COACHING DAYS IN NSW

Horse teams and American coaches were imported, the coaches further modified to suit the harsh Australian conditions. The Australian bush tracks necessitated lightweight, strong vehicles and it was here that the American designed coaches proved their value. Coaches ranged in size from 8 seat coaches to the famed Leviathan coaches carrying 80 passengers. Horses were bred specifically for the coaching industry and were strong and speedy. Coach teams were matched on performance, size and temperament, as well as colour and markings. Teams of three, four, five, six or more horses pulled the coach depending on the size of the coach and the topography of the route. Each of Cobb & Co.’s drivers specialised in particular sections of the coach runs and knew every twist and turn of the road. The drivers had favourite horse teams and it was the groom’s job to have the correct team of horses ready for the driver as the coach came into the changing station. A law was introduced requiring the coach driver to sound a bugle as he approached a settlement or changing station. This alerted people to the approach of the coach and warned the groom to harness the next set of horses. The team from the last section run was unhitched, fed and groomed, the fresh team hitched to the coach to thunder off across the countryside to the next changing station. Unlike many of the rival companies, Cobb & Co. operated its lines after nightfall. Cobb & Co. was known for its triangular arrangement of coach lights – lights either side of the coach and a large central light on the coach roof. The triangle of lights could be visible to the changing stations and settlements from across the plains, the magic of the effect recorded by Australian poets such as Henry Lawson and Will Ogilvie.

Shortly after Cobb & Co. established their operation base at Bathurst, a coach works was opened and a wide variety of horse drawn vehicles built on the site, even a one wheeled vehicle for rough and steep country (the design was not a success). There were six distinct trades involved in coach building. They were the body maker, the carriage maker, the wheelwright, the blacksmith, the painter and the trimmer. Each was a specialist trade, the pride and workmanship evident in the finished vehicles with precision craftsmanship, plush upholstery and detailed scrollwork. Tradesmen were also employed to make and maintain all the harness required for the horse teams. Cobb & Co. coach factories were also set up in Goulburn, Hay and Bourke. The coach industry peaked in the 1880s after which competition with the expanding railway lines altered the transport system.

The coming of the railway saw Cobb & Co. move further westwards, to service localities and communities beyond the rail terminus. Cobb & Co. viewed the introduction of railway lines as a basis to expand their own operation into western NSW and worked in support of the rail industry. Cobb & Co. founded the Eskbank Iron Works at Lithgow. The plant was eventually acquired by Australian Iron and Steel, later a subsidiary of BHP.

In 1865 Cobb & Co. expanded into Queensland and a new coach factory built in Charleville. The NSW & Victorian Cobb & Co. coaches were traditionally painted red and yellow, but the stock coming out of the Queensland factory was painted white. The NSW factories closed down, all business being transferred to the Charleville plant (Bathurst closed 1893, Bourke’s factory in 1899). The coach industry started to decline with most NSW lines ceasing operation by 1897, although some licences were still held in the Bourke area until 1916. The Charleville factory closed in 1920 and the last coach run for Cobb & Co. in Queensland on 14 August 1924, between Yuleba and Surat.

Of the partners to this famous Company, several retired from the firm, new partners taking their place. WF Whitney remained with Cobb & Co., living in Orange and later at Carcoar. He died in 1894 and is buried in the Orange Cemetery. Frank Whitney was the booking office manager at Orange and was well respected by the employees of Cobb & Co. Upon his retirement from the booking office and as a mark of respect for his contribution to the company, the employees of Cobb & Co. in Queensland and NSW donated funds for the construction of a marble fountain, located in Orange’s Robertson Park.

James Rutherford was still working as Cobb & Co. General Manager at the time of his death on 13 September 1911. He was on a tour of inspection of his Queensland properties when taken ill. He died in Mackay and is buried at Bathurst, NSW. His death marked the final chapter in the operation of the firm, coupled with the political and economic effects of World War 1 and the 1930s Great Depression. However the legend had been born and the name of Cobb & Co. was destined to become an Australian institution.

The Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co. Story

In 1997 the Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co. Heritage Trail Working Party was established and represents the twelve local government areas between Bathurst to Bourke. The area covers approximately 1000 km of diverse landscape. Throughout the area are many sites and places that were part of the Cobb & Co. story. The aim of the group was to record the history of Cobb & Co. and its contribution to the area.

This education resource kit is a direct result of the initiative of the Working Party. The kit focuses on the Bathurst to Bourke line as a case study. The education resource kit has been prepared to compliment the HSIE primary school syllabus and foster an interest in Australia’s diverse and colourful history. The kit offers a challenge to schools and community groups to locate further historical accounts of the Cobb & Co. story. You are invited to share the Bathurst to Bourke Cobb & Co. Heritage Trail experience, and in return, provide the Working Party with an account of your findings. This way a resource base can be established to record the story of Cobb & Co.

We hope you find the contents of the resource kit entertaining, informative and challenging.