



# Richmond Bridge

TASMANIA

The sandstone arches of the Richmond Bridge have straddled Tasmania's Coal River since 1825. Built by convict labour, Richmond Bridge is Australia's earliest large-stone bridge and represents an important element of our convict past.

Richmond Bridge has outstanding heritage value to the nation for its rarity as Australia's oldest large-stone arch bridge and its aesthetic qualities that have inspired the work of major Australian artists.

The Richmond area was first explored by Europeans in 1803. European settlement and cultivation of Richmond quickly developed. All available land in the district was made over to wheat cultivation and from about 1820 the region became known as the granary of the Australian colonies. Increased road traffic made a bridge over the Coal River a necessity. For some years carts and cattle had crossed the river at a ford south of where the bridge now stands. However, traffic was often delayed in winter and spring when the Coal River flooded. The need for a bridge was recognised by the Royal Commissioner, John Thomas Bigge, when he visited Richmond in 1820 as part of his commission of inquiry on agriculture and trade. The site was selected and construction of a stone bridge commenced in December 1823.

Richmond Bridge was probably designed by Major Thomas Bell, who had six years experience as Acting Colonial Engineer. Bell also supervised construction of the bridge, which was undertaken using convict labour to cut, transport and place the local sandstone. The bridge was completed in either late 1824 or early 1825 (various dates are given). The establishment of Richmond is closely associated with the bridge. Within two months of the commencement of work on the bridge the township of Richmond was proclaimed.

Richmond Bridge allowed heavy traffic to proceed without delay between Hobart and the east coast and Tasman Peninsula. The bridge served to consolidate Richmond as a focus for commercial and institutional development. By 1835 Richmond had the largest district population in Van Diemen's Land and was the third largest town in the colony. The opening of the Sorell causeway in 1872 provided a more direct link between Hobart and the Tasman Peninsula. Land traffic thereafter largely bypassed Richmond. The population of Richmond remained virtually unchanged at approximately 1600 people



between 1862 and 1957. One of the main attractions of the town became Richmond Bridge, which is still used for road traffic today but remains little changed from the 1820s. The aesthetic design and setting of the bridge became a major tourist drawcard in the 20th century. By the 1920s Richmond Bridge was featured on postcards and this was followed by artistic and photographic depictions, as well as commemoration in exhibition and books.

From the 1960s Richmond Bridge began to be more widely recognised for its architectural and historical significance. The bridge featured on Australian stamps issued in 1976 and 2004. Richmond and its bridge today attract more than 200 000 visitors annually.

National Heritage List: 25 November 2005

