

## **Theme: Tocal Homestead Precinct, Campus and Farm – landscape and environment**

*Note: Tocal's thematic history has been prepared as part of the assessment of the site's heritage significance in the 2012 (draft) conservation management plan.*

**Australian heritage theme:** 3. Developing local, regional and national economies

**NSW heritage theme:** Environment - cultural landscape

Tocal encapsulates multi-layered evidence of the ways in which successive occupants of the site interacted with and shaped their physical surroundings.

Archer (2007) demonstrated how the pre-European landscape of Tocal was a product of the interaction between the lifestyle practices of the Aboriginal people and their environment. Key Indigenous interactions included regular, strategic burning of selected areas for various reasons such as to provide favourable areas for game where hunting prospects would be enhanced. The most tangible evidence of Indigenous habitation at Tocal today comprises several rock outcrops containing grinding and sharpening grooves created by use over hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years.

The principal elements of Tocal's pre-European landscape, indicated in Archer's diagram below, are wetlands, rainforest, open woodlands, grasslands and paperbark forest. All are still evident today despite extensive modification of some elements by European occupation, agricultural and pastoral activities. In recent years some of these modifications have been reversed. Parts of Tocal's wetlands have been restored and Tocal's remnant rainforest, situated in close proximity to Tocal Homestead, has been expanded through regeneration. This rainforest now includes the interpretative Pumpy Brush Walk.

Evidence of the impact of early colonial agriculture on Tocal's landscape includes extensive clearing (which now shows varying degrees of regrowth), and the drainage of some of the wetlands, although large areas of wetland remain. Webber drained some of these wetlands in the 1820s, for which he received praise at the time (Dawson, 1830 and Walsh, 2007). Other evidence of Webber's impact on the Tocal landscape include the mounds of his vineyard which are still clearly evident, a testament to his innovation and the toil of his assigned convicts.

Evidence of the impact of European settlement is also provided at Tocal by Aboriginal grinding rocks within the bank of Webber's Creek that are now under water at high tide. This indicates a marked rise in water levels during the Aboriginal era of occupation.

Today most of the Tocal property outside the Homestead precinct is a rural landscape formed by agricultural and pastoral activities since 1822. This landscape comprises a mixture of heavily timbered country, eucalypt regrowth, native/naturalised pasture and improved pasture.

Tocal's natural vegetation contrasts with the 19th century European landscape around the lagoon. Poplars, willows and other planted species dominate the lagoon and flats around Tocal Homestead, their presence demonstrating European interaction with the environment for aesthetic and amenity purposes.

European efforts to manage Tocal's spaces for agriculture in the colonial era are particularly evident in the extensive sets of timber post-and-rail fences that radiate from the Tocal lagoon to provide access to water for animals in several separate paddocks and to facilitate stock movement to and from the yards and sheds. Tocal's lagoon was a deciding factor in the use of this area by both Aborigines and Europeans, as it provides a permanent source of fresh water for people and animals. For Aborigines it was also an important source of food, not only from fish and other marine life but also from the numerous species of water birds for which the lagoon provides habitat. These include spoonbills, pelicans, wood ducks, moorhens, stilts, cormorants, ibis, herons, coots, egrets and black swans (Aartsen, 1991; Hathway, 2003).

Transport infrastructure has significantly impacted on the Tocal landscape. Evidence of Settlers' Road can be found in several places on Tocal. This was the early road north from Maitland that, of necessity, skirted upstream (west) of the tidal reach of Webber's creek to provide a shallow crossing. In 1849 the current Tocal Road and bridge were completed,<sup>3</sup>

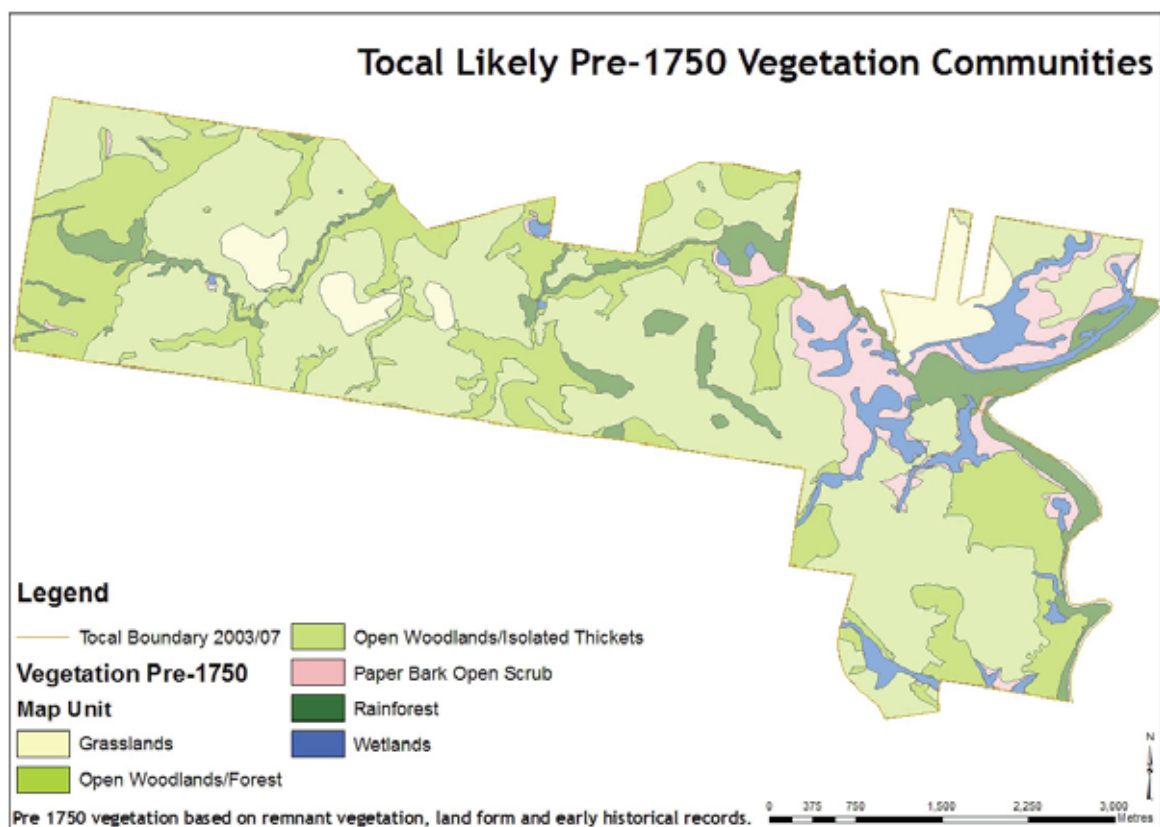
<sup>3</sup> *Maitland Mercury*, 1 August 1849.

effectively splitting the eastern portion of Tocal in two and ending the estate's previously unencumbered corridor to the Paterson River. The construction of the North Coast Railway further dissected the Tocal property to the west in 1911.

Tocal's natural landscape was a major source of inspiration for Philip Cox and Ian McKay's prize-winning design of the CB Alexander Campus in 1963. The campus buildings were designed to merge into the hill-top to form part of the landscape, with the chapel as the centrepiece. The buildings' architecture reflects the vernacular of the colonial timber buildings at Tocal Homestead, particularly Blacket Barn.

Several studies on various aspects of Tocal's landscape have been undertaken, which serve to inform and guide future usage. These include a reconnaissance survey of Tocal's natural environment (Aartsen, 1991), a Tocal landscape master plan (Ratcliffe, 1994), a report on the rehabilitation of Tocal's Quarry Creek wetlands (Heinrich, 1996), and a vegetation development and management plan for the Tocal Homestead precinct (Heinrich, 1998).

Details of the extensive conservation and landcare measures that have been implemented on Tocal since 1965 are provided in the theme on agriculture and pastoralism.



**Figure 1:** Tocal Likely Pre 1750 Vegetation Communities

**Chronology:**

- 1822 James Webber granted land at Tocal;
- 1843 Webber sold Tocal to Caleb and Felix Wilson;
- 1841 Tocal Homestead built;
- 1843 Tocal leased to Charles Reynolds (lease continued to 1907);
- 1907 Tocal sold to Charles' son, Frank Reynolds;
- 1926 Tocal sold to Jean Alexander who took up residence with three siblings;
- 1947 CB Alexander died, the last of the Alexander family at Tocal;

- 1963 Ownership of Tocal passed to the Presbyterian Church;
- 1965 The CB Alexander Presbyterian Agricultural College, Tocal, opened;
- 1965 A detailed farm plan prepared to guide future changes to the farm's landscape;
- 1970 CB Alexander Foundation established and College operated by NSW Government;
- 1987 Tocal Homestead opened to visitors;
- 2002 Tocal Visitor Centre opened;
- 2006 The education facility at Tocal became the CB Alexander Campus of Tocal College.

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