

Skippers Road Schist: *Memorials in Danger,* Queenstown

Increased road usage and vehicle size in response to tourism ventures is seriously affecting historic Skippers Road.

The narrow, unsealed road which snakes its way through the spectacular Skippers Canyon, not far from Queenstown, is not for the faint hearted. Vertical drops to the Shotover River, negotiating slips on the road and cautiously edging past other vehicles is all part of the 17-km Skippers Rd experience. Rental car companies warn clients not to take their cars on this dramatic and at times terrifying road which branches off the Coronet Peak ski field road.



Rental car companies warn clients not to take their cars onto Skippers Road. Photo: Outback NZ



The striking capping stones and schist walls (below) are under threat. Photo: Hocken Library

Visitors have long been lured to the Upper Shotover landscape to enjoy its dramatic schist bluffs and rock tors that stand like sculptures in this tussock-draped landscape. The road commands views of the Richardson Mountains to the west and the Harris Mountains to the east. The past few decades have seen dramatic increases in road usage and size of vehicles in response to tourism ventures in the canyon. Large wheel base vehicles, trailers, buses and four-wheel drives make regular use of the road catering for tourists keen to raft the Shotover River, leap off the historic Skippers Bridge or the pipeline bungee, or mountain bike part of the original 1860s pack track.

Built between 1883 and 1890 in four sections, the Skippers Rd was considered an engineering feat in its day. Miles of schist stonewalling, complete with their striking capping stones, once curved their way through Skippers Canyon. Today these stone memorials are becoming scarce.



Photo: NZ Historic Places Trust.

Increased road use combined with naturally occurring slips, and the need to ensure safety measures and regular maintenance on the road, has resulted in accelerated erosion of the remaining stacked schist walls.



Today, these stone memorials are becoming scarce. Photo: NZ Historic Places Trust

The Queenstown Lakes District Council, which manages the road, does not have an easy task. Maintenance costs are high and keeping the road open especially in winter can be a constant battle. Continual grading and widening of portions of the road over the years has caused an alarming disappearance of the stone walls.

The Historic Places Trust and locals have lobbied the council for the past two years to recognise the significance and

importance of these walls. The Trust wants to see a long-term management plan created for the road, aimed at balancing practical road use and maintenance with retention, and possibly restoration, of some of the iconic heritage features along the route.



The Skippers Road was considered an engineering feat in its day. Photo: Hocken Library

To this end the Trust initiated an archaeological report last year which provides a baseline of over 100 photos identifying remaining stone walls and significant heritage features of the road with recommendations for their future management. Transfund has recently provided the district council with funding for a strategy study for the Skippers Rd, and the Trust has been given the opportunity to ensure that the special heritage issues are identified and integrated into the document.

The Skippers Canyon overflows with history. It was the Shotover River, often referred to as the richest river in the world, which lured thousands of prospectors to its banks after gold was discovered there in 1862. A precarious pack track was the only access to the Skippers township and Upper Shotover diggings for more than 20 years. Pressure for a dray road increased in the 1880s when quartz mining came to the fore and the need to transport heavy machinery to sites such as Bullendale [9.6 kms north of Skippers] became urgent.

The large Phoenix mine at Bullendale was already contributing greatly to the local economy and this helped sway the argument for a road. By 1886 New Zealand's first hydro-electric supply was underway up the left hand branch of Skippers Creek which was designed to drive the 30 stamp Phoenix battery at Bullendale.

A three-kilometre stretch of the road involved hand drilling and blasting solid rock to create a road platform, 183 metres above the Shotover River. This daunting task called for men with a head for heights who had to hang on ropes to complete much of the task. They built impressive stacked revetments to support the road from beneath and stone walls to provide a safety barrier for horse and dray. Today this section, aptly named Pinchers Bluff and the Devils Elbow remains as the most intact memorial to these pioneer road builders.

The Skippers Rd is one of the most significant gold mining access routes left in New Zealand and we are hopeful that its narrow width, impressive stone walls and rock

cuttings will survive to remind us of the skill and tenacity of the road builders to forge a road through such daunting country.

Can you help with historical information about the road, or do you hold any photographs of the road or its features which the Trust might find useful?
If you think you might be able to help, please contact Rebecca Reid, Area Coordinator, in the Trust's Dunedin Area Office Office, P O Box 5467, Dunedin, tel. 03 477-9871 or send an [email](#).