction of the bridge.<sup>xviii</sup> The following month the Coomera Shire Council completed the construction of a concrete weir at Upper Coomera which offered an alternative river crossing at times when delays could be expected with the ferry service.<sup>xix</sup>

About this time public outcry was mounting at the amount of revenue collected by local authorities on ferry services fares. It was reported that the sum of £2,060 (approximately \$158,753 today) had been earned by the Coomera Shire Council in the financial year 1926-27 and some estimates suggested that this could rise to as much as £4,000 (approximately \$311,723 today) the following financial year as the use of the South Coast Road increased.<sup>xx</sup>

By the end of March 1928 works on upgrading the length of the Southport Road from Brisbane were proceeding well with surfaces being sealed and the more time-consuming work of bridge-building commencing. South of the river, the road was being upgraded although large sections remained unsealed.<sup>xxi</sup>

As with previous years, Easter 1928 experienced increased delays in waiting for the Coomera River ferry and led to renewed calls to expedite the construction of the bridge over the river. One motorist was reported to have amused himself while waiting by counting the waiting cars on the southern side, finding that he was the 234<sup>th</sup> in line for the ferry and delays of up to three or four hours were experienced by some motorists.<sup>xxii</sup> The failings of the ferry service were again exposed just a few days later when flooding of the Coomera River stopped ferry services for some time.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Towards the end of the year the patience of users of the South Coast Road was wearing thin with no visible progress on the construction of a bridge over the Coomera River occurring. Disappointment in this lack of progress was expressed by the R.A.C.Q. who commented that, at the present rate, it will be another year or two before the bridge will be completed; in the meantime motorists will have to continue to suffer inconvenience and delay at the antiquated ferry.<sup>xxiv</sup> Observers, such as the R.A.C.Q., noted with some distain that the Main Roads Commissioners Annual Report made little reference to the proposed Coomera Bridge aside from reference to preliminary plans having been prepared and a comment that it was "hoped" that a start could be made in the next financial year.<sup>xxv</sup>

Much to the relief of locals, tenders for the construction of a combined reinforced concrete pile and steel deck bridge over the Coomera River were called in early March 1929. The timeframe for construction was specified as being 13 months from the date of acceptance of tender, which would be late April. The tender noted that the bridge has been designed for the Commissioner's first-class loading and will be able to carry military tanks and guns. The total length of construction work was 1,550 lineal feet (474.44 metres), of which 654 feet (199.33 metres) was bridge.<sup>xxvi</sup> The bridge and its approaches were to be built under the Federal Aid Road Scheme with contribution from both Commonwealth and State Governments<sup>xxvii</sup>, and was to be located some 50 yards upstream from the ferry crossing.<sup>xxviii</sup>

A drawing of the proposed bridge appeared in newspapers and showed a concrete and steel bridge similar in form and design to the bridge today with the exception of a raised wooden curved approach on the southern river bank, which has now been replaced by a combined embankment and small concrete bridge extension, and removal of the original reinforced concrete balustrades.<sup>xxix</sup> This wooden approach was considered the most cost effective means of dealing with the flood hazards of this low lying area of land.<sup>xxx</sup>

Four tenders were received for the work;

M. R. Hornibrook	£27,282	17s	8d (approximately \$2,079,450 today)
P. Blondell	£28,614	1s	11d (approximately \$2,180,913 today)
A. M. Midson	£35,918	18s	0d (approximately \$2,737,671 today)
Taylor Bros	£37,354	17s	0d (approximately \$2,847,117 today)

The Commissioner of Main Roads estimate of the work was £30,525 0s 6d (approximately \$2,326,560 today).<sup>xxxi</sup>

The tender was awarded to M.R. Hornibrook at a contract price of £29,147 (approximately \$2,221,530 today) and completion date 19 April 1930.<sup>xxxii</sup> Under the terms of the contract a bonus of £5 (approximately \$381 today) per day was payable to the builder for each day the job was completed under the time allowed in the contract.<sup>xxxiii</sup> At the same time the construction of earthworks and metalling of the South Coast Road in the Southport Town Council's area was approved at a cost of £16,733 (approximately \$1,275,358 today).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Work on construction of the Coomera River Bridge proceeded over the summer months with the foundation work completed and steel girders, to take the weight of the superstructure, in place by the end of January 1930. The elevated southern approach had also been finished.<sup>xxxv</sup>

At this time tenders for the much smaller concrete bridge over Saltwater Creek, to the south of the Coomera River Bridge and on what is now Siganto Drive, were called.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In May that year, tenders for the bridge over the Logan River were also called.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The infrastructure of the South Coast Road was beginning to be upgraded to meet the requirements and expectations of the modern motorist and their vehicles.

Drama, and an act of heroism, occurred at the bridge's worksite on 13 March 1930. A worker, Thomas Leaney, was being hoisted up to the top of the piles with pieces of timber when the rope broke. Leaney was struck by the timber and fell some 50 feet (15 metres) into the river, a fall which rendered him unconscious. William Chaplain, who was working at the top of the piles, saw what had happened and immediately dived into the river holding on to Leaney until further assistance arrived. Leaney suffered concussion, fractured ribs and internal injuries as a result of the accident and his condition was noted as 'dangerous' upon admission to the Mater Hospital in Brisbane.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

As a reminder of the benefits that a bridge over the Coomera River would bring, heavy rains in the district over the weekend of 9 and 10 May 1930 caused the Coomera River ferry to cease working from late Friday night and throughout Saturday and the concrete weir at Upper Coomera to be impassable for a number of days.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Construction of the bridge was completed on 7 June 1930<sup>xl</sup> and as part of celebrations leading up to the opening of the bridge, the Southport and District Branch of the R.A.C.Q. had a club run to the bridge.<sup>xli</sup>

The Coomera River Bridge was officially opened by the State Attorney-General, Mr N.F. Macgroarty in a ceremony on 14 June 1930 that befitted the importance of the bridge. Hundreds of private cars lined up either side of the bridge and at the northern end, where the ribbon cutting ceremony was to be performed, a large crowd of interested onlookers had gathered.<sup>xlii</sup> Weather conditions were not favourable for the opening. There was heavy rainfall during the morning and another downpour during the ceremony. Accounts of the event note that the conditions failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the crowd nor stop the eloquence of the speakers.<sup>xliii</sup>

As well as Mr Macgroarty, other notable attendees at the opening included the Lord Mayor of Brisbane (Alderman W.A. Jolly), Main Roads Commissioner (Mr J.R. Kemp), local State Member of Parliament (Mr T.F. Plunkett), President of the R.A.C.Q. (Mr B.F. Lloyd) and the Secretary (Mr A.E. Jones), Mayor of Southport (Alderman J.H.



Grice), Councillor C.J. Edwards (Coomera Shire Council) and other representative of the South Coast local governments.<sup>xliv</sup>

Coomera Shire Councillor Edwards described the opening of the bridge as being 'one of the most important events that had ever taken place on the Great South Coast Road between Brisbane and Coolangatta'. Mr Lloyd of the R.A.C.Q. said that, together with the proposed Logan River Bridge, that 'these two bridges form the most important links between Queensland and New South Wales' while State Member Mr Plunkett described the bridge as 'an emblem of progress and development'.<sup>xlv</sup> Mr Kemp, the Commissioner of Main Roads, stated that 'occasions such as these were milestones in the history of road construction' while noting that a number of important road bridges like the Coomera River Bridge were being or about to be built around Queensland.<sup>xlvi</sup>

In declaring the bridge open, Mr Macgroarty expressed satisfaction in the work done and made observation that the main South Coast road formed part of the arterial road system of Queensland, and was an important connecting link with the North Coast district of New South Wales. It was hoped, he said, that the new bridge would bring 'further prosperity to the people of the district and the advancement of Queensland in general'. Mr Macgroarty also took the opportunity to inform those present that the Government had decided not to place a toll on the bridge.<sup>xlvii</sup>

The final speaker at the opening was Mr R. Clark, general manager for M. R. Hornibrook, who commented that many problems were faced in the construction of the bridge but that 'difficulties were made to be overcome'. In terms of construction of the bridge, Mr Clark noted that as far as possible all local materials had been used with two exceptions; the steel bars came from Lithgow, New South Wales, and the girders from Belgium. At the time, the girders were the largest solid girders ever imported into Australia.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Mr Clark then presented Mrs Macgroarty with a pair of golden scissors which she used to cut the ribbon amid loud cheering from the onlooking crowd. Preceded by the Southport Model Band the Ministerial car, occupied by Mr and Mrs Macgroarty and Mr and Mrs Edwards and chauffeur, led the procession of cars across the bridge.<sup>xlix</sup>

According to local folklore, the Macgroarty car was not the first public crossing of the bridge. It is believed that two students from Coomera State School, Vince and Allan Hargraves, rode their horses over the bridge a week earlier.<sup>l</sup>

During the next few years that followed the opening of the Coomera River Bridge the approaches to first the northern and then the southern ends of the bridge were planted with candlenut trees. Tulips were also planted on the southern approach. These were planted for aesthetic purposes and, in the case of the candlenut trees, to also provide shade.<sup>li</sup>

A plaque is located on the downstream side of the northern end of the bridge, inserted in the top of the concrete kerb and reads;

MAIN ROADS COMMISSION  
COOMERA BRIDGE  
COMPLETED 7<sup>th</sup> JUNE 1930

It is not known when this plaque was attached to the bridge although the clean edging between the plaque and the concrete kerb, wording (in particular the reference to the Main Roads Commission), location near to where the ribbon was cut on 14 June 1930 and its general aged appearance suggest that the plaque is contemporary with the bridge opening.

Changes over time include: the removal of reinforced concrete balustrades from both sides of the bridge and replacement with steel posts with cyclone mesh and steel tubing, and replacement of the southern wooden approach with a more permanent approach, an outcome anticipated when the wooden approach was designed and

built in 1930.<sup>iii</sup> Today the approach is an earth embankment with rock wall abutment. A small concrete bridge, about 17 metres length, has been inserted between the edge of the abutment and the 1930 bridge.

In 1971 the Coomera River bridge duplication project was completed as part of the upgrade of the Pacific Highway to motorway standard and a new bridge, upstream of the existing one, was constructed across the Coomera River. Nearly thirty years later a similar upgrade of the motorway infrastructure resulted in the twin M1 Pacific Motorway bridges being completed in 1999. These twin bridges run parallel to and in between the two earlier bridges. Despite the presence of these newer bridges, the original 1930 Coomera River Bridge remains in regular use today and is part of the service road network parallel to the M1 Pacific Motorway.

## Description

The original Coomera River Bridge was constructed during 1929-30 by M. R. Hornibrook on behalf of the Main Roads Commission. The bridge is a high-level design and was opened to traffic on 14 June 1930. The bridge comprises eight 61½ feet (18.745 metre) steel deck girder spans and is 20 feet (6.096 metres) wide between the kerbs, which are reinforced concrete. There are 224 girders in the bridge, each 61½ feet (18.745 metres) long and each weighing 6½ ton (5.9 tonnes). These girders were manufactured in Belgium and, at the time of the bridge's construction, the largest solid girders ever imported into Australia.

The deck of the bridge is reinforced concrete sections. At the time of construction the roads surface was the exposed concrete sections of the bridge decking and this has since been covered with bitumen. The bridge was constructed with reinforced concrete balustrades typical of the form and height of the era however these balustrades have been replaced with steel posts, steel tubing and cyclone mesh which extend into the bridge deck.

The kerbs of the bridge are reinforced concrete and set in the northern end of the downstream kerb is a plaque commemorating the completion of the bridge on 7 June 1930.

Steel spans, manufactured in Lithgow N.S.W, carry the superstructure. The bridge piers are of reinforced concrete and are supported on concrete piles.

The wooden approach that formerly existed at the southern end has been replaced by an earth embankment with rock abutment wall and a small inserted concrete bridge. The northern approach was constructed with wooden guard rails. These have now been replaced by steel guard rails.

Services run along the outside of both sides of the bridge.

## References

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