

**A Brief History of Human Use
in the
MEEHAN RANGE**

for the

Meehan Range Management Plan

Historical Overview and Implication

**For the
Clarence City Council**

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The Meehan Range - A Brief History of Human Use

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Background

The Meehan Ranges.

East Risdon was the site of the first European settlement in Tasmania in 1803. The hills behind the first base of European settlement in Van Diemen's Land, the Meehan Ranges were the site of the first encounters and clashes with Aboriginal Tasmanians, and the first domestic buildings of the settlers.

These hills were named after James Meehan, the surveyor in the first formal surveys which alienated Aboriginal land to the British settlers in 1803-4.

Meehan was an Irish born political rebel and former convict who had taken part in the 1798 uprising against British rule in Ireland. He returned to survey in VDL in 1806-7 and in 1812-13. (In 1812 he surveyed the Kangaroo Bay area near Bellerive including the early land grants to Richard Morgan and other Norfolk Islanders which is now Rosny Park Golf Course.)¹

Two Climates, Two Histories.

The Meehan Range has two aspects - east toward Pittwater and west toward the Derwent River. These aspects also have two distinct topographies and two climates. While the west has a narrow band of land beside the Derwent River, now heavily urbanised, the eastern slopes are essentially rural, although becoming subdivided into large commuter blocks.

Traditional Use.

When the Range was part of a rural existence, they were used in a relaxed manner by some land owners - though not without conflict. Farmers permitted access to wood-carters and shooters. Workmen walked cross country to shear or harvest as labourers on the larger farms while their children crossed the Range to and from school – and both used the tracks to visit relatives on either side of the Range. These routes often followed traditional paths, such as the Risdon Creek Bridle Trail between Risdon and Dulcot. (see below)

Subdivision in the foothills.

From the 1980's, the foothills and the Range itself began to be subdivided, the break-up is changing permanently their natural and historic features. New commuter-based residents bring urban attitudes to entry onto private property. They are not familiar with the old traditions. Such attitudes and cars have lessened the need and opportunity for cross-country walks.

¹ Stock Thieves and Golfers: a History of Kangaroo Bay and Rosny Farm Tasmania 1803-1998. Peter MacFie, 2002. Published by Clarence City Council.

Recent History.

To protect good quality rural land and the rural nature of the approaches to Richmond historic village, this subdivision is only occurring above the Richmond Road. South of the Eastern Outlet the same concern is ignored and subdivision is occurring without apparent control on essentially arable land.

New Needs.

Now however a new need has arisen, a recreational need for walkers and mountain bike riders. These traditional routes and walk-ways can and should be available to residents of both sides of the Range. In so doing, they are following in the tradition of the districts, and returning to descendants of former residents the traditions their ancestors began- and in so doing, improving the health of the community - plus re-establishing face to face contact with old and new community members.

British Models.

Based on British examples² where walking trails, including sections over private land, are a feature of the countryside and rural traditions, a similar status needs to be given to the Meehan Range Trails. This article reveals the need and suggests some solutions to overcome restrictions on access over private property.

1. Human History of the Meehan Range

Access across the Range was made by Aborigines and settlers; the latter probably taking advantage of the old routes established by Aborigines.

Aboriginal Use.

Local tribes of the Moomairemener people were known to have used the area.

Conflict.

The well-known 1803 clash between the military and aborigines at Risdon was part of a series of clashes in the Meehan Ranges. In 1804, Surveyor James Meehan refers to Aborigines stoning his party while trying to erect white survey markers in the Meehan Ranges and to the Aborigines pulling the flags out of the ground.

At present no archaeological survey to identify Aboriginal occupation of the Ranges has been done, but - based on scant available knowledge and some current local knowledge - such an examination would reveal significant sites and insights.

European Settlement.

With European settlement, the ranges were alienated to a number of settlers. Large land grants were often leased however, and tenants then appropriated as small farms. The hill country of the Meehan Range was adapted as sheep runs attached to larger land grants, where sheep and wildlife shared the bush.

² Blackshaw, Alan. Our Right to Roam. Countryside Commission News, May 1991, No. 49.

Small sections of fertile soil on the foothills and on plateaus were used by small-scale settlers - often emancipists or former convicts - for crops and orchards. These settlers have been identified as "Fringe Farmers" for their habit of taking up land on the verge of larger grants and in the foothills of hill country such as the Meehan Range.

Stock Theft Trails.

During the first 30 years of settlement, stock theft was rife in south-eastern Tasmania, as the Colonial Government's purchase of meat for convicts and soldiers made mutton a profitable enterprise – especially if stolen.

The gullies of the Meehan Range was used extensively as a conduit to walk stolen flocks from the southern Midlands to slaughter-houses for sale to the Colonial Authorities in Hobart Town. Numerous examples of small farmers charged with these offences – for example, the family of Richard Morgan - indicate the use of the Range for this purpose. The small farmers, who were nearly all emancipists, seem to have been in collusion with more prominent settlers, including the likes of Rev Robert Knopwood.³

2. Historic Trails & Roads.

Aboriginal Use.

The Moomairemener people using the Derwent-Coal River district appear to have crossed from the Derwent to the rich game 'reserves' of the Coal River-Pittwater valley. They also collected shell-fish along the eastern shores of the Derwent- as well as Pittwater – and also hunted wallabies, possums & the (now extinct) Tasmanian emu.

Probable Routes used

The old routes from the Derwent to Pittwater probably crossed the Range along the routes followed later by the first settlers.

* from Kangaroo Point across the Mt Rumney saddle to Pittwater.

* from the Derwent River at East Risdon over the Meehan Range saddle alongside Risdon Creek (now Belbin Rivulet) to Pittwater.

Early Settlement Trails

Half-way Hill Trail

From Kangaroo Point across the Mt Rumney saddle (now Tunnel Hill) to Pittwater.
(Aboriginal/settlement)

The Risdon Creek Bridle Trail.

From Risdon along the Risdon Creek (now Belbin Rivulet) route.
(Aboriginal/settlement) This led to the short-lived *Risdon Creek Inn* being built on the

³ Stock Thieves and Golfers: a History of Kangaroo Bay and Rosny Farm Tasmania 1803-1998. Peter MacFie, 2002. Published by Clarence City Council.

Richmond Road - bypassed in 1834 with the opening of the convict-built Grass Tree Hill Road.

Post settlement period saw a variety of uses by routes used by settlers, some formal, others informal. Some routes followed those of aborigines as above. Others used routes for commercial access (eg the Break Neck Hill Coach Road), while others were made residents and children moving to work and school from their homes. The former Bellerive Sorell Railway line offers another recreational use.

Post Settlement Roads and Trails

Break Neck Hill Coach Road Route.

Crossed over from the Half-way Hill route to Pittwater, diverting north over the hill that bears this name to join the Richmond Road alongside Cross Rivulet at *Craigow*.

Grass Tree Hill to Dulcot Trail.

This route crossed private land via 'Downham Town' to Dulcot School.

***Craigow* to Grass Tree Hill.**

Used to access farm work at *Craigow*.

Bellerive-Sorell Railway Route. The embankments of the former Sorell railway which runs through the Meehan range are still visible in many places, and if managed could provided a useful recreational route. (Part of the line on Mt Rumney (behind the former *Three Trunks Inn*) is apparently used by riders and walkers.)

Peter MacFie, 1997

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