

Of The Forests and Timber Sawmills - Teamsters and Axemen In Mount Wilson

The early years

I outlined in an article in 2011 written for the Heritage newsletter of the Blue Mountains Association of Cultural and Heritage organisations the birth of sawmilling in Mount Irvine. What then was the story of sawmilling in Mount Wilson? In the earlier days timber was certainly cut but not on an organised basis or in a purpose built permanently sited mill. It certainly took place but it was after World War I. Part of the explanation lies in the different origins of European settlement on these two mountains. Mount Irvine began as a farming and rural development; Mount Wilson 20 years before 1897 was the quintessential 'Hill Station' where wealthy people established some retreats arriving in November and departing in April to their comfortable homes in Sydney, Newcastle, Mulgoa or Mudgee.

Yet those same notable members of Society were confronted with the 'impenetrable bush' or 'brush' on Mount Wilson as it was called. ¹



A glimpse of the 'Brush'. This is the pristine state of the temperate rainforest on Mount Wilson before settlement.

It seems puzzling that the Mount that was to become known as Mount Wilson after 1868 remained undiscovered for so long. Already Mount Tomah was known following the early journey of George Caley in 1804 who reached Mount Banks (known as Mount King George for many years).

These mounts along with Mount Bell, Mount Tootie and Mount Hay were covered with a layer of basalt capping, the remnant of an 18 million-year-old lava flow across this landscape. In 1823 ²Archibald Bell from Richmond Hill found a way across to the Cox's River, from Kurrajong to Hartley. He was assisted in this achievement by Aboriginal guidance. Not long after, he was accompanied by a surveyor from the Surveyors General's office (Robert Hoddle). In time this track became a way to drive cattle and sheep from the West³. In 1832 – 1833 William Govett undertaking an arduous survey in that area according to Eccleston Du Faur in the railway guide of 1879⁴ crossed the western end of what became Mount Wilson. We know from other sources that Govett described that western end as 'a high mass of range of the richest soil and covered with almost impenetrable scrub'⁵. Describing forests as scrub reflects the impression the Australian bushland had on English born surveyors and explorers at that time. It does not do justice to the magnificent giants of eucalypt forests and the temperate rainforest found on these Mounts.

In the temperate rainforest were Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*), Coachwood (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*), Blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*), Possumwood (*Quintiniasieberi*), the Lily Pilly (*Acmenismithii*) and many tree ferns ranging from the King Fern (*Todea Barbara*) to the Soft Tree Fern (*Dicksonia Antarctica*) and beneath them a forest floor of many others. High on the mountains above the rainforest in Mount Wilson grew the giant eucalyptus trees: the Blue Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*); the Brown Barrel (*Eucalyptus fastigata*) a stringy bark; Mountain or Yellow Gum or Mountain

¹ From Du Faur's early photos; copies in the archives of the Society

² The Sydney Gazette October 9th 1823

³ Louisa Atkinson 'Voice from the Country' published in SMH 1860s

⁴ NSW Railway Guide 1879 copy in the archives Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society

⁵ Page 21 Mount Wilson New South Wales CH Currey 1968

Grey Gum (*Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*); Black Ash or Silver Top Ash (*Eucalyptus sieberi*); *Eucalyptus blaxlandii* a stringy bark; and the Manna Gum or Ribbon Gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) to name a few.

When the first European settlers (such as Richard Wynne) arrived c. 1875 – 1876 in Mount Wilson Robert Kirk, with his background of farming on the Nepean and Hawkesbury, was in contact and able to organise labour for the clearing of the ‘impenetrable scrub’ and the making of the first tracks to provide access. Recalling that the railway moving west had reached Mount Victoria in 1868 and had passed through Bowenfels via the famous ZigZag created by John Whitton, the New South Wales Railway Chief Engineer, it is not surprising that the timber getters, seeking sleepers for the construction of the railway line had visited Mount Wilson via the track surveyed by Edward S. Wyndham in 1868 when he carried out his historic survey of 62 portions on Mount Wilson. Mount Wilson received its official name bestowed by Philip Francis Adams, the New South Wales Surveyor General in March 1868 while visiting Wyndham on site. The name was in honour of the Secretary for Lands in the New South Wales Government, John Bowie Wilson.⁶



Hon. John Bowie Wilson

It seems direct evidence of timber being cut to sleepers was found when Richard Wynne built his first tiny two roomed Gothic cottage in 1875. The floorboards show distinct notches deliberately placed by Richard Wynne to prevent their use as sleepers.⁷

Organised timber milling did not take place in Mount Wilson until after World War I. In 1914 a timber company in Lithgow had plans for the timber milling in Mount Wilson. Under the heading ‘Reserves in Mount Wilson Petition against Interference with Them’ was being circulated in Lithgow.⁸

As citizens of the state who do not own a foot of land at Mount Wilson but who appreciate the natural beauties of the locality we respectively protest against this interference with its recreation reserves which we understand is contemplated.

The petition details the beauties of Mount Wilson and the importance of preserving the natural bushland of Mount Wilson for the future, for residents of Sydney, for tourists and travellers. Two days later in the Mercury there was a detailed reply from W. Slattery of Eskbank Mills. Mr Slattery was an alderman in the Lithgow City Council. Here are some extracts from Mr Slattery’s reply:⁹

I wish to state that the natural beauties of the place [Mount Wilson] are not to be found on the reserves upon which application has been made from permission to fell and remove large, fully matured trees. [and later] with the exception of one reserve through which the road known as the ZigZag passes, the whole of the beautiful sights of Mount Wilson are privately owned by a few persons, who, no doubt are the Originators of the petition. A few plutocrats owned property at Mount Wilson and have summer residences there, and to my mind the greatest objection to the removal of large trees

⁶ Page 27 Mount Wilson new South Wales C.H. Currey 1968

⁷ Members of the Wynne family; The Settlement of Mt Wilson H Fraser 1969

⁸ Lithgow Mercury February 16th 1914 page 3

⁹ Lithgow Mercury February 18th 1914

from the reserves is the sight of the timber cutting and bullock teams in the locality where only wealthy tourists and motor cars receive any quarter.

Mr Slattery's comments are blunt. Remembering this is in 1914 and it seems there were motorcars in Mount Wilson! Elsewhere Mr Slattery speaks of the thousands of acres of Crown land in the Blue Mountains nearer to Sydney and much more accessible than Mount Wilson and far more beautiful and attractive; furthermore the reserves in Mount Wilson are 'a harbour of venomous snakes snakes, lizards etc'! I am sure you are all relieved that Mr Slattery's submission was unsuccessful! Curiously, reference to the Trust in Mount Wilson or the Mount Wilson Group of the Blue Mountains Sights Reserves did not receive a mention on this issue. Yet in a later Mercury Mr Ivie Sloan [of Bebeah] and Mr Jesse Gregson [of Yengo] who were members of that Trust did receive comment concerning the placing of a shelter shed for picnickers in Mount Wilson near Campanella. Officially our Society has records of that Trust or the Mount Wilson Group of the Blue Mountains Sights Reserve commencing in 1930. The references in the Lithgow Mercury indicate that the Trust was functioning well before 1930.

Syd's mill, established post WWI

Having rejected timber milling in Mount Wilson about 1914, what changed to persuade some that it could be viable in Mount Wilson after World War I?

Already firmly established in Mount Wilson was the Kirk family. Robert Kirk and Athelia Hempstead had 11 children.¹⁰ One of Robert Kirk's sons, Sydney, had married Mary Marceau who had been a servant at Campanella in 1887. They had a modest cottage on the land leased to them by Jesse Gregson. Sydney and Mary quietly produced a large family commencing with Sydney William George 1889; Mary Constance 1891; Athelia Louisa 1892; Herbert Charles 1894; Vivian Clarence 1896; Albert Frederic 1897; Cecil Robert 1905; Eric Roy (Peter) 1908; Septimus Boyd (Tom) 1914. (The Kirk 's two sisters Mary and Athelia died during the War Years from pneumonia. Athelia is buried in St Georges cemetery; hers was the first burial in that cemetery.)



Sydney and Mary Kirk with children at the first Kirk cottage

¹⁰ Genealogy covering 6 Generations in the Female Line by Carol Liston 1980

By the end of World War I the sons Sydney Herbert and Vivian had returned from the war. Sydney had already experienced timber milling in John Anderson's mill in Mount Irvine before 1914. A substantial social shift also took place among owners of property in Mount Wilson. Richard Owen Wynne, grandson of Richard Wynne, returned from England to Mount Wilson to claim his inherited property Yarrawa and to establish himself permanently in Mount Wilson with his English wife Florence Mariamne. Edward Gregson, younger son of Jesse Gregson with his new American wife Margaret decided to live in Mount Wilson first at Yengo, later at Wyndham. George E. Valder, another returned from WWI drove his pony and sulky to Mount Wilson to live permanently at Nooroo¹¹. The Sloan family was already established at Bebeah. Thus Mount Wilson ceased to be the hill station as it had been in the late 19th century and early 20th century although there were still some families who functioned in that mode.

Richard Owen Wynne and Mariamne planned to build an impressive home on the large holding on Wynne's Hill or Wynstay. The relatively modest timber home known as Yarrawa was not sufficient for their needs. On some of the land owned by the Wynnes especially portions 15 and 16 from the original survey, and on the south-east slopes of Mount Wilson were rich tracts of temperate rainforest with fine softwoods. It was not surprising that Richard Owen Wynne was prepared to lease this land to Sydney William George Kirk, a man from the war and with some experience of timber, to set up a mill. The agreement between Syd and R. O. Wynne was that he and his brothers would have sole timber rights to cutting timber on his land while at the same time supplying Wynne with timber. It was not long before this mill became known as Syd's mill or Sid's mill, and at least five or six of the Kirk brothers became involved; it supported six men after WWI. Wynne was paid a certain amount for the timber they took off.¹²



A view of the steam operated mill in the early days.

Between 1922 and 1930 timber was worth about two shillings and sixpence per 100 super feet. The men earned about two shillings per day, working from dawn to dusk¹³. In those days Tom Kirk was too young but helped by carrying meals and being a general messenger. Later Tom was sent out on the road to Bell to set alight to patches of ground which would produce grass after rain—an indigenous method used for centuries.

Young Peter, Sydney and Albert were involved in those early days. Inevitably during the 1930s depression demand for timber decreased and gradually four of the six brothers diversified on the mountain finding other work. In that time there is little doubt that the presence of the Kirk brothers on the mountain

¹¹ The Settlement of Mt Wilson 1969 H Fraser and others.

¹² Sawmills of Mt Wilson by Tom Halliday 1995

¹³ Sawmills of Mount Wilson Tom Halliday 1995

provided much needed support to other residents whether it was repairs to pumps; maintenance; removal of trees and clearing and building, caretaking and later even a taxi; only a few had cars.

Fortunately, in 1995 Tom Halliday [son of Alex and Alison Halliday of Mt Wilson] interviewed Tom Kirk producing an excellent assignment for his school. Much of the material produced here relies on Tom's

study. A copy of the assignment is in the Society's archives.

Sassafras and coach wood are wonderful rainforest timbers from those south eastern slopes of Mt Wilson and were highly valued by cabinet makers. While some was used locally [e.g. Wynstay] some had to be sent to Sydney to fill orders. This timber usually was close to the mill.



Peter, Sydney and Albert Kirk

To cut down a tree it had to be mature and large. Many trees were thought unsuitable and not cut down. Triangular divots were cut into the tree and planks inserted until the axemen were above the ribs. Timber in the ribs was not used as it was too crooked. Two men felled a tree using a crosscut saw. A large hinge was cut out of the tree at first, thus directing where the tree was to fall and avoiding striking other trees. If there was only one man, an axe was used to fell the tree. The first saws had pointed teeth but later saws had M shaped teeth which gave a greater 'bite' to the pull of the saw. Today chain saws are a familiar sight, they first appeared during World War II having been introduced by American Service Support men.

Bullocks were used to haul timber to the mill and then the cut timber to the rail head at Bell, here are three Kirk brothers.



After the tree was felled, it was hauled to a dump of timber. Originally Bullock teams of 12 hauled each log. At the mill the timber was debarked by an axe. It was then put through the circular frame saw which cut it in to half or quarter rounds. It went through another series of parallel saws cutting it vertically. The saws could cut the logs into sizes of 4-by-2; 3-by-2 inches or 20cm-by-10cm.. The lengths of timber then went through a planer which cut items such as tongue and groove and weatherboard. Those logs not milled for locals on the mountain were taken to the rail head, the station called Bell. [originally Mt Wilson Platform]. Bullock teams of 24 in 12 pairs were led by one man, hauling 15 tons of wood. The journey over 10 miles or 16km took two days allowing one day to return.

After World War II the bullock teams were replaced by a truck which made the journey to Bell three times a day each time taking 30 hundred weight. Thus, over three days the truck could take half as much again as the bullock team. Later the bullock team was replaced at the mill by a timber jinker, a motorised cab with a winch on the back. The mill was powered by steam.



Herbert 'Bert' Kirk with bullock team, 1922.

The boiler had to be inspected annually, generating 90 pounds per square inch. The fuel was offcuts from the timber. There had to be a continuous supply of water; first it came from a well; later it was piped to a tank from a small dam at the bottom of the waterfall on Waterfall Creek. This steam engine is now



preserved on south coast of NSW. It was replaced eventually by a diesel engine after World War II. This mill stayed in operation until 1967. Naturally the numbers working there varied. During world War II Mattie Davies (originally Richard Owen Wynne's batman and gardener) worked there as did Albert Kirk and over time they developed a fine track walking through the bush which became known as Mattie's track which has quite often been used by the local Bushwalking group in more recent times.

The boiler in the 1920s.

During World War II they acquired two contracts using sassafras and coachwood. Sassafras was used to make cordial boxes. The coachwood was sold to the Army for the making of rifle butts, being a very dense and stable timber that did not warp when the rifle parts became hot. In 1947 timber was worth four pounds ten shillings per hundred superfeet; men were earning about two pounds per week. Colonel Richard Owen Wynne died in 1967 and the mill closed. However Syd still walked from his house Coolangatta in Wynnes Rocks Road when required and an occasional log was milled for use on Wynstay. Sydney William George Kirk passed away on 26 November 1971. We should remember that his wife Elizabeth [Lizzie] had been Patrick White's nanny for many years. Both Syd and Lizzie had close links with Patrick during their lives.



Syd at the 1968 Centenary celebrating the 1868 survey of Mt Wilson by E.S. Wyndham in the Mt Wilson village hall

Tom's Saw Mill, or Tom and Peter's Saw Mill c 1946-1990s

To do justice to this story one must first recognise the role of Tom and Peter Kirk in the world of wood chopping over a period of decades. More particularly Tom (Septimus Boyd Wilson Kirk), gained state, national and international renown as an axeman, sawyer and timber man generally. He was a legend at the Royal Easter Show in Sydney from his teenage years 1930s until his retirement in 1960s, winning the 15 inch standing world championship there with his axe eight times between 1940 and 1954 and the single handed-sawing world championship in three consecutive years from 1957 to 1959. In 1963 he competed in



the United States of America winning eighteen events.¹⁴ Growing up in Mt Wilson Tom became educated in this bush environment and very efficient in the world of timber cutting and saw milling. During World War II he was working in Lithgow and wanted very much to join the Services but his employer would not release him. Tom returned to Mt Wilson to drive a truck for his brother Peter who was working out at Hampton but on the understanding that Tom would enlist. This he did becoming a mechanic in the RAAF in 1942. In 1945 he returned to Mt Wilson determined to establish his own saw mill. With Peter, his older brother, he constructed a mill at the bottom of Lamb's Hill off the Mt Irvine Road.

Young Tom in action on Silva Plana, Mt Wilson.

Tom Kirk being congratulated after winning the Wood Cutting championship yet again at the Royal Sydney Easter Show in 1950s.

He and Peter came to an arrangement with the Lamb family who had owned Portion 52 in Mt Wilson since 1889.¹⁵ However in 1963 portion 52 became the property of Thomas. Breen Senior and while the mill only took up a small fraction of Portion 52, it became necessary to remove the mill to a nearby site owned by Tom and Peter. In 1963 they had purchased three acres and half a perch, the northerly section of Portion 67 in the Parish of Irvine, county Cook.



Tom and Peter dismantled the entire mill and erected it on its present site. It is on this site that the remnants of the mill can be seen today.¹⁶ Prior to the mill's removal it had been supplying timber to the state mines at Lithgow where it was used for everything from pit stops to machinery parts.¹⁷ With two saw mills now operating in Mt Wilson a pattern evolved between the two. Tom's mill came to focus on handling hardwoods while Syd's mill continued with the softwoods. Nevertheless often Tom's mill milled timber from private land after negotiations with the owner as Tom had a 'private licence'. As stated earlier Syd's mill was not in continuous operation after 1967 but timber from Tom's mill was sent to Syd's if it

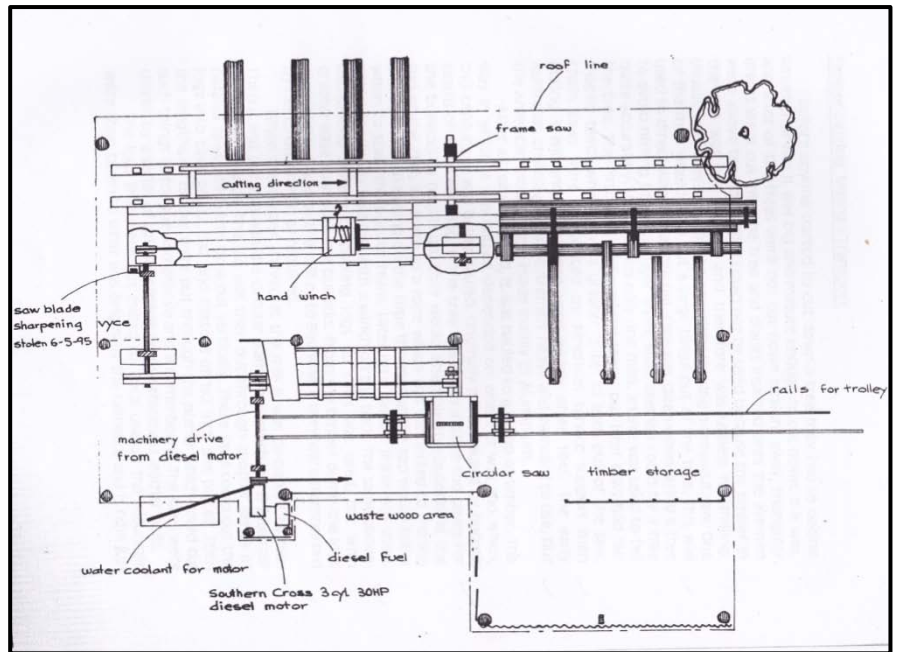
¹⁴ Tom Kirk's Timber Mill at Mount Wilson Ian Jack for Ian Jack Heritage Consulting Pty Ltd June 2012

¹⁵ Land Title documents Mt Wilson & Mt Irvine Historical Society

¹⁶ Tom and Peter ready for work 1960s Archives Kirk Collection Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Hist. Society

¹⁷ Saw Mills of Mt Wilson Tom Halliday 1995

required further refining to be planed or made into weatherboards. They worked seven days a week and were involved with the timber for broom handles,¹⁸ rifles and desks plus requests from residents and property owners requiring gates, fences or other wooden structures on their properties, and renovations to houses. Peter spent much of his time as a carrier, transporting timber to Sydney and to Bell. The brothers carried out their own maintenance.. It is worth noting that while Tom's mill was very similar to Syd's it was powered by a petrol [later a diesel] motor. Syd used a steam engine. By the mid 1990s with a decline in health for Tom and restrictions imposed by the National Parks and Wildlife the mill's use became limited.



Layout of the saw mill at Mt Wilson



With the passing of Tom in February 2001 and his brother Peter a year or two later, the land on which the mill stood was sold and was no longer in Kirk hands. 'The mill has been gently decaying'. [Ian Jack 2012]

Tom and Peter at their mill

Some of the Championship Ribbons won by Tom Kirk



¹⁸ Interview with Peter Kirk by Des Barrett 2001 and Draft Conservation Plan Kirk's Saw Mill Warren F' Day May 1995



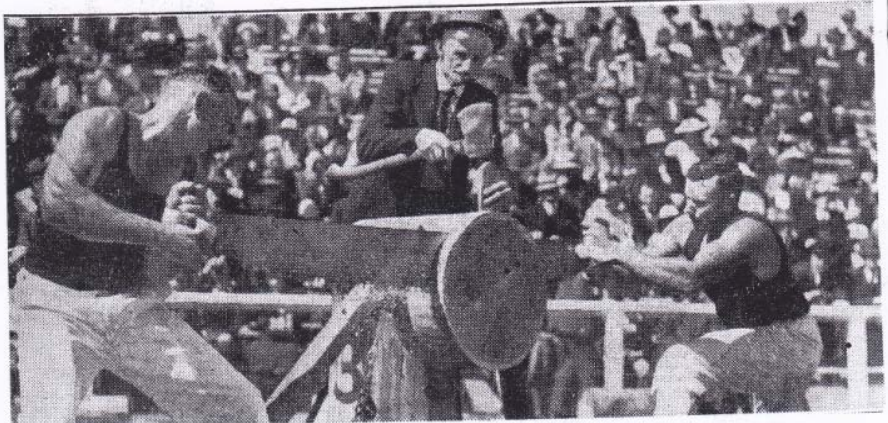
Charles Moses General Manager ABC and Tom Kirk felling a giant in Mt Wilson. 1950s.¹⁹ There was strong relationship between Charles Moses and Tom as Charles was Chairman of the Wood Cutting Section. of the Royal Sydney Agricultural Society. Tom served as a Judge for the Royal Agricultural Society and was inducted into the Hall of Champions in 1980s after his retirement.²⁰

Significance of the Era of Saw Mills in Mt Wilson

Covering over seven decades in the 20th Century, the mills operated in a period when the social pattern had altered substantially for Mt Wilson. After World War I some families were living there permanently along with the caretakers and workers, including the Kirk family. These families such as the Gregsons were endeavouring to make a living from the land on property they had inherited or purchased from the original European settlers²¹. On a smaller scale other families for example the Mann family from Dennarque; the Whites of Withycombe and the Joshuas of Campanella still treated Mt Wilson as a place for holidays and retreat. At the same time the Kirk family of seven brothers and their families provided an essential services while maintaining Syd and Albert's saw mill from 1920s to the late 1960s. In that period there were always Kirks to clear paddocks for fruit trees; Kirks to deal with the timber from those paddocks; Kirks to build fences, gates and small or large buildings; Kirks to repair and maintain equipment especially pumps; Kirks to transport to Bell railway station or to provide a taxi service to the train. It is not surprising that amid all these activities, and the skills acquired, that wood chopping became an event first on the local scene at Silva Plana (Mt Wilson) where in 1929 the Country Women's Association Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine branch initiated the sports day on new year's day.²²

THE SUNDAY SUN AND GUARDIAN, APRIL 9, 1939

MADE WORLD'S RECORD



T. and E. Kirk photographed while winning the final of the world double-handed sawing championship at the Show yesterday. Their time of 18 2-5 was a new R.A.S. record. C. and M. Winkle, who created a new record in the first heat, were only a fraction of a second behind the Kirks in the final.

¹⁹ Kirk Photo Collection Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society

²⁰ Kirk Collection of Photos Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society; Halliday obituary of Tom Kirk Sydney Morning Herald 7 March 2001 Archives Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society.

²¹ A Mount Wilson Childhood Helen Warliker 1990

²² CWA Minute Books Archives Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Hist Society

Tom became a world renowned identity in the field of wood chopping winning the 15 inch standing world championships with his axe eight times between 1940 and 1954 and, with his older brother Peter, world champion with the cross cut saw. In 1963 Tom toured the USA winning 18 events there. The establishment of the saw mill by Tom and Peter, first on part of portion 52 in 1945-6 and then its removal to Portion 67 opposite the now well-known Cathedral Reserve, reinforces the latter years of saw mill activity in Mt Wilson. Sadly Syd's mill is now a ruin but Tom's mill still stands, a present reminder of those days and times which have vanished otherwise.

Professor Ian Jack, in a report dated June 2012, reminds us that Tom Kirk's fame in wood cutting with the saw mill provides much greater than local importance. The saw mill is listed on the LEP of the Blue Mountains City Council. Professor Jack also stresses another element not to be forgotten, which is the story of its machinery- 'some purchased new but much acquired second hand from Lithgow, Bathurst and /or Singleton. Whatever the correct origin of the frame saw'²³ Tom was milling timber for 50 years with the oldest saws in the State'²⁴.

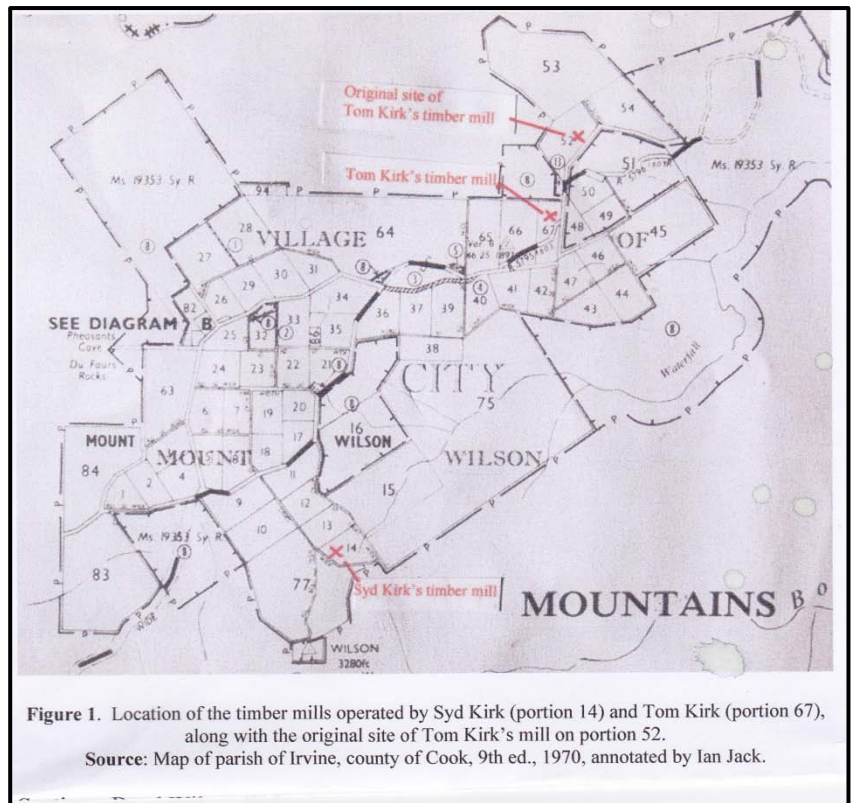


Figure 1. Location of the timber mills operated by Syd Kirk (portion 14) and Tom Kirk (portion 67), along with the original site of Tom Kirk's mill on portion 52.
Source: Map of parish of Irvine, county of Cook, 9th ed., 1970, annotated by Ian Jack.

All seven brothers of that generation have passed on. Their legacy and work deserve recognition in our small community and on the broader stage the heritage value of that era of saw mills and industry which sustained Mt Wilson along with its gardens, avenues of trees and the preservation of its reserves of rain forest and eucalypt forests now surrounded by a World Heritage National Park.

Mary Reynolds

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Mt Wilson History photo Collection and Kirk Photo Collection held by Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine Historical Society.

²³ Draft Conservation Plan By Warren Day 1995

²⁴ Ian Jack for Ian Jack Heritage Consulting Pty Ltd June 2012