

# Beyond the Flood Levels





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## OVERVIEW

Maitland's flood history has left a permanent mark on the development of the city with major flooding occurring in 1820, 1893, 1913, 1930, 1949 and devastatingly in 1955. There have also been periods of flooding in recent times. In 1982 a series of 100 flood markers were installed on power poles around flood liable areas of Maitland describing the high points of the 1955 flood. Only a handful of these markers remain. Reinterpreting these markers to acknowledge the floods of the past and the stories that come with them has been identified in the [Central Maitland Heritage Interpretation Plan](#).

## VISION

Through a combination of contemporary digital technology and exceptional storytelling, visitors and local community members will be able to engage in meaningful, authentic, and memorable experiences across Central Maitland. These experiences should ultimately increase a sense of connection to place and memorialise the significant impact of historic flood events on the citizens of the Hunter Region and the city of Maitland.

## THE PROJECT

This project invites creatives and digital placemaking specialists to create a connected series of unique, location specific, innovative and captivating interpretive experiences to acknowledge the significant impact of flooding events across Central Maitland on the Maitland community and the identity of the city.

The project should produce 10 to 12 interactive augmented reality experiences with a consistent visual aesthetic, of varying significance, duration and impact that create an interpretive journey across the City. It is requested that two to three significant augmented reality experiences form the cornerstone of the project. Awareness of the importance and significance of the remaining flood markers from 1982 should be considered.

This project is directed by the [Place Activation Strategy](#) guiding principle Interpretation and is aligned with the [Central Maitland Heritage Interpretation Plan](#).

## LOCATIONS

The project should produce 10 to 12 connected interactive experiences forming a journey throughout Central Maitland. Applicants can select the locations from the list provided in Appendix A, and the significance of the location(s) should be reflected in the storytelling.

The applicants will need to work with the Place Activation team to confirm the suitability of locations for the project. This will ensure that both any sites impacted by planned works are identified and that private landowner approval is received where required for access or placement of markers developed and installed by Council. Given the Central Maitland footprint, consideration to location selection such as accessibility and participant safety must also be addressed prior to development of final plans.

## FORMAT

It is envisaged the experiences will be designed to be hosted on the [MyMaitland website](#), however other suggested delivery platforms will be considered, including alignment with the Maitland Walks app, available from both the Apple Store and Google Play. Markers at each location will be developed and installed by Maitland City Council to support awareness of the flood history interpretation and to align with the format of the Poverty and Prosperity Heritage Walk.

Minimal maintenance should be required over the lifespan of the project including, but not limited to, domain hosting, software or app upgrades and user experience support and feedback.

## THE AUDIENCE

The primary intended audience for the Beyond the Flood Levels project is the local domestic tourism market and the local community, including those with lived experience of the floods.

## BUDGET

\$70,000 (Plus GST if applicable) to produce 10 to 12 interactive experiences.







TIMELINE

STAGE	DATE
Expression of Interest open	25 October 2021
Expression of Interest closes	29 November 2021
Shortlisted submission notification	15 December 2021
Full submissions close	28 January 2022
Successful project selected	15 February 2022
Project delivered	From July 2022
Launch	From August 2022

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Central Maitland suffered one of its most serious floods in 1955. Only two hectares of land remained free of flooding while other areas were flooded to a depth of 2.75 metres (9 feet) and greater.

The flood was one of the first natural disasters in Australia to be broadcast worldwide. Original [Movietone News footage](#) of the flood was shown both nationally and internationally. Maitland’s identity has been associated with serious flooding ever since.

While floods have caused damage to property, disruption to business and even death, the citizens of the Hunter Region banded together performing acts of heroism and humanitarianism in the face of adversity and loss. Capturing narratives around bravery and charity with interpretive flood markers will memorialise the history of Maitland’s perseverance. These experiences will further conversations around the effects of flooding on the social history of the city beyond how high the waters rose.

The attached Appendix A is a collection of stories, images, and articles on the historical floods in Maitland. They are not prescriptive of the expected stories or animations but for inspiration to approach this project. Appendix B is a map of Central Maitland showing some key locations which were affected by the floods, as documented in Appendix A, and the location of remaining flood markers within Central Maitland. Appendix C includes links to various additional resources. It is recommended that applicants conduct further research to help develop their interpretations.

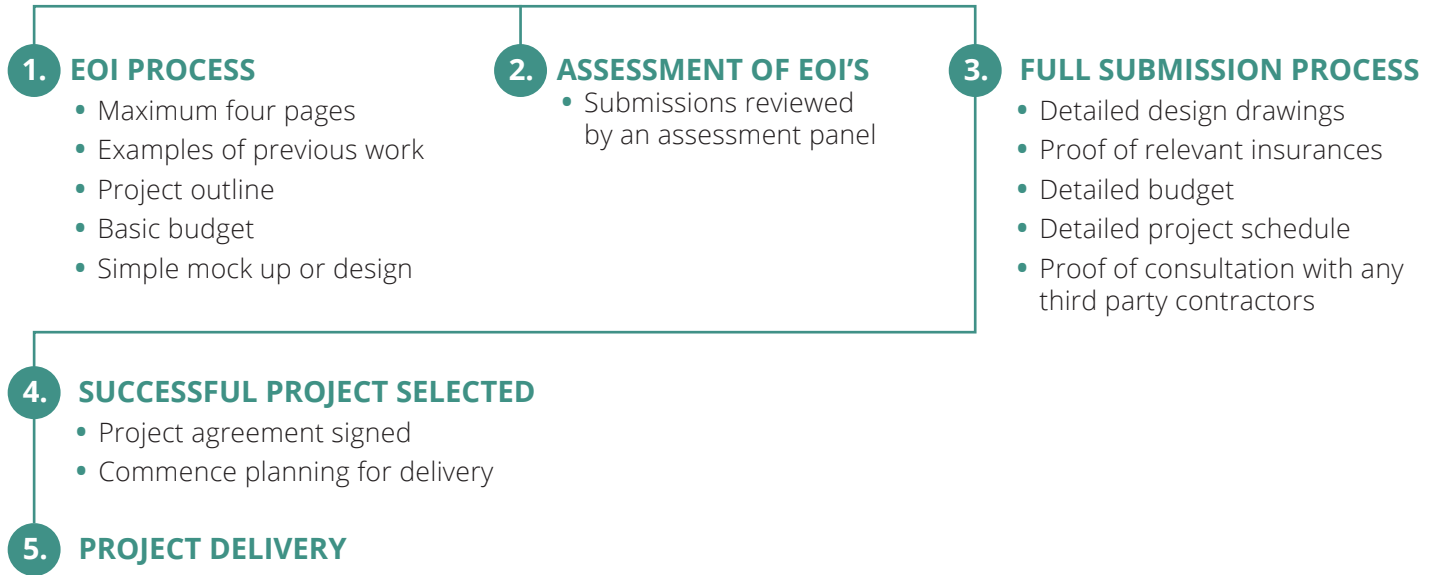




# Submission Process

An Expression of Interest for flood markers must fulfil specific requirements and be received by midnight on Monday 29 November 2021. It must be a maximum of four pages, include examples of previous works, have a project outline, basic budget and a simple design or mock-up of up to three interpretive experiences.

## BELOW IS A SUMMARY OF THE PROCESS



We encourage creatives to discuss their ideas and direct any questions to the Place Activation team on 02 4939 1065 or [Place.Activation@maitland.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Place.Activation@maitland.nsw.gov.au)

Digital submissions are preferred.

### EMAIL

[Place.Activation@maitland.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Place.Activation@maitland.nsw.gov.au)

### POST

Place Activation Team  
Maitland City Council  
PO Box 220  
Maitland NSW 2320







# APPENDIX A

## INTRODUCTION

'Maitland Memories' is a collection of stories, images and articles on the historical floods of Maitland and its effects on the community. This document is to inspire the applicants of 'Beyond the Flood Levels' and provide historical research related to the Maitland floods. The purpose of this project is to reinterpret the stories from the floods in a creative way to capture and memorialise the resilience of the people of Maitland.

## CENTRAL MAITLAND LOCATIONS

1. W. J. McLauchlin's Bakery, 305 High Street
2. Capper & Son Store, corner of Hunter and High Streets
3. **A.** M'Fren Car Dealership, corner of Devonshire and High Streets  
**B.** McLEOD, KELSO & LEE, 299 – 301 High Street
4. Maitland Town Hall
5. Maitland Post Office
6. 39 Lee Street
7. Horseshoe Bend, Hunter Street
8. Maitland Sportsground
9. Maitland Hotels:
  - A.** The Currency Lass, 205 High Street
  - B.** The Royal Hotel, 246 High Street
  - C.** The Queens Arms Hotel, 243 High Street
10. 87 Elgin Street
11. Princes Engineering Works, corner of High and Denman Streets
12. Swales Café, High Street
13. Catherine Street and the Cinema Complex
14. Advanx Tyre Specialists, 511 High Street
15. Maitland Railway Station
16. The Railway Signal Box
17. Mt Pleasant Street
18. The Long Bridge
19. Maitland Hospital
20. Evacuation Centres

**Flood Dates:** 1820, 1857, 1861, 1864, 1867, 1870, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1893 (the worst until 1955)  
1913, 1930, 1949, 1952, 1955, 1971, 2007

By Georgia Bennett Local Studies Librarian



LOCATION 1 – W. MCLAUCHLIN’S BAKERY, 305 HIGH STREET



W. McLauchlin's Bakery Town and Country Journal 1902. W. McLauchlin's Bakery today.

McLauchlin's Bakery was a Maitland icon for over a century and it has a personal connection with several Maitland flood events. John McLauchlin who founded the bakery in 1854 drowned in the flood of 1870, apparently whilst delivering bread to Louth Park flood victims (Wingham, Chronicle and Manning River Observer 15 September 1944). A newspaper article written shortly after his death writes that John McLauchlin could often be seen rowing supplies of bread and other provisions to families who had become flooded in. This tradition continued with the flood of 1955 in which his son Walter John, baked a 1,000 loaves to feed those who had taken refuge at the Town Hall and at the Convent.



High Street February 1955

When the 1955 flood hit, a former employer Harold Mayo recollects that the waters reached the height of the double oven. Some of the bakery staff sought shelter upstairs as there was plenty of bread to eat, tinned food and water to drink.





## LOCATION 2 - CAPPER & SONS STORE, CORNER OF HUNTER AND HIGH STREETS



*Image taken of Capper & Sons store from 'With Compliments, West Maitland 1922'.*

When the Army DUKWs (colloquially know as 'ducks') moved up High Street during the flood, the waves that they created smashed many shop windows. Subsequently people who needed supplies like cutlery and household goods rowed in through the broken windows and took what they needed. Once the business reopened all the goods were paid for!

The store was located on the corner of Hunter and High Street opposite the Maitland Mercury building and was destroyed by fire in 1971.



*Original location of Capper & Sons, date unknown.*



LOCATION 3. A - M'FREN'S CAR DEALERSHIP, CORNER OF DEVONSHIRE AND HIGH STREETS



The site of M'Fren's car dealership today.



1955 flood damage to M'Frens.





**LOCATION 3. B – MCLEOD, KELSO & LEE, 299 – 301 HIGH STREET**

These are the memories of Max Howard who worked at McLeod, Kelso & Lee car dealership.

Max recalls the massive clean up that was undertaken after the 1955 flood, saying 'there was so much mud!' The Fire Brigade was down the road from the workshop helping to hose the mud and debris out of the cellars. The clean up at the dealership and workshop was a very slow and arduous task so it was decided to see if the Fire Brigade would lend their hose to speed the process up. According to Max this was all rather exciting saying 'the fire hose was like a mad snake!'

There was a pit four foot deep in the workshop which was completely full of water and thus virtually invisible. One chap who was busy mopping up the mud took a step and disappeared into the watery pit. He was unharmed and it gave them all a good laugh which helped break the tension.

SPECIAL

SPECIAL

Used Car

Week

SPECIAL

SPECIAL

Each of the vehicles listed below have been locally owned. Late owner's name and history of each car supplied. This removes from the purchaser's mind any doubt as to what the car has been used for.

**1936 CHEVROLET STANDARD SEDAN**  
Here is something quite out of the ordinary run of Used Cars. Its condition is absolutely as new, immaculately clean, upholstery and duco unmarked. Has done very small mileage, mechanically perfect. Ducoed dark blue, with leather to match.

**1936 CHEVROLET STANDARD SEDAN**  
This car is practically the same as the previous one but has done little more mileage. Condition is perfect throughout. Ducoed green, brown leather upholstery.

**1934 CHEVROLET STANDARD SEDAN**  
This car has had complete overhaul and re-ducoed dark blue, now in faultless condition.

**1937 VAUXHALL 14 H.P. SEDAN**  
Here is something exceptional. In splendid condition throughout, ducoed ivory with red leather upholstery, well shod, economical.

**1928 WHIPPET 4 CYL. TOURER**  
Four Wheel Brake Model. Just overhauled and re-ducoed. Very smart and attractive, new tyres. Very economical and light registration.

**1937 CHEVROLET 15-18 CWT. UTILITY**  
All Steel Cab, very roomy All Steel Body. In tip top order throughout. Appearance as new. Well shod. These jobs are very scarce. Don't miss this opportunity.

**McLEOD, KELSO & LEE PTY. LTD.**

McLeod, Kelso & Lee advertisement Maitland Daily Mercury Fri 1 Dec 1939.

**LOCATION 4 - MAITLAND TOWN HALL**

In the 1949 flood a car was driven into the Town Hall via the double doors so that it would not get swept away down High Street in the torrent of flood water. During the 1955 flood, a boat was rowed into the Town Hall with supplies whilst people saw chairs float out of the building and away down High Street.



Flood appeal workers sorting through donations at Town Hall 1955.



## LOCATION 5 - MAITLAND POST OFFICE

These are the memories of staff and people who worked or took shelter at the Maitland Post Office. Recollections from Cliff McHardy (a Police Officer in town from Tenterfield attending a court matter).

### *Catering for the Masses and the Unclaimed Keg of Beer!*

Cliff's first night in town was spent at the Police Station on the top floor, where he watched nearby houses being broken apart from the force of the flood waters. He watched as a grand piano suddenly appeared whilst the house was being broken apart. Further up the street there was a car yard in which the water was pushing all the cars into the gates, when the gates finally gave way all the cars floated off down the street. After a night at the Police Station, Cliff was moved to the mail room of the Post Office.

An Army DUKW brought supplies to the Post Office including meat, which needed to be stored somewhere cool. Arthur Nichol's butcher shop was located across the road, so it was decided to clean the mud out of his cool room and to supply it with power. Cliff was a young bachelor at the time of the floods who was tasked with organising the meals and cooking for those who had taken shelter at the Post Office. This presented a few problems, the main one being that there were only three little electric stoves to cook on (one day they catered for 500 people). His solution was to approach all the Greek restaurants in town. He negotiated that if he supplied the produce, they could cook whatever meals they liked.

'They were great fellows and I'd compensate them with whatever groceries they wanted and as the government was paying for it, it wasn't hard to do!'

One day the surf boat came by with an unclaimed and unmarked keg of beer. The keg was stored in the cool room at the butcher's shop and as the owner could not be ascertained, it was dully opened for an impromptu party.

THE MAITLAND DAILY MERCURY, WEDNESDAY, MAY 10, 1929

A print advertisement in the Maitland Mercury by J. A. Nichols, 342 High Street, West Maitland.





Paula Carter worked at the telephone exchange at the Post Office and was called into work during the flood crisis.

'I looked out the window and saw water pouring down the laneway past the Carrington Hotel into High Street. I'd been boarding at a house in Denman Street and was told that the water was coming up into the house so I should get my clothes.'

Paula was taken to collect her clothes and possessions and was subsequently the most popular lady at the Post Office. Many ladies sheltering or working at the Post Office were without clean clothes, so anyone that could fit into Paula's clothes was wearing them.

**These are memories of Dorothy Crouch.**

***Telegram boys and banana fritters for dinner***

'Coles was opposite us and the telegram boys were picking things out of the water and saying, 'who wants a toothbrush', 'who wants some undies' and throwing all this stuff up to us.' The manager of Hustlers then came across and asked if there were any girls without a change of clothes? 'None of us had any clothes so he let us get what we wanted. He didn't ask for money either he just let us take what we needed.'

Many people who talk about the floods mention the bananas. Supplies were sent by train from Sydney including boxes and boxes of them. All up High street there were boxes of bananas so dinner at the Post Office that night was banana fritters! As a result of all the bananas there are people who have been interviewed about their flood memories who say they haven't eaten one since!



Post Office 1955 Flood. Image courtesy of Peter Bogan.





## LOCATION 6 - 39 LEE STREET

During the flood of 1949, local man 61 year old Gordon Judge, swam through freezing cold flood waters to try and rescue the family cat. According to the Maitland Mercury (21 June 1949), bystanders watched him cling to the verandah until an Army DUKW was hailed and the freezing man was rescued. His first words were 'get my cat!' Many family pets and livestock have perished in the numerous floods which have beset the region.

One animal related flood story that has now entered the realms of flood folklore, is the swimming cow. The story tells a cow which was swept out to sea during the 1955 flood which, when finally found, was still swimming!

## LOCATION 7 - HORSESHOE BEND, HUNTER STREET

Frank Morris was a linesman who was living with his mother in Hunter Street at the time of the 1955 flood. Many people who had lived through the 1949 flood assumed that the flood of February 1955 would be of a similar magnitude, however it was much more devastating. When a truck arrived at his mother's house to collect their belongings to take to a safe location, they declined the offer as did many others.

Over the course of the day, the water continued to rise and started to breach the levy. Frank recalls stepping into High Street where the force of the water was so strong that it picked him up and swept him to the other side of the street. A council truck arrived in Hunter Street with sand and bags, but this idea was soon abandoned due to the force and amount of water.



*This is the end of Hunter Street in Horseshoe Bend today. Prior to the floods it extended onto Hunter Terrace.*



*Hunter Street looking towards the Hunter River.*

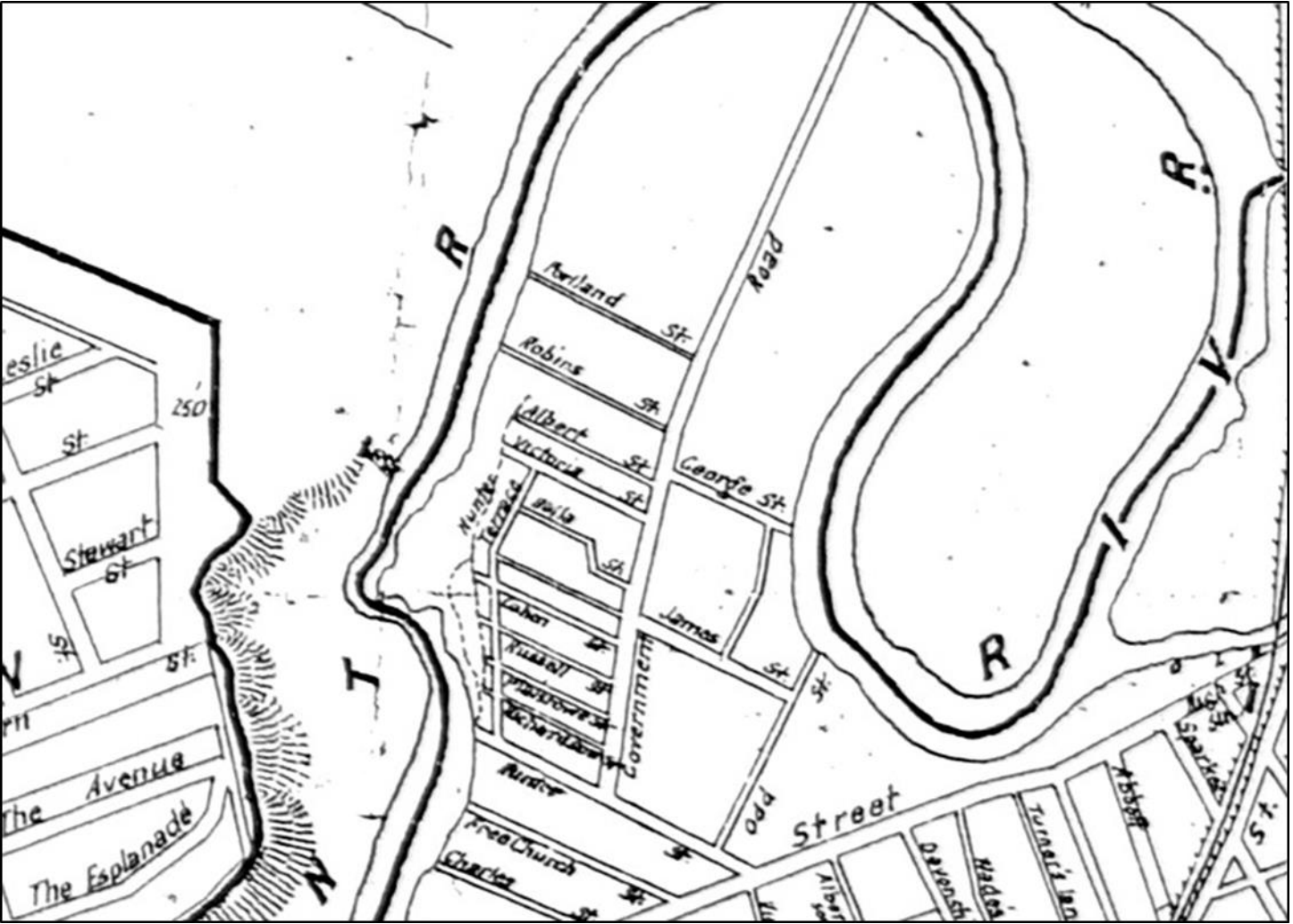




Frank and his mother left their house and stayed at a friend's two storey house also in Hunter Street. From the verandah of the house they could hear people calling for help. Unfortunately, one man who was trapped underneath a fallen wardrobe was unable to be saved. In the clean up that followed, local coal miners came and shovelled the mud and debris out of the house. They had it cleaned up in a few hours!

In the 1955 floods many residents of Horseshoe Bend had to climb up into the attic of their house or onto the roof to escape the flood waters. Houses were often poorly built and poorly situated on the riverbank and the landslips that occurred resulted in the loss of several houses. Floods not only destroyed houses, but the waters also altered whole areas of Maitland such as at Horseshoe Bend. Mallon Street was destroyed by the flood in 1870 along with 20 houses which were swept away, whilst other streets were modified.

The destruction of Hunter Terrace by a landslip also resulted in the shortening of the streets that adjoin it such as Hunter, Plaistowe, Russell and Cohen Streets. The impact of floods on Maitland has seen whole areas transformed as the river changed its course.



Hunter Street, map of Horseshoe Bend, date unknown.



**LOCATION 8 - MAITLAND SPORTSGROUND**

Maitland Sportsground located north of High Street adjacent to Horseshoe Bend has also been greatly impacted by floods over the decades. The image below was taken in the floods of February 1955 with the first grandstand visible.

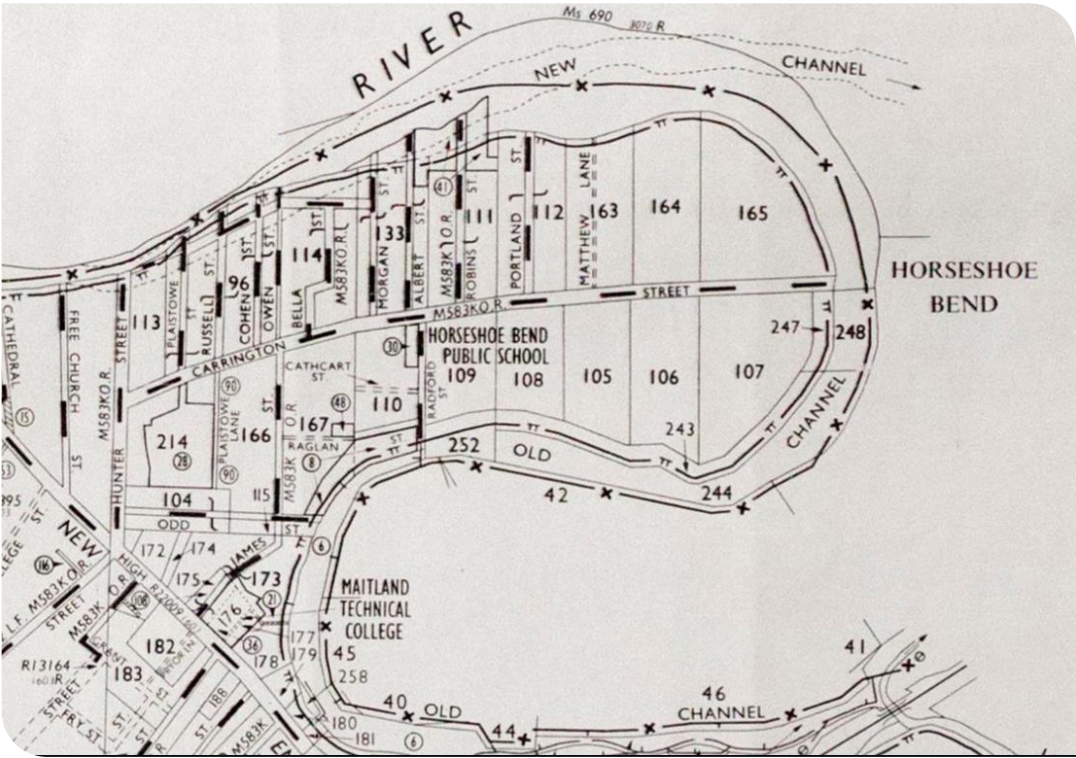
The land on which the Sportsground sat was created when the Hunter River altered its course due to flooding in the late 19th century. Construction of the Sportsground was undertaken during the depression era, with local men working to fill in the old river course. Records show that in 1933 there were an average of 425 men employed each week. Interestingly, the park was colloquially known as ‘Dole Park’ for many years. Payment for work was with a dole ticket which was exchanged for food (Heritage Impact Assessment 2015).

Looking at the maps (on page 15) one is able to see how the river has changed its course allowing for the Sportsground to be built.

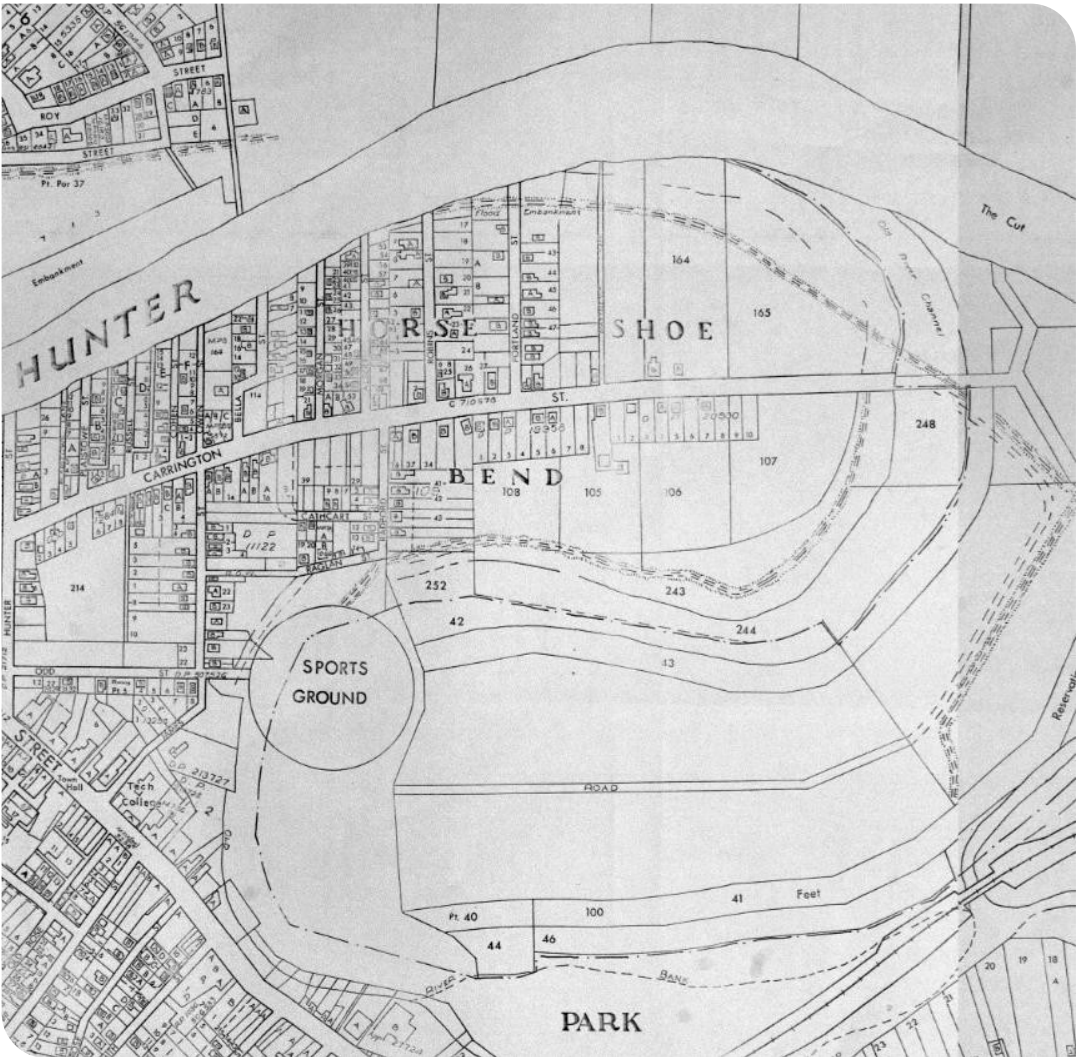


*Aerial shot of Maitland Sportsground and Horseshoe Bend during the 1955 flood.*





March 1885. Parish Map.



1970 Map.





## LOCATION 9 - MAITLAND HOTELS

### 9A - THE CURRENCY LASS HOTEL, 205 HIGH STREET

#### ***Beer O'Clock***

Colleen and Bill Bower were the proprietors when the 1955 flood waters were rising, and when suddenly there was a knock on the front door. The door was opened, and it was one of the regulars wanting to come in for a beer! He was told that the town was flooding and that he should go home. A few minutes later there was another knock on the door, and he was back, still wanting that drink. Bill Bower took him home but had to swim back to the Currency Lass because the waters had risen so much.

The Bowers and 13 boarders were stranded upstairs for several days but they had food and water. Once again there is enormous gratitude for the local miners who came in to clean out the mud after the flood. The force of the water was so strong that the red letter boxes could be seen floating past High Street (they were made for the PMG under contract by a local man).

When they finally managed to get downstairs to the bar, they saw that the water had taken all the labels off the bottles.



*The Currency Lass today.*



*The Currency Lass during the 1955 flood.*





9B - THE ROYAL HOTEL, 246 HIGH STREET



The Royal Hotel, 1987. Image courtesy of F. Cook.



The Royal Hotel building today .



### ***It's a Dry Old Affair.....***

Many people sought shelter at The Royal Hotel during the 1955 floods. There were a few grumbles from some of those sheltering there including the hotel proprietor Bill Martin, that it was a bit of a 'dry stay'. Being a pub, there were plenty of bottles of beer down at the bar if someone was willing to dive down and get them. Several of those sheltering at the hotel were regulars and knew the hotel layout as well as the proprietor. They therefore volunteered to dive down and retrieve supplies. This was done and the bar was drunk dry!

Frank Threlfo (see Advanx Tyre, Location 14, for more information on how he caught a tyre down High street in the flood waters) sat on the awning of The Royal Hotel for three days looking out for a mate (Kelvin who was the son of the hotel cook) who had been washed away at Mt Pleasant Street. After three days, Kelvin was found alive clinging to a tree at the end of the Long Bridge and was rescued by a local. Frank looked down from the awning of The Royal and saw Kelvin waving to him as he was finally brought back to the hotel.

Suzanne Martin lived at The Royal Hotel with her parents who were the proprietors. She was seven at the time of the 1955 flood and recalls that it was an exciting time for her, indeed most children's memories of the floods reflect the excitement that they felt. She saw chairs from the Town Hall and a piano from the Convent float past the hotel.

## **9C - THE QUEENS ARMS HOTEL, 243 HIGH STREET**

### ***The Pub Bread Run***

A boat full of bread was rowed by locals to the Queens Arms Hotel and the Currency Lass Hotel. The water was so high that it was rowed right up to the awnings where the bread was passed out to those inside. They also floated into the Town Hall doorway in order to distribute more bread.



*The Queens Arms Hotel today.*





## LOCATION 10 - 87 ELGIN STREET - SAVING DAD'S WINE COLLECTION

### ***Peter Smith's Memories.***

Pete was about 11 when the 1971 flood scare happened, and it was a big scare as the family lived at 87 Elgin Street. Elgin Street went under in the 1955 flood, so it was expected to happen again. His father's main concern was his wine cellar, which was under the house, would get flooded. There were frantic efforts to get the wine upstairs. Wooden crates were borrowed from Heads Cordial Factory down the road and used to pack all his wine in to move it upstairs. They saved the wine!

## LOCATION 11 - PRINCE ENGINEERING WORKS, CORNER OF HIGH AND DENMAN STREETS

The shop was owned by Will Bogan and Charlie Loss and it was opposite the Belmore Bridge. When the 1955 flood hit, the shop completely disappeared, it was taken by the force of the water. There were big lathes, drilling machines and other heavy equipment in this building, but everything was washed away by flood water.

## LOCATION 12 - SWALES CAFÉ ON HIGH STREET (WHICH WAS OPPOSITE THE PALMERS SHOP AND FACTORY IN 1955)

### ***These are the childhood memories of Jenny Lister of the flood of 1955.***

'The water broke at the side of the Carrington Hotel and it was a wall of water! We basically just lived on the roof of the building for six weeks, dangling our legs into the water and catching the lollies that the boats threw up to us. The Greek café below put their stock up on our landing because it was out of the reach of the water, so we also had free chocolates.'

Jenny watched as an Army DUKW tried to move up High Street, however the force of the torrent of water was so strong that the DUKW was spun around and pushed through the front windows of the Burgess and Lightfoot shops, the water was just that strong. The smaller surf boats fared much better.

A board was placed out on one of the third floor windows of the Carrington Hotel and over to the roof of the adjoining building (the top storey of this building has since been removed) which people slid across to leave the hotel.



*Carrington Hotel and Palmers February 1955.*



*The big blue/grey building is the old Palmers Building on High Street as it appears today.*

**LOCATION 13 - CATHERINE STREET AND THE CINEMA COMPLEX**

Local gentleman Max Howard recalls living in Catherine Street at the time of the 1949 flood, not far from the gas works in Charles Street (where the cinema complex is today). When the water reached the railway line, they knew that they would get flooded. When the '49 floods hit, his family used a broken billy cart and wardrobes to move their belongings. They laid the wardrobes flat on the cart, opened them up and filled them with all their precious things such as photos and papers and dragged it up to Bulwer Street.





### LOCATION 14 - ADVANX TYRE SPECIALISTS, 511 HIGH STREET

They were located on Belmore Corner opposite Maitland Library in what is now The Cabin Collective. After the 1955 flood the building was hidden under trees, debris and mud.

There were plenty of spare tyres out the front of the shop and during the flood of 1955, Frank Threlfo who was swept up in the torrent of water rushing down Mt Pleasant street, grabbed one big tyre that was floating past him. He climbed into the centre of the tyre and steered it as best he could down High Street until he washed up at The Royal Hotel.



1955 Flood, Advanx Tyre Specialists and the Court House in the background.



The Cabin Collective on the site of what was Advanx Tyre's.

**Motorists...**

NOW IS THE TIME FOR YOU  
ANNUAL CHECK UP

BRING YOUR CAR OR TRUCK  
TO

**ADVANX  
TYRE & REPAIR CO.**

OF HIGH STREET, WEST MAITLAND  
(RIGHT OPP. COURT HOUSE.)

We have a Complete One Stop Service. All Your Requirements  
at the One Service House.

We have all makes of New Tyres and Tubes in stock at the  
Right Prices.

**BUY YOUR REQUIREMENTS NOW AND AVOID RISING PRICES**

Have your Tyres Processed by Advanx Roadmaster Remoulding.  
The Largest Country Equipped Factory in N.S.W.

Skilled Mechanics and Registered Inspectors always available.  
Get your quotes on all your work. Satisfaction Guaranteed.

Delay means Disappointment and Congestion. Do it now. Call  
on us and have trouble free Motoring over the Holidays.

REMEMBER THE ADDRESS—

**ADVANX TYRE & REPAIR CO.**  
HIGH STREET (right opp. Court House). PHONE 889.

National Library of Australia

Advanx Tyre & Repair Co advertisement Maitland Daily Mercury Thu 7 Dec 1939.



**LOCATION 15 - MAITLAND RAILWAY STATION**

During the 1955 flood you could see telegraph poles being picked up by the force of the water and being swept away. There was still electricity connected to the wires. One gentleman Frank Morris, who went to see what damage had been done around town after the flood, has memories of swimming the length of the railway station because it was entirely under water. The flood water rose to a height of 4.2m above the rail level.



*This image has '13.5.1962' handwritten on reverse and is courtesy of Cynthia Hunter.*



*Maitland Railway Station 1930 flood. Image courtesy of S. Smith.*





## LOCATION 16 – THE RAILWAY SIGNAL BOX AND THE HELICOPTER CRASH

### ***Brian Vitnell's Survival Tale***

'My dad and I had to abandon the car and cross the railway line on foot. There were other people also walking along the railway line when the water suddenly started flowing faster! The operator in the signal box waved to us to climb in for shelter. There was jokes and laughter at first until the water kept rising and bringing timber and logs down the river which were smashing the weatherboards off the signal box. A few hours later we were still safe, but the box was coming apart. Word came that a helicopter was on its way, but the signal box was starting to lean over, so we all got ready to jump out the window when it did go over. There was another man in the box with us who couldn't swim. We jumped out when the box toppled over and I thought that it was the end because of the fast torrent of the water but I grabbed a piece of timber and clung on! There were a few of us all in the water. Then the helicopter turned up and dad suggested that the older men in the water go first, they dropped the cable to pick them up and then they hit the high tension wire, which killed the two men being pulled from the river and caused the helicopter to crash. We all hung on to that piece of timber for hours and we had beetles and bugs crawling all over us. We finally came across a haystack and climbed onto it keeping the log with us just in case! Just on dark we saw the Caves Beach surf boat coming out to us and they took us to the East Maitland Police Station.'

'We were then taken in an Army DUKW back to Maitland, but it got stuck in Wallis Creek, so we ended up back at East Maitland for the night. Finally, we were reunited with the family in Maitland who were sheltering in the church on Church Street.'



*An example of a signal box.*



## LOCATION 17 - MT PLEASANT STREET

In the 1955 flood over 30 houses were destroyed with the main area of devastation being Mt Pleasant Street where 20 were washed away.

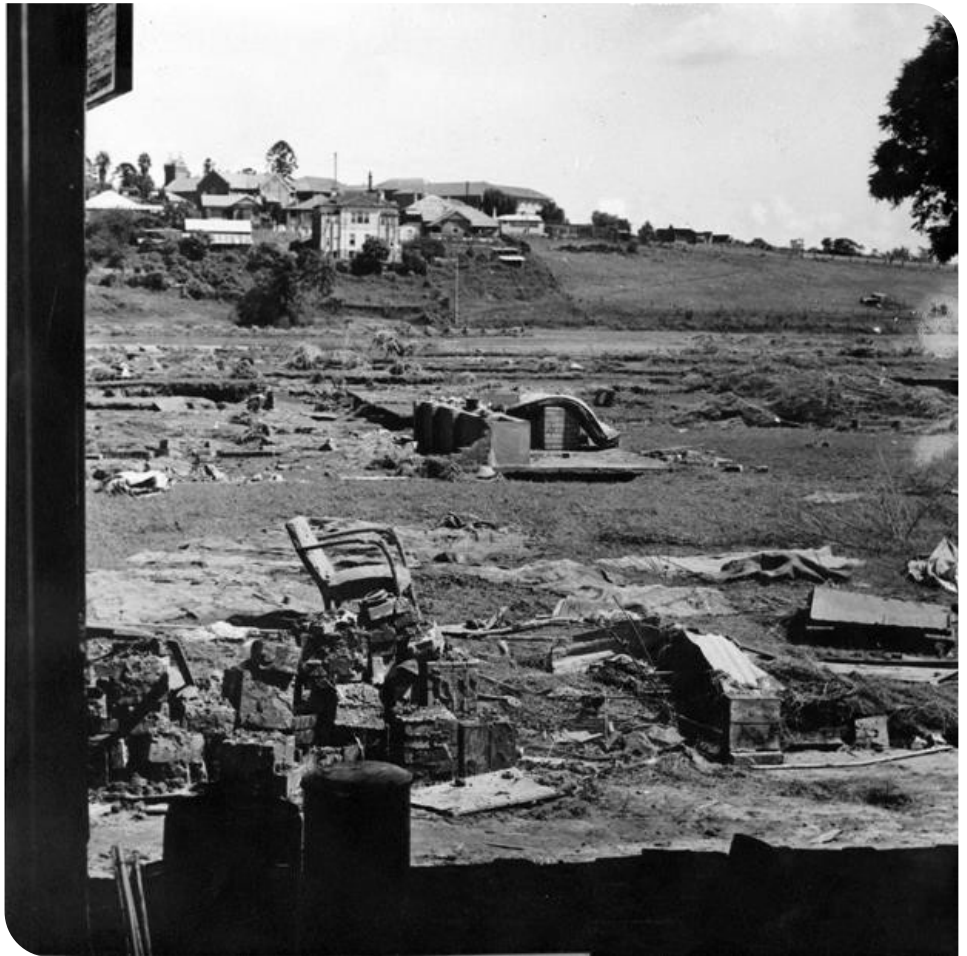
The 1955 flood was a sudden flood. Jenkins Dam at Oakhampton was breached which sent water rushing through Mt Pleasant, Hannan and Sempill Streets into Maitland causing enormous damage. The street was essentially destroyed by the flood waters.

One resident recalls the water picking up the neighbour's house and smashing it into his family's house. One of the walls came down and the house was then pushed over the top of another home.

People had to jump from the roof of their floating house onto the poplar trees at the end of the Long Bridge and cling on waiting for a surf boat to rescue them, sometimes this meant staying there all night. All this was witnessed by people standing on the roof of the Hampton Court building.

Ron Jenkins went with his father to help some family friends. They had parked their car on the hill behind Maitland Hospital and walked down to Mt Pleasant Street. Realising that the family dog was tied up on the verandah Ron volunteered to go back to save the dog. The water continued to rise and by the time Ron had made his way back to Mt Pleasant Street it was at chest height. Suddenly his father was waving for him to hurry because the water was now rushing towards them from Oakhampton. Ron recalls that 'it was just like the ocean with huge waves carrying all sorts of debris with it.' Many people didn't leave their homes because they had lived through the 1949 flood and believed that this flood would not be too bad. Ron and his family watched the flood from the safety of the hill at the Hospital.

After the flood of '55 Hannan and Sempill Streets had three foot of mud over them, you couldn't see the road. Thankfully the miners from Kurri Kurri and Cessnock came and dug the streets out.



*Mt Pleasant Street 1955 flood.*





LOCATION 18 - THE LONG BRIDGE



*The collapsed Long Bridge 1955 flood.*

Over 20 houses were washed away and smashed against the Long Bridge with people making a leap to relative safety in the poplar trees. One house however with the owners still clinging to it was swept under the Bridge and eventually washed up at Testers Hollow.

One of the saddest memories that Dorothy Crouch has is of a couple of Policemen who came into the Post Office and said that they wouldn't be back in for a meal that night because they had to go to Mt Pleasant Street and clean out a house. The owners of the house hadn't managed to get out in time and had drowned. The Police Officers did come back for dinner and the younger officer who was from Sydney and didn't have a change of clothes said to Dorothy 'can you smell me?' It was the first time that she'd smelt death and she never forgot it.



*Long Bridge 1955 flood.*



## LOCATION 19 - MAITLAND HOSPITAL

### Recollections of Peter Byrnes

#### ***Bed pans and mattresses.***

The hospital was having sewerage issues during the flood, and the night cart that collected the used pans and supplied new ones for the outside toilets, was stored in a car park next door to Peters building in Maitland. It was loaded with new cans and pans and Peter decided to take the loaded up launch to the Hospital. They managed to load about 40 – 50 in the launch. People were always offering to help when they saw the launch... but not when it was full of the pans!

The Maitland Mercury ran a story about some nurses at Maitland Hospital who were watching the rising flood waters from the Hospital roof. They saw a roaring torrent pick up and move about 20 houses from the Oakhampton Road and Mt Pleasant Street areas and smash them against the Long Bridge. Some of these houses had people clinging to the roof at the time.

Another story tells of a group of people including a heavily pregnant woman, who floated five miles on a mattress before they were eventually saved.

## LOCATION 20 - EVACUATION CENTRES

There were many evacuation centres set up in Maitland during the 1955 flood. Maitland Court House was used as an evacuation centre and a Sempill Street resident who took shelter there was seen to use the magistrate's bench to hang her children's clothing on to dry. Other locations used were, the Town Hall, Palace Theatre, St Ethel's Primary School, Maitland Primary School and Maitland Boy's High School.

The domestic science block at what was then Maitland Girl's High School was set up to prepare meals. The Army supplied wood fired coppers (the big ones that were used for washing clothes in) and bags and bags of vegetables. Members of the Salvation Army and others peeled mountains of onions, carrots, turnips and potatoes and made soup in the coppers which was distributed around town. The Salvation Army served about 20,000 meals during the 1955 crisis.

Donations: the quadrangle at Maitland Boy's High School was full of mountains of clothes. These had been donated from Sydney. Children's toys were also donated and there was a room at St Ethel's full of boxes of brand new toys!



An Army DUKW 1955.





## ANECDOTES AND STRANGE FLOOD TALES

### ***Pumpkins and Watermelons***

After the flood of 1955 there were masses of watermelons and pumpkins along the railway line. These had been washed down from the nearby farms and had settled in low lying Louth Park along the railway line. All the kids would collect them and take them home.

### ***Biscuit Bombing***

Aircraft were dropping food parcels by parachute into the streets of Central Maitland. A sheet was put down to mark out where to drop the food. One carton was full of sandwiches and fruit from the Central Coast and placed in with the supplies was a note of support and offers of help. One drop point for the pallets of food was near Bulwer and Church Streets.

The parachute material was also used to make children's clothing so there were a lot of children walking around dressed in parachutes!

### ***Charred Cedar Roots***

The flood water from the 1955 deluge washed away so much soil that the charred cedar roots from previous generations of cedar logging were visible.

### ***Grandmother's Chickens***

'Grandmother had newborn chickens at the time of the flood which were put into an old shoe box and taken from the flooded house along with other precious possessions. At the evacuation centre Grandma went and knocked on the doors of people's houses asking if they would look after her chickens. After the floods when we had moved back home Grandma was looking up at the 'large birds' in the trees! These were the chooks that had been left behind and were now roosting up in the trees. They wouldn't come down!' (Astrid McPherson's memories from age seven).

### ***What are those shrubs?***

As the family were rowed to an evacuation centre, seven year old Astrid McPherson's mother asked her father what the shrubs were that they were rowing past? Those 'shrubs' were the tops of the oak trees near Maitland Pool.

## **References:**

- Keys, C. 2008: 'Maitland – City on the Hunter: Fighting Floods or Living with Them?'
- Heritage Impact Assessment 2015: "Maitland Sportsground Redevelopment"

## **DVDs:**

- Historical Flooding in the Maitland Region: Stories from Flood Survivors
- Memories Come Flooding Back Local Studies Collections:

## **Oral Histories**

- Burg, A: '1955 Maitland Flood'
- Boyle, H: 'Maitland and Hunter region floods 1857-1899'
- Newspaper Reports and Articles 1955, 1949
- Picture Maitland
- Historic Map Collection



# APPENDIX B

MAP



- |                         |                                      |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Sempill Street       | 7. James Street                      |
| 2. Little Bourke Street | 8. Odd Street                        |
| 3. Charles Street       | 9. James Street                      |
| 4. Church Street        | 10. Radford Street                   |
| 5. Plaistowe Street     | 11. Portland Street Horseshoe Bend   |
| 6. Hunter Street        | 12. Carrington Street Horseshoe Bend |





# APPENDIX C

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### MAITLAND FLOODS – ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR SUSAN KERRIGAN

#### UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

This podcast on the Maitland Floods was created as a project led by Associate Professor Susan Kerrigan, and who was funded through the Centre for 21st Century Humanities as a start-up project. The funding employed Dr Harry Criticos, Victoria Kerrigan and Simon Richie, who all assisted in creating the podcast.

[soundcloud.com/university-of-newcastle/maitland-floods-associate-professor-susan-kerrigan](https://soundcloud.com/university-of-newcastle/maitland-floods-associate-professor-susan-kerrigan)

### MAITLAND FLOODS (1955)

#### AUSTRALIAN SCREEN, NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE OF AUSTRALIA

Clip description

Residents outside their homes wade knee deep in water. Front lawns have disappeared completely, and houses are quickly engulfed. Water is seeping through the sand bags in place to hold back the flooding banks of the Hunter River.

In one disorientating shot, a man with a bicycle momentarily appears to be speeding through the water, but he is actually stationary and the impression of speed comes from the rapid flood waters rushing by him.

[aso.gov.au/titles/home-movies/maitland-floods/clip2/](https://aso.gov.au/titles/home-movies/maitland-floods/clip2/)

### MAITLAND FLOOD FILMS 1949 AND 1955 (16MM COLOUR AND B/W REELS)

#### CULTURAL COLLECTIONS, AUCHMUTY LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

In September 2014 thirteen (13) 16mm film reels were rescued from disposal by Peter Smith and donated to the University of Newcastle's Cultural Collections (Auchmuty Library) in Australia.

[youtube.com/watch?v=eT7TZ9cLlmo](https://youtube.com/watch?v=eT7TZ9cLlmo)

### REMEMBERING THE HUNTER VALLEY FLOOD SIXTY YEARS ON BY ROBERT VIRTUE

#### ABC LOCAL 20 FEBRUARY 2015

Features composite current day images and flood images of iconic locations and stories of individuals from across the region who experienced the floods.

[abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/02/19/4182970.htm](https://abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/02/19/4182970.htm)

### REMEMBERING THE 1955 MAITLAND FLOOD BY REBECCA BERRY

#### MAITLAND MERCURY 23 FEBRUARY 2017

Stories of the flood accompanied by photos and video footage.

[maitlandmercury.com.au/story/4482113/throwback-remembering-the-1955-maitland-flood-photos-video/](https://maitlandmercury.com.au/story/4482113/throwback-remembering-the-1955-maitland-flood-photos-video/)

### WALK AND TALK FLOOD TOUR WITH PETER BOGAN - MAITLAND STATION

#### NSW SES

The Maitland Railway Station tour recounts the tragic events of the helicopter crash and the DUKW army vehicle that struck high tension wires.

The Walk and Talk Flood Tours were developed in partnership with the NSW State Emergency Service, Hunter Local Land Services and Maitland flood historian Peter Bogan. This tour along with the Mount Pleasant Street tour were recorded in 2015 in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the 1955 flood - the largest and most destructive flood in the history of the Hunter Valley.

[youtube.com/watch?v=wVSmhT0X\\_Y](https://youtube.com/watch?v=wVSmhT0X_Y)

Additional contacts and resources are available via contacting the Place Activation Officer.



For any further questions please contact  
Place Activation Team  
02 4939 1065 or  
[Place.Activation@maitland.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Place.Activation@maitland.nsw.gov.au)