INTRODUCTION

The discovery in late 2011 of the substantial remains of No.1 Farm, The Australian Agricultural Company's first venture into agriculture in New South Wales has prompted me to write a review of what is known about the site from an historical perspective. The farm was situated at Yalimbah Creek, a kilometre or so from Karuah, north of Newcastle NSW.

The farm was short lived. It was established in 1826, but by 1830, it had been all but abandoned. In the process it generated heated controversy within the Company and throughout New South Wales. The sacking of Robert Dawson, the first Chief Agent of the Company, in part, as a result of his failed experiment at No.1 Farm, resulted in a series of defensive documents as well as considerable condemnation.

Recent scholars such as John Atchison, Damaris Bairstow and Pennie Pemberton have produced a large body of analytical work that examines the background to and the causes and results of Dawson's dismissal some of which I have drawn on here. I have also examined the words of Dawson himself as well as others involved in the controversy such as James Macarthur.

My most exciting involvement was in the discovery of the site itself. With the help of early maps and documents supplied by Dr Pennie Pemberton at the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at The Australian National University and documents from The Culture Collection at The University of Newcastle, I was able to establish the most likely site for No.1 Farm.

When Gray Myers and his daughter Beki Myers, Bill Swainson and I walked the site in late 2011, we were delighted and amazed to find the site in a surprisingly good state of preservation.

On the 21st November 2011, Great Lakes Council recognised the importance of the “corduroy section” of The Old AACo Road which is part of the No.1 Farm site, by including it as an heritage item in their Local Environmental Plan and nominating that it be Listed on the State Heritage Register.

David Benson
3rd April, 2012

A Note on the front cover: This is a fragment of the controversial Dangar & Harington Map of 1828 courtesy Pennie Pemberton at Australian National University (ANU) Archives Program, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) AACo records Map X653 A4
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THE FIRST FARM

CHAPTER 1

A Modern Perspective

In 2004, the small village of Karuah which sits on both banks of the Karuah River, but mainly on the southern side, was by-passed. The Pacific Highway was diverted a couple of kilometres to the west, a huge new state of the art bridge was built to cross the river upstream and suddenly, as if the sound of a rock band in full flight is switched off, silence descended on the town. Some cars and trucks still passed through and the locals still went about their business, but nothing was ever the same.

This was good and bad. After a week or so, the townsfolk found that they could sleep without the continuous sound of traffic and whilst some businesses closed their doors, most got on and made the best of it. By 2010, the town was becoming what it maybe should have always been, a pleasant village with a beautiful river and access to Port Stephens to the east. A good place to live in and to retire to.

Now the sound of the traffic is a gentle hum to the west and many who pass by on the highway do so without any knowledge of what they're passing.

As the cars, trucks and buses pass the northern entrance/exit road link with the town, they climb or descend a hill, usually without even slowing down. They're on what the locals call Mill Hill which may or may not be marked on any map. To the west, the hill has been eaten away by the workers at The Hunter Quarries' Karuah Quarry site. To the east is a small but unique creek, hemmed in at the top by Mill Hill and a line of rugged hills, that form a kind of natural amphitheatre. These hills form the creek's catchment area and because they're reasonably limited, they ensure that, even in the heaviest rain periods, the creek doesn't flood to any great extent. This is important!

The creek is called Yalimbah Creek on maps, but the first Europeans in the area called it Yallinber Creek in translation of the way in which local aboriginal people pronounced its name. However, if you ask local oyster farmers, they'll tell you that it's Number One Creek. Actually, if you ask the locals at random, many won't even know the creek is there at all.

All in all, the creek is probably about six or seven kilometres long, but it snakes its way through salt marsh for most of its length and, as the crow flies (and there are a few), it covers about two kilometres. Along the whole of its length, right up to the new highway, Yalimbah Creek is tidal. Twice a day and a bit behind the tide down in Port Stephens, the tide seeps in and then seeps back out again, sometimes struggling a bit against the flow of fresh rainwater. This is a peaceful creek.

The banks of the creek are uniformly steep and the creek is surprisingly deep...
all the way up to within the sound of the roaring traffic. Right along its length it forms a barrier to those who would cross it.

Today, as you paddle up to the very top you find an egret's nest with two scrawny babies in it suspended across the middle of the creek which is about five metres across at this point. They have never seen a predator so they stretch their necks and beg for food as if you are their parent.

Chapter 2

Back Then ....

If you were standing on the eastern side of Yalimbah Creek a few hundred years earlier though, you may have seen some frightened and tired young men making their way along a faintly marked trail.

Along that eastern bank ran the initiation path for young men approaching manhood. At various points along the trail they had been stopped by elders and shown the rich variety of cultural sites along the valley. Their journey took them to the top of Mill Hill where today vehicles fly across what was once their sacred path. When they reached the top of the hill, they would get a glimpse of their destination, conical shaped hills leading down to Kundaine, the river that is now imaginatively known as The Branch, a branch of the Karuah River.

Back down towards the mouth of Yalimbah Creek, the boys would have visited a bora ring on the flats beside the creek. Then, the bora ring, full of its magic was on dry creek flat. Today it is mostly under water. Near the bora ring was an ancient crossing of the creek. Stones allowed those who knew to cross the creek and head towards modern day Karuah where they could swim the Karuer River.

Today local aboriginal people still know these secrets and they remember camping places and ceremonial sites. Sadly, the creek flats are too wet to allow a crossing here now and the camps have gone.

Chapter 3

The Unique Qualities of The Creek ...

If you were on Yalimbah Creek around the year 2005, you may have seen two young men in a precarious inflatable boat with a small outboard motor on the back. They would have had strange looking instruments on board and every so often you would see them submerging the instruments so that they were just below the surface at low tide.

Then they would tie a cord from the instrument to a tree on the bank, cover the cord with leaves and soil and then take note of its position. They would leave the instruments in the creek for the next few weeks.

Doctor Gareth Davies and his mates from The University of Wollongong were at
work measuring the tidal flows in this unique creek. They were engaged in a study of the rates of flow of tidal water off salt marsh.

They were to discover that when the tides were so high that they overfilled the creek and flooded the salt marsh and creek flats, the creek flowed more quickly on the outgoing tides. The data they gathered has since been used to assist in the computer modelling of scenarios involving tidal water flows off salt marsh areas along the coast.

Gareth Davies' description of Yalimbah Creek is precise and revealing. He wrote:

_Yalimbah Creek is a microtidal channel (tidal range usually less than 2 m), situated in the north western corner of Port Stephens, a large natural harbour in South Eastern Australia. The channel is largely sheltered from wave processes, and its small catchment has no inflowing river channel. For most of its length, the channel meanders through a narrow valley filled with intertidal marsh, the elevation of which gradually decreases downstream. At its most downstream end, the channel flows into an unvegetated intertidal cove (Number One Cove), where it gradually shallows until it is no longer clearly distinct from the rest of the cove. The channel is formed largely in unconsolidated muddy sediments, consisting of organic rich silt and clay, with some fine and very fine sand. In many places it is also partly bound by bedrock._¹

What Gareth doesn't mention in his technical article is that when he was on Yalimbah Creek, he observed some unusual features. Towards the top of the creek, he noticed that there were a number of completely straight channels running into the creek from the salt marsh. Right at the top of the creek was a kind of inlet with the remains of what looked like bridge or wharf materials protruding from the banks. Also there were inexplicable mounds running in remarkable straight lines. Gareth felt that they probably would have little impact on his calculations.

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**Chapter 4**

1825 Robert Dawson Arrives at Port Stephens

To explain the mysterious anomalies on the banks of Yalimbah Creek, we need first to cross the range of hills to the east of the creek to the settlement of Carrington/Tahlee and go back in time.

The main protagonist in the Yalimbah Creek mystery was Robert Dawson. In 1826, Dawson was involved in establishing a settlement at Carrington (then known as Carabean).

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¹ Flow in a microtidal channel during within-bank and over-bank tides: Yalimbah Creek, South Eastern Australia. Gareth DaviesUniversity of Wollongong Shortcut URL: http://serc.carleton.edu/36187
E. Flowers gives a succinct summary of Dawson's early life leading up to his arrival in NSW in 1825:

Robert Dawson (1782-1866), company agent and pastoralist, was born at Great Bentley, Essex, England, the youngest son of Joseph Dawson. He was educated at Dr Lindsay's Grove Hall School near Bow, whence he returned to Essex to farm the family estate. Married in 1811 to Anne Taylor, Dawson remained at Bentley Lodge until 1821 when an agricultural depression forced him to Berkshire where he managed Becket, Viscount Barrington's estate.

In December 1824 Dawson was prevailed upon by John Macarthur junior, an old school friend by whom he was highly regarded, to accept from the newly formed Australian Agricultural Co. the post of chief agent in New South Wales in which capacity he was to establish and administer a pastoral domain of 1,000,000 acres (404,609 ha) subject to a committee resident there. This committee was entrusted by the directors in England with 'extensive discretionary powers', and dominated by its many representatives of the Macarthur family, whose advice Dawson was enjoined to accept at all times. In early 1825 Dawson bought stock in France, Saxony and Spain and, with his nephew John Dawson, then 19, as his assistant, he left England in the ships York and Brothers with a party of 15 men, 14 women, 40 children, more than 600 sheep, 12 cattle and 7 horses, reaching Sydney in November 1825.2

Dawson's background in England was to have the major impact on the recorded history of Yalimbah Creek. As with the Macarthurs, Dawson was particularly interested in sheep raising.

Dawson's home at Great Bentley in Essex bears some superficial geographical similarities to the Karuah area. It is about the same distance from the sea. Great Bentley lies in an area where salt marsh abounds and where much land had been reclaimed from the sea. This tended to shape Dawson's attitudes towards sheep raising.

JF Atchison recognises Dawson's attitudes when he writes:

There can be little doubt that Dawson's English background led him to incline towards a hasty decision to take all, instead of a part of the grant in this coastal region. His English training had inculcated in him the importance of having saltwater rivers close to sheep pastures. The Port Stephens area satisfied this criterion.3

Early in January 1826, Dawson explored areas to the north of Sydney looking for a suitable place to serve as a base for the company's venture while his party waited at a farm at Bringelly, to the west of Sydney. After looking at the Hunter Valley and areas to the south of Port Stephens, Dawson investigated Port Stephens and

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3 Port Stephens and Goonoo Goonoo by JF Atchison … Doctoral Thesis ANU 21st August, 1973
travelled up the Karuah River.

Dawson was quite taken with the scenery on the northern side of Port Stephens opposite the army establishment at Soldiers Point. He later described his impression:

“In crossing the harbour in the evening, on our way back, I was much struck with the beauty of the scenery on the northern side ...” 4

In his report to the AA Co directors back in London in February 1826, Dawson was more defensive and precise:

- “12. On our way back [from Booral along the Karuah] to the harbour in a boat, I was struck with the appearance of one part of the land on the north shore which had not before been observed and which indicated that it was flat and extensive enough to form our first settlement upon, but the presence of mangroves at the water’s edge and the information we had previously collected did not hold out much hope that the quality would be found to answer our ends.

- 13. The importance however of the harbour, the quality of the sheep ranges at the back of it, and the beauty of the surrounding scenery were not to be resisted, and I determined to examine the spot the following morning in company with Mr. Harington [the Company Secretary in Sydney]. Our surprise on landing was equal to our delight on finding that it appeared above all other places we had seen the best calculated for our first settlement independent of the harbour. It consists of land thinly timbered and descending gradually from the base of the hills into flats, or slightly undulating ground that extend to the margin of the shore.” 5

The area he landed at is today known as Tahlee and Carrington. Today, the place is still beautiful and it is made up of private homes, an oyster farm and a Bible College.

Dawson was later called upon to defend his choice of the site and received severe criticism from some quarters.

This is part of the same report to London:

- “19. My reasons for fixing at first upon a spot where there is only a limited quantity of land that can be profitably cultivated in preference to going beyond the navigable parts of the Karuer [sic] River, where it is said there are some thousands of acres of land of the first quality, are too obvious to need any detail. When we have firmly established ourselves in the harbour, are old and strong enough to send forth branch establishments, and find, should that be the case, that we can grow food at less cost, in any other part of the grant than at home, or should required more than can be produced there, we can and shall no doubt have recourse to this good land.” 6

The settlement at Tahlee and Carrington in the 1820's and 30's has been well

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4  The Present State of Australia .... by Robert Dawson, published by Smith, Elder & Co., Cornhill, 1830
5  AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/1 Para.12 & 13 (held at the ANU)
6  AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/1 Para. 19 (held at the ANU)
documented and there is still physical evidence of the very early settlement to be seen to this day. Dawson built and was criticised for building the well known Tahlee House. The Tahlee House in existence today is still beautiful and occupies the site of its predecessor that was burned down in the 1880's.

In fact, the AA Company's time at Carrington was quite limited with full concentration on the site fading within ten years. By the 1850's, the company was trying to sell the property at Port Stephens and had moved west.

Chapter 5

The decision to establish a farm ...

It was Dawson who was responsible for what happened at Yalimbah Creek.

After he had the settlement process at Carrington under way, he began exploring the area in detail. Indeed, his well known book The Present State of Australia is substantially dedicated to his exploration of the Karuah River valley and adjacent areas in the company of a party of local aboriginal people. In the process, Dawson began naming places almost exclusively by their aboriginal names. He was continually examining the area with an eye to its future agricultural worth.

In April 1826 he wrote further (to the Colonial Committee in Sydney, to be passed on to the Directors

10. As soon as the various matters which engage my attention admitted of it, I made short excursions daily into the country into the Settlement for the purpose of ascertaining the nature of the country and quality of the sheep walks which I previously knew existed, but to what extent in the immediate vicinity of the port, I had not been able accurately to ascertain. Between this harbour and a branch of the Karuer called by the Natives Kundaine, about 8 miles in extent, as well as on the banks of the river, the hills in general are moderately elevated, lightly timbered, and grassy, forming in my opinion excellent sheep walks, and for the most part accessible without the necessity of felling much timber. At the foot of these ranges, sheep stations may be easily formed with communications, by water in most cases, either from the river or by creeks. There are occasional scrubby and unprofitable hills, but they bear a small proportion to those above described.7

Dawson's idea was to form stations or farms from which sheep would be run with shepherds bringing the sheep in each night for protection. He continually refers to the possibility of “sheep walks” as areas where sheep would feed during the day.

As a measure of the importance of these protective places for sheep to be gathered at night, in April 1827, Dawson reported that he had four men permanently employed making “hurdles” or protective fences for the purpose of temporary enclosure of sheep at night. Thirty one men were designated as “shepherds”. Meanwhile, he had the convicts at his disposal also busy fencing larger areas for sheep flocks. There were fourteen men employed in fencing at this time.

Dawson was particularly concerned to find somewhere very close to Carrington where he could run sheep and grow crops. He continually describes any choice of

7 AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/1 Para.10(held at the ANU)
land close to his headquarters as a temporary solution, but he did find what he thought would be a satisfactory short term farm and he named it accordingly No.1 Farm.

Here is his first report of the site for this first farm:

- 11. The flats in this district which are considerable in extent, are almost uniformly bad. The few that are pretty good are fortunately at no great distance from the Settlement. The best flat which I have seen is at the head of a navigable creek called Yallinber, by land about two miles and a half from the port.8

This is the first direct reference to Yalimbah Creek.

A visit today to this area today makes Dawson's claim that Yalimbah Creek flat is “The best which I have seen” appear unlikely, but there are a number of factors that need to be taken into account when looking at his decision to set up a farm here.

Atchison's comment:

Dawson's earlier experience caused him to follow approved English practices of placing these sheep on what he described as “salt water runs”. These were pastures subject to inundation at high tide.9

…. throws some light on Dawson's decision to choose Yalimbah Creek as the site for his first farm. Dawson was subsequently condemned for his decision to run sheep in inundated pastures, but he was not, at the time advised against it by members of the Colonial Committee.

Dawson's own comment supports this:

- 27. The spot I have fixed upon for cultivation appears upon its being cleared fully equal to my expectation, both in extent and quality. Its contingency to water carriage, and also the port, present many conveniences at the present moment, beyond the richer tracts at a greater distance to which we shall one day have recourse.10

The “richer tract” refers to land around the Booral/Stroud area.

Another of Dawson's reports report gives further insight into his motives:

- The higher parts appear to be calculated to grow wheat, and the lower ones maize, and is surrounded by hills forming good and extensive sheep walks. It is here that I propose to commence a small farming establishment as soon as I can have a supply of men from the Government. Bark huts are the only buildings I shall cause to be erected at this place, until I shall be able to

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8 AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/1 Para.11 (held at the ANU)
9 Port Stephens and Goonoo Goonoo by JF Atchison … Doctoral Thesis ANU 21st August, 1973
10 AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/1 Para.27 (held at the ANU)
ascertain the quality and capacity of the land for cultivation. The flats between the shore of this Settlement and the hills immediately behind it are not so extensive as I at first imagined. This land will by and bye be required for horses, cows and other stock for the use of the Establishment. I do not therefore propose to cultivate any part of it, but to confine cultivation to one part only of sufficient extent to supply the wants of the Establishment without interfering with other departments.\footnote{AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/1 Para.11 (held at the ANU)}

In this report, Dawson reveals his intention to establish only temporary accommodation in the form of “bark huts”. This was to mean that the workers on the site would be required to walk the two miles or so from Carrington to No. Farm and back every day. They would use the easiest route which was via what has become known as the \textit{Old AACo Road} thus ensuring that this would become the main access road from Carrington to Karuah for over a century.

Dawson saw the site in terms of the settlement at Carrington and Tahlee as being a long-term proposition. The settlement would need some source of food and agistment in the immediate vicinity. He couldn't see any alternative site available.

\section*{Chapter 6}

\subsection*{Who worked there?}

When looking at the question of why Dawson chose Yalimbah Creek as the site for his No.1 Farm, we can't ignore the workforce he was using.

- 28. \textit{The following are two of the most prominent advantages in my opinion. First – that the cultivated ground is surrounded on every side by fine sheep hills which will send nightly above one thousand sheep to the fold, on the cultivated ground, if required. Secondly – that it serves in the mean time as a kind of penal plan, where convicts only are kept, and where such as are indolent, but not actually deserving of greater punishment, are sent to labour with the axe, or the hoe, under overseers appointed especially to superintend them.}\footnote{AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/1 Para.28 (held at the ANU)}

Dawson here reveals that at least one of his intentions in embarking on what looked like being a difficult and not particularly rewarding project was that it would serve as a site to keep his often difficult to control workforce working close to home base and under supervision.

- 29. \textit{The proximity of this place to the military guard and to such other protection and advantages as the principal Settlement can afford to it, the complete separation which is effected at the same time between certain classes of convicts and such emancipists as are employed at the port, present favourable opportunities in my mind for forming good arrangements as the outset, and for laying the foundation of such practical measures, as}
may here after form future precedents at more remote stations on the Grant.

The return of 1827 *(Distribution Return .... shewing the manner in which the Australian Agricultural Company's Men are employed on their Grant “Port Stephens” the 30th April 1827)* reveals that in that year 301 persons were employed at Port Stephens. Of these, four were *Employed in the Chain Gang, quarrying stone etc.*\(^{13}\) Equally significant was the employment of another four described as being *Employed as Constables and Floggers*\(^{14}\).

However, these were not the only people employed on the project at No.1 Farm, a specific group of twenty four was assigned as: *Employed on Farm No.1 in attending to Maize Grounds, clearing ground for wheat and attending on Sawyers, Hurdle Makers, Fencers etc including Overseer*

In addition, many from the following groups are reported to have at various times worked on No.1 Farm:

- *Employed in splitting and preparing Wood for building Huts for Sheep stations etc* 4
- *Employed in fencing* 14
- *Employed in sawing* 20
- *Employed as ....... Stockmen for sheep* 7
- *Employed at Burning off Timber, Road Making etc including overs* 10

This total of 87 persons is conservative, and at any one time certainly in excess of 40 persons on site is a realistic figure. When James Macarthur visited the site in 1828, he found six convicts at work under the supervision of John Folkard. At the time however, Dawson was attempting to downplay the amount of manpower and expense that had been expended on the No.1 Farm site. Macarthur claimed that he had been informed that as many as eighty had been working on the site. Dawson denied this, but his own figures above tend to contradict his denial.

**Chapter 7**

**What the work was like ....**

It is possible to gauge the extent the work done at the No.1 Farm site.

It must be admitted that Dawson down plays the work done at No.1 Farm when he says:

*No drainage has been performed there beyond an open ditch on two sides at the foot of the Hills, and several drains in the bottom to carry off the surface waters of*

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\(^{13}\) AA Co Despatches Distribution Return .... shewing the manner in which the Australian Agricultural Company's Men are employed on their Grant “Port Stephens” the 30th April 1827 (held at Uni of Newcastle)

\(^{14}\) Ibid

\(^{15}\) Ibid
the Hills above. Little more is required to complete the whole in this respect. A small quantity of land amounting to about 30 acres has been reclaimed from the Salt Water by means of a very slight embankment and a small tide sluice. The valuable part of the soil above this, having been formed by stagnant fresh water and decayed vegetable matter... The estimated expense for draining does not exceed one hundred and forty pounds. The extent of the enclosure with the outer drain and the Creek is 150 acres. The poor soil on the verge of The Farm was not enclosed for cultivation, but with a view only to make the enclosure more complete. ..... The number of men employed there is eight and one Overseer.  

James Macarthur errs in the opposite direction when he says:

The next subject to which I could call your attention is The Farm, about three miles from Carribeen, termed by Mr Dawson No.1 Farm. Much labour and expense have here been thrown away upon clearing and draining a saltwater swamp. This appeared to be about one hundred and twenty (120) acres on which the trees are felled and partly burned off. The drains are still incomplete. This greatly to be lamented that the heavy expense which has been incurred upon this (in my opinion) unclaimable Desert, had not been devoted to the cultivation of some of the alluvial flats near Stroud. According to every received principle either of Agricultural or Political Economy, this should have been the course.  

He later states:

- The nearest estimate that I can make of the cost of this Establishment is about four thousand pounds instead of one hundred and forty pounds as stated by Mr Dawson. I could not however find that any correct accounts had been kept here, or, if such accounts ever existed they either been taken away or destroyed.  

Somewhat closer to the truth of the matter is probably the following revealed in a Statement of Amounts laid out and expended by the AACo in improvements upon Land granted to the Company in New South Wales – pursuant to the eighth condition of the Charter of Incorporation.

In the formation of roads

......No.1 Farm two bridges over creeks and causeway through swamp.... £100

In clearing of lands

At No.1 Farm 180 acres, 3 rods and 9 perches (approx. 73 hectares)...£267.5.10

In the draining of lands

...At No.1 Farm 760 rods of 3ft drains. (approx. 3.8 kilometres) £104.10

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16 AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/3 ff 127-167 (held at the ANU)
17 AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/3, ff 67-112 (held at the ANU)
18 AACo Despatches to London, Volume 78/1/6, ff 67-112 (held at the ANU)
So, the work done at No.1 Farm included two bridges. One of these bridges crossed Yalimbah Creek as part of The Old AACo Road route from Tahlee to Karuah. This was a substantial construction. The other was across the small harbour constructed at the top of the No.1 Farm site and was not as extensive.

A 1911 Army Survey of the area (page 25) shows the bridge at the corduroy road as being 12 foot wide and 120 foot long. It survived in local memory and was in constant use until the late 1950s. It was sturdy enough to carry timber lorries.

The land cleared included land along the flats beside the creek and a two hundred metre wide area at the top of the farm site still visible today.

The three foot ditches extended on both sides of a number of the roads that were also constructed. This was a major construction task and one that was fraught with difficulty. It was made more difficult by the twice daily inundation of the site. Beside the corduroy road alone, there were 600 metres of ditches and in total, 3.8 kilometres of ditches were dug on the site, many still remaining.

The corduroy road is one of the “causeways” mentioned. It is 300 metres long and would have necessitated digging a 12 foot wide by 3 foot deep channel in the mud that was then filled with broken rock.

The tasks involved would certainly have served Dawson's purpose in using the site as a punishment or threat for unruly workers.

What is not mentioned in the above figures is the quarrying that played a significant role in maintaining the roadworks to this day. Along the Old AACo Road today are visible remains of the series of quarries where convicts extracted significant quantities of stone, broken by hand into usable sizes.

The workforce return shows:

Employed under the principal Mason in quarrying, plastering etc including labourers and overseers .................12 men

and

Employed in the Chain Gang, quarrying stone etc .....4 men  20

The Old AACo Road on the Tahlee side of Yalimbah Creek today allows us to see the work that went into the site as whole.

Chapter 8

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19 ...the Company's copy is not extant, however there is in the Colonial Office ... records CO201/357, folio 121

20 AACo Despatches Distribution Return .... shewing the manner in which the Australian Agricultural Company's Men are employed on their Grant “Port Stephens” the 30th April 1827(held at Uni of Newcastle)
Dawson's Dismissal

Some of the problems Dawson was to face in relation to No.1 Farm and his actions overall have already been hinted at. The future of No.1 Farm was already looking bleak by early 1828. By 1830, the farm was all but finished.

Dawson's achievements are often overlooked, but they were considerable. He managed to establish the site at Carrington, explore a considerable amount of the country being considered for lease by the Company and establish good relationships with the local aboriginal population. He set up communication lines with Sydney and other areas. He established local industries in brick making, building and in the creation of materials necessary for expansion and he worked at developing a security system to allow him to control his often unruly work force.

He had in plan systems for the development of an agricultural industry that would in all likelihood have brought profits for the Company.

In April 1828 however, Dawson was dismissed.

His sacking was the result of a complex scenario.

This minute carries the impact of that sacking from The London Court of Directors in the following January and also conveys to a modern reader the time delays in communications:

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At a Meeting of the Court of Directors

Held at Their Office on Friday 16\textsuperscript{th} January 1829

William Manning Esq MP in the Chair

It was Unanimously Resolved:

1stly  \hspace{1em} That the Report now presented by The Committee, to whom the case of Mr Dawson was referred, be confirmed and adopted, And that Mr Dawson be dismissed from the Company's Service, such dismissal to take effect from the date of his suspension the 18\textsuperscript{th} April 1828.

2ndly  \hspace{1em} That the thanks of this Court are eminently due, and are hereby given to The Colonial Committee for the decision and sound judgement which they have displayed during the very embarrassing situation in which Mr Dawson's conduct has placed them.

3rdly  \hspace{1em} That the thanks of this Court are especially due, and are hereby given to the Hon. John Macarthur for his able and gratuitous services to the Company, in having taken the chief direction of its affairs, regardless of personal inconvenience at a moment of extreme difficulty.

12 Kings Arms Yard London

16\textsuperscript{th} January 1829

(Signed) J Strettell Brickwood
In broad terms, Dawson was criticised for:

- his failure to report events adequately to either The Colonial Committee or The London Court of The AA Company
- his failure to account adequately for expenditure
- his failure to achieve the best grants of land that he could for The Company
- his failure to adequately control the work force at Port Stephens
- his unnecessary expenditure of Company's money on what were perceived as luxuries at Tahlee
- his failure to adequately develop the Company's assets in the Booral/Stroud/Gloucester areas and;
- his misplaced faith in the worth of No.1 Farm at Yalimbah Creek

Dawson's prime antagonist in the event was James Macarthur who went as far as to travel back to England to put the case against Dawson.

The situation was complicated by factors such as:

- The antagonism of the Macarthur family and other members of the Colonial Committee who Dawson claimed had sold poor quality sheep to him thus effectively defrauding their own Company
- the failure of the Colonial Committee to involve themselves in what was happening at Port Stephens until too late
- the failure of the Colonial Committee to fulfil their charter of providing advice to Dawson on a regular basis
- doubts about the advice the Colonial committee had provided to Dawson regarding the suitability of areas of the potential grant for the Company based on the word of John Oxley who owed James Macarthur a large sum of money
- the failure of the Colonial Committee to advise Dawson against his perception that inundated areas such as No.1 Farm would be suitable for running sheep

Dawson's defence of his own position was not strong and was in turn complicated by his own mental state when on the 28th February, 1828, he learned of the death of his beloved daughter Ellen back in England. Consequently, he spent the month or so preceding his dismissal in a state of withdrawal and depression and failed to fulfil the requests of the Colonial Committee.

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21 AACo Despatches to London, Jan 1829 (Held at The Uni. Of Newcastle)
Chapter 9
The End of the No.1 Farm Project

It must be borne in mind that much of the criticism of The No.1 Farm Project was in the context of a general condemnation of Dawson's actions at Port Stephens. However, in spite of the colourful language used particularly by James Macarthur, there were genuine and valid criticisms lodged.

That Dawson himself was aware of the limitations of the No.1 Farm site is supported in the following:

- 49. In the preparation of land for wheat, I have not been able to make as much progress as I have wished or had anticipated from a want of hands to prepare the ground during the proper season. I had vainly supposed that I should have been able to have supplied our wants in grant during the next year, but I see no prospect of that now. I cannot venture to name the probable quantity of grain, we shall produce at the harvest, as I must depend almost entirely on spring sewing of wheat, on ground too recently broken up to ensure a crop, according to the opinion of those who have had more experience in the nature of the soil in this country, than I have had. 22

That he was also aware of the value of the site of No.2 Farm at Stroud is equally evident:

- 50. The richness of the ground on the River Stroud where I am making efforts to grow wheat, forms the only hope I have success for the ensuring year, & were it not that I am told the land requires more time for exposure & tillage after breaking up than I can now or have been able to afford it, I should be very sanguine in my expectation of an abundant produce this year. 23

However, James Macarthur’s criticisms and those of people like James Bowman, whilst exaggerated were substantially correct. One of James Macarthur's many statements contained these words:

- I afterwards rode to the Farming Establishment called by Mr Dawson No 1 Farm. It is three miles from Tahlee in a westerly direction. Much labour & expense has been here incurred in clearing & attempting to bring into cultivation a salt marsh. There appeared to me to be about 120 acres with the timber felled & partly burnt off. The drains are still incomplete. The soil is a shallow grey colour upon a stiff clay bottom. In my opinion it is incapable of being rendered productive. The

22 AACo Despatches to London, No. 1 9 Oct 1827 Volume 78/1/2 49 (held at the ANU)
23 Ibid (50)
labour which as been here thrown away would have been employed to some purpose upon the alluvial flats near Stroud. 24

As is outlined above, Macarthur was also at pains to draw attention to the costs of the project and the failure to achieve any returns from the effort involved.

The number of men employed on their clearing & draining of the marsh has been so continually fluctuating as to render it impossible in the absence of labour returns (which have not been regularly kept to form any estimate of the expense). At time I am told there have been near 100 men at work here – and for about three months the average number was from forty to fifty. We saw a flock of 500 lambs in wretched condition looking very unhealthy. 25

The superintendence of the Port Stephens establishment rested for a short time on James Macarthur himself and was permanently handed to Dawson's successor, Sir Edward Parry in 1829:

Parry's comments speak for themselves:

Friday, 15th January 1830….

I afterward rode out to No 1 Farm about which so much has been said & written. There has probably been exaggeration on both sides. I have no doubt that it was not worth over half the expense which has been laid out upon it, even if £2,000 be the whole. The enclosed portion is above 60 acres, upon 20 of which only wheat has yet been raised. The quantity in stock at this time is estimated to be by Stokes at 450 Bushels, of which 50 to 60 are last year's produce, and the rest this. This year's is much the best in quality. About 6 acres more of any fair land are in progress of breaking up. To say nothing of the expense of draining a swamp, which it is, so small a portion of land is not worth the attention of the Company; for it can never pay them any profit. The same expense of hours &c &c would serve for many hundred acres.

From a particular position on the hill above it, the view of it is beautiful. I returned by a different route from that of our Outward Journey, and virtually saw nothing calculated to convey any hope of Profit to the Company on this Part of their Estate. 26

Parry effectively ceased Company operations at No.1 Farm in 1830 as he hints in his report to London:

It will be an object of future consideration to add fifty acres of sound forest land, but not by any means first quality, to this Farm or to abandon it entirely. 27

24 AACo Despatches to London, Nov 1828 Volume 78/1/16 (James Macarthur's journal handed to The Court in London)(held at the ANU)
25 Ibid
26 Sir Edward Parry's Diary 9 Jan 1830 (held at Mitchell Library MA 630)
27 AACo Despatches to London 78/1/9 Despatch 11 17 Feb 1830]
PART 2
SOME CLUES

Introduction

Thanks in great part to Dr Pennie Pemberton of The Australian National University, I was able to plot a rough location for the likely site of No.1 Farm. The very early maps are consistent in their recording of the site as being at the head of Yalimbah Creek.

Some of the maps are quite difficult to read and they were each drawn with particular intentions and are therefore sometimes likely to be misleading. I have included a couple of later and quite recent maps for the additional information they provide.

On their own, the maps give a fascinating insight into the times and circumstances of their production.

Chapter 1

The First Settlement Map - 1826
The early maps of the Port Stephens area give the most likely information on the whereabouts of No.1 Farm. A number of maps do show the site as being at the top of Yalimbah Creek, but even those that don't can give a clue to the possible site.

Map 1

The First Settlement (1826)- Port Stephens

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28 Australian National University (ANU) Archives Program, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) AACo records Map A31 First Settlement Port Stephens
This early map of the first Australian Agricultural Company settlement at Port Stephens shows early names of geographical features and water depths. In comparison to a number of later maps, the foreshore is roughly delineated and many of the original names have since been changed. No.1 Farm is not shown on this map, however, in an area directly north of “Tarlee” Point is shown “Tents”. It can be assumed that this would have been the area allocated to convicts and their overseers. It is at a distance from the “Village”.

The position of the tents is significant in its relation to the position of the Old AACo Road which, in its current form runs through the tents site, then on to the site of No.1 Farm.

Chapter 2

The Joseph Cross Map

Map 2

Joseph Cross … Map of the River Hunter, and its branches:shewing Lands reserved thereon for Church purposes, the Locations made to Settlers, and the Settlement and part of the Lands of the Australian Agricultural Company at Port Stephens together with the Station of the Mission to Aborigines belonging to the London Missionary Society on Lake Macquarie, New South Wales 1828 (Map NK 646) 29

This 1828 map(rotated clockwise 90 degrees) is the first to show the already

established route including the **Old AACo Road.** This early map still uses some of the names used in Map 1 above, but it renames the Karuah River, the Carrington River.

The zoomed and rotated map below allows us to see some of the salient features of the map always bearing in mind that it is primarily intended for purposes other than geographic.

Features to observe include:

- **A** The crossing of Yalimbah Creek
- **B** (planned) Ferry at the site of Karuah
- **C** (planned) school
- **D** (planned) church
- **E** The road continuing to the (yet to be named) Raymond Terrace
- **F** The road continuing on to Booral etc
Chapter 3

The Estate 1828

Map 3

The Australian Agricultural Company's Estate 1828 (Plan of the AACo's Grant at Port Stephens, New South Wales; sent to London by ship Eliza.)

This map does show the site of (A) No.1 Farm on (B) Yalimbah (or No.1) Creek. It also shows the road going north to Booral and Stroud. What is very clear from this map (and subsequent maps) is the “High Rocky Range” between The “Settlement” and No.1 Farm. Walking from Carrington to No.1 Farm in a direct line was and still is an extremely difficult undertaking. It is unlikely that convict workers would have travelled over the (C) “High Rocky Range” on a daily basis.

The four kilometre walk to No.1 Farm via the route of the Old AACo Road would have been then and still is by far the easiest way. It is relatively flat and relatively clear walking. It follows the shoreline and then the creek line for most of its path.

Descriptions such as those indicated on this map of “Infertile Country” and “Bad Land” give an indication as to why the flats along No.1 Creek were selected by Robert Dawson to establish the farm.

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30 Australian National University (ANU) Archives Program, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) AACo records Map F15 The AACo's Estate 1828
This map was drawn as a report on the viability of the land contained within the AA Company's grant and was to be used as a base for arguing for changes, so perhaps some exaggeration could be expected. Significantly for the future, townships were outlined and Sawyers Point was so designated.

Chapter 4

The Settlement 1830

Map 4
Port Stephens Settlement (Carrington) NSW 1830

Once again, this map shows the location of (A) No.1 Farm on Yalimbah Creek and once again, it shows the (C) “High Rocky Ranges” between the “Settlement” and the farm.

The key to the map indicates that the B and the space bounded by a red line indicated part of the 330 acres designated for townships, in this case Sawyers Point (Karuah).

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31 Australian National University (ANU) Archives Program, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) AACo records Map X92 Port Stephens Settlement (Carrington) New South Wales 1830
**Chapter 5**

**Dangar & Harington’s Track 1826**

**Map 5**
*Port Stephens Grant. Part of Map to accompany Mr Armstrong's Reports of Jun-Jul and May 1829. Created in 1828 and tracing Dangar and Harrington’s 1826 Track – Port Stephens New South Wales*  

This map has caused some confusion. A pencilled note in the top right hand corner of the map says: *Facsimile of Armstrong’s Sketch Port Stephens 1830.* The intent of the sketch is to give an indication of the journey that included a visit to **(A) No.1 Farm.** This sketch should not be used to identify the location and likely route to No.1 Farm. The hastily sketched hills including “Cowulobray Hill”? are not accurately placed and whilst No.1 Farm is shown correctly at the head of Yalimbah Creek, it appears to be approximated as an illustration for the journey being described. The **(B) “track”** is shown as dots with various branchings showing the directions taken. The “track” as shown here, leading to No.1 Farm would be through impassable bush and hills.

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32 Australian National University (ANU) Archives Program, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) AACo records Map X653 A4
Chapter 6

P P King's 1847 Map

Map 6
Phillip Parker King's Map of Port Stephens – published 1847

It is significant that this 1847 map does not show No.1 Farm (X). By this time No.1 Farm was virtually in disuse. The Old AACo Road to Karuah from Tahlee is in place though as is (A) the bridge over Yalimbah Creek. Also in evidence is the (B) Punt Station at Sawyers Point.

The remains of No.1 Farm covered a large portion of the Yalimbah Creek catchment.

33 Great Britain. Hydrographic Dept. Australia, East Coast, Port Stephens [cartographic material] 1847. MAP British Admiralty Special Map Col./40.
This 1911 map illustrates a number of issues:
- The steepness of the terrain between Tahlee and the established site of \(X\) **No. 1 Farm**
- The established road from Tahlee to Yalimbah Creek and on to Karuah
- The distance to be travelled if one was to use the alternate route to the north
- The dimensions of \(A\) the bridge over Yalimbah Creek – 12ft wide X 120ft long

This map also gives an outline to the area of salt marsh available to be cultivated. It is worth noting that the area of saltmarsh near where early maps show No.1 Farm as being located is relatively narrow, whilst it widens further downstream.

**Chapter 8**

**A Conclusion:**

The site of No.1 Farm is established by these maps and the preceding documents. The clues were enough to urge us to make a search!
This is the personal part of the story. Having looked at the maps and the background to Yalimbah Creek, I talked some others into joining me to look for No.1 Farm where it would have been 186 years ago. Our little expedition led to some interesting discoveries.

Chapter 1
A Walk in the Bush

This view of Yalimbah Creek courtesy of Google Earth shows a reddish circular patch at the point where most of the early nineteenth century maps show No.1 Farm. The site is surrounded by dense undergrowth and is difficult to access.

The site is located on the property of Gray and Deborah Myers of Karuah. They hold 150 acres at the top of the creek. Mr Myers agreed to join Bill Swainson and myself to inspect the area.

This view of the top of Yalimbah Creek shows:
- A. The Myer's home clearing
- B. The potential site of No.1 Farm
- C. Cleared area under power lines

We felt that since No.1 Farm was consistently shown at the extreme head of the creek and that the circle shown was at that location, the two could coincide.

Our “expedition” consisted of Gray Myers, Beki Myers (Gray's daughter), Murray...
(the mastiff), Bill Swainson and David Benson. We went armed with GPS, camera and metal detector. We allowed ourselves a couple of hours from 3.00pm on Friday 9th December 2011.

Just getting to the site was quite a struggle. We came at it from the Myer's homestead and along what is known as the bridle path that was supposedly an alternate route to The Branch and Booral. When we reached the track running under the power lines we had some easy walking down hill before we headed off into dense undergrowth to bash our way through to the “red circle”.

The red circle is indeed red. It is a cleared space maybe 200 metres in diameter.

Photo 1:
The area is still tidal and the red plant is growing in salt water and the ground is littered with small salt water snail shells. The area appears to be man made but there were no visible structures apparent.

Photo 2:
There were a few regularly shaped ponds.

We were unable to detect anything specific with the metal detector although there were some responses that followed straight lines that we thought may indicate
either stone or brick guttering of some kind.

**Photo 3**
At this point, we were interested, but not excited.

We now headed down stream, in a south easterly direction, wading through swamp and more fairly thick undergrowth.

When we pushed through the bush on the south eastern perimeter of the clearing, we came upon the scene below:

**Photo 4**
As you can see, this is a straight, raised road of built up rock above the swamp and on either side are two canals. It is very similar to the “Corduroy Section” of the *Old
AACo Road. It shows no sign of having been used in the recent past. It stretches perhaps 200 metres until it reaches what appears to be the remains of a bridge or a wharf structure.

When we were at the site, it was close to low tide and the creek banks (hidden from above by foliage) were clearly visible.

Photo 5
At this point there appeared to be the remains of a low bridge stretching across a wet section of the road.

Photo 6
Here, the edges of the road appeared to have been supported by stone work in the same way that they are along the Old AACo Road.
At the end of the straight stretch of road, we reached a point at which there was the remains of what appeared to be a bridge. In this picture, you can see structural wooden beams still protruding from the bank. At this point, so far up the creek, the tidal influence is reduced to around a metre, meaning that the bridge would be just about at water level at high tide.

This photo is taken from the other side, looking back. You can see the road (track) stretching away towards the right.
The road from this point on changes direction and continues straight ahead as a raised platform with channels along each side. We were so excited by the road at this point that we forgot to take photos. The road continues until it reaches the power line area where the Electricity Commission workers have heavily cleared and the undergrowth has grown intensely thick.

This section of the roadworks is so clear that it can be seen from above.

Photo 9
Here are the straight lines of the road shown leading through the power line clearing.

At this point, we headed home up one of the cleared power line tracks and home.

Chapter 2
Some Conclusions

Further research is needed before we can assess the importance of the No.1 Farm site as it is now. There is no doubt that a surprising amount of the work done by convicts in the years 1826 to 1829 is still there. There is striking evidence of the “3 foot ditches” dug under appalling conditions for a length of 3.8 kilometres. Fragments of the bridges are still in place. The roads are probably the most exciting remnants with their ditches on either side. They must have rock bases to them to still be so clearly visible after all this time.

It seems mandatory to record the features that remain for posterity. A survey of the site showing the roads and ditches should be conducted as soon as possible.

It is somewhat ironic that much of the work done on the site by the convicts was based on the quarrying of stone in the quarries on the eastern side of the creek whilst today a modern quarry is echoing their work only a few hundred metres to
It is doubtful that the No.1 Farm site would ever become a tourist attraction, but that doesn't lessen the responsibility of the landowners including The Office of Environment and Heritage. Nor does it lessen the importance of the site. There can be very few sites with so profound a recorded history in such original condition anywhere in the state.

I believe that the site ought to be declared a site of state importance as a matter of urgency and I have contacted Heritage Branch with details of the site.

I have written this article in an attempt to raise awareness of a hidden treasure in the Great Lakes Local Government Area and adjacent to the town of Karuah and the settlement at Tahlee/Carrington.

Photographs by David Benson