



# Historical Paper - No. 7

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## The Distinguishing Features of Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine

*Ian Jack has kindly given the Society permission to reprint the text of this paper which he gave at the Society's 11th Annual General Meeting on 24th November 2007 at the Mt Irvine Village Hall. Ian Jack is Professor of History at Sydney University, President of the Royal Australian Historical Society and in 2004 headed the last heritage review of the entire Blue Mountains area. He has been a great friend to the Mt Wilson & Mt Irvine Historical Society for many years.*

I am very attached to Bells Line of Road. No matter how many times one travels that way, the sudden revelation of the Grose Valley wall never loses its magic and the undeveloped bush along most of the road has an impact lost forever on the Great Western Highway. But despite the multiple delights offered by Bells Line, I always get a thrill of anticipation when I turn off, just at the headwaters of Birrabong Brook, to reach Mount Wilson, and sometimes go on to Mount Irvine. Those of you who live here hardly need me to tell you why Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine are so special. Nonetheless, most of you are here looking out, while I am looking in, a reasonably well-informed stranger looking in from a whole variety of different viewpoints.

Over the first five years of the new century, I have been engaged on a comprehensive review of the heritage items identified throughout the length and breadth of the Blue Mountains local government area. So I have been privileged to see the 43 heritage items at Mount Wilson and four at Mount Irvine in the context of over 900 heritage places in the Mountains as a whole.

Although the heritage of the Aboriginal peoples - the Gundungurra, the Darug and the Wiradjuri whose domains met here in the Mountains - is, of course, important and ancient, and although the natural environment, however modified, is older still and is the reason for World Heritage listing, the heritage which I have reviewed was overwhelmingly created by the invading Europeans. Some of the icons of the Mountains relate to the earliest intervention by the Europeans: Cox's Road is the most obvious and most worthy example; the Explorers' Tree the most bizarre; Lapstone Bridge and Victoria Pass the most aesthetically dramatic while retaining their utility in a world which even Sir Thomas Mitchell could not foresee.

The railway brought relatively cheap rail travel to the Mountains in the late 1860s. It was not only cheap, it was also frequent and reliable; more reliable than the rail service of the twenty-first century. The corollary of a decent train timetable was the efflorescence of tourist facilities in the 1870s and the predictable development of tourist traps in the 1880s. This factor of exponentially accelerating exploitation transformed the area and created the bulk of what appears on the Council's heritage register today.

The obvious categories of the new built environment dating from the last third of the nineteenth century are the hotels, the guest-houses, the private country retreats, the walking tracks, and the

railway stations, railway quarries, railway dams and railway culverts plus, of course, John Whitton's three Colossi: the Knapsack Viaduct and the railway ZigZags at Lapstone and Lithgow.

There are important corollaries to all this. By and large the railway followed the line of the Great Western Highway, the single narrow ridgeway which already contained Cox's and Mitchell's roads. As a result there was and still is a dual corridor of road and rail going through inconveniently narrow pinches. It is these pinches which give the Roads and Traffic Authority so much trouble and their trouble is too often someone else's grief, like the good folk of Lawson.

Along this dual corridor, villages and later towns developed in a variety of ways, almost always associated with the railway stations. As a result, for the first time there were some properly laid-out grid-pattern settlements in the Mountains, usually resulting from the sub-division of private land. The Pilgrim Inn and the Weatherboard were no longer sufficient. A stream of holiday-making visitors created a need for more permanent residents and permanent residents created urban concentrations. These urban concentrations, from Glenbrook to Mount Victoria, in turn needed services such as shops, pubs, banks and cafes. Soon utilities were required, such as water, gas and eventually electricity. And of course after 1889 there was the ambivalent pleasure of having local government.

Another striking corollary of the railway was the continuing dominance of the southern side of the Grose. The railway had a great deal of power. In the Southern Highlands, for example, the first settlement at Bong Bong, near today's Moss Vale, was bypassed when Mitchell rerouted the Great South Road through the new law-and-order town of Berrima in the 1830s. But the railway bypassed Berrima, and reinvigorated the Old Argyle Road at the expense of Berrima so that the new railway stations at Mittagong, Bowral and Moss Vale soon encouraged the growth of rival conurbations, which soon eclipsed Berrima. Bong Bong was revenged.

Here in the Blue Mountains it was a rather different story in detail, for the railway of the 1860s followed the same ridge-line as the Great Western Highway and there was no existing Bong Bong or Berrima. But the overwhelming power of the railway link was the same in the two regions. In the Blue Mountains there were two alternative routes across from the Cumberland Plain to the grazing lands of the west. The great Western Highway, to the south of the gorge of the Grose Valley, and Bells Line of Road to the north. The railway confirmed the southern route as the principal road.

As a result of this dominance of the southern corridor, Bells Line of Road was still into the twentieth century only a stock-route, with very minimal services for the drovers and light use by wheeled vehicles. Even today Bell, Berambing and Bilpin barely exist as urban centres and there is sparse population along the orcharding country. The isolated and undeveloped state of Bells Line is neatly summed up in one of my favourite heritage places. Just west of Mount Tomah is Thomas Shearwood's wonderful rock-cut sign outside his so-called Cave Hotel. And the Cave Hotel is no more than a commodious cavern festooned with emu-tracks engraved by Aboriginal people. It is telling that there is no signage and no provision for parking at Shearwood's hotel.

The problem with Bells Line was first and foremost the crossing of Mount Tomah.

Bells Line of Road ran from North Richmond over Kurrajong Heights to the Darling Causeway and presented travellers with a pretty easy traverse of a fairly even plateau until it reached Mount Tomah. Mount Tomah defeated all wheeled vehicles until the 1870s and this awesome mountain is the reason that Bells Line remained basically a drove-road for cattle and sheep throughout the nineteenth century. The Aboriginal people who guided Archibald Bell in 1823 were frightened of Mount Tomah: 'debbil country' they called it, and I am not alone in finding Mount Tomah a dark and hostile place today; it gives bad vibes.

Yet George Bowen, a military man who settled in Berambing in 1829 and whose mother owned the square mile of the mountain itself in the 1830s, described Mount Tomah in very glowing terms:

*The character of the vegetation there is superb. There is nothing else like it in the Colony except in the small district of Illawarra. The soil seems too fertile for the brown green Eucalyptus; for there are but few of them, and they are giants. The ground is chiefly in the possession of various trees of the laurel kind, many of them covered with blossoms in the summer. The graceful and beautiful tree fern, some as much as forty feet [13 metres] high, are there in thousands. The soil is occupied by a great variety of splendid and rare specimens of fern, moss, and lichen, while the trees are oppressed by parasites, and almost strangled in spots by enormous creepers climbing up to the sun-shine and mingling with their branches. Here and there, the foliage is so thick over-head as to make the place gloomy under a midday sun, while underneath the ground is bare.*

But at the end of this description he owns that 'There seemed to me something awful in the silence'.

I have dwelt on Mount Tomah because of the geological factor. Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine share much of the vegetation of Mount Tomah because all three eminences owe their unusual characteristics to their basaltic soils. Mount Wilson lies to the west of Mount Tomah, however, and it took another generation of settlement to unlock its potential.

The critical change came when George Bowen's son, George Bartley Bowen, who, like his grandmother, had land at Mount Tomah, went exploring in 1867. He crossed the fearsome gorge of Bowens Creek (named after his father), emerged near Waterfall Creek and climbed up onto the basalt cap of Mount Wilson. The elder Bowen contacted the Deputy Surveyor-General, PF Adams, who, after consulting Govett's 1833 map, realized that the hazards of Bowens Creek could be avoided by following the present road-line along the spur from Bell, which was a bit of a put-down for George Bartley Bowen after the trouble he had taken in crossing Bowens Creek.

The creation of Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine on this spur running off Bells Line was made possible by the railway line coming north from Mount Victoria along the Darling Causeway before it turned west again towards Lithgow. The Darling Causeway had been perfectly well known from the 1820s onwards, for it was part of Bells Line of Road: the original Bells Line descended from the Causeway into Hartley Vale by the present Hartley Vale Road. But the railway right along the Causeway was the necessary stimulus to the creation of Mount Wilson.

Unlike all the other settlements along the railway, however, Mount Wilson, and *a priori* Mount Irvine, lay quite a long way from the nearest station. As a result, Mount Wilson preserved something of its innocence and became not a Katoomba on basalt but the most satisfying equivalent of an Indian hill station. Mount Wilson was, and to some extent still is, Australia's Simla, with Mount Irvine on its outskirts. It does not resemble the other villages within the Blue Mountains City area.

Yet there was nothing novel about the concept of building country retreats in the cool of the Mountains as escape holes for the well-to-do of the plains when summer's heat and humidity made life uncomfortable. There were many country retreats, comparable to *Wynstay* or *Dennarque* and comparison with them is instructive. Most of the Mountain estates built for occasional residence by coastal people of substance lay close to the railway line from Lapstone to Mount Victoria.

Faulconbridge is an outstanding example of political and legal power: Sir James Martin in the 1870s had his own railway platform of *Numantia* close to his house; his friend Sir Alfred Stephen (who also bought but did not build at Mount Wilson) had his weatherboard cottage *Alphington* close by. Very close too was the cottage of another friend, Professor Charles Badham of the University of Sydney, who similarly bought but did not build at Mount Wilson. These three distinguished friends visited their country estates frequently throughout the year and Stephen often went up by train for a Saturday or a weekend alone, with his family or with friends, with a very occasional excursion to see his son and other friends at Mount Wilson. Martin too was a frequent visitor by train, partly to get away from Lady Martin.

Sir Henry Parkes was also a neighbour to Martin, Stephen and Badham at Faulconbridge from 1878 to 1882, but Parkes was not quite in the same social set and his sick wife and two daughters were in semi-permanent residence while Sir Henry commuted from his Parliamentary business and his lodgings in town. Faulconbridge was very much an extension of normal life in all seasons of the year and an escape from tensions, political and personal, particularly for Stephen and Martin.

In striking contrast Mount Wilson was seasonal. Almost all of Edward Merewether's letters from Mount Wilson in the 1870s are dated in December or January and he refers enthusiastically to *Dennarque* as 'the abode of health and happiness'.

The only other part of the Mountains which had something of the summer hill station flavour of Mount Wilson, as opposed to the country-retreat atmosphere of Faulconbridge, was Kurrajong Heights. It was high enough above the Hawkesbury valley to tempt people like the Richmond

Presbyterian minister, Dr Cameron, to buy a salubrious cottage for the summer months. Like-minded folk included the politician James Comrie at Northfield, the government astronomer Canon Scott at Bunburra and the naturalist Louisa Atkinson at Fernhurst. Kurrajong was not, of course, on the railway, but it bore a relationship to Richmond station not dissimilar to the link between Mount Wilson and Bell. But Kurrajong Heights, unlike Mount Wilson, was easily accessible by the best part of Bells Line of Road and attracted orchardists as well as overheated capitalists in the late nineteenth century so that the hill station aspect there was substantially moderated by commerce.

Later in the twentieth century it is true that Mount Wilson developed its own nurseries and its own tourism centred around the tree-ferns which had given *Yarrawa*, *Dennarque* and *Beowang* their original Aboriginal names and around the exotic gardens created out of the felled forest, but the basic character of Mount Wilson remained and remains, despite many changes in individual properties and in social *mores*, a hill station which is unique in the state.

The social mix at Mount Wilson is also a definitive feature, which takes a form rather different from elsewhere. To make the support of settled life at Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine possible, permanent residents were necessary to caretake the larger properties and to provide services. Quarries for building stone and road-metal had to be opened. The timber for housing and fencing was cut at the saw-mills of Tom, Syd and Albert Kirk, members of the quintessential caretaker community. The propagation of plants for the private gardens but in conjunction with the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney is an intrinsic part of the hill station origins at Mount Wilson, whereas it is an intrusion at Kurrajong Heights where the independent orchardists were different from the caretakers and gardeners who were enmeshed in the Mount Wilson system. The children of orchardists and landowners attended the same Kurrajong schools just as, ultimately, the children of caretakers, gardeners and landowners attended Mount Wilson public school, but they arrived there by very different routes.

The creation of a hill station village took time, however. Although all the 62 portions created by crown sub-division were sold by the beginning of 1876, which is the year after the railway station was opened near Bell, only a small proportion of the 34 initial purchasers actually built houses at all. Some like William Hay were speculators and sold much of their land quite rapidly. The Sydney lawyers, Thomas Salter, Sir Alfred Stephen and three of his lawyer sons, all bought early, but only Matthew Stephen built a house, called *Campanella*, in 1878. Charles Brownrigg, formerly superintendent of the Australian Agricultural Company, based near Newcastle, bought what is now *Silva Plana* reserve and sold it in 1876 to Edward Merewether, who was the current superintendent about to retire. In turn Merewether enthused about the place to his own successor at the AA Company, Jesse Gregson, who bought a portion in 1877. As a result, Merewether built *Dennarque* in 1879 and Gregson built *Yengo* in 1878-80.

The earliest of the summer retreats erected in this first period of Mount Wilson was the work of Richard Wynne, who had made his fortune in building materials in Sydney and was the inaugural mayor of Burwood in 1874. His first purchases from the crown in Mount Wilson in 1875 totalled 93 acres (37 hectares) in six portions and by 1882 he held some 300 acres (120 hectares). In 1875 he

built the two-roomed cottage which is the earliest building in the village today, with flooring of sleepers illegally cut on his land and notched by Wynne to make them unacceptable to the railway. I particularly like this story and I took great pleasure in photographing the notched sleepers, not least because, unlike so many creation myths, this one seems to be true.

The development of Mount Wilson during the twentieth century owed much to a nineteenth century sort of paternalism among the leading families. This is a contrast to Kurrajong Heights and also to places like Faulconbridge, despite the pervasive shadow of Sir Henry Parkes. At Mount Wilson, old owners, outstandingly the Wynnes of *Wynstay* and their descendants the Smarts, and new owners, outstandingly Marcus Clark and his family of *Sefton Hall* (on the site of Cox's *Balangra*), gave generously of their spare land for community use. The Anglican church, an outstandingly successful design in asbestos cement, was built in 1916. The land was given by Owen Wynne while the church was built by the Clark children as a memorial to their father three years after his death. The Village Hall, so vital a resource for such a community, was built in 1952 on land donated by Mrs Sloan of *Bebeah*, while Miss Helen Gregson of *Yengo* left a bequest which was used for the building and the Wynne family organised a campaign to build and fund the hall. The provision of electricity to the village came in 1940 primarily through the influence of Charles Jefferson, a high-powered American electrical engineer who was also the father-in-law of Edward Gregson of *Wyndham*, formerly of *Yengo*. But there was also a strong element of self-help and co-operation which spread throughout the entire community, led not least by the many members of the Kirk family who have been the custodians of a collective memory going back to the 1870s. This collective memory is not always correct, but its existence is important.

Helen Warliker, born Helen Gregson in 1924, the daughter of Edward Gregson who built *Wyndham* in Wyndham Avenue when the family sold *Yengo*, wrote her reminiscences called *A Mount Wilson Childhood* in 1960. In her foreword, Mrs Warliker recalled that in the 1920s and 1930s:

*Life was not idyllic but I think we were privileged to have been brought up in this unique environment, not only because of the beauty of its gardens and seemingly endless expanses of bushland which were our playground, but because of the diversity of people who formed the community. Long after my family had become fragmented and I and other contemporaries had moved away, there was still the feeling of an extended family and a strong emotional link remains to this day.*

The diversity of the community is a key factor. Mount Wilson is now, in the twenty-first century, a still more diverse community, certainly larger because of further sub-division, but it retains the special character of isolation. In some ways, ironically, it is more isolated, with fewer facilities than in the past. There is no Mrs Olive selling 'bread of a sort' as Merewether grumbled in 1878; there is no longer a post office, either at *Silva Plana* or at *Beowang/Withycombe* or at 77 The Avenue; no refreshment-room could be relied upon to be open for the casual visitor when I was last up here. But public reserves and public toilets are liberally provided throughout the village, in a public-

spirited way unmatched anywhere else in the Mountains or indeed in Sydney. The tree-ferns and the gardens attract people from all over the world, although the gardens have emerged at the expense of the basaltic rainforest and those tree-ferns which eke out an existence in bare paddocks without any of their protective canopy give me some worry. Some of the fine gardens retain their Victorian aspect, others were created between the wars or, like the splendours of *Breenhold*, were created as recently as the 1960s.

It is good that Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine have not stood still. They are not fossilised like some of the wood. Yet vigilance is always needed to ensure that changes are compatible with the values of the place and this is a vulnerable environment, vulnerable to human mistakes and recently too vulnerable to fire for comfort.

But there have been some well-conceived changes. I have nothing but praise for one of the newer homes. This is the Simpson-Lee house off Wynnes Rocks Road, completed in 1988 by Glenn Murcutt: it is a remarkable example of interplay in design and environmental setting between highly sophisticated, educated clients and a great architect.

Françoise Fromonot recently summed up the aesthetic merits of the Simpson-Lee house:

*The plan, which is highly simplified, achieves a quasi-monastic sobriety; the lengthwise itinerary, which is strongly affirmed, organizes landscape and living spaces alike into a long panoramic sweep and embodies the very reason for the house's existence. The building confirms Murcutt's shift towards a kind of abstract expression of the external wall plane: handled like a precious, ribbed and banded screen, it echoes the rhythm of the large trees filtering sunlight and views.*

Those of us who have been privileged to visit the property have no hesitation in acclaiming its aesthetic qualities as triumphantly beyond the threshold for State significance. It is a shining and rare example of the way in which sensitivity of comprehension and design may still today enhance the Mount Wilson environment. Mount Wilson is the richer for this late addition.

To sum up, the character of Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine is quite unlike the temper of the villages and towns of the Great Western Highway. It is not a simple character, nor a simple relationship between the original environment and the modified. The sublimity of the rich vegetation of the basalt cap with an understorey of magical tree-ferns remains in part, but this vegetation is interspersed with ruthlessly large clearings filled with exotic gardens around fine old houses. I love Mount Wilson, but its heritage values are complex and its pleasures are not unmingled with regrets. To a degree unlike anywhere else on the Mountains, Mount Wilson presents dilemmas of judgment. What would Paris do if given a choice of the Cathedral of Ferns, Wynstay and Glen Murcutt's Simpson-Lee house: which of these is Venus? And would a decision lead to another Trojan War? I'm glad that I am not Paris, for I love them all in different ways.