
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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RUINED CASTLE AND **OUR FEBRUARY WALK**

**GOLDEN STAIRS and
FEDERAL PASS to RUINED
CASTLE, GIANT LANSLIDE
and FURBER STEPS at
KATOOMBA**

Friday 19th February 2010

“Send her down! Send her down Hughie!” This was the cry of the miners and prospectors to the dust filled skies in Katherine Susannah Prichard’s tale ‘The Roaring Nineties’. It would appear that someone in the Blue Mountains had made a similar exhortation during the weeks prior to our planned February walk. Storm and flood damage had caused the closure of our planned route through the Valley of the Waters, National Pass and Wentworth Pass; it was decided we would instead explore the Ruined Castle and other sites along the Federal Pass.

Hughie was still sending a few drops down as eighteen walkers gathered at the Scenic World car park where Libby organised a car shuffle to convey us to the trackhead on Narrow Neck.

We were greeted there by the raucous metallic chatter of a pair of Black Cockatoos searching for food in a nearby tree. The mountains today appeared in their veiled secretive guise; distant



Autumn in the Bush

THE FEDERAL PASS

views hidden behind curtains of fog, swirling mist imparting a ghostly aura to the crowns of trees, the valley floor hidden below a nebulous blanket. We began our descent of the Golden Stairs into this fog-filled chasm.

The Golden Stairs route was first used in the late 1880s as an access track to the small mining community that sprang up to exploit the rich kerosene shale deposits near the Ruined Castle.

The stairs were named after a hymn ‘Climbing up the Golden Stairs’ which was said to be sung by visiting Salvation Army Officers (and by some miners) as they climbed out of the valley. “----- O I’m climbing up the golden stair to Glory, O I’m climbing with my golden crown before me, I am climbing in the light, I am climbing day and night, I am climbing up the golden stair!” The miners at the Ruined Castle were mainly single men and it was common for them to use the Golden Stairs en route up and then down again to the Nellies Glen Hotel at the more substantial mining village in the adjacent Megalong Valley. I venture to suggest that rather than golden stairs or golden crowns these young men were more likely to have had thoughts of a Golden Sheaf Stout or two as they made the steep climb.

We passed a few young Grass Trees (*Xanthorrhoea sp*), slender leaves arching

gracefully to form green 'fountains' beside the track. Large grey globular unopened flowers sit above the glossy foliage of several Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) clinging to the steep terrain.

About two hundred metres from the start of this track we come across Bottings Lookout just to the left of the path. A brass plaque notes that Walter Botting was a pioneer track-maker of the Katoomba District. "His spirit remains always in the mountains". (The Giant Stairway and the Prince Henry Cliff Walk were two major projects he was involved with in the early 1930s.) From this point, on a clear day you can see forever; across the valley to the Giant Landslide and beyond then back along Narrow Neck to Castle Head, the Ruined Castle and Mount Solitary. Today the swirling mists sweep up from the valley, their ebb and flow momentarily exposing cliff faces and revealing tantalising glimpses of the valley floor.

As we continue down well-worn stone steps past mossy rock faces the continuous yet pleasant tinkling of Bell Miners rises through the fog, occasionally interspersed with the distinctive melodious call of the Currawong. The Smooth-barked Apples (*Angophora costata*) now beside the track display their recently exposed new bark; smooth yet dimpled reddish-orange trunks so tactile it is almost impossible to pass them without reaching out to touch. Pine-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia pinifolia*) carry bright yellow flower buds at the tips of their drooping branches. A huge domed termite mound sits beside the track as we approach the junction with the Federal Pass.

We pause here for a short rest and this signals the first LEECH ALERT! Socks and tops of boots are searched, sticks and twigs used to flick off any freeloaders; trouser cuffs are tucked into socks, sleeves pulled down, collars pulled up, hats and caps tugged low in an attempt to ward off the little suckers. The leeches of course are excited by all this movement and warmth, they can be seen as tiny vertical columns on the path, oscillating

gently as they detect the heat and vibrations of these passing meals on heels.

We now follow the alignment of the old Horse Tramway. This line was constructed to convey the rich kerosene shales from the thirty-three adits driven into the outcrops in the Ruined Castle area across to the incline at what is now the Scenic Railway. Two horses harnessed nose to tail dragged five skips, each containing about half a ton of shale. Mining operations were carried out in the Ruined Castle area from 1889 to around 1895.

This almost level path leads us through magnificent rainforest having virtually no understorey or ground cover vegetation. This results in a clear view through the towering lichen-blotched trunks which disappear into the mist above. Thick vines hang from unseen branches and coil across the leaf litter of the forest floor. A sandstone monolith beside the track is draped with the fleshy fronds of the conspicuously dimorphic Rock Felt Fern (*Pyrrosia rupestris*); narrow fingers of fertile fronds intermingling with smaller spoon-shaped sterile fronds.

We linger awhile to watch a Superb Lyrebird strutting and scratching as it runs through its extensive repertoire, mimicked calls of other birds and various sounds of the forest interspersed with its own specific call. The male, who performs no parental duties whatever, uses a much quieter song when in close pursuit of a female; very much a sweet-talking playboy rogue of the rainforest.

Soon we arrive at a superb grove of Coachwood (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*) and settle down in this magical spot for morning tea. The blotches of lichen on the mottled bark of these trees almost glow in the subdued light. As we sat looking down through the forest from our slightly elevated position someone commented the scene before us was a 'middle earth' vista. A quote by the Scottish-born US pioneer of environmental conservation John Muir seems quite apt for this spot: "The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness". (John Muir

was largely responsible for the establishment of Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks.)

Further evidence of the mining activities appear as we continue; off to the right is an adit and levelled areas can be seen adjacent to the track, no doubt old camp sites. Soon we arrive at an area where low stone walls indicate the site of a more substantial hut. Here a tiny bush snail was sighted, its flattish shell only five or six millimetres across.

We now move into more open forest where the creamy-white smooth trunks of Blue Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) dominate the scene. Also present here are Black Ash or Silvertop Ash (*Eucalyptus sieberi*) their furrowed bark almost black and Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*) with their greyish fibrous bark. Below these towering columns are miniature beauties; twining through the undergrowth, strangely enough, is the Twining Glycine (*Glycine clandestina*) displaying its mauve pea-like flowers. The often overlooked Slender Tick-trefoil (*Desmodium varians*) is also hiding in the ground cover; tiny pink pea flowers sitting above triple sets of glossy green rounded leaves.

We pause at the junction where the Ruined Castle track leads off to the right; time for another Leech Alert! As we begin the climb toward the castle formation we pass two signs: "Ruined Castle - Steep Hard Climb" and "Track in Very Poor Condition". Though both signs were rather decrepit their messages proved to be correct.

Upon reaching the ridge we were now in an exposed dry environment; towering above us was the spectacular Castle Head. We made our way through a grove of Forest Oaks (*Allocasuarina torulosa*) with deeply furrowed corky bark and slender drooping branchlets and skirted around some huge sandstone tors before arriving at the base of the Ruined Castle. A photograph of this formation appeared in The Sydney Mail in May 1880 accompanied by the description "a rocky pile the ruined keep of some gigantic castle" and bushwalks to this area were recorded in the Katoomba Times in 1891.

Some in the group decided to settle for lunch at the base of the formation while others squeezed (well this writer squeezed, others may have had an easier passage) through a cleft in the rocks to sit atop the battlements. As we settled down among the turrets of this rock formation one could well understand descriptions alluding to castles, towers and fortresses being used. Soon a lone bushwalker emerged through the cleft and greetings revealed he was a visiting Frenchman.

Thoughts of the Bastille came to mind when Robbie Harricks made a major contribution to international relations by flicking a leech off herself which landed on the forearm of the visitor.

We were joined for lunch by the resident Currawongs who displayed great expertise in catching pieces of bread in mid-air and preventing grapes from rolling away from them on the sloping rocks.

We spent some time here on top of the world taking in the extensive views of Mount Solitary, Narrow Neck Plateau, The backwaters of Lake Burragorang and the clifflines below Katoomba and beyond; what a magical place.

The popularity of Libby's Bushwalker Cake was demonstrated when Don Clarke, container in hand, climbed up to the battlements to collect pieces for those who lunched at the base of the castle walls. The lone Frenchman also accepted a slice thus averting a diplomatic incident over the accidental leech attack.

Reluctantly we left this very special place and returned along the Federal Pass. The fog by now had well and truly dissipated, exposing the full majesty of the rainforest giants and opening up glimpses of the cliff tops through the canopy as we made our way back along this enchanting shaded pathway. We passed one of those stunning tableaux created by Mother Nature; a group of Rough Tree Ferns (*Cyathea australis*) spotlighted by a shaft of afternoon sun.

We then traversed the face of the Giant Landslide with views back across the valley to the castle from whence we had come and soon

arrived at the Scenic Railway. Several opted to take a ride to the clifftop while the remainder headed for Furbers Steps. Nine hundred and sixty one steps later (Alison Halliday counted each one) we were back at Scenic World; what an apt name for a spot which attracts so many visitors from all over the globe.

As the overseas visitors dispersed in the late afternoon, tranquillity returned to the park as we ended another wonderful day in this, our little corner of the world.

John C

EMERGENCY LOCATOR BEACON

We have had a magnificent response to the call for contributions toward the cost of this beacon. The actual cost of the beacon was \$590 and thanks to your keen support plus a couple of very generous donations a total of \$750 was collected. The surplus of \$160 will be put into the general funds of the Group provided there are no objections. Thank you all for your cooperation in this important undertaking.

LORD HOWE ISLAND UPDATE

Fourteen members and friends of the group have booked stays, of varying lengths, on Lord Howe Island between 7th August and 17th August this year to indulge in the delights of this little piece of paradise.

As mentioned previously this is a casual get together, not an organised tour, so booking of accommodation and flights will be your responsibility if you decide to participate. If you are interested contact Helen Cardy on 9871 3661 and she will be happy to answer queries and send you comprehensive printed information.

Do hope you can join us.

OUR MARCH WALK

Friday 19th March 2010

Shady Creek-lines, Open Fields, Rubble-strewn Creek-beds and a Tranquil River

Carlton Creek and Breakfast Creek to the Cocks River and Return in Megalong Valley

The group last undertook this walk in August 2002; on that occasion we ran out of time and had to turn back before reaching the Cocks River. The walk has been scheduled in March this year to take advantage of daylight saving, giving a little more time to complete the full walk. This is a long solid walk (approx 14km) with many rocky creek crossings, some rough sections of track and a long gradual climb to finish. Please be aware when considering this walk that we will need to maintain a faster than normal pace to complete the full length of the track. A vehicle rationalisation will take place at Blackheath for the longish drive to the trackhead in the Megalong Valley.

Meet at St Aidan's Church in Hat Hill Road at Blackheath at 8.00am or 7.30am at Merry Garth.

Bring morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea and plenty of water.

Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 (after 7pm) or Helen and John Cardy on 9871 3661 or on mobile 0418 646 487 if you need to leave a message.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 16th April 2010 – The Wollongambe River and Joes Canyon at Mt Wilson.

Friday 21st May 2010 – **20th Anniversary of the formation of the Group!** Tessellated Pavements at Mt Irvine followed by a celebratory afternoon tea at the Mt Wilson Village Hall, details later.

Friday 18th June 2010 – Centennial Glen at Blackheath

BUSH CARE

Bush Care is held on the second Friday of each month from 9am to Noon. Any help, even for a short time, would be appreciated both by the other workers and by the native vegetation.

12th March 2010 at Sloan Reserve

9th April 2010 at Sloan Reserve

Contact Beth Raines on 4756 2121 for details