
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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ODIN HEAD AND BLAIR ATHOL MINE

TOPIC

OUR MARCH WALK

ODIN HEAD and BLAIR
ATHOL COAL MINE at
MOUNT VICTORIA

Friday 15th March 2019

Several far-flung places and exotic gods and legends touch this rather short walk in the Upper Blue Mountains; more on that later.

It was a dark and stormy night (could not help myself in using that well-worn old cliché) on the Thursday before this walk; the next morning however it was fine in Sydney and looked even clearer to the west. Nevertheless, as we approached Wentworth Falls dark clouds billowed and rolled, shouldering each other across the sky; fog was rising from the valleys. Despite that, on our arrival at the meeting point on Victoria Falls Road, though the sky was overcast, it appeared we would be experiencing ideal walking conditions.

Eighteen walkers gathered here for this walk which was new to the Group. We were joined by Jenny Dargan's sister Heather and by David Howell and Monica Hayes, two members who had not been able to join us for some time. After a vehicle rationalisation we set off on the short drive to the trackhead where the nineteenth walker, Freda Moxom, was waiting for us. Freda had kindly checked out this first section of the walk on a previous



Autumn in the Bush

occasion and was to lead us today; I took up my more familiar role as whip at the rear of the Group.

And so we set off along an old fire trail, stepping over the many fallen tree trunks which were initially scattered across our path. The path led us through open forest consisting of both stringy-barked and smooth-barked eucalypts; in the understorey were numerous Broad-leaved Geebung (*Persoonia levis*), their bright green leathery leaves a feature in the landscape. Drifts of Curly Sedge or Old Mans

Whiskers (*Caustis flexuosa*) spread across the forest floor.

Beside the track was the stem of a Waratah (*Telopea speciosissima*) carrying a cluster of spent seed pods formed into a grey metallic-looking sphere, dimpled where the seeds had been ejected; an interesting image.

Deeper into the forest the stringy-barked trunks were blackened by fire while the bases of many of the smooth-barked trunks carried dark sculptural hollows and apertures framed by rolled edges where the repairing cambium has wrapped into the cavities.

We passed a few Hairpin Banksias (*Banksia spinulosa* var *spinulosa*) carrying some early golden-yellow flower spikes, the hooked styles not yet taking on their red to bluish black colour from which the common name is derived.

As we made our way along the track we passed many stone cairns. Some were quite narrow structures set upon large base stones; one, the more traditional pyramidal shape, was artistically placed in front of the arching ribbon-like leaves of a Grass Tree (*Xanthorrhoea sp*). Then there was one rather fanciful example sitting atop the end of a horizontal fallen tree branch about a metre above the ground.

The track then descended, climbed a little as we passed some large rock outcrops and we arrived at Odin Head; what magnificent views were on offer here.

To the east were the cliffs below Burra Korain Ridge above which there were several domed pagoda shaped formations. Beyond this ridge the line of Burramoko Ridge could be seen leading out to Burramoko Head. Below us the line of Victoria Creek led the eye to Birrabang Walls in the north and then to the horizon along which Bells Line of Road runs. Closer at hand, again to the north, were the sheer vertical cliffs on the other side of Odin Gully; these cliffs wind around to Victoria Falls Lookout.

In these magnificent environs we settled down for lunch. On the edge of the cliff near where I sat for lunch was an Old Man Banksia (*Banksia serrata*); battered and twisted by the elements and growing in what appeared to be an impossible position atop the rock face, this was a splendid ancient dwarfed tree. It carried several old flower spikes resembling May Gibb's character the Big Bad Banksia Man; open seed pods resembling a gaping mouth and hooded eye lids.

Features in this area were named by Myles Dunphy, drawing on Norse mythology; thus Asgard, Valhalla, Thor and Odin.

Odin was the Scandinavian name for the god called Wodin by the Anglo-Saxons. He was the god of wisdom, poetry, war and agriculture. He was also god of the dead and presided over banquets for those slain in battle; he was obviously a multi-tasker. To obtain these powers he had to give up one of his eyes; thus he is often represented as a one-

eyed man wearing a hat and carrying a staff; his remaining eye was the sun; I guess, therefore, one eye was more than enough. The Promise of Odin was the most binding of all oaths to a Norseman; in making it, the hand was passed through a large silver ring dedicated to that purpose, or through a sacrificial stone. Such a stone exists in a Neolithic stone circle near Stromness in Orkney; today, loving couples join hands through this circular hole when they declare vows to each other.

Here, on the southern side of Odin Head, I noted a rock pillar made up of ironstone plates sitting atop a low rock outcrop. It has a hole big enough to pass a hand right through. One wonders whether this small feature influenced Dunphy in selecting the name Odin for this particular headland.

We now retraced our steps back to the cars and drove a short distance back to where the 132kv transmission line crosses the road. This was the starting point for a short walk down to the Blair Athol Coal Mine. Helen and I checked out this track a few weeks ago so I now took over as leader and Freda brought up the rear.

Soon after leaving the transmission line easement the track becomes a footpad and we arrive at a clearing where flakes of coal are scattered. The footpad then follows the raised per-way along which the coal skips were hauled from the mine. We passed between the trunks of two very attractive eucalypts bordering the track, each covered with shards of loose bark. Nearby I spotted a tiny orchid with two pinkish white petals, possibly the Parsons Bands Orchid (*Eriochilus cucullatus*), as is nature's way, a tiny gem on the larger palette.

Soon David Howell spotted two concrete foundations in the shallow gully on the left of the per-way and we arrived at the eroded remains of a set of steps down to the creekline. We climbed down here, carefully avoiding the protruding star pickets, and arrived at the Blair Athol Coal Mine; we knew this because the sign told us so.

The entry to the tunnel, about four metres wide and two metres high, is shrouded by tree ferns and there is a container on a post which once contained a visitors book with information about the mine.

Armed with a few torches and the lights of mobile phones we ventured into the tunnel. Close to the entrance there is the pendulous nest of a Rock Warbler; it appeared to be long abandoned. The tunnel descends at an angle of about fifteen degrees; impressions can still be seen where sleepers once laid, indeed, further on there are some sleepers remaining. There are refuge alcoves cut into the tunnel walls.

We descended about two hundred and fifty metres where we arrived at the edge of the water now flooding the mine; the actual coalface is about a further two hundred and fifty metres on. Cave divers do occasionally come here and dive to the coalface, squeezing past coal skips which remain in the mine. I can think of thousands of things I would do for entertainment before attempting that, hoping that I run out of time before I run out of ideas!

We climbed back to the surface and made our way back to the cars, thus ending another wonderful day exploring these mountains. Seeing the spectacle of the Upper Grose Gorge from a quite different angle and the endeavours of man almost one hundred years ago made this a very special day.

The Blair Athol Pastoral Station and Homestead, north west of Rockhampton in Queensland, was owned by James McLaren. Blair Athol was the name of McLaren's birthplace in Perthshire, north west of Dundee in Scotland. In 1866 he had a well sunk on his property; the well sinkers struck a seam of coal. It was many years before this coal reserve was exploited but the Blair Athol Coal and Timber Company Limited was eventually set up and the reserves proved to be extensive. Initially they were extracted by underground mining but soon open cut mining was employed. The mine became one of the biggest in Queensland. A small mining company, TerraCom, controversially recommenced operations at the mine in

August 2017 after purchasing the lease from Rio Tinto for \$1. Therein lies another story.

Back to our little mine at Mount Victoria. In 1920 a test bore was sunk by the Blair Athol Coal and Timber Co Ltd.

Wednesday 1st December 1920; The Lithgow Mercury reported: "COAL ON THE MOUNTAINS says The Brisbane Daily Mail; *There is every indication that the Blair Athol Coal and Timber Co Ltd has secured a valuable coal proposition at Mount Victoria in New South Wales. Alderman JW Hetherington, managing director of the company, has just returned from a visit to the property, where a bore has been put down. He stated to-day that this bore struck coal at a depth of 252 feet. The coal struck by the bore is 4 ft 11 in thick, and Mr Hetherington estimates that the company's lease contains about 22,000,000 tons of good marketable coal. A tunnel has been started in a gorge about forty chains from the top of the ridge, where the main pithead will be constructed. Mr Hetherington, who will leave Brisbane on Monday for Rockhampton, states that he will have no hesitation in recommending to the members of the board of the Blair Athol Coal and Timber Co Ltd to push on with all speed with the work of opening up this valuable property.*"

Tunnelling began in 1921; it was expected 250 men would be employed to operate the mine.

Wednesday 23rd May 1923 The Lithgow Mercury proclaimed: "*The Mayor of Katoomba, Ald WJ Rumble and the president of the Chamber of Commerce, Mr JS Henderson, paid an official visit to the Blair Athol Coal Mine, at Mt Victoria. They were welcomed by Mr JW Hetherington, the managing director of the company, who escorted them to the coalface.*

The visitors were impressed with the prospects; each stressed the fact that the opening of the field means the commencement of a new commercial era for the Blue Mountains. It is estimated that the field contains about 37,000,000 tons of good quality coal. When development work is

completed, it is expected to mine two thousand tons a day.”

Friday 8th June 1923: Coal Co given an ultimatum to pay an outstanding, and disputed, power bill of £232 to Blue Mountains Shire Council. The Coal Co claimed it only owed £185, a settlement was reached for £220.

Friday 25th January 1924 The Blue Mountains Echo reported: *“The Blair Athol Coal Mine and Timber Co Ltd has notified the Shire Council that operations at the Mount Victoria coal mine have been temporarily suspended and that, consequently, electricity power will not be required until further notice.”*

Friday 19th September 1924 The Blue Mountains Echo proclaimed: *“The Shire Council has been notified that the Blair Athol Coal and Timber Co Ltd, Mount Victoria, has ceased operations and that negotiations were in operation for the sale of the property.”*

Friday 24th April 1925 The Blue Mountains Echo reported: *“Blair Athol Coal Mine, developed at a cost of approximately £30,000 was closed down some time ago and the surface coal and all equipment sold to Mr Hill for £500. A sale was held on Friday when a considerable quantity of machinery and mining equipment was disposed of.”*

Friday 28th May 1926 The Lithgow Mercury reported: *“Mount Victoria coal leases forfeited.”*

And so ended the sad tale of the Blair Athol Coal Mine, there does not appear to be any record of what caused such a spectacular collapse, although one wonders how the project could have been given the go ahead on the basis of a single test bore. (The term ‘snake oil salesman’ does spring to mind.) As the tunnel now sits partially flooded, it is perhaps an uncanny reflection of the origin of its name in the digging of that well in Queensland in 1866.

John Cardy

OUR APRIL WALK

NOTE CHANGE OF DAY AND DATE

THURSDAY 4th APRIL 2019

Lush Rainforest, Ferny Glens, Mossy Nooks

The Victory and Sassafras Gully Tracks from Faulconbridge to Springwood with a possible side trip to Numantia Falls

The Group last walked these tracks in June 2013. It is a creekline walk mainly through a rainforest environment. It is a medium grade walk of about 7km on mostly good tracks. There is a steepish climb to finish but it is not too long and the rewards are many – two waterfalls, small cascades, lush greenery and bright orange stalactites and stalagmites.

Meet at 9.30am at the Corridor of Oaks in Sir Henrys Parade at Faulconbridge (cross the railway line at the level crossing just east of Faulconbridge Railway Station).

Those wishing to car share from Mt Wilson should meet at St Georges Church for an 8.15am departure.

There will be a short car shuffle to leave cars at the Springwood finish for transport back to Faulconbridge.

Bring morning tea and lunch and plenty of water.

Contact Helen and John Cardy on 9871 3661 or on mobile 0400 444 966.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 17th May - Castle Head at Katoomba

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.

Friday 12th April at Hay Lane – Sloane Reserve

Mt Wilson contact Alice Simpson 0414 425 511 or 4756 2110

Council contact Tracy Abbas 0428 777 141