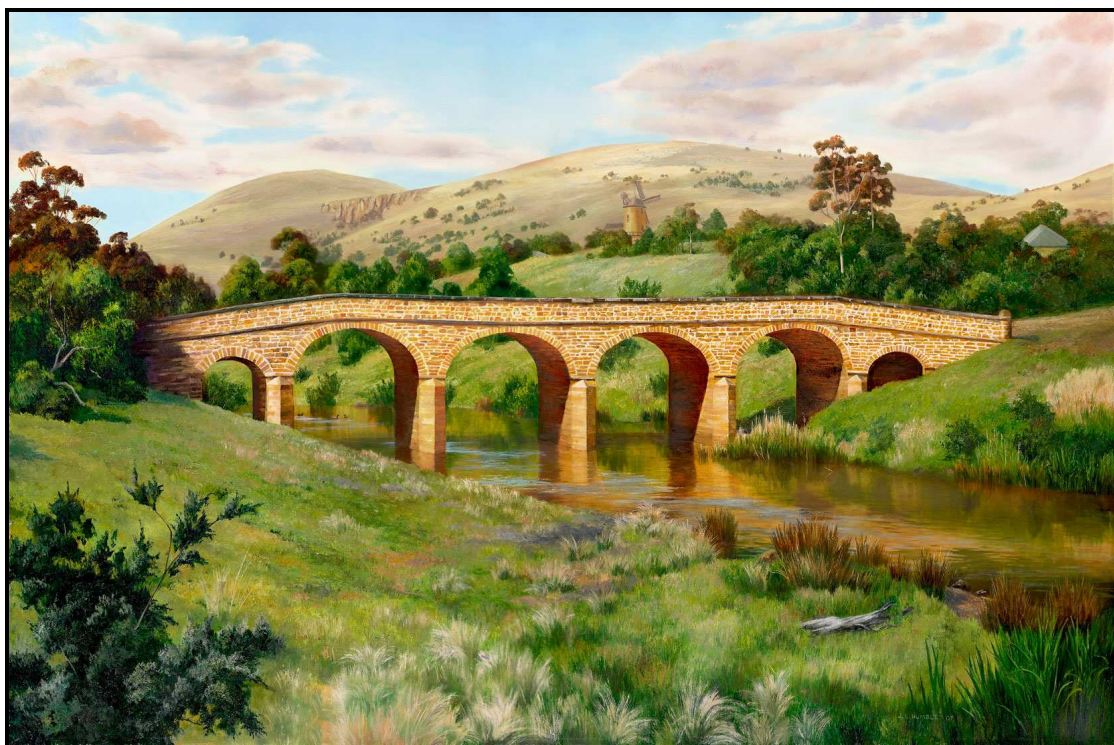


Bigge's Bridge

Richmond, Van Diemens Land, circa 1832



A contemporary artistic work of historical significance by Joan Humble

Bigge's Bridge (Richmond Bridge), Richmond, Tasmania – circa 1832

General Background

Richmond Bridge (originally named Bigge's Bridge after Royal Commissioner John Thomas Bigge) is not only the oldest road bridge still in use in Australia but may also validly be claimed to be the most graceful of its type in this country. Little wonder it is one of the most photographed and painted subjects in Australia.

The bridge was commenced in December of 1823 and completed in January 1825. It was built by convict labour under military supervision, and under the direction of Colonial Superintendent of Stonemasons William Hartley Wilson, great-great-grandfather of the writer.

In overall command of this and the many other construction works proceeding in Van Diemens Land at that time was Major Thomas Bell who commanded the Hobart military garrison. Bell also acted as Justice of the Peace, Engineer, and Inspector of Public Works for the entire Hobart settlement under Lieutenant Governors Sorell and Arthur.

William Wilson (a lowland Scot as was Major Bell) had been engaged during 1821 to fill the role of Colonial Architect of Van Diemens Land. He was in fact a master stonemason and there is no evidence he was qualified as an architect, rather it is believed he was so appointed by Lt Gov. Sorell in the absence of a more qualified person. He resigned the Colonial Architect role in June of 1824 to concentrate on farming his land grant at Sorell, although it seems likely he continued his Superintendence role on the bridge until its completion.

He was succeeded by Mr David Lambe who was an architect and who arrived in Hobart in May of 1824. Official records in the Mitchell Library confirm both Lambe's appointment to and Wilson's withdrawal from the Colonial Architect position.

Whilst it is to Lambe that history attributes the official honour of being the first to hold the position of Colonial Architect of Van Diemens Land, in reality both Wilson and Lambe may claim this honour – Wilson whilst Van Diemens Land was still part of the Colony of New South Wales, and Lambe after Van Diemens Land secured its own sovereign status as a Colony under the Crown. This event occurred in 1825.

Composition and Content of the Painting

Most contemporary images and paintings of the bridge and its locale have featured the bridge looking to the north, with the historic Saint John's Catholic church (1837) set in the background, typically seen either framed within an eastside arch, or above and beyond the parapet.

The earliest period images which could be discovered in searches of bridge and Richmond village history in the respective State libraries/galleries of Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales were by artists Thomas Evans Chapman and James Gould Medland**. They also used the traditional aspect with Saint John's church in the background. Both images feature a windmill on the upper townside bank, Medland's also showing a later added steam mill chimney, shown in Image 1.

The Chapman painting is dated 1843 whilst Medland's undated black & white sketch is believed to have been created somewhere between the late 1840s and early 1850s. The first steam mills appeared in Van Diemens Land about this time and both wind and steam mill are recorded in owner Buscombe's property sale advertisement in 1858. Other evidence suggests the steam mill was there closer to 1850, one document stating 1848.

***{Thomas Evans Chapman arrived in Van Diemens Land in 1834 painting many landscapes until his death there in 1864. Reverend James Gould Medland arrived in Van Diemens Land in 1844 and returned to England in 1859 where he died in Sussex in 1889.}*

Image 1

Black & White sketch by James Gould Medland, circa 1850



Displays Buscombe's wind & steam mill, Bigge's Bridge, St John's Church (1837) and to its left the school (1843), and down the slope, the convent, of similar vintage

Our subject painting, believed to be historically accurate in its content (see 'Artistic Licence' below), was created by renowned Tasmanian landscape and miniature painting artist Mrs Joan Humble, and is the result of extensive study by the writer over some two years, of both period and contemporary documents and images which record the history of the bridge, Richmond township and hinterland, and the fauna & flora of the Richmond locale.

The writer was periodically assisted in this research by members of the Coal River Valley Historical Society, Mrs Joan and Dr. John Humble, and by Dr Humphrey Elliott, former Chief Scientist of Forestry Tasmania. Dr Elliott assisted in identification of the original native flora of the Richmond locale.

Our image departs from the more traditional perspective – it looks to the south and features Butchers Hill in the background. The remnants of an old quarry are clearly visible. It was the source of the masonry used not only in the construction of the bridge but also many of the period buildings which still exist in Richmond today.

The reason for this departure is in one sense fairly obvious – the simple desire to show together the old quarry and the bridge it supplied. Further, as our circa 1832 date was several years prior to Saint John's church being built, the 1832 choice also made a northern aspect less relevant.

Special Dedication

But there was deeper motivation too. In these two places, under military supervision and under William Wilson's direction, toiled the convicts whose labours extracted the stone and built the bridge. It is sad that history gives these myriad souls no recognition whatsoever as individuals, neither for this bridge nor for the many other bridges and public works buildings and roads they constructed. It is to each of these unknown persons that our painting is especially dedicated – today all Australians and other visitors to Richmond may admire and enjoy the beauty which has arisen from their onerous toil

Other Constructions in the Image

The research undertaken supports inclusion in our painting of the several constructions other than bridge and windmill. On the western (townside) of the bridge is the roof of a house which during construction of the bridge was occupied by a Mr James Turnbull, Overseer of the bridge's construction. Immediately beside the windmill is a small mill related storage building, and a little further on can be seen a small part of the roof of the gaol (1825).

The village and immediate hinterland reportedly had some 30 buildings in 1832 but none other than these would be seen from our chosen position, particularly given the foliage cover we have depicted. Saint Luke's Church of England, today located on the mid distant townside bank beyond the gaol would be within line of sight from our chosen position but it was not commenced until 1834.

Original Bridge Design

It has been suggested in at least one reference that the design of several of the period bridges in Tasmania was based on existing bridges in Britain. In the case of Bigge's bridge, Stourhead Bridge in Stourhead Gardens, Wiltshire has been suggested as a likely model. Bigge's bridge is larger in all its dimensions, but its lines and structure are certainly similar.

Quoting from *Convicts & Carriageways* the technical description of the bridge's construction has it 'Stonework generally is of the ancient description ... "random rubble", a name which belies the skill involved in the selection and fitting together of suitable stones with the minimum of cutting and dressing to shape..... a string course at arch-crown level is of dressed stone, as are the parapet wall coping and domed finals of the parapet terminals. the bridge displays an enduring example of ancient principles of design and construction handed down from beyond the Middle Ages.'

In selecting the circa 1832 date to display Bigge's bridge, we have done so in order to present it as it was originally, prior to significant modifications which were made to it from the mid 1830s.

The significant visible modifications which were made to the bridge occurred in 1834/35 and in 1884/85. In the 1834/35 modification the townside parapets on north and south sides of the bridge were raised for reasons of safety – as can be seen in the bridge today the townside (western) parapet is horizontal whilst the eastern end parapet retains its original gentle downslope. The original downslope line of the western end may still be seen in the line of the lower roadlevel string course.

The second modification in 1884/85 saw the encasement of the three central piers with very large sloped cutwater supports of elongated hexagonal plan in order to better protect the foundations in flood times [some settlement had already occurred by 1828 leading to enlargement and strengthening of underwater foundations at that time].

Prior to 1884/85 all five piers had been vertical with narrow cutwaters facing both up and down stream. Today the two piers on the waters edge retain the original construction design. Many may feel that as attractive as the bridge is today, each of these modifications significantly detracted from the natural balance and aesthetic harmony inherent in the original finer lines of the bridge.

In the absence so far of any image earlier than that of Chapman's in 1843, our image presents for the first time the bridge as it was when built in 1823/25. The choice of a date later than 1825, circa 1832 when the bridge was still in its original state, was chosen to allow inclusion of the Buscombe windmill on the right upper bank. Construction of this mill commenced in the 1828/1829 period and was completed in 1831. It was demolished in 1908.

The 1823 Plaques

The evidence we have does not support inclusion of the 1823 plaques which can be seen on each side of the bridge today. There is no indication of the southern side plaque being present in either Chapman's or Medland's images.

The Chapman image is distant and somewhat indistinct but has no hint at all of a plaque. Of course the artist may have chosen to ignore it.

The 1848/50 Medland image is much clearer and precise with the bridge much closer: but again not the slightest hint of a plaque. Being a black & white drawing it might have been expected to highlight the plaque's presence by its sharper contrasting. Artistic advisers have also informed the writer that artists in black & white, tended to be more precise to the real image in their creations than oil and watercolour artists.

In the absence of even a slight hint of plaque presence in these earliest images, we have felt compelled to exclude the plaque (as much as we might have wished it to be otherwise). We suspect it likely the plaques were added perhaps in recognition of the 25th anniversary of the bridge's commencement or completion – thus 1848/1850 - but post dating Medland's image.

The earliest photographic images (using CDV photography) began to appear from the mid 1850's and one such image hand dated 1855 shows the plaque. Several other images from the 1860s on show the plaques. Suffice to say the plaques were certainly in place from shortly after the middle of the 19th century.

Painting Design Process

The composition design process began with the taking of some 280 digital images by the writer's youngest son (Daniel L Wilson) on a sunny early autumn day in 2004 – the images were taken from dawn to dusk in order to capture the full array of autumn colours and hues which the changing sunlight highlighted, including the eastern end in some shade or somewhat subdued light. One of the images used as the general composition base was that shown in Image 2. This image and that in Image 3 clearly show the raised to horizontal townside parapet.

Image 2

Composition Base Scene (2004)



Image 3

Richmond Bridge as it is today – base image used in digital reconstruction

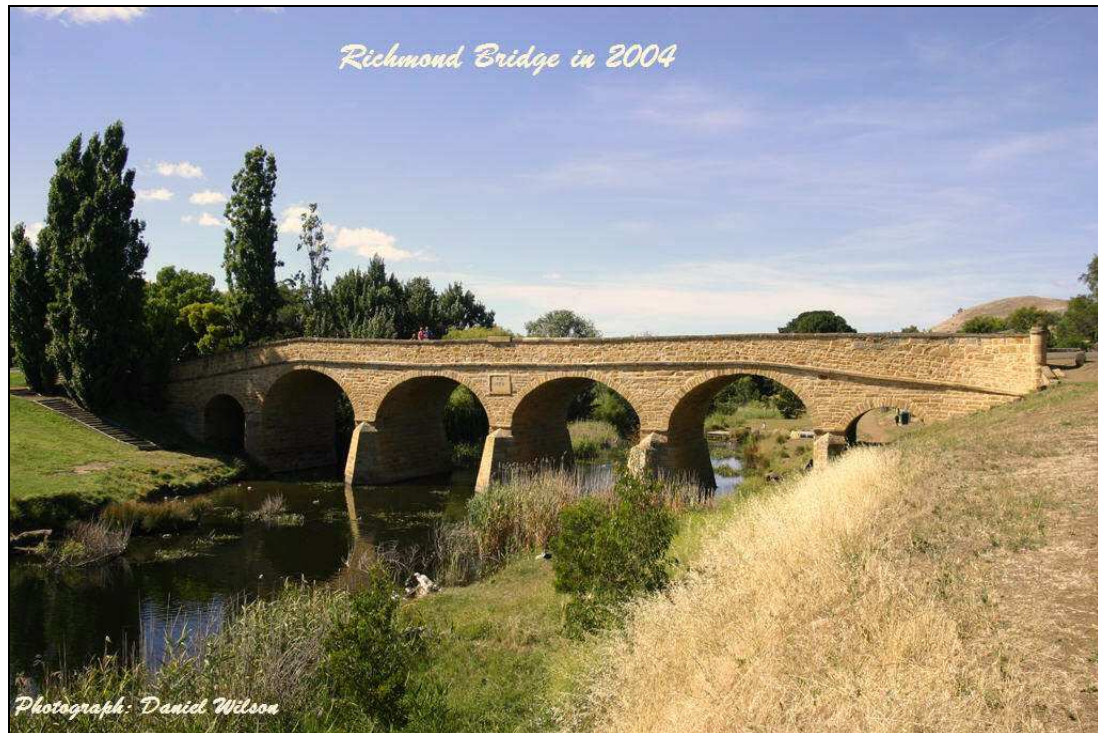
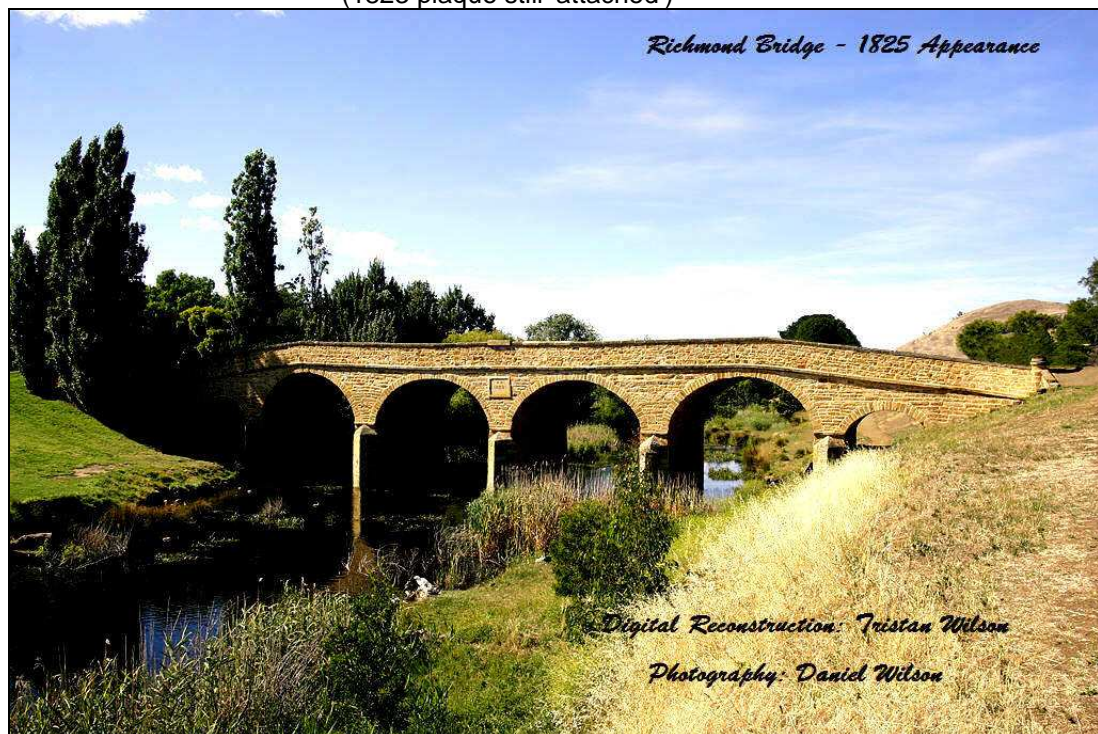


Image 4

Richmond Bridge digitally reconstructed – showing its appearance in 1825
(1823 plaque still 'attached')



Having established from our research the bridge's original design features, our next step was to produce a digital photographic re-construction back to the 1825 design in order to allow our artist to appreciate the detail of that design and to reflect on and generally prepare for the creative project before her.

Using further images from the 2004 photo shoot, yet another great great great grandson of William Wilson, Tristan Wilson, re-created the digital composition on his computer. This work was part of a broader programme of digital projects used by Tristan to successfully gain entry to a tertiary multi media study course. The initial and reconstructed images are shown in Images 3 & 4.

In addition, a series of black & white images sourced from libraries/galleries and dating from the mid 1850's through the early 20th century were studied. Together with the earlier Chapman and Medland images these assisted with identification and dating of various constructions, bridge modifications, and also assisted in understanding flora density and to some extent flora type.

These images also served to highlight more recent levelling and grassing of the north eastern bank along the river – no doubt executed to cater to the needs of modern day visitors/picnicers. Our painting steepens that bank back to its original condition, and restores undisturbed flora.

During mid 2006 Mrs Humble took further photographs from the same aspect in order to 'fine tune' the composition, whilst later in 2006 preliminary composition layout sketches were prepared for critical evaluation by artist, writer and other advisers. Thereafter Mrs Humble commenced work, completing the project in May 2007.

Fauna & Flora

Dr Elliott greatly assisted in identifying from his own resources and from various repositories the flora of that time in the Richmond region. This included identifying grasses and reeds along the stream, small tree and shrubbery along and above the stream banks, and tree types on the upper slopes including on the slopes of Butcher's Hill. All period imagery and documents accessed confirmed the Coal River valley to have been quite lightly covered.

Dr Elliott was also able to locate an array of original flora within the Richmond region and accompanied Mrs Humble to assist in her visual and photographic recording.

Larger trees present in the valley were eucalypt (white gum) and she-oaks (casuarinas), with mostly she-oaks on the higher slopes, scattered Woolley Tea Tree and native grasses closer to the stream, and indigenous reeds such as Common Reed, Native Rush and Water Ribbon in or on the water's edge.

Fauna relevant to our painting was confined to indigenous duck recorded as being in the region at that time. Our painting includes an unobtrusive presence of a small group of these ducks likened to native Grey Teal and Black duck varieties.

'Artistic Licence'

Whilst by 1832 there are likely to have been a few elements of European flora present around the village, none have been identified in the early images, and we have chosen not to include such in our painting.

The other aspect in which we have consciously deviated from likely reality is in the density of flora coverage. To present an image of greater balance and colour we have somewhat intensified coverage immediately beyond the bridge. However, stream banks and upper slopes retain reality, and our accuracy in respect to bridge and other constructions is believed to be as true to 1832 reality as our research allows us to be.

[Written and Compiled by Lawrence A Wilson – August 2007]



Biographical Profile Mrs J I Humble

Joan Humble is an Associate of the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Sculptors & Gravers, a Founder Member of the Australian Society of Miniature Art Tasmania Inc., a Member of the Miniature Art Society of Florida, a Member of the Art Society of Tasmania, a Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, and to round out her considerable artistic talents, she is an Associate of the London College of Music (Violin).

Joan delights in painting the natural beauty of Tasmania and has had many field trips into the wilderness. Her paintings have won numerous awards both in Australia and overseas.

References Consulted

Documents studied as part of the process of defining content of the painting were -

Richmond - Tasmania , A Crossing Place - by Elizabeth Jones whose primary research for her book is regarded as authoritative on Richmond and District

*The Australian Heritage Database – Richmond Bridge, Bridge St, Tasmania
[Richmond Bridge became a ' Listed Place' of historic significance on the National Heritage List in 2005]*

Gossip and Facts about Richmond, by 'Granny Jones'; Convicts & Carriageways, Historical Committee of the Department of Main Roads, Tasmania

Various History of Tasmania Texts; and many downloads of historical materials on relevant people, events, images, buildings, fauna & flora from Internet sources

Stourhead Bridge at Stourhead Gardens, Wiltshire, England



