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# Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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## COXS & LOCKYERS ROADS AT MT YORK

## TOPIC

### OUR AUGUST WALK

**COXS and LOCKYERS  
ROADS – MT YORK to  
HARTLEY VALE and  
RETURN**

Friday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2013

*Oh! Ma, you will never get  
down, I'm sure you won't! I  
can't see much of the road, but I  
can see the valley you are to  
reach. It is dreadful.* This was

the unwelcome message  
spluttered out by young Tom  
Hawkins when he came  
galloping back after his mother bade him to go  
forward about one mile to check out Coxs  
Pass in April of 1822.

Mrs Elizabeth Hawkins was travelling to  
Bathurst with her husband Thomas, her  
seventy year old mother and her eight  
children; Thomas had been appointed  
Commissariat of the Government Store. They  
had been travelling for fourteen days since  
leaving Sydney on the 5<sup>th</sup> April and when  
complaining about the condition of the road  
she was told by experienced travellers to say  
nothing until she had seen the 'Big Hill' – Mt  
York. Elizabeth and her family did of course  
'get down' carrying the younger children. She  
did recount however: "We were often obliged  
to sit down on a fallen tree, but when we did  
the pains in our legs and the violent trembling  
all over us made it difficult to get up again.  
We at last reached the bottom in safety." One  
of their drays did not fare so well, overturning



Spring in the Bush

on a steep pinch and having to  
be righted and reloaded.

Since Blaxland, Wentworth and  
Lawson completed their  
crossing on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1813  
the problem of reaching the  
valley floor from Mts York and  
Victoria has resulted in five  
routes being planned, only four  
completed; more on that later.

The bicentenary of Blaxland,  
Wentworth and Lawson's  
crossing of the mountains has  
prompted a refurbishment of  
this historic precinct, now  
known as the Mount York  
Heritage Conservation Reserve.

What a marvellous job, a credit to all those  
involved and now well worth a visit.

Thirteen walkers gathered at the end of Mt  
York Road to see if we could get down this  
dreadful slope without suffering painful legs  
and all over trembling. Come with us as we  
descend via the first road built and return  
along the third route to be planned but which  
was never completed.

Once again we are blessed with perfect  
weather - a clear sky and not a breath of wind.  
A short distance down the track we divert to a  
rock platform which affords views into the  
Hartley Valley and beyond. Many farm dams  
dot the valley floor; pools of intense blue  
mirroring the azure sky. A tree line defines the  
course of a fine stream, the River Lett  
meandering through the valley to meet the  
Coxs River at Glenroy. (Therein lies another  
story. Assistant-Surveyor George Evans, in his

journal written during his survey of the road to Bathurst in 1813, referred to this stream as a rivulet but misspelt the word as 'riverlett'; the stream subsequently became known as the River Lett.)

Continuing along the track we sight evidence of the work carried out by William Cox's work gang. A deep benching along a sloping rock shelf to form a gutter and the line of the road, three mortices chiselled into a rock face to carry the rails of a stock fence. Vertical cutaways on huge boulders to widen the pass, in one case specifically to allow passage of Governor Macquarie's carriage on his 1815 journey over the newly-constructed road to Bathurst. Frozen in time in the stone are the pick marks created by the hands of the convict workers one hundred and ninety nine years ago. (Cox incidentally never referred to his workers as convicts, they were referred to by the trade in which they were skilled or simply as workers or hands - never convicts; a fine measure of the man.)

We divert off the main track once more, duck through a tunnel formed by a huge sandstone boulder leaning against a rock face and drop down some steep stone steps to an area used by rock climbers. Here there is a wonderful shelter cave below the cliff; 'shelter' perhaps not the right description as the huge slabs of honey-coloured sandstone forming the ceiling do not appear all that stable; they do however present a spectacular sight.

Not wishing to tempt fate any longer we climb back up to the main track and continue our descent into the valley. We pass below a huge pointed rock outcrop looking somewhat like the bow of a ship protruding from the hillside. The Mitchell Library holds a wonderful Purcell lithograph of a bullock-drawn cart passing below this formation as it ascends Coxs Pass in 1821; a marvellous glimpse into the past.

Lower down the track the head of a small gully had to be bridged. Still evident are gutters cut into the rock shelves and cutouts which once housed large timber beams to bridge the gap. A little further on another

immovable boulder has been cut back to a vertical wall to widen the pass, the pick marks forming a pattern of arching grooves on the rock face. Among these arching grooves the initials WBP are carved by an obviously skilled hand; perhaps the stonemason signing his work. (The patina on the rock face across both the grooves and the letters indicate a similar age.)

The line of the road now moves away from the cliff faces into a much drier environment as it descends across the talus slope. Beside the track a Purple Twining Pea (*Hardenbergia violacea*) grows, its racemes of violet flowers decorating the scene. Lower down the track the slope beneath the canopy of open woodland is illuminated by an abundance of wattle blossom, probably the Sydney Golden Wattle (*Acacia longifolia*). In this area Ray Nesci finds an exquisite little hemispherical birds nest which had obviously been dislodged from its tree; the skill with which the intricate weaving of these nests is carried out is amazing. Libby feels it may be the nest of a Yellow Robin.

We pause nearby for morning tea. As I sit on a fallen tree trunk I can not help but think of Mrs Hawkins with her 'painful legs and all over trembling' sitting in this area 191 years ago with her eight children and her mother as darkness fell, waiting for their drays to descend the pass. Incidentally there was no shortage of tree trunks in this area back then. They were tied to the back of carts and drays to act as brakes during the descent. Of course they were left lying at the bottom of the slope, at times becoming so numerous that convict gangs were sent to remove them.

Continuing on we soon reach the point where the route of Coxs Road swings to the left onto private property. We follow the Nature Walk straight ahead to cross a small creek and pass a sometimes boggy section where a line of pine-post stepping blocks have been provided for use when necessary. When necessary? Who can resist testing their balance on the stepping blocks even when the ground is dry?

Glancing back we see not only the cliffines of Mount York silhouetted against the brilliant blue sky but off to the left is a copse of trees, not native to here, devoid of leaves at this time; their stark white trunks and branches incandescent in the morning sun. A stunning effect against the dark grey/green background of the eucalypt-clad slopes.

A little further on, just past a tree which is well on its way to swallowing a track marker nailed to a blaze on its trunk, we reach the line of Lockyers Road east of Collits Inn. Perhaps here we should discuss the various routes off the western escarpment into the Hartley Valley.

The first was Coxs Pass, construction of which commenced on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1814 and was completed 5 weeks and 3 days later on the 15<sup>th</sup> December; a remarkable achievement. Part of Cox's entry in his journal for November 3 states he went forward with three others to examine the mountain at the end of the ridge, he wrote: "Found it much worse than I expected. It commences with going down steep between immense large boulders, ----- --- it falls off so steep that it is with much difficulty a person can get down at all." Later in the same entry he writes: "I have, therefore, made up my mind to make such a road as a cart can go down empty or with a very light load without a possibility of its being able to return with any sort of load whatever; and such a road will also answer to drive stock down to the forest land." He went on to state fat bullocks or sheep could be driven back up the road and: "The sheep also will be able to bring their fleeces up, and be shorn on the mountains, or driven to the second depot for the purpose." Soon after completion of Coxs Road a shearing shed was indeed established at Blackheath to relieve the sheep of the fleeces they carried up from the valley.

Cox's misgivings about this section of his road soon proved to be correct. Major Antill, who accompanied Gov Macquarie on his journey to Bathurst wrote in his journal: "----- with much difficulty and exertion we got the carts down by fixing drag-ropes behind and holding on with the people; it was so perpendicular in

places that the cattle could scarcely keep their footing." And of course we have read Mrs Hawkins' thoughts on Coxs Pass.

The problem of getting loaded carts up Coxs Pass was overcome to some extent by steel rings being anchored to rock faces at the steepest pinches and a series of pulleys and ropes used to allow bullocks driven down hill to assist carts up the hill. There was pressure however to find an easier route.

The first alternative was Lawsons Long Alley, completed perhaps in 1823 but certainly used on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1824 by René Primevère Lesson, surgeon on the French ship *Coquille* in Sydney at that time. He wrote: "The old road, which was regarded as dangerous and frightful ----- (bore) the name of Cox's pass. The new road, however, is much easier to negotiate -----." Though only slightly less steep it gave faster access to water and pastures for stock. As this new road was developed Collits Inn was built in 1823 close to the line of both routes and each road was subsequently used. Pierce Collits, the proprietor of the Golden Fleece Inn as it was initially named, was reputed to be a good host and was known to "smooth the rugged asperities of the way". Coxs Road began to fall into disrepair. In 1827 a local newspaper reported the road: "----- is fraught with such danger and difficulty as none but British settlers would overcome. You will see reputable men up to their middles in mud, straining their horses, till altogether give it up for a bad job." Obviously those quitters were not of good British stock! It was about this time that Lawsons Long Alley became the favoured route into the valley and Coxs Pass fell into disuse.

Surveyor-General Major Thomas Mitchell reported in 1827 that a route between the two existing descents offered an easier path. From April 1828 until late 1829 Major Edmund Lockyer supervised the construction on this route, starting at Collits Inn and working up the incline.

Thomas Mitchell by now however had discovered a route down Mount Victoria

which he very much favoured despite having recommended the route on which Lockyer was working. After much argument over the waste of construction funds he was given permission to proceed and withdrew the work gangs from Lockyer's project; Victoria pass was completed in October 1832 and was the route west for 80 years until motor vehicles arrived.

Early motor vehicles had trouble climbing Victoria Pass and often suffered the indignity of being towed by horses. Berghofer began construction of his pass, with easier grades, in 1907 and completed it in 1912; Victoria pass then fell into disuse. About 1920, when motor vehicles became more powerful, Victoria Pass came back into favour and of course is still in use today; Berghofer Pass closed in 1933/34.

Back to our walk. We pass the unfinished end of a fine stone retaining wall where work finished on Lockyers Road and climb up a steep mossy little gully. Beside the track here is an example of the Leafless Sourbush (*Omphacomeria acerba*) displaying small glossy green globular fruit among its thin leafless branches. We climb onto the ridge past many spectacular rock outcrops and meander through a meadow of Sunshine Wattle (*Acacia terminalis*) in full bloom; a delightful spectacle. Following lunch on a rock shelf which affords views across to Mount Blaxland, south of Old Bowenfels, where the three explorers terminated their journey, we continue through open woodland soaking up the rugged beauty of the bushland.

Presently we are back at Mt York Road and make our way back to our starting point. Along the way we visit the two historic wells, whose history remains a mystery, and take in the panoramic views from Bardens Lookout, named after Herbert and Elizabeth Barden, long time residents of Mt Victoria. A beautiful shrub with an abundance of tiny white flowers catches our attention and causes much discussion and investigation as to its identity. My guess is one of the Bearded Heaths, probably *Leucopogon setigar*.

We spend some time examining the beautifully presented information boards and

refurbished monuments and facilities while indulging in the usual after walk cuppa, rounding off a wonderful walk through the Australian bush and a stroll through history.

John Cardy

## OUR SEPTEMBER WALK

Friday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013

**Little Zig Zag, Bushrangers Cave, Rienits Pass and Wilsons Glen at Mt Victoria.**

The group last visited this venue in April 2009. This is a circular walk of approximately 4km and is rated as medium grade. There is a 250m descent and ascent. It includes the mystery of the Bushranger's Cave, open woodland, rainforest and stunning views.

The walk will commence at the far end of Kanimbla Valley Road at Mt Victoria. However this road consists of two discontinuous sections so to avoid possible confusion please meet at Mt Victoria Station at 9.30 am or at Merry Garth at 8.50am for a 9.00am departure.

Bring morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea.

**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 18<sup>th</sup> October – Blue Gum Forest, Perrys Lookdown to Govetts Leap Lookout

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> November – Fortress Ridge north of Leura

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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.**

**13<sup>th</sup> September at Wynne Reserve**

**11<sup>th</sup> October at Silva Plana**

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