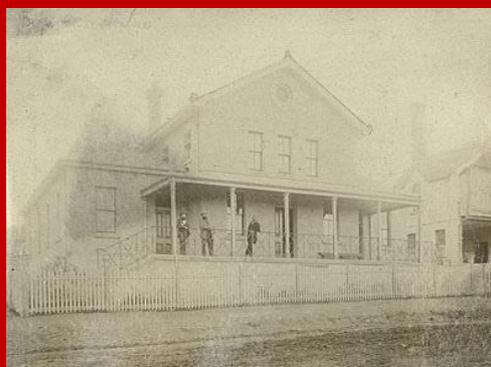# HISTORY IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAINS
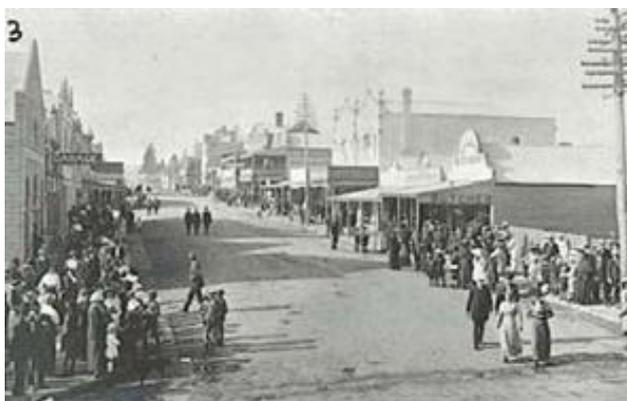
A journey through the history of the Sapphire Coast

Part 7 – The Towns - Bega

Bega

(Bega map on the last page)

Bega at the turn of the 19th century.

Squatters moved into the Bega Valley from the inland areas of Monaro and Braidwood and staked out their grazing 'runs' in the early 1830s. Part 4 of this series describes these events, including the 1834 arrival of the Imlay brothers, who acquired over 65,000 acres of runs and began permanent settlement of the area including the 'Tarraganda' run at 'Biggah'.

Government Surveyor Parkinson laid out a new town at what is now North Bega (on the site of the present Bega Cheese Factory). The origin of the name Bega is not definitive but is probably based on the Aboriginal word 'Biggah', which is thought to mean 'big camping ground' or 'beautiful'.

After a disastrous flood In May 1851 the town was moved to higher ground on the southern side of the river where it still stands today. In the first plan, the main street was Auckland Street, hence the construction of substantial buildings along that street. When the town centre moved Carp Street became the main street.

The first town allotments were surveyed in February 1854 and sold at Eden in August of that year. Eden was the only port for communication and transport until Merimbula port was opened in 1855.

In 1858 the Victoria Inn was opened in Auckland Street, and in 1859 the Family Hotel opened on the corner of Bega and Auckland Streets. Both buildings are still in existence, the Family Hotel is now the Bega Pioneers' Museum. You can obtain from the Bega Pioneers' Museum a pamphlet for a Bega Heritage Walk that contains a small map indicating several historic buildings and places. The buildings described below are just a sample of those you can see (http://museumb.freeiz.com).

Bega Pioneers' Museum

By 1861 the population of Bega was 625 in 100 households. The Bega district was regarded as one of the few successful areas where land selections under the 1861 Crown Lands Acts facilitated orderly settlement of the lands, with an average consolidated holding up to 500 acres.

Under the Crown Lands Acts, anyone with a small deposit was able to take up Crown land and convert the title to freehold. Men and women with energy and entrepreneurship took up land in the Bega Valley and, with hard work, turned it into profitable farms. The ports of Tathra and Merimbula were relatively close to the farms and this meant that produce could be shipped easily and quickly to Sydney, Melbourne and Tasmania.

The operation of the Crown Land Acts is considered to be largely responsible for the successful development of the dairy industry in the Bega Valley. This success is recorded in the Morris and Rankin Report to Parliament on the *State of Public Land in New South Wales* (1884) that said:

> *Bega is one of the most prosperous districts in the colony, and its prosperity is mainly attributable to the fact of the land having been thrown open to the people. Rich land, mild climate, copious and regular rainfall, and last but not least, easy and cheap communication by water with the metropolis, all these stamp it as a locality peculiarly adapted for homestead settlement, and upon which (there can be no question) the legislation of 1861 conferred incalculable benefit....' Morris and Rankin Report to the New South Wales Government in 1884.*

Dairy farming expanded quickly throughout the 1860s, overtaking cattle farming as the predominant industry. In 1858, Tathra was used as a port for the transport of products to Sydney, and the Illawarra Steam Company was established. In 1860, the Tathra Wharf was constructed by the company, which allowed for the further growth and expansion of the dairy industry.

In the late 1890s the Bega Dairy Co-operative Limited was established. Bega is now well known for its cheese that is manufactured by the Bega Co-operative Society, one of the larger Australian cheese companies. 'Bega Cheese' is exported around the world and distributed across Australia and is available in most supermarkets and general stores. You can visit the Bega Co-operative and its Heritage Centre and Tourist Information service in North Bega, by turning off the main highway at the northern end of the bridge.

Bega Co-operative Creamery in the 19th century

Notable examples of Bega's built heritage

An early picture of Bega Courthouse   Bega Courthouse today

Bega Courthouse

The Bega Courthouse, erected in 1881, has a lengthy association with the town's social history and a period of hectic and impressive building activity by the Public Works Department.

Bega Courthouse is listed on the Register of the National Estate. With its double height central courtroom and smaller flanking office wings, Bega Courthouse illustrates the general form of courthouses in New South Wales during the greater part of the 19th century. The scale of the building, with its prominent gabled façade, decorative railing and position at an intersection on Bega's main street, make a significant contribution to the streetscape.

Bega Primary School Group

The buildings of the Bega Primary School Group are Victorian Free Classical in style and are representative of public school buildings of the 1880s to1890s period. The group is listed on the Register of the National Estate.

In 1880 Bega residents petitioned for additions to be built at the town primary school to overcome the overcrowding. In fact a new building was approved - the present southern building facing Auckland Street. The buildings were occupied by January 1892 and finally completed in September that year. A belltower stands above the central entrance. The infants' building, added later, has a gabled wing similar to that on the 1882-83 building and is also built of brick. It has relatively little decoration and is T-shaped in plan. The residence is stuccoed and painted.

Former Commercial Banking Company building

The Commercial Banking Company (CBC) of Sydney building was erected in 1865. It is understood to have been the first bank in Bega, the first two-storey building, and the third building of substance in the town. It is a simple mid-Victorian Colonial style commercial building constructed of English bond brickwork on coursed rubble bluestone foundation. The building occupies a commanding position at the edge of a bluff on Auckland Street that was originally the main town street. The building is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register.

Former CBC building

Former jeweller's shopfront

The former jeweller's shopfront at 165 Carp Street, dating from about 1899, is an elaborate and intact example of the late Victorian shop fitter's art. As such, it is listed on the Register of the National Estate.

Originally single storey, it was rebuilt as a two-storey building in 1904. The shop has two curved shop windows with panelled timber stallboards of grained oak, a central door (originally surmounted by a fanlight which has now been partly replaced by a clock) and a chequered marble floor entrance. Decoration to the windows includes

gold painting; the shop name is painted in gold on the door and at least one window. There is also a curtain type of decoration to the upper parts of the windows. You can still see where iron grille fences for security were drawn across the entrance each night.

Jewellers' shopfront in Carp Street