
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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RUINED CASTLE AND GIANT LANDSLIDE

TOPIC

OUR MARCH WALK

**GOLDEN STAIRS, RUINED
CASTLE, GIANT
LANDSLIDE and FURBER
STEPS at KATOOMBA**

Friday 18th March 2016

Light has a dramatic effect on these mountains. Bright sunshine bathes the cliffs in gold, broken cloud casts dark islands of shadow across the valleys, cliffs are painted vermilion, scarlet, crimson, magenta by the rising or setting sun, heavy storm clouds appear to suck the colour from the landscape. The mountains present a variety of faces dependant on the play of the light; we were to experience an array of those facets today.

There was a rather rare occurrence when thirteen walkers gathered at the Katoomba Falls Reserve, Libby was nowhere to be seen; she had a family matter to attend to, which of course takes precedence over a walk in the bush. In these circumstances yours truly took a giant leap from my usual position at the rear of the group to act as leader and Allan Cupitt kindly offered to take on the role of whip. The car shuffle went surprisingly well considering it was organised by me, and we were soon at the top of the Golden Stairs.

The Golden Stairs track was completed in 1889 and derived its name from a Salvation Army hymn 'Climbing up the Golden Stair' which was sung by Salvation Army officers as



Autumn in the Bush

they climbed the stairs after visiting miners at the Ruined Castle shale mine village. The miners, mainly single men, climbed these stairs up to Narrow Neck, then climbed down the Dickson Ladders on the opposite side of Narrow Neck to visit the Megalong Hotel beside Megalong Creek. I wager there would have been much more vocalising by the miners on their return journey after having consumed their fill of 'singing syrup' at the pub.

There was a strong wind blowing, rain threatened, and most donned jackets against the

surprisingly cool conditions. We set off down the Golden Stairs track and were almost immediately sheltered from the wind. We paused at Bottings Lookout to take in the view; cliff faces more red than gold in the subdued light. The huge vertical cliff resulting from the giant landslide still appears freshly exposed although the rock fall occurred eighty-five years ago; an indication that the surrounding well-weathered cliffs must have been exposed long long ago. (Walter Botting worked closely with Jim McKay on the promotion and construction of the Giant Stairway and Prince Henry Cliff Walk in the early 1930s.)

Further down the track distant views opened up of the Ruined Castle sitting atop the saddle between Castle Head and Mount Solitary. In the opposite direction was a different aspect of the Three Sisters, lightly veiled in a hint of

mist. As our path descended more steeply we passed a large old moss-encrusted timber beam bearing a now almost illegible inscription 'Golden Stairs' lying beside the track. Soon we arrived at the Federal Pass and turned right for the 3.4km walk to the Ruined Castle; the signage indicated we had travelled only 0.8km to this point.

The track now followed the route of the horse-drawn tramway which was used to haul shale from the Ruined Castle mines. These mines operated from 1888 to 1897 with a brief reopening in 1903 to extract second quality shale for gas production by AGL.

We were now enclosed in a moist rainforest environment. Soft Tree Ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) lined the track, large trackside boulders were shrouded in Rock Felt Ferns (*Pyrrhosia ruppestris*) with their mixture of rounded sterile fronds and elongated fertile fronds draped over the surface. We arrived at a fine stand of Coachwood (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*), their smooth-barked lichen-splotched trunks towering into the canopy; what better place to pause for morning tea?

Here we experienced another facet of the differing light. The low level of light due to the combination of overcast sky and thick canopy intensified the greenness of the moss which clothed the buttressed bases of tree trunks and enveloped the scattered rocks and boulders. Thick vines snaking across the ground, coiling up tree trunks and hanging in loops to form trapeze-like swings added to the rather special atmosphere in this dimly lit spot.

We continued on accompanied by the pleasant tinkling of the bellbirds; the more correct 'bell miner' is perhaps the most appropriate common name to use in this mining area. Indeed their distinctive carillon chorus of chimes was with us for most of the day.

As we approached the Ruined Castle track the rainforest gave way to more open woodland and the track was lined by lush ferns; at times arching over and partly obscuring the path.

On this group's last visit here, in 2010, the track up to the castle formation from Federal

Pass was badly eroded and very much in need of refurbishment; National Parks have since carried out that work. Well-formed steps with timber risers are now in place most of the way up to the ridgeline. A toilet has also been installed near the intersection to cater for the high usage of these tracks by those accessing the Ruined Castle or Mount Solitary.

Well-formed steps however did not seem to alleviate the steepness of this climb. The first reward for our perseverance was the spectacular view from the ridge top up to the lofty Castle Head high above; a craggy eminence silhouetted against the grey sky, framed by the foliage of the nearby trees.

We then followed the original footpad along the ridge toward the Ruined Castle. The lower track gave clear views across the upper reaches of Cedar Valley and over Cedar Creek to the softly lit cliffs below Narrow Neck Plateau. Plumes of mist rose slowly from the valley but were quickly swept away by the strong wind when they rose above the cliff line; the whiteness of the plumes was made more brilliant in the diffused light.

The low track looped back to the ridgeline and we were once more exposed to the strong wind. The footpad then led us through a grove of Forest Oaks (*Allocasuarina torulosa*) with deeply furrowed corky bark and slender drooping branchlets; we passed some huge sandstone tors and a large shelter cave. Looming above us then was the Ruined Castle formation, "a rocky pile, the ruined keep of some gigantic castle"; we climbed to its base.

Three hardy members of the group, Alice, Robbie and Anne climbed through the narrow gap to the parapets of the castle to take in the view and be buffeted by the wind. The rest of us settled down in the sheltered area at the base for lunch and were shortly joined by the three adventurers returning from the windblown ramparts.

Lunch was very welcome after our morning walk and in these cool conditions, yet there was a feeling of emptiness, a hollowness, a void; something was missing – Libby's bushwalker cake. Then a miracle, the cake

appeared; the same cake tin wrapped with the usual towelling! Libby had made the cake as usual, sliced it, wrapped it snugly and gave it to Judy to bring along. What a thoughtful leader we have; many thanks Libby, for the cake and many other things!

We then retraced our path to the base of the Golden Stairs and continued along Federal Pass. There was obviously a break in the clouds for shafts of sunlight now penetrated the canopy, creating an entirely different atmosphere in the rainforest. The fronds of a pair of Rough Tree Ferns (*Cyanthea australis*) were spotlighted, forming a stark contrast with their dark slender trunks. The sun glinted off moist foliage in the understorey; there was now a variation in light and shade in the landscape. The differing effects of light clearly on show.

Toward the landslide area vigorous rustling of leaves on a shrub on the left of the track was noted; the draft from the Mount Rennie Tunnel was causing this isolated movement. The tunnel, constructed during 1891 with the break through on 22 January 1892, runs for approximately two hundred metres under Narrow Neck. It was used to transport kerosene shale from the Glen Mine in Megalong Valley to The Incline (now Scenic Railway) to be lifted out of the valley and taken to the main railway at Norths Siding. The Glen Mine was closed down in 1895, the whole operation only lasting four years.

We then emerged from the rainforest onto the sloping mass of rock and rubble, estimated to be approximately 250,000 tonnes, deposited by the Giant Landslide in 1931. The track drops and climbs across the face of the landslide over broken rock and around huge boulders and angular tors, some the size of houses. Regrowth across the face has been quite slow over the last eighty-five years and if the strength of the wind present today is a regular occurrence one can well understand the stunted nature of that regrowth.

There was a magnificent view back across Pitts Amphitheatre to the point from whence we had just come. About two and a half

kilometres of cliff face below Narrow Neck stretching to Castle Head was on show; a distinct horizontal line of foliage about two thirds down the cliffs indicates there must be an almost continuous ledge running along the cliff face. The Ruined Castle formation, about three and a half kilometres away in a straight line appeared, in the low light caused by dark rain clouds rolling in from the south, as a rather insignificant few crags on the saddle.

A rather steep climb on an exposed section of the landslide, where one had to brace against the wind gusts, led us into a more sheltered area. We dropped down across an exposed coal seam and were back in a rainforest environment. We passed the point where the Williams Landslide Deviation route starts, crossed the steel cables which formed the aerial ropeway across the valley to a point near the Ruined Castle, (supported on high timber trestles it collapsed less than a year after it began operations in 1889) and were soon in the Scenic World area. Those rain clouds we had seen rolling in now began dropping some of their load; it was decision time, Furber Steps or the Scenic Railway.

Five of the group, each with \$16 in hand, headed to the Scenic Railway platform; the remaining eight decided to battle on and tackle the steps. The sign at the start of the Furber Steps track indicates it is a 45-minute climb to Cliff Drive; surely we can beat that.

Immediately on leaving the Federal Pass there was a steep set of stairs, no gentle lead in here. There was a short respite as we passed through an overhang cave on a short level section of track to a second steep climb; then another overhang, another climb. As we zig zagged up there were views through the trees of the waters of Witches Leap Creek forming a delicate waterfall dropping down to Veras Grotto; the waters of this creek flow on to join the Kedumba River below Katoomba Falls.

We resisted the temptation of following the short track to Veras Grotto and soon arrived at the base of Furber Steps. These steps were completed in 1908, the identity of the constructor is unknown but they were

completed in five months with the use of a lot of explosives. Frederick Furber was a government surveyor who was mainly responsible for obtaining the £140 grant for their construction. I doubt that this was how the grant was calculated but it resulted in £1 for each of the 140 steps carved into the cliff.

From the steps, and from Furber Lookout at the top of the steps, there were magnificent views of the full drop of Katoomba Falls; across the valley the Three Sisters sat in gloomy isolation in the muted afternoon light.

We continued past Queen Victoria Lookout where the views across to Mount Solitary were enhanced by streams of mist rising from the valley floor. The track then led us past Rainforest Lookout and Witches Leap to emerge onto Cliff Drive adjacent to our meeting point of this morning. Spurred on by the threat of rain we took just 25 minutes from Federal Pass, arriving only a short time after those who took the Scenic Railway.

I then took the drivers involved in the car shuffle back to the Golden Stairs to retrieve their vehicles. Driving back along Glenraphael Drive I was compelled to stop and take in the view to the west. A horizontal line of brooding dark cloud sat above Megalong Valley, the floor of the valley however was illuminated by bright sunshine while the cliffs around the valley sat in subdued shadows; a dramatic example of the play of light on the mountains.

John Cardy

OUR APRIL WALK

Friday 15th April 2016

Wind-pruned Heath and Open Woodland, Craggy Headlands and Expansive Views

Lions Head Ridge and Lions Head on the Kings Tableland at Wentworth Falls

This is a new venue for the group; we have not previously ventured onto Kings Tableland. This is a medium grade walk of about 6km return with a steepish climb to the top of Lions Head. (We return along the same route so you could elect not to do that final climb and await our return.) There are spectacular views into

the Jamison and Kedumba Valleys at many points along this walk.

Meet at Wilson Park in Falls Road just off the Highway at Wentworth Falls (near the Bowling Club) at 9.30am, or at Merry Garth for an 8.30am departure.

There will be a vehicle rationalisation at Wentworth Falls for the approximately 12km drive to the trackhead, the last 6km on an unsealed but quite good road.

STOP PRESS!!! Freda Moxom has kindly invited us to afternoon tea at her home where there will be delicious scones and a slice to be had; Freda's home is just a short stone's-throw away from our meeting place at Wilson Park. Therefore you only need to bring your own morning tea and lunch.

Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 (after 7pm) or Helen and John Cardy on 9871 3661 or on mobile 0418 646 487.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 20th May 2016 – Leura Cascades, Gordon Falls and Pool of Siloam at Leura

Friday 17th June 2016 – Popes Glen, Pulpit Rock and Govetts Leap 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.

8th April - meet at Hay Lane (Sloan Reserve)

13th May – meet at Gregson Park

Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 for details