

Biggest Bridge Never had Ribbon Ceremony

Howard Jones

There are a few puzzling questions about the Bethanga Bridge. Who designed the Murray River's longest bridge, and why was it never officially opened?

How is it all held together like a Meccano set?

When work on the Hume Dam began in 1919, everyone knew it would "drown" the river bridges at Talgarno and Ebden, isolating the Bethanga district.

An alternative route was not settled until 1925, after a "battle of the bridges" among affected farmers.

One group wanted a bridge from Bethanga over the Mitta arm, because they shipped stock to Melbourne via Ebden railway station.

Another, led by Arnie Sutherland, said that people would benefit most from a bridge where it was ultimately built.

Sutherland insisted it would bring Albury closer to the farmers and anyway, they could reach Wodonga easily by crossing the Bethanga bridge and then the dam itself.



A rare picture of workmen perched in a cradle while riveting a steel span of the Bethanga Bridge in 1929. A "creeping crane" prepares for the next span.

Picture: Howard Jones Collection

Percy Allan, New South Wales chief civil engineer, might have had a say in plans for a nine-span bridge, 2870 feet long before retiring in 1927.

But an unsung junior roads engineer, Vincent Packer, aged about 24, designed and supervised construction.

Charles Ruwolt Pty Ltd's £71,890 tender won the steel fabrication contract in 1928, though a British firm had tendered only £62,488.

The commission deliberately favoured an Australian firm because it could employ 200 to 300 Melbourne men for a year.

Ruwolt assembled the truss spans in Richmond, then dismantled them and delivered them, by train to Ebden, and light rail to the site. Price Hill, a trucking pioneer, brought in sections by road.

A Kew firm, W.H. Thompson, had a £43,473 contract to erect the spans on concrete piers, their men riveting pieces of each span high about the ground and rising lake.

BHP made most of the 1550 tonnes of steel (Sydney Harbour Bridge was of British design and 80 per cent of its steel came from England).

The original timber deck came from northern New South Wales.

But not all had been delivered by August 1930 when a sudden flood submerged the Talgarno bridge.

In desperation, the engineers secured some local planks to complete the deck and open the new bridge.

There was no time to summon a minister or celebrity to cut a ribbon.