

Haast River flood record

THE HAAST
is in
SOUTH WESTLAND

by

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Cole's epic was not the only one of that time and place. A bulldozer made its trail-blazing journey to the south. It was needed at the Haast, and W. D. Blair of Reefton decided to drive it from Paringa under its own power. He abandoned the idea of using the cattle track and took a more direct line, nearer the proposed route of the new road. In this journey of thirty-eight days, some sixteen and a half were spent in actual travelling and twenty-one and a half were used in "scouting for suitable going and effecting minor repairs, packing food, and delays through bad weather". His crew of S. R. Smith, W. N. Hartley, and E. Story crashed through virgin bush, slept in wet sleeping-bags, fed mosquitoes, lost weight — and took their tough conditions in good spirit. On the worst day they made only ten chains. Crushed ponga ferns and niggerheads bore the bulldozer across swamps; the winch pulled it up as it tore out trees.

It must also be recorded that when at one stage this bulldozer and its gang were completely bushed Harold Cole was sent to their rescue and to blaze for them the direction of the last part of the journey.

Political pressures continued to increase. In June 1954 the Westland County Council sent a petition of 1,217 signatures to the Prime Minister praying for the completion of both sections: Paringa to Haast; Haast to Haast Pass. A deputation of fifty-one local bodies waited on the Minister of Works. The newspapers, the progress leagues, and local bodies added to the pressure.

The engineers were appreciative of the natural beauty of the route and the Commissioner of Works wrote: "If we could introduce some coastal scenery in places . . . the monotony would be relieved. Clearing for lake scenery is desirable and we will of course have fine river scenes and some mountain views up the Haast River." Two years later he informed tourist interests that the total cost of completion including the Haast Bridge would be £1,400,000, and that the benefits would include tourist traffic, access for minerals and timber, and for primary production. The forces of public opinion were strong even beyond Westland and Otago; by now the whole of New Zealand was interested.

The Westland County Council offered to build a punt vehicle ferry but this scheme was considered impracticable because of the changes that every flood made to the course of the river. Ministry of Works records of flood for ten years from 1947 were compiled from interviews with local settlers and other sources. They showed that floods could occur in any month of the year, that seven was the maximum number of floods in any one month over a ten-year period, and that the minimum number was two. They further revealed that there had been as many as three floods in a month on two occasions, that most floods have occurred in October, December, and February, and the least in January, May, July, and September. Settlers' conclusions were that prevailing northerly winds causing snow-melt made floods likely between October and April, and that a total of twenty floods in a summer period would not be uncommon, with the river at a consistently high level, with fords changing two or three times, and the main

channel itself shifting. Local residents also thought that although winter floods were of short duration, they could be sudden and treacherous, that large logs and trees could menace the punt and its equipment, and it could be out of action at least once a week in average conditions and more frequently in bad ones.

The target dates for completion were 1962 for the Haast to Haast Pass road; 1963 for the Haast Rivermouth Bridge; and 1965 for the Paringa to Haast link. This plan would require an expenditure of some £260,000 a year. The perennial argument about the justification for the road flared up: tourism versus land development — as though one precluded the other. Meanwhile, good progress in 1960 included the use of a helicopter to take 16,000 lb of materials for a new survey camp in the Blue River area.

It was now time to reach final decisions about the permanent route between Blue River and the Haast. Many factors were relevant: the increased capacity of modern earth-moving machines; the long life ahead of the new road; the wear and tear on vehicles in terms of the national economy. An inspecting engineer¹ reported that while the inland route was safe from the point of view of construction, its long lengths of grades of one in ten, its summit height of 1,311 feet and its length generally made it less attractive than the coastal route rising only to around 600 feet and with easier grades. Government geologists had given a slight preference for the coastal route. The lower altitude and better gradient for the coastal route was also favourable for logging and timber transport.

While the inland route would obey the slogan "follow the ridges and dodge the bridges" the coastal route would give tourists grand views of cliffs and beaches as a change from bush avenues. The coastal route was finally chosen because it would in the long run be capable of continued improvement.

The success of the Paringa-Haast road spelt finish to the old inland cattle track. The closing of the eighty-five-mile gap, Paringa - Haast - Haast Pass - Makaroa Valley in the main round-the-South-Island-highway had been treated as one entity. At last the end was within sight.

By May 1963 the West Coast newspapers could headline "ALL NOW READY FOR ASSAULT ON FINAL SECTION OF HAAST PASS ROUTE", the New Zealand Travel and Holiday Association could publish a thirty-seven-page report on tourist facilities required, and in January, 1965 there was only 150 yards to go, with machines working in sight of each other across the steep gully confining Bullock Creek.

In May 1965 a sour note was struck by a newspaper correspondent: "If it rains like it did last year, the Prime Minister will only be able to open a goat track." In the event, on 6 November, heavy rain did fall, and the road had to be closed temporarily just after its opening, but the slips were soon cleared and the new highway had become a reality at last.

¹The names of J. Wood, H. L. Hume, F. D. Grant, T. C. H. Mouat and other engineers will be set out in an appendix as a roll of respect.