

We walk with
history beneath
our feet.

Sydney's Woodblocked Streets



Gas Lane in Millers Point, 1909-1913, paved with woodblocks.

Until the 1880's, Sydney's roads were constructed of graded broken stone, laid in cambered beds and overlaid with ironstone.



George Street, Sydney c 1880 showing stone paving prior to woodblocks



Old Police Court (now site of the Queen Victoria Building), George Street, Sydney (NSW), c 1883

In heavy trafficked areas the stone surfaces were subject to cracking and frequent wear and tear. As an alternative, woodblocks proved superior. They reduced noise, looked attractive, minimised dust, were durable and easily cleaned, plus Australia had an ample supply of suitable hardwood timber.

Woodblocking of roads had developed in England and the US in the 1840's but had not been successful, possibly because the higher rainfall made the wood rot more easily and because softwoods were used.

In Sydney the technique was embraced enthusiastically from the 1880's.



Customs House, Sydney c 1887, newly laid woodblocks

By 1900 much of Sydney from Broadway to Dawes Point and from Darling Harbour to Kings Cross was paved in woodblocks. The last woodblocks were laid during the 1930s.

The blocks were brick shaped and there were numerous experiments by city engineers as to the optimum means of laying and treatment. It was eventually determined that blocks steeped in tar were best hammered together as tightly as possible and covered in sand, later in a tar solution or tar and sand mix, to prevent slipperiness.



Tarring wood blocks for the construction of Pyrmont Bridge, Sydney 1902

The replacement of horse drawn transport by motor vehicles saw woodblocks progressively removed from Sydney streets and replaced by asphalt, often on a concrete base. Woodblocking of roads ceased in about 1932 but repair of woodblocked roads continued until after World War 2. The woodblocks were considered perfect for firewood and during the Great Depression, young boys were often caught helping themselves to one or two to heat the family home and cook dinner. The Council also gave redundant woodblocks to the elderly and disadvantaged.



George Street in the 1890's, showing the woodblocked road in the foreground and Sydney University in the background. Note the steam tram in the centre. The street was widened in the early 1900's and renamed Broadway.



Woodblocking Macquarie Street, Sydney 1925.



Deteriorating woodblocked road surface in Castlereagh Street, between Goulburn and Liverpool Streets, 1932. The holes have been spot filled with bitumen.

Today there are still many streets with the originals woodblocking beneath the bitumen that was later applied over the surfaces. They are occasionally revealed by roadworks.



Parramatta Road, Camperdown 1931. Detail of woodpaved surface showing subsidence from heavy traffic.



The City Engineer records the newest road-making technique being laid and tested in Park Street 1929 by the Neuchatel Asphalte Company. Woodblocked roads were gradually upgraded with asphalt from the late 1920s.



Australia's First Road

George Street in The Rocks was the first road made by Europeans following their arrival in Sydney Cove in January 1788.

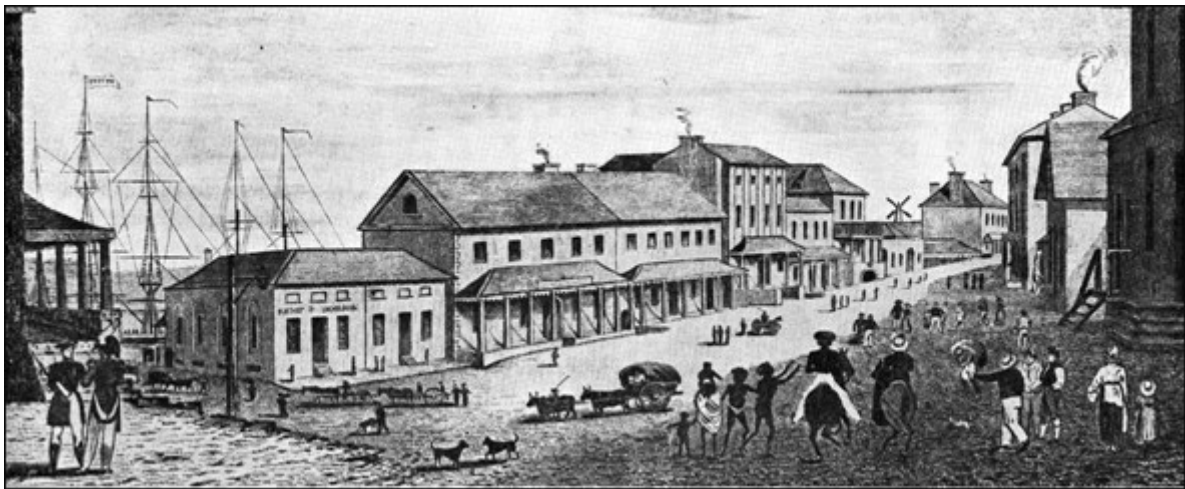
The original track followed the lines of tents that were erected for shelter along the cove, after the arrival of the First Fleet. There were no carriages, carts or wheeled vehicles so the small population basically had to walk everywhere. The "road" was little more than a dirt track and was a nightmare during the dry season, creating clouds of dust and even worse in winter, becoming a muddy quagmire.

The original road was called Sergeant-major's Row or Spring Row and then High Street, but Governor MacQuarie changed it to George Street in 1810 in honour of King George III. The road was still very much a nightmare.

Luckily during the 1820's skilled engineers began arriving in Sydney and the condition of roads improved with new building methods. The techniques of Thomas Telford and John Loudon McAdam were adapted to colonial conditions and roads began to be constructed in layers of graded broken stone and a final coat of ironstone.

Woodblock Paving

By the 1880's, Sydney was a thriving commercial centre with a growing population and expanding city precinct. Steel shod horses, buggies and carriages, being the backbone of personal and commercial transportation, needed a firm and stable surface that provided good traction and wasn't too noisy. Experiments with sandstone failed in heavy traffic areas as stone paving readily wore and cracked. Shopkeepers continually complained about the dust, dirt and mud.



George Street North

The solution? Woodblocks. Woodblocks were selected because they reduced noise, looked attractive, minimised dust, and were durable and easily cleaned. Plus best of all, Australia had an ample supply of suitable hardwood timber. The woodblocks were washed down every night with disinfectant to lower the risk of disease.

Block Boys

During the day the council employed "block boys" to pick up rubbish and horse droppings to keep the streets clean. They were affectionately called "Sparrow starvers" because in the droppings were undigested seeds that the sparrows ate. Strangely enough it became a much sort after job by local boys and often led to a career on the council.

First Woodblock Paving

Sydney City Council began to use woodblocks as a road surface from the 1880s. By 1900 much of Sydney from Broadway to Dawes Point and from Darling Harbour to Kings Cross was paved in woodblocks. The last woodblocks were laid during the 1930s. The use of woodblocks for road surfacing had been tried in Britain and the United States but was found to be unsatisfactory, possibly due to rot from higher rainfall and the use of poorer and more common softwoods found in these countries.

The section of George Street between Dawes Point and Argyle Street was paved in 1888 and used to trial various timbers for woodblocks. Sydney council also experimented with the use of tar and pitch, block spacing, bedding and surface finishing. The best timbers were Australian hardwoods including blue gum, red gum, jarrah, blackbutt, tallowwood, karri and turpentine. The blocks were brick shaped and laid in stretcher bond pattern. The surface of the woodblocks was top dressed with tar, peagravel and sand to provide a firm surface and improve traction. Consequently George Street North did not require maintenance for five years, proving the cost and labour effectiveness of woodblock paving.



The gradual replacement of horse and cart with much heavier automobiles saw an increase in wear of the woodblocks. They were progressively removed from most parts of the city and replaced with asphalt. The woodblocks were great for firewood and during the Great Depression young boys were often caught helping themselves to one or two to heat the family home and cook dinner. The Council also gave redundant woodblocks to the elderly and poor. Not all the woodblocks in The Rocks were removed. Some remain under the asphalt in sections of George Street. During footpath widening works, woodblocks were uncovered and found to be in very good condition. At least 80 years after they were first laid. Wherever possible the blocks are left in place for future generations to discover. The original woodblocks were finished with tar and pitch mixed with pea gravel. Tar and pitch are now identified as a health risk and are not permitted in contemporary building works. These materials have been substituted with bitumen emulsion which looks and performs like tar.