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# Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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Volume 21 Issue 8

August 2011

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COXS RD & LAWSONS LONG ALLEY

TOPIC

## OUR JULY WALK

COXS ROAD AND  
LAWSONS LONG ALLEY –  
Mt YORK AND HARTLEY  
VALE

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2011

Gregory Blaxland's journal of his May 1813 journey of discovery (written in the third person) describes their arrival at Mt York, in part, as follows: "On the 28<sup>th</sup> they proceeded about five miles and three-quarters. Not being able to find water, they did not halt till five o'clock, when they took up their station on the edge of a precipice."

After a short car shuffle from the Lawson Track Head the twenty walkers attending today gathered near that same precipice where an imposing monument celebrating the centenary of that 'first' crossing of the Blue Mountains now stands.

Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson were the first Europeans to cross the Blue Mountains, we were all taught this at school; but were they? There is much conjecture among historians as to who actually was the first non-indigenous person to succeed in making the crossing.

The Aboriginal people had been travelling back and forth across the divide for tens of thousands of years; apparently no one in authority during the first twenty-five years of the colony thought to ask for directions. (The



Winter in the Bush

original inhabitants of course had no need for a road 'at least 12 feet wide so as to permit two carts to pass each other with ease'.)

Alison Halliday commented on the speculation regarding Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson rather succinctly, saying 'at least it was a first for them.'

Today we welcomed Anne Rodrigues who was the 'lone walker' we met on the Terrace Falls circuit last month and who has subsequently joined our group. We also welcomed

friends of Barbara Harry; Sue Taylor who has walked with us previously and Jenny Wilkins. Libby gave a short run-down on the history of the five routes into the valley and also noted she felt the weather would not be warming up too much today despite the presently clear skies; this proved correct of course, such is Libby's experience and knowledge of these mountains.

Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson's crossing of the mountains, first or not, triggered the opening up of the land west of the divide. They terminated their venture at Mt Blaxland on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1813. By January 1814 George Evans had surveyed the route from Emu Crossing (Penrith) and extended the survey to a point about sixty miles west of the site of Bathurst. Governor Macquarie, in July 1814, gave William Cox the task of building a road along this route. This was commenced on the 18<sup>th</sup> July and, with a work party of only

thirty convicts, was completed on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 1815, a mere eighteen months after the crossing! You wouldn't even get the necessary Federal, State and Local approvals in that time today, let alone the environmental impact statement, health and safety issues, etc, etc.

We commence our walk near the point where, one hundred and ninety eight years ago, William Cox stood and declared he would 'make such a road as a cart can come down empty or with a very light load without a possibility of its being able to return with any sort of load whatever, ----- sheep will be able to bring their fleeces up and be shorn on the mountain'. (To this end a woolshed was established at Blackheath where the western flocks were driven to be shorn until the opening of Victoria Pass in 1832.)

We set off down the steep incline passing below a cluster of Cypress Pines (*Callitris sp*), their lichen-encrusted trunks arching over the track. A short sidetrack delivers us to a vantage point overlooking the "Vale of Clwydd". Wisps of smoke curl up from farmhouse chimneys on this crisp winter morn and the mirror surfaces of numerous farm dams, about two hundred and fifty metres below, reflect the morning light.

Continuing on we pass examples of the stone masonry skills of the convict work gang; a large hand cut gutter, then mortices cut in a vertical rock face to carry a three-rail stock fence. A plaque indicates pick marks where rock was removed to allow Governor Macquarie's retinue to pass on his twenty-one day journey over the mountains soon after completion of the road; it was on this journey that he named the proposed town of Bathurst. Mrs Macquarie accompanied her husband on this trip and thus was the first European woman *recorded* as having crossed these mountains.

Dropping down through a short tunnel formed by a huge sandstone tor leaning against a rock face we descend some rough steps which lead us to a popular rock climbing spot. Here the honey coloured wind worn sandstone below

large rock overhangs appears quite unstable with large cracks apparent and blocks of stone having dropped and become wedged against other blocks or fallen to the floor of the overhang.

Back on the main track we pass beneath a huge rock edifice resembling the prow of a ship. Soon we arrive at the site of a gully which was once bridged by a rock-filled structure. Here there are hand cut gutters and a drain along with a large cutout in the rock shelf to accommodate a timber retaining beam. A little further on there is a large hand cut vertical face on the right hand side of the track, rock needing to be removed to allow passage of the road. This face has an intriguing pattern of pick marks, a sweeping linear pattern indicating the motion of the pick. The letters WBP are inscribed on this face in very well formed script; a convict's mark for posterity or a more recent effort by a less deserving hand? (The patina over the inscription is similar to the overall area of pick marks, indicating a similar age.)

The track, which now leads us away from the base of the cliff, is still quite steep and the loose gravel surface calls for care while walking. Now in open woodland we take advantage of the seating provided by two large fallen trunks to pause for morning tea.

Continuing on we emerge into clear farmland. The track crosses two small bridges and we are now on level ground that is often quite marshy. A long 'caterpillar' of treated pine stumps meanders across this area providing an elevated path when conditions are soggy. Some of course couldn't resist the urge of childhood memories and step along this line of stumps, and indeed why not indulge in a little frivolity?

Speaking of frivolity, those of us at the back of the group were pondering whether the surface of a nearby pond was in fact frozen. Rosemary suggested that rather than just dip a toe she perhaps could take a skinny dip and break the ice, an interesting proposition which, alas, did not come to fruition. With that idea frozen in time we decided to cut our losses and

move right along before drowning in a swirl of clichés.

We passed the turn-off to the never-completed Lockyers Road, a project constructed between April 1828 and late 1829 under the direction of Major Edmund Lockyer. Surveyor General Thomas Mitchell decided the road gang would be better employed on his pet project, Victoria Pass. The abandonment of infrastructure projects on the whim of vested interests is not a recent phenomenon.

Soon we enter the tiny village of Hartley Vale. Passing what was originally the schoolhouse, Fred Roberts mentioned that the Scout Group he was once involved with had purchased this building for use by the scouts but it had later been sold. Indeed Iris Paridaens states in the chapter on Hartley Vale in the booklet 'The Oil Shale Industry' published by the Lithgow Historical Society in 1979: "The school is now used by Boy Scouts, and theirs is the only noise except for the occasional car returning its owner to his home in the valley."

Two companies began exploiting the oil shale in late 1865; one refining the product in the valley while the other transported the shale to Waterloo for processing. Initially the shale was transported up Victoria Pass to One Tree Hill Station (Mt Victoria) for rail transport to Waterloo. When the western line was extended to Bowenfels in 1869 an access line was built out to the end of the ridge above Hartley Vale. A funicular railway, 'The Big Incline', was constructed from the mine to this rail siding. The gentlest grade of the incline was 1 in 4 and the steepest was almost vertical. Mining and processing continued in Hartley Vale under various companies up until December 1913 when the plant closed and equipment, such as the kerosene tin manufacturing plant, was moved to Newnes.

We now set off along the gated road which leads to Lawsons Long Alley. It was in 1822, just prior to the construction of this route into the valley that oil shale and coal was first noted here; the area became known as Petrolea Vale. Off to the left is the steep incline up which the shale was once hauled. In this

vicinity the faint rippling of water could be heard for the only time on this walk; the unseen waters of Kerosene Creek purling their way toward the River Lett. Across an open field to the right a large stand of wattle was tinged with gold; innumerable buds about to burst into their winter splendour.

As we progressed along this road I noticed the group, now some distance ahead, were moving as one tight bunch. It put me in mind of those young teams on a soccer field who move around the ground as a single unit. Some weird perceptions of the outside world are observed from within this writer's eyeballs.

Presently the track leaves the road and meanders through the bush where we soon stop for lunch, the sawn blocks of wood conveniently lying in this area made good seats. Discussion in our small group turned to the names of two pungent-leaved shrubs prevalent in this area; the unfortunately named Prickly Shaggy Pea (*Podolobium ilicifolium*) also known as the Native Holly and the Prickly Moses (*Acacia ulicifolia*). The former was previously known as Oxyloioium rather than Podolobium; that change made it much easier didn't it? The latter's common name Prickly Moses is a corruption of 'prickly mimosa' so that clears that up, doesn't it?

Speaking of peas, it is amazing what you sometimes find when you move off the track for a 'pit stop'. As the group moved off after lunch I did just that and noticed a peculiar little structure. About two hundred millimetres high it was a perfect miniature of a conical volcano. The sloping sides carried shallow flutes coated in fine moss and the 'crater' contained a hole which I assume was an entrance to a long abandoned ants nest - a fascinating find.

An information plaque states that Lawsons Long Alley, which was completed in 1823, had a corduroy constructed on this low-lying section to convey vehicles. This was a term I had not encountered in relation to roads; investigation revealed it refers to logs being laid together across the roadway in order to traverse swampy ground - live and learn.

Soon the track began to climb more steeply and was now retained on the downhill side by a wall of rough hewn sandstone blocks. Though some in the group may not agree as they climb this section, this road was built to provide access to the valley via a gentler grade than Coxs Pass which had served as the only access for the previous eight years.

Suddenly the cars we had left at Lawsons Track Head this morning came into view indicating the end of our walk for the day. A short drive took us back to Mount York where we had the customary cuppa in the shelter shed as fine rain began to fall; impeccable timing.

I headed the notice for this walk in the last newsletter thus: 'A Little History, a Touch of Victory, a Little Mystery and Lots of Scenery.' The history and scenery were self-evident and the sweetest of victories was for the convicts who worked on the construction of Coxs Road. They were awarded their freedom at its completion, a promise they had been given if they achieved a six-month construction period. (Goes a long way in explaining the rapid progress of the project.)

The little mystery relates to Hartley Vale Village. The resident roosters were totally unreliable for a morning wake-up call. Sunrise meant little to these feathered alarm clocks, they would crow at all hours of the night. It was not the rising of old man sun that set these cocks crowing, it was the glow from the spent furnace coals being taken to the ash dumps.

John Cardy

'The Blue Mountains Rediscovered' by Chris Cunningham is a detailed yet entertaining and humorous look at early efforts to cross the mountains – a very good read.

## OUR AUGUST WALK

Friday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2011

**Deep Ravines and Soaring Spires, Dramatic Cliffs and Boundless Views**

**Kanangra Walls in the Kanangra-Boyd National Park**

The group last ventured to Kanangra Walls in 2006. The Walls are approximately 108km from Mt Wilson, 86km from Mt Victoria with the last 25km unsealed but suitable for 2WD vehicles. The longish drive to this superb venue is through such wonderful countryside you will be there before you realise. This walk is not particularly long but the majestic views most certainly are; there is plenty to catch your interest at this venue.

**Meet at the Mt Victoria Railway Station Parking Area at 8.30am or at Merry Garth at 8.00am. Those coming from the Lithgow area may prefer to meet at the hotel in Hampton on the Jenolan Caves Road at 9.00am. Early notification of your attendance would be appreciated to allow Libby ample time to organise vehicle rationalisations.**

Bring morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and plenty of water (binoculars recommended).

**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.**

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## FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 16<sup>th</sup> September – Six Foot Track; Megalong Cemetery to Coxs River

Friday 21<sup>st</sup> October – Asgard Swamp near Mt Victoria

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## 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.**

**12<sup>th</sup> August 2011 at Sloan Reserve**

**9<sup>th</sup> September 2011 at Sloan Reserve**

**Contact Libby or Beth Raines on 4756 2121 for details**