

Explore the wonders along Old Grafton Road

The Old Grafton Road begins 35kms east of Glen Innes along the Gwydir Highway. The drive is steep and narrow with some two-thirds gravel and parts heavily corrugated. It's unsuitable for towing caravans although campervans can negotiate it.

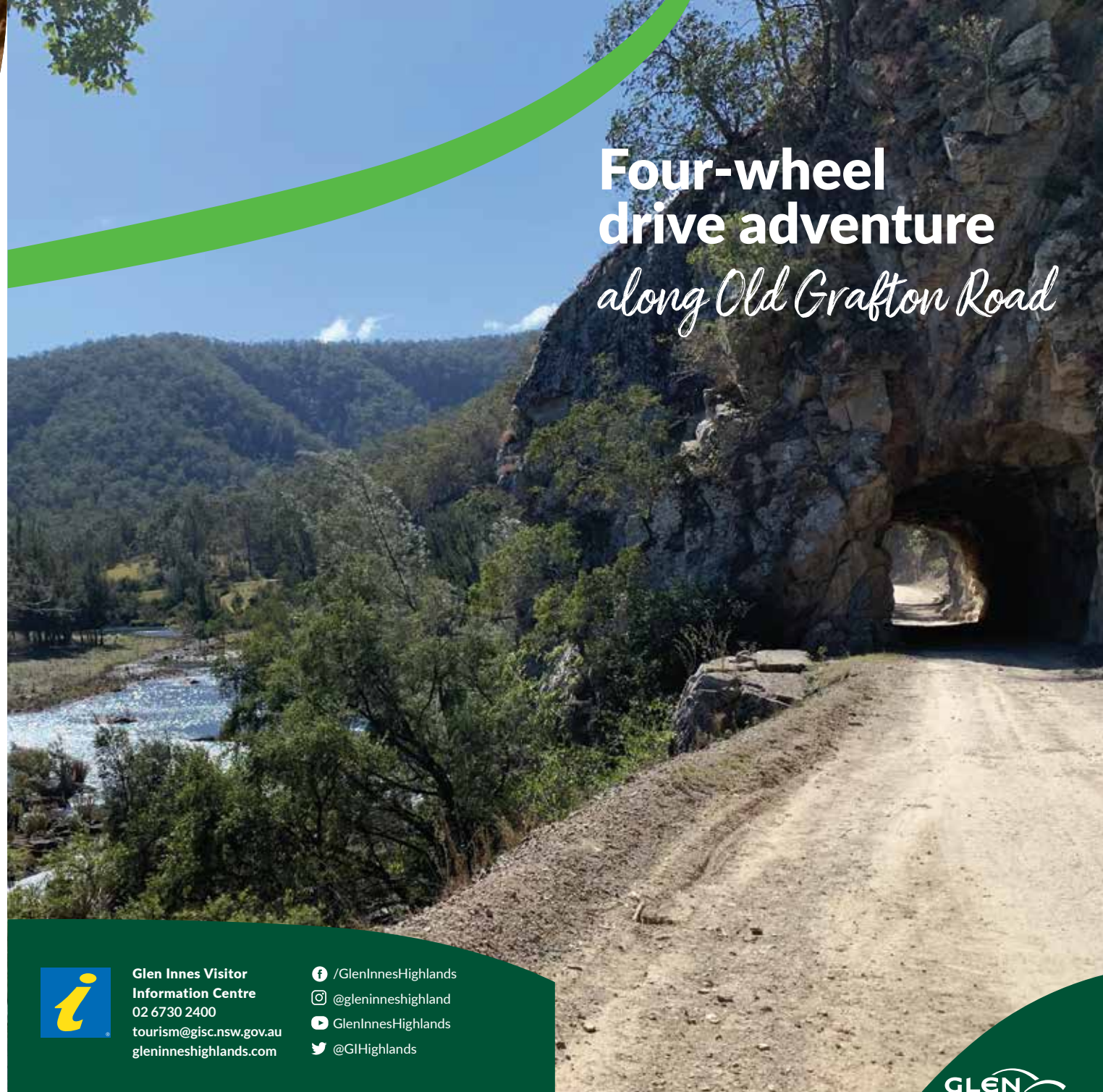
Called Big River Country, the valley has five major rivers flowing through it: Mann, Nymboida, Henry, Boyd and Orara. All are tributaries of the Clarence and offer great swimming, fishing, and canoeing. The Nymboida, with its rapids, is popular with canoeists, parties descending the valley from Buccarumbi to Jackadgery. Experienced kayakers seek out the area further upstream, towards the Dorrigo plateau. The stunning natural wonders, wildlife and history of Mann River nature reserve and Guy Fawkes River State Conservation area offer excellent recreation for 4wd, camping, canoeing, fishing and bushwalking.

Wildlife is abundant, with some threatened species, and it's a paradise for bird watchers. Camping and picnic locations are found along the Mann River at Mann River nature reserve in the upper valley or the Boyd River at Dalmorton camping grounds. Both locations have toilets and pit-fire barbecues. Camping fees apply at Dalmorton.

Road conditions

Not suitable for caravans. Mostly gravel surface, corrugated, narrow and steep in some parts. No service stations for 180km and phone service is limited.

Four-wheel drive adventure along Old Grafton Road



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180km of scenic road awaits



Discover unspoilt beauty

The 180km scenic road was opened in 1867, linking the mountains to the sea. Fringed by wild rivers, breathtaking scenery and a romantic past of pioneers, gold miners and bushrangers, it has long inspired poets and artists like Henry Lawson, Henry Kendall and Tom Roberts.

Capturing the spirit 'a local perspective'

Gifted writer Peter Mathew, a former Glen Innes resident, captured the spirit of the Old Grafton-Glen Innes Road when he wrote evocatively.

"Sit quietly by the side (of the road) and listen carefully. In the stillness of the deserted valley you may just hear the

snap of the reins on a horse-drawn coach team, the thud of the timbergetter's axe, or the cry of the bullocky hauling down the track to the Clarence River." And, he went on, "don't be surprised if a ghostly form emerges, for it's just the magic of the valley working its tricks on your imagination."

The drive draws adventurers, especially 4WD enthusiasts, seeking something different and challenging. Following the rough, steep and narrow track carved by bullock drays in the 1840s, the road was hailed as an engineering feat with its steep descents of more than 1,000 metres, over 40kms of cuttings and an impressive 20 metre hand-cut tunnel (3.3m clearance). It was to remain the main route for New England towns to the coastal regions for almost a century – helping too, to open the northwest, to Inverell and Moree – until the development of the Gwydir Highway in the early 1960s.

History & outlaws

Horse-drawn coaches ran to Grafton on the old road. It was also used by timbergetters searching for the prized red cedar, gold miners, and graziers. With the gold rush, five towns sprang up, with a population estimated at 20,000, Dalmorton boasting 13 pubs.

Outlaws roamed the area most notably Thunderbolt and Black Tommy, who is immortalised by Tommy's Rock in the Mann River nature reserve, towering more than 600 meters above the valley, peaking at 1013 meters. Legend has it, Tommy used the rock as a lookout for travellers – and his body is still hidden in the mountain. The lookout is accessible to four-wheel drives via the Narrow Pass Fire Trail and for experienced hikers from the Mann River.

The gold rush was short lived and today only a few shacks, signposts and tombstones reflect once flourishing towns like Newton Boyd, Springbrook, Dalmorton and Buccarumbi. Historians recall how more than 30 men left Newton Boyd farms to enlist in WW1 and only one man, a member of the Lacey family, returned – ironically, to be killed in a rock slide, the accident scene known as Lacey's Gully. The WW1 memorial at Newton Boyd's Henry River Bridge is testimony to the patriotism of the district's youth.

With the decline in gold, the valley reverted to farming and new generations followed the pioneers. But in many ways the new frontier remains: horses are still used for mustering cattle since the rugged terrain is unsuitable for motorbikes.

