The History of the Guy Fawkes River Australian Brumbies and the Brumbies of the Northern Tablelands

Collected and Compiled

by

Robyn MacDougall of Newton Boyd, NSW

December 2001
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and from Mr Joe Meehan, Dorrigo by Mr Graham Baldwin

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Introduction

Although I have enjoyed serving on the Heritage Working Party, I feel I must state that like most members, I was unaware of its Terms of Reference going in that it was the intention “that the horses would be removed regardless of heritage value”. This was a great disappointment to almost all serving on the Heritage Working Party, as well as many people who contributed documented and oral histories of the horses. Our motivation in serving had been to see the horses kept where they have always been for generations and managed the way they had been by our old horsemen for as long ago as anyone could remember in these parts.

In speaking of the value of oral histories and diaries in his writings, Professor Yarwood, in Australian Horses Abroad, talks of Frank Maxwell, a distinguished Indian Army Cavalry Officer who fought in the Boer War and won the Victoria Cross mounted on an Australian Waler. His diary entries, which he kept for some twenty years, recorded day by day the training and exercising of his wonderful horses, many of them Walers:

"Narrative history though this is, including accounts of horsey adventures at sea and on three continents, it seeks to contribute to a strangely neglected field of Australian effort."
"There has been complete silence on the part of historians about the remount trade and indeed about the place of horses in Australian history. It has been an extraordinary omission."

The Collection of Oral Histories and Documented Evidence

I take this opportunity to set out a description of where I live and where the country over which our Australian Brumbies range for readers who may be unfamiliar with the Northern Tablelands. Our region is part of the Great Divide with steep and rugged ranges where the horse still plays an important daily part in the life of property owners, and here in the high plateau, it can rise to about 4,000 ft with deep descents of 1,000 ft to the valley floor of mostly timbered and wild country. Where I live is considered to be remote being at least an hour’s drive from the closest town. The ranges have been the home of some of Australia’s toughest and most renowned stock horses for generations, many of whom are legendary.
I think it is important that readers also understand that the area in which my family has worked for over a century is known as The Gulf Country which also includes the Guy Fawkes River region. The area known as The Gorge Country is the region of the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park. Stockmen may refer to going “down the River” (Guy Fawkes) from ‘Marengo’, or “up the River” from ‘Broadmeadows’, but it is still considered to be The Gulf Country. These areas and ours are fairly remote from anywhere and our closest towns are Glen Innes, Grafton and Armidale which are about one or two hours drive in any direction. Our area is accessed is via a dirt all-weather road which is extremely steep in places with tight bends, so travel to and from our properties is not as easy as some may imagine. To this day, our homestead and our area has no electricity — even to receive a fax means we usually have to turn on of the generator — something many in city areas may find hard to imagine in this day and age, but a way of life for us.

I mention these things simply so that readers may understand the necessity for me and others on the Heritage Working Party to gather oral histories by phone interview wherever it was not possible to speak to contributors face to face. I also called on any sources available to obtain documented histories of the horses.

Appreciation and Acknowledgements

Because it was not possible to have each person sign their contribution, I have attested that I have documented such interviews factually and faithfully. It seems ironic that the collection of the documented history of the horses, their origins and continuity in the Guy Fawkes River and Northern Tablelands area since the beginning of White settlement, was easier to find than collecting the oral histories from the surviving older generations of our legendary horsemen, as so many have already passed away.

It should be noted that many of the older gentlemen spoke of locations, areas, landmarks, creeks and gullies by specific names which either no longer exist, have disappeared with the passing of the older stockmen, or have been changed on latter day maps. It reflects their intimate knowledge of their regions where they had lived and worked on horseback all their lives. It must be remembered that this was working cattle country from the time of white settlement and for many generations until its takeover by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

For those who may have expected more from the gathering of the horses' history, it must be understood that had it been known that we here in the Northern Tablelands would one day have to prove our Australian Brumbies’ worth in order to save their lives, we may have been able to collect our oral history before the older generations died. There are only about seventeen “Diggers’ from World War I still living across our nation Of
our own local surviving veterans of the Second World War who had originally signed up with the Australian Light Horse regiments and are now well into their eighties and nineties, many are infirm or residents of nursing homes, and very few are left who were able to contribute to the histories.

The old horsemen, veterans and stockmen interviewed were wonderful and almost all could not understand why the horses could not stay where they have known them to have always existed. It was a privilege to speak with them, to hear their stories and their oral histories, and I was left with an abiding respect for all these older Australians. I have always listened to the stories of the land and the wild horses of the Northern Tablelands, told to me by my forefathers and their friends and intend to continue the collection of the history before it is lost forever.

I would like to also offer my appreciation for the extensive documented research generously lent to me by the Australian Brumby Heritage Society, Armidale and referenced in the Bibliography. The Society also provided sets of photocopied research for members of the Heritage Working Party at its meeting in August 2001. I would also like to thank Mr Brian Fahey for providing information on his personal interview Mr Hector Brazier of Wards Mistake, who kindly gave of his time.

For the time afforded to me particularly by my father-in-law, Mr Noel MacDougall of Newton Boyd and Mr Ted Mulligan of Guyra, both of whom put me directly in touch with other horsemen in the area, I would like to express my gratitude. And to the following contributors who so generously gave me the time to share their generational histories and knowledge of the Northern Tablelands horses with me, my grateful thanks:

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Mr Alex Piper, Armidale
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Mr Fletcher Brazier, history kindly provided by Mr Brian Fahey and
Mr Joe Meehan, Dorrigo, history kindly provided by Mr Graham Baldwin
Biographical Details of the Collector

I was born at “Wandobah”, Gunnedah on the Liverpool Plains, NSW in 1950. My family always bred stock and station horses. My father, Charles Tindal, had worked in the Northern Territory as Head Stockman on “Willaroo Station”, Katherine, prior to the Second World War. My mother, Patricia ‘Tommy’, was a well known horsewoman and successful competitor throughout the Agricultural Show circuits and was still preparing and exhibiting show hacks up until the early 1990s. All of my siblings were involved in horses through Pony Club and the showring.

In 1976 I married Graham MacDougall from “Marengo”, Hernani in the Northern Tablelands, on the eastern border of the Guy Fawkes River National Park. The MacDougall Family history began in this area in 1895. Graham shared my lifelong love of the land and horses, beginning with Pony Club and continuing with competition in Campdrafting events on his well-bred stock horses. Within a year, we also purchased the property “Karrawendri” located on the Dorrigo Road near “Bald Hills”, Ebor. Naturally, our four children grew up riding horses.

Some seventeen years ago, when the National Parks and Wildlife Service took over much of the leasehold country held by “Marengo”, our family purchased “Kintyre”. Newton Boyd is an area name, not a township, located on the north-eastern side of the now Guy Fawkes River National Park. It is geographically remote and the isolated nature of the area meant Distance Education for our young children. We have continued the breeding our registered Australian Stock Horses and are proud of their historical connections. They boast some of the earliest bloodlines of the breed and trace back to the original horses owned by the Brown Family who were early settlers of the area.

My husband and I have always been active contributors to our community: Graham as a member of the NSW Volunteer Bushfire Brigade, the Australian Stock Horse Society and the NSW Pony Club Association, and myself as Councillor of the Isolated Children and Parents Association and Secretary of the Australian Brahman Association for many years.

Graham’s father, Noel MacDougall was born in 1917 and served in World War II in the 15th Australian Light Horse Regiment. It had been raised around the Ebor and Wollomombi area which was stationed in Armidale. As was the case with most of the cavalry and mounted units, the Light Horse Regiment was transferred to become one of the motorised units, and Mr MacDougall saw active duty in the Middle East.
Attestation

During the months of August through October 2001 I collected oral histories from the persons named herein and I attest that to the best of my knowledge and abilities they have been faithfully documented.

Signed:  
(Robyn MacDougall)

Dated this day Wednesday of 5th December 2001
The Australian Brumby and The Waler Defined

The Australian Brumby

The Australian Brumby is a wild horse descended from domestic horses which were either turned loose or escaped into the ranges. The first horses to bolt away into the bush were the first seven horses landed with the First Fleet in 1788. It is recorded in our history that they were never recovered so it could be said that the horses have ranged free since the time of colonial settlement on the continent.

Australia’s horse lineage derived from her wild horses has been internationally recognised for its inherent toughness. The wild horses are rarely of consistent size, conformation or colour as their ancestors were of mixed type which included Thoroughbred, Arab, Clydesdale and Timor Pony. Many have proven to make excellent stock and station horses and their round, high walled hooves and short pasterns have been shaped for running on steep and rocky pastures.

In 1840 when the squatting era began, horses were allowed free-range of the unfenced country. By 1858, the term ‘Brumby’ was known and used widely in Australia as recorded in the Reminiscences of R.D. Barton:

"Many stock horses slipped their hobble or escaped through weak fences. These became the foundation of herds of wild 'Brumbies' which roamed the unsettled lands."

He also paid tribute to their toughness and survival of the fittest at that time:

"In the wilderness, the process of natural selection became even harsher. Mares foaled without human aid and any offspring not strong enough to care for itself very soon fell a prey to wild dogs."

In later years, some horses were abandoned when machinery took over working the land. They were used as replacement horses for stock work and as Army remounts provided they met the type and conformation required. The Australian Brumby is the horse of Australia’s history.

Origins of The Name “Brumby”

There are two origins often quoted for the name for Australia’s wild horses, the “Brumby”.
The first, it is thought, was derived from the owner of a number of horses named James Brumby. James Brumby was born in Scotton, Lincolnshire. He arrived in the Colony on the “Britannia” in 1791 and was a soldier-pastoralist with the New South Wales Corps and he was also a farrier. It is thought he was responsibly for some horses in the early Australian Colony. When James moved to Tasmania in 1804, he left some of his horses in the New South Wales settlement. When locals asked who owned the horses, the reply came “They’re Brumby’s” and this has long been considered the route to their naming.

The second origin is thought to come from the named used by the Aborigines for a wild horse, *baroombie* (or *baroomby*), and a variety of spellings are offered depending on the reference sourced. Another Aborigine word specifically given for horse is yarraman, but the word *warrigal*, which may mean also wild horse, wild dog (Dingo) or wild Aborigine, has often been used when referring to an Australian Brumby or sometimes, colloquially, a horse that bucks or is hard to handle.

Colloquially, the term ‘Brumby’ has sometimes been used by horsemen, breeders or breakers to refer to a domesticated horse which bucked or perhaps difficult to handle, just as the term ‘Cowboy’ has sometimes been used to indicate a particular individual who was considered to be a rough handler. The use of either of these terms had no reflection on real ‘Brumbies’ or ‘Cowboys’ but rather an expression of disapproval of that individual.

**The Waler**

The Waler is a saddle horse bred by crossing hack mares with some bone contributed from part-draught or Clydesdales, with Thoroughbreds, Arabs and Anglo-Arab stallions. The Welsh and Timor Ponies and the Australian Brumby with their hardiness and stamina, often contributed to the Waler’s conformation. The classic Waler type stood 15 to 16 hands, although many were 14 to 15 hands with fine, clean legs showing good dense bone, a short back, muscular sloping shoulders, a broad head, and the unmistakable stamp of his Thoroughbred ancestry. They were not all uniform in type but known as great-hearted horses. Used as a stock horse, the Waler could be ridden day after day mustering cattle and at night, simply unsaddled and turned out to look after itself.

The Waler was named after the place of his origin, New South Wales which, in the early days of settlement, was the name given to all areas newly inhabited by colonials in Australia. The Waler is the horse of Australia’s legend.
The Horses Arrive and Conquer

First Fleeters — Four Footed

The first horses brought to Australia were with the First Fleet in 1788 and in subsequent importations. In this, as in all areas of animal husbandry in Australia, breeders enjoyed the advantages of a clean sheet, uncluttered by the mistakes of past generations and, above all, free from established equine disease.

The foundation stock was largely drawn from the Cape Colony, including two stallions and five mares landed from the “Sirius”. Another four came from India in 1793 and there was an influx of thirty-three from the Cape, out of a total bought there of forty-one and carried in the “Britannia” in 1795. The stock was of the Arab breed, popular in both the Cape and India, so that by 1799, when the Thoroughbred ‘Rockingham’ was brought in from the Cape, Australian bloodlines were predominantly Arab.

Military and civil officers in New South Wales were set up with pastoral estates and given convict labour, often financed by a combination of Government salaries and lucrative commercial ventures. This class of land owners, who aspired the attendant prestige, opened the way for the growth of those who could afford to own and breed fine horses.

Australia’s first horses arrived on the Continent with the First Fleet in January 1788. At Sydney Cove, seven horses were unloaded, purchased by Governor Phillip from the Cape of Good Hope: 1 stallion, 3 mares and 3 yearling colts. According to the actual documented accounts of the day, all but two got away from the Convict grooms and escaped into the bush.

The heavier workhorse types, Draught horses, were also imported from the Cape over succeeding years and in 1794, the Colony’s horse population was recorded as numbering twenty. Many horses died during the long voyage to the Colony and only the fittest survived. In 1875, some 41 horses were loaded at Cape Town and only 33 were alive at the end of the voyage at Sydney Cove. By 1798 in the Colony of New South Wales, horses numbered 117 of which 73 were mares. Further imports from the Cape and the English Thoroughbred ‘Rockingham’ had arrived by the turn of the century in 1800. Of the eighty-eight horses imported in the twelve years to 1800, the mortality rate was estimated at 20%.
A blood horse named ‘Washington’ by ‘Timoleon’ was apparently imported from America in 1802, along with some Arab horses transported via India. In 1803, the Thoroughbred stallion named ‘Northumberland’ was sent out to Major George Johnston by his old commander. The horse numbers were recorded at 300. In 1806, the first fine Arab stallion of note was imported by Mr Robert Campbell, Sydney’s first free merchant and later one of the key people involved in Australia’s remount trade. This horse was ‘Hector’ and many horses in the Australian Thoroughbred Stud Book of today may be traced back to this sire.

Horse racing was recognised as a sport in Australia in 1810. The first races held in Sydney were established largely by the officers of the 73rd Regiment, a piece of ground being cleared for that purpose, now called Hyde Park.

Exploration of Australia had a greater need for good horses than any other. In 1813, Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson crossed the Blue Mountains barrier accompanied by 4 horses and five dogs. They were quickly followed by the squatters with cattle and horses. Many an historical account of the following years contains references to horses getting away, even those of “high pedigree who joined the wild mobs, and often enough, splendid animals are captured and broken in. In the north and west settlers later introduced the Timor ponies and from these various origins have come our wild brumbies.”

The Timor Ponies were descendants of the Java and East Indian Pony and had been imported from the Island of Timor. The Veterinary Officer, Captain M.H. Hayes described the breed as follows: “Horses attain their greatest height in temperate climates and diminish in size in cold or hot climates. We can see the effect of temperature on size by observing the difference in size of horses in Eastern and Western Australia, the animals in the more temperate East growing to full size and those in the west remaining as ponies.” The breed may produce any colour, sometimes attractive mixtures such as chocolate coat with cream spots and creamy mane and tail, much like the Palouse or Appaloosa types. They are known to be strong across the back and quarters, eager, surefooted and tireless, and smart when worked around stock.

The Long Treks in Unknown Country

In 1817, Oxley lead a party of ten men and 14 horses inland. That year saw another influential bay blood stallion named ‘The Governor’ imported. Then in 1818, Oxley and his group of fifteen men and 18 horses opened the way for settlement in the Liverpool Plains and the New England districts. He was followed by Alan Cunningham in expeditions of 1823, 1827 and 1828. Starting from the Hunter Valley in 1827, Oxley discovered the Gwydir River and the rich Darling Downs, now the location of many
fine Thoroughbred studs, in company with six other men and 11 horses. Between 1831 and 1846, Sir Thomas Mitchell further explored inland New South Wales and Queensland. He was followed by early settlers like Patrick Leslie drove his stock from the New England district to become the first settler on the Condamine River. “Many of their mounts and packhorses were of doubtful origin.”

By the early 1820s, there were some 5,000 horses and imports of Arabs continued until around 1823, the breed having a significant influence on many of our very early bloodlines. By 1824, Arab importations had diminished in favour of English and Irish Thoroughbreds.

Douglas M. Barrie writes of the importance of our home bred horse in opening up the country:

“Australia unfolded with colonial-bred horses playing the major role in transport. They were horses of mixed origins, although as the 19th Century progressed, the Waler evolved as a distinct type. Pastoral development was demanding a superior type of stockhorse and from these were recruited the majority of the explorers' mounts.”

The 1830s saw the beginnings of the overlanders and drovers and these pastoral pioneers on horseback drove stock to open up the lands from east to west of the continent. Names like Conricks, Duracks, Redford, and Nat Buchanan opened up vast trackless country. Australia’s greatest era of traditional droving lasted almost one hundred years, and only finished in the 1960s.

In the history of Australian exploration, it is noted that in 1837, Sir George Grey of Glenelg “was mounted on ponies bought from Timor. Other explorers used colonial stock and their journeys are proof of the good enduring qualities of the local-bred horses.”

It was calculated that 22 stallions had arrived by 1839, some were good English sons of famous sires such as ‘Whalebone’, ‘Emilius’ and ‘Priam’. Mares were predominantly Capers or Caper-Chilean crosses before 1835 but between that time and 1855, Thoroughbred mares came out from England. These were widely dispersed and no records were kept of their progeny. Some of the squatters who owned them were aware of the value of purity in the marketplace and sent them only to Thoroughbred stallions. Others were covered (serviced) by half-bred stallions and, likewise, Thoroughbred stallions covered half-bred mares. “It follows that Australia had plenty of thoroughbreds, but they were indistinguishable from half-breds except in conformation or their owner’s conviction. Thoroughbred or half-bred, by the middle of the century, Walers
were magnificent horses. Australia profited immensely from the deterioration of the Caper, and the Waler became the pre-eminent horse of India.”

Grazing to the Horizon

In 1840 when the squatting era began, horses and cattle were allowed free-range of the country. Even as late as 1846, the mortality rate for imported horses was one in three, so high that they were only paid for when landed “safe from the tackle.” For large consignments, such as the remount buyers and other breeders of quality stock such as the Squires of Camden, the Macarthurs, discounts were offered on shipping transport costs. In 1849, they were offered “a splendid English horse for exchange, if you need a change of blood”.

Shipmasters took the opportunity of importing Arab and Thoroughbred stallions as speculative return cargoes, so contributing to the genetic pool on which breeders would draw in the decades of pastoral expansion that accompanied the gold rushes of the 1850s. Escaped horses were not uncommon, not only in the Colony of New South Wales, as the Shipping Gazette of 1846 records an incident where one Superintendent described runaway Australian horses on arrival in India “flying away over the country and several are reported as having galloped themselves to death.” Little was done about the root causes of this problem stated as “the shipping of wild, unbroken horses”.

Breeding Bushranger Style

Well documented from the 1840s through to the mid 1860s are the reports of the influence of 19th century bushrangers on Australian bloodstock, many of whom “would travel miles to secure a racer” and many of whom “bushed” their horses. Fast horses were a necessity of their trade and “many of these horses were literally ridden to death by these desperate men.” Famous names such as ‘Soppho’, the greatest and most successful colonial-born brood mare was lifted on three occasions. “Some of the most distinguished matrons of our stud book were either stolen or strayed mares whose owners never recovered them.”

Our own local Captain Thunderbolt (born Fredrick Wordsworth Ward in 1835) was known for being a good judge of quality horses and was “mounted on a splendid grey Thoroughbred he had stolen from a station” when he was shot dead by Constable Alex Walker at Kentucky Creek near Uralla, a few miles from Thunderbolt’s Rock on the New England Highway, in May 1870. His first crime had been stealing 75 horses and he went on to amass a list of horse stealing and robberies in the New England, Hunter and Liverpool Ranges from 1855 through to 1870. His grave is in the Uralla Cementery and, as part of Australia’s Bicentennial Year, a statue of a horse-mounted Thunderbolt was erected in the town in 1988.
Another famous Bushranger known to have ranged in our region was Ben Hall, who concealed his stolen horses in stockyards in the thick timber beyond Doughboy Hollow. In 1845, his exploits saw him flee his home in the Upper Hunter Valley to evade a police warrant for his arrest for “duffing” cattle and horses. He is credited with having stolen twenty-three racehorses in twenty-six months between 1863 and 1865. They and many other wild Colonial boys were part of the landscape in the country and many stories of bushrangers and cattle duffers are known in the rugged country of Northern Tablelands, some based on happenings as recent as the 1940s and 50s.

In laying out the history of the origins of the Australian Stock Horse, it is stated that:

“Many of the fine stallions and mares stolen from time to time by bushrangers came into contact and mated with poorer types of horses, so that their bloodlines were proliferated and caused some upgrading amongst types which they would not, under normal circumstances, have bred with.”

The Bushrangers were not alone in the practice of duffing, poddy-dodging, gully-raking, or stealing horses. “To pick up a good looking brood mare in foal, or with foal at foot for nothing, was a temptation impossible to be resisted by many such a weakness as they travelled on horseback through the wild outback places behind their mobs of cattle and droves of sheep.”

The first New Zealand horses were brought from Sydney to the Bay of Islands by the Reverend Samuel Marsden in 1814. Two other great Thoroughbred stallions bred in Australia which were sent to New Zealand was ‘Hercules’ in 1852 (returning in 1857) and ‘Plover’ in 1853.

By 1858, the term ‘Brumby’ was known and used widely in Australia. At this time in his Reminiscences, R.D. Barton wrote that: “Many stock horses slipped their hobbles or escaped through weak fences. These became the foundation of herds of wild ‘Brumbies’ which roamed the unsettled lands.” He also paid tribute to their toughness and survival of the fittest at that time, stating that: “In the wilderness, the process of natural selection became even harsher. Mares foaled without human aid and any offspring not strong enough to care for itself very soon fell a prey to wild dogs.”

The Coach Horses

Although the history of coaching commenced in Australia as early as 1814 with Highland’s coach run between Sydney and Windsor and the Cuthbert’s stage to Parramatta, it was not until the 1850s that coaching developed under companies such as Cobb & Co. Managed by James Rutherford, by 1870 the Company was harnessing
6,000 horses a day with coaches travelling 2,800 miles a week throughout the eastern States. Cobb & Co. also controlled large pastoral estates and traded in the export of military horses.

One of the routes operated at one time ran from Stanthorpe in Queensland to Armidale in the Northern Tablelands. One the first day, the coach traversed the Granite Belt of the Darling Downs and crossed the border into New South Wales at Wallangarra to arrive at Tenterfield for an overnight stop. Conditions up to that point were good but the journey was more difficult on the second day, as the coach climbed the Bolivia Range on the way to Glen Innes. “All the male passengers had to walk up the ascent to ease the load on the horses. From Glen Innes, the coach left in the evening for Armidale over a road which reached an altitude of 4,700 ft. near Ben Lomond, the highest peak of the New England Range and in winter, snowstorms were an unpleasant hazard.” The Company had several horse staging and depasturing depots in the New England region.