

# COBUNGRA BRIDGE



COBUNGRA BRIDGE SOHE 1 cobungra river bridge ntv  
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cobungra bridge plan

## Location

OVER COBUNGRA RIVER, OMEO HIGHWAY ANGLERS REST, EAST GIPPSLAND SHIRE

## Municipality

EAST GIPPSLAND SHIRE

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H1854

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO359

## VHR Registration

November 18, 1999

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 3, 1999

What is significant?

The Cobungra River Bridge, situated adjacent to the Blue Duck Inn at the Anglers Rest on the Omeo Highway, is a three-span timber-beam road bridge of standard 1930 CRB design. The bridge was probably built during the early years of the Second World War when this section of Omeo Highway was up-graded for proposed military use, though some timber piles may date from c.1909, when the first road on this route was constructed by the Public Works Department to serve the Glen Wills gold and tin mines. The bridge consists of six-pile timber piers, with a longitudinal-timber deck, 22 metres in overall length and 5 metres in width, supported by timber crossbeams on round longitudinal timber stringers and finished with timber gravel beams and side rails. Two timber piers have outlying 'fender piles' to protect their upstream extremities from flood-borne logs and debris. After the demise of the Glen Wills mines, the Blue Duck Inn and associated Cobungra River Bridge became a haven for anglers and hikers, hence the tiny settlement's latter-day name of Angler's Rest. There is now a popular camping ground on the south bank of the river.

How is it Significant?

The Cobungra River Bridge is of historical and scientific (technical) significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it Significant?

It is of historical significance as a now exceedingly rare example of the symbiotic relationship between bridges at crossing places and hotels (the genesis of many settlements) in pioneering times. The adjacent Blue Duck Inn was built as a resting place for travellers to the Glen Wills mine, apparently predating the first Cobungra timber bridge. As with most other early crossing places, this first bridge was relatively short-lived, replaced by a later-generation bridge built according to CRB advances in timber bridge design. The juxtaposition of a vernacular timber bridge with an adjacent travellers resting place, especially outside a township of any size, is now extremely rare, perhaps unique, in Victoria. The bridge also reflects the political importance of the Omeo Highway, the first declared State Highway (1925) in Victoria. Other historical associations include the Glen Wills mine, and, probably, its rebuilding as part of improvements to a potential interstate highway route with strategic defence significance. Timber bridges of any type are now extremely rare on Victoria's State Highways or Main Roads.

It is of technical significance as a representative and well-preserved example of one of the most important innovations in timber bridge design of the twentieth century. Developed by Victoria's Country Roads Board in 1930, this style of bridge was the first standard timber bridge designed specifically for the demands of motor transport. It revolutionised engineering thinking about the durability and viability of timber road bridges in Australia. Replacement of the traditional transversely planked timber deck with a longitudinally planked deck supported on timber crossbeams represented a new standard bridge design that provided both longer life and easier maintenance. Medium size examples of this type of bridge are now scarce and becoming rare; no other

highway examples now remain. The sharply angled road approach at one end, peculiar in the era of fast motor traffic, is typical of the horse-drawn vehicle era and increasingly uncommon and significant. Its outlying 'fender piles' are also notable.

## Permit Exemptions

### General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

**Places of worship:** In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must [notify](#) the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

**Subdivision/consolidation:** Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### Specific Exemptions:

General Conditions:

1. All exempted plans and alterations are to be carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object.
2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of alterations that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such alteration shall cease and the Executive Director shall be notified as soon as possible.
3. If there is a conservation policy or plan approved by the Executive Director, all works shall be in accordance with it.
4. Nothing in this declaration prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions.
5. Nothing in this declaration exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authority where applicable.

### Specific Provisions/Exemptions

No permit is required for routine maintenance or minor repairs which replace like with like.

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|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Construction dates      | 1940,             |
| Heritage Act Categories | Registered place, |
| Hermes Number           | 5989              |
| Property Number         |                   |

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## History

### Contextual History:History of Place:

Although we generally think of the Omeo district as linked to Bairnsdale and therefore as a part of Gippsland, both geographically and historically the Omeo region has been properly regarded as a part of north-eastern Victoria. The area was opened up for mining in the 1850s from the direction of Mt Hotham and the north-eastern goldfields, from whence its stores originally came. When Alexander Sutherland produced his classic work entitled *Victoria and its Metropolis* in 1888, he included Omeo Shire in his chapter entitled 'The Ovens or North-Eastern District'. Omeo town was then described as lying 'in the valley of the Mitta Mitta River, in a rugged country south of which towers the Dividing Range, separating it from Gippsland, access to which can only be gained through gorges from 1500 feet to 2000 feet in depth'. This geographic description may surprise the modern traveller from Bruthen to Omeo, but that easy motoring route via the Tongio Gap is the product of highly imaginative CRB engineering of the 1960s. The early mining areas scattered off to the north and north east of Omeo in rugged mountainous country, like that around Anglers Rest and the Cobungra River Bridge, were even more difficult of access than the notoriously difficult Omeo township, especially in winter and early spring.

The Omeo Highway linking Bairnsdale with Wodonga via Tallangatta was Victoria's first officially declared State Highway, under new legislation which late in 1924 first created the category of 'State Highway'. It pre-dates the Murray Valley Highway by many years. This fact says more about Gippsland political influence than about Victoria's road system. Gippsland politicians were determined to claim the Omeo hinterland for themselves. The creation of the Country Roads Board in 1912-13 was very largely a response to Gippsland political agitation, and the early CRB took a great interest in Gippsland roads. In the years around 1920 there had been much political agitation for a 'developmental railway' to connect the Omeo district to the Gippsland rail system at Bruthen, and local politicians encouraged considerable local expectation of such a railway service, quaint as the idea appears to us.

By 1924 governments had become very wary about building loss-making railways into obscure places, and the official proclamation of Victoria's first State Highway to link Bairnsdale with Wodonga via Omeo and Tallangatta was a political ploy, rather than an infrastructure reality. If vociferous dwellers on the high plains and their political allies in Gippsland could not have their very own 'developmental railway', at least they were important enough to have their very own 'State Highway'. Travellers on this 'State Highway' between Omeo and Glen Wills still had to make do with the extremely bendy dirt road built for tin miners and horse-drawn vehicles before World War 1, until the CRB began to take an interest in alleviating the dangerous twists and turns at the prompting of defence authorities during World War 2. At the end of World War 2, citizens of Omeo still agitated loudly but unsuccessfully for the modern bitumen 'highway' that they believed they had long been promised.

It has proved impossible to pin down the date of construction of the current Cobungra River bridge, but the most likely date seems to be in the 1940s when CRB records became very patchy due to war conditions. A careful search of the detailed information on works carried out on the Omeo (Road) Highway between 1924 and 1940 (published annually as appendices with CRB Annual Reports to Parliament) indicates no bridge construction or major road works undertaken in this vicinity in those years. However, it is possible that some ageing timber piles belonged to the earliest Public Works Department timber bridge constructed at this site, circa 1909-10. The current timber bridge at Anglers Rest still has an acutely angled road approach at one end, close to the old Inn buildings, suggesting that the bridge site (at least) belongs to that earlier era of horse-drawn vehicles.

The Blue Duck Inn, immediately adjacent to the Cobungra River Bridge site, was a stopping place between Glen Wills and the Omeo Goldfields as early as 1890. It pre-existed any real road, the first road-formation work on this particular route between the Glen Wills mines and Omeo being undertaken by unemployed men in 1909. The

Glen Wills tin mines were even then in a state of decline, and with their lapse into obscurity by World War 1 official interest in this section of road declined accordingly.

It appears very likely that a timber bridge was built at the Cobungra River crossing at that time, before the creation of the Country Roads Board. However bridges built during or prior to World War 1 were of very different pattern to the current bridge, as one can readily see by comparing this structure to the nearby Livingstone Creek Bridge's substructure, which dates from the earlier period and was one of the first bridges constructed under CRB auspices.

The Blue Duck Inn at the Cobungra River crossing managed to survive the demise of the once-prolific Glen Wills gold and tin mines, and with its close proximity to several fast-flowing mountain rivers it became a favourite camping haven for fishermen anxious to get away from all vestiges of civilization, hence the tiny settlement's latter-day name of Angler's Rest. Prior to World War 2, any motorist sufficiently intrepid to brave the twisting section of narrow and rough road linking Omeo with the historic Blue Duck Inn certainly needed a rest on arrival.

When war broke out in 1939, Australia's defence authorities became very interested in the Omeo Highway as a direct north-south road link between Gippsland centres and the Riverina, and a possible alternative to the Hume Highway and Princes Highway road links between Sydney and Melbourne. An official report produced for the military authorities indicated that the road surface, its dubious bridges and its sharp bends rendered it useless for military traffic. Fierce forest fires also devastated Omeo and many parts of the adjacent high country in January 1939, but it appears that the buildings of the old Blue Duck Inn and the immediate vicinity of the Cobungra River Bridge were not directly affected. The Bairnsdale press of 13 January, 1939, reported 'a fierce forest fire blazing on a hundred mile front in rough, heavily timbered country between Omeo and Glen Wills', and the Glen Wills mail car was burnt out en-route between Glen Wills and Omeo around that time. Other bridges on this route, including the Bingo Munjie Bridge, had to be rebuilt after these fires but there is no reference in CRB records to bridge construction at Anglers Rest during 1939-40.

One surviving engineer's report on this bridge bears the date November 1941. This report makes it clear that at the end of 1941 the Cobungra Bridge still retained its original transverse-deck form (complemented by running planks), and that the deck was almost a metre narrower than the current deck. In 1941 the bridge had only three timber stringers per span, as against five today. The 1941 report described two key stringers as badly rotted, and ended with the engineer's comment that a new bridge was urgently required. The basic design of the timber elements of the substructure appears very similar to that existing in 1941, and some ageing timber piles possibly date back to circa 1910.

However, the CRB does appear to have undertaken its first real efforts to improve this very poor section of 'the Omeo Highway' in the years between 1939 and 1942, most probably in response to the military's expressed interest in the route. That is the only real explanation for CRB interest at that time, when rural bridges and roads were usually very low on the official priority list. In the last published detailed CRB appendices relating to highway works, covering works carried out in the financial year ending June 1940, reference was made to re-alignment works on the sharp curves near Livingstone Creek Bridge, and to the widening and improving of dangerous curves between Glen Wills and Livingstone Creek. Due to wartime austerity measures, detailed information on works undertaken in the ensuing years was not published. It appears to have been assumed in VicRoads circles that the bridge piles at Anglers Rest are old (1932?), and some certainly look old. These may in fact date back to the original bridge of circa 1909-10, and have been re-used for a later CRB motor bridge.

The Omeo historian comments that 'heavy floods in April and May [of 1941] caused great damage to all roads and bridges, and all available labour had to be recruited to keep roads open'. Although no explicit supporting evidence has been found and any such serious flooding must have been confined to the Omeo district, 1942 would appear a much more likely construction date for the current Cobungra River Bridge than the very depressed year of 1932. Prior to the military's interest in this section of road, it had ceased to interest road authorities after the decline early this century of the Glen Wills tin mines, and the CRB had shown no interest in reconstructing this section of its first 'State Highway' prior to the war. This section of 'highway' fulfilled no important function in relation to the dominant primary industries of that era, whereas the northerly section connecting with the Murray Valley became an important timber-access road.

If the current Cobungra River Bridge was not built in those mysterious war years, then the persuasive lack of evidence for its construction in detailed sources covering the period between the world wars would suggest a construction date after World War 2. The current timber bridge certainly post-dates 1930, when the CRB introduced a new style of longitudinally-decked motor bridge that became standard on CRB roads after 1931, and

was still being constructed on such lightly-trafficked Gippsland roads after World War 2. Many bridges of very similar design can still be found scattered across the mountainous terrain of East Gippsland, where the all-timber road bridge seems to have made its last stand against 'the forces of progress' represented by reinforced concrete. By the late 1950s the Bairnsdale District headquarters of the Country Roads Board was very proud of its capacity to produce new lightweight reinforced-concrete bridge components to tame East Gippsland's notoriously difficult rivers, but lesser mountain streams could still be handled by conventional timber-bridge design. The only concrete in the Cobungra River Bridge comprises a more recently inserted concrete abutment that replaces an original timber abutment at one end, and some concrete collars around the bases of older piles.

## **Assessment Against Criteria**

### **Criterion A.**

The historical importance, association with or relationship to Victoria's history of the place or object.

The Cobungra River Bridge is of historical importance as a now rare example of the symbiotic relationship between bridges and hotels which was an important part of the pioneering of many districts and towns in Victoria. The bridge is situated at an important historic travellers crossing and resting place (beside the associated Blue Duck Inn and camping site), on a route that since the later part of the 19th century has served as a vital transport link for some of the State's most isolated mining and farming settlements. It would appear to have been built in the early 1940s as a successor to an earlier bridge (c.1909), some parts of which may remain.

The bridge is of historical significance through its relationship with the Omeo Highway, Victoria's first 'State Highway'.

The existing bridge appears to have been rebuilt during the Second World War when renewed interest was shown in the Omeo Highway and its potential to form a strategic interstate link in the nation's defence infrastructure.

### **Criterion B.**

The importance of a place or object in demonstrating rarity or uniqueness.

The Cobungra River Bridge is a rare, perhaps unique, example of the once widespread and historically important association of hotels and timber bridges.

It is one of the best preserved examples of a once common but now increasingly rare form of timber road bridge.

Its vernacular construction and materials contribute to one of Victoria's exceptional cultural and natural landscapes. It is a setting of rare beauty and historic integrity.

Timber bridges of any type are now extremely rare on Victoria's State Highways or Main Roads.

Timber bridges with fender or buffer piles are now rare in Victoria.

### **Criterion C.**

The place or object's potential to educate, illustrate or provide further scientific investigation in relation to Victoria's cultural heritage.

The Cobungra River Bridge has educational and tourism value in its potential to demonstrate typical design features and construction detail of a once ubiquitous, but now increasingly rare, form of all-timber road bridge. It also has the potential to educate in historical patterns of pioneering in Victoria.

### **Criterion D.**

The importance of a place or object in exhibiting the principal characteristics or the representative nature of a place or object as part of a class or type of places or objects.

The Cobungra River Bridge is an excellent representative example of the standard 1930 CRB design longitudinal deck all-timber bridge, one of Victoria's most significant bridge design innovations.

It is also a now rare example of one of the more important marks of the genesis of settlements in Victoria.

**Criterion E.**

The importance of a place or object in exhibiting good design or aesthetic characteristics and/or in exhibiting a richness, diversity or unusual integration of features.

**Criterion F.**

The importance of a place or object in demonstrating or being associated with scientific or technical innovations or achievements.

The Cobungra River Bridge is of importance as a representative and well-preserved example of the standard longitudinally-decked all-timber 1930 CRB road bridge design that was both technically innovative and of enormous economic benefit to the State. This style was not only the first standard Victorian timber bridge design developed specifically for motor transport, but was so innovative in its construction detail, that it would revolutionise a whole generation of engineers' thinking about the practicality and longevity of timber bridges. It was to become one of the most widely used timber bridge designs in Victoria during the middle decades of the 20th century.

**Criterion G.**

The importance of a place or object in demonstrating social or cultural associations.

**Criterion H.**

Any other matter which the Council considers relevant to the demonstration of cultural heritage significance.

The Cobungra River Bridge is of aesthetic significance through its contribution to a picturesque cultural landscape that characterises Victoria's high country. The swiftly-flowing mountain stream, acutely angled approach road and historic timber buildings of the adjacent Blue Duck Inn, set amidst forest and mountains, all combine to provide a splendid backdrop with rare 'old world' charm for this otherwise typical medium-size Country Roads Board timber motor bridge.

## **Extent of Registration**

All the bridge marked B1, including its abutments, and land five metres either side of the bridge and its abutments, as marked on Diagram Number 1854 held by the Executive Director, being part of the land described as government road (Omeo Highway) part in the Parish of Bingo-Munjie North and part in the Parish of Bundara-Munjie.

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*