

The Six Foot Track – Jenolan Caves Section

Friday 15th July 2005

Thousands of years before Europeans set foot on these lands the Gundungara people inhabited the Jenolan Caves area giving it the very appropriate name of Binoomea meaning “dark places”. This walk follows the ridge which now carries that name. The first European known to have set eyes on this wondrous landscape was an escaped convict, James McKeown. The delightful little valley named after this man also makes up part of this walk. Incidentally, the first officially gazetted title given to this complex was Binda Caves, they were also known as the Fish River Caves. They were given their present name in 1884. A fitting choice as Jenolan is derived from an Aboriginal term for a high mountain and was the indigenous name given to a hill on the nearby Coxs River.

Eleven walkers gathered at the Jenolan Caves Cottages (formerly Binda Cottages) on Kiora Hill on a rather chilly morning, ideal conditions for a brisk hike. It was very pleasing to have Libby’s husband Keith and Anne Clark’s husband Don join us today and we also welcomed back Ray Harrington who has missed several walks while dealing with a real pain in the ----- heel. A car shuffle delivered sufficient vehicles to the caves carpark to transport us all back to the starting point following the walk, a very civilized way to return to the top of the steep hill.

The Six Foot Track, which runs for 42km from the Explorers Tree near Katoomba to Jenolan Caves, was first marked in 1884 and reopened in its present configuration in 1985. Today we were to cover about the last 5km of the track as it drops down into the deep valley in which the caves complex nestles. Just as we were about to set off on this journey into the Australian bush, right on cue, direct from the special effects department, a kangaroo bounded across Jenolan Caves Road and disappeared into the scrub.

Initially the track follows a well graded fire trail through a tree cover consisting mainly of Brown Barrels (*Eucalyptus fastigata*). These trees have coarse fibrous bark on their trunks and major branches which contrasts markedly with their smooth upper limbs. An unusual feature in this area is the almost total lack of any understorey, the forest floor being furnished with only a few scattered clumps of Spiny-headed Mat-rush (*Lomandra longifolia*) and a smattering of tufted grasses. This of course opens up the vista through the forest with a multitude of clearly defined tree trunks in the near view and the forested slopes dropping steeply to the Jenolan River three hundred metres below in the west and to Pheasants Nest Creek in the east.

As the track dropped below the ridgeline a sheltered spot out of the chill wind was found and the group decided morning tea would be in order while they waited for the three walkers involved in the car shuffle (Fred Roberts, Alan Cupitt and yours truly) to catch up. From this point the track begins to descend more steeply and the environment becomes more protected and moist. Here moss beds decorate the trackside and granite boulders become more prominent. Blackthorns (*Bursaria spinosa*) abound here displaying at this time their clusters of tiny heart shaped seedpods. Silver/grey crust forming lichens

adorn the trunks while the branches are draped with fine grey beard-like lichens creating a softening effect on these thorny shrubs. A slope on the high side of the track is embellished with a tumble of small granite boulders among which a velvety flow of moss creates the impression of bright green lava oozing down the incline.

A vertical naturally formed granite embankment gives the impression of being a beautifully laid stone wall created by a master stonemason (some may say that was indeed the case) and alongside is an example of the Narrow-leaf Geebung (*Persoonia linearis*) carrying a single yellow flower. Nearby there is a Prickly Beard-heath (*Leucopogon juniperinus*) its straggly spiky habit belying the beauty of its tiny solitary five-lobed tubular white flowers no more than six millimeters long. Here, contrasting with the brilliant green of the mosses, the trunks and branches of shrubs carry flashes of gold lichens.

On this lower section of Binoomea Ridge there are examples of the Eurabbie (*Eucalyptus bicostata*), a Eucalypt that grows only in scattered areas of the state and is more abundant in the Tumut/Tumbarumba locality. It is closely related to the Tasmanian Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*) and has glossy green leaves up to 250 millimetres long. A tree 12 to 30 metres high, it has rough bark at the base of the trunk while the upper portions and branches are smooth blue/green to grey/green. Also in this area was a fine example of the Mountain Gum (*Eucalyptus dalrympleana*) its white to cream newly exposed bark glowing against the dark forest background.

There is now a dramatic change in the landscape as the limestone cliffs come into view. The general grey hue of the rock face is tinged here and there with cream and orange splashes. A couple of small portals are visible on these cliffs, the few stalactites barely discernable inside these dark entrances give only a small hint of the splendour hidden within. Soon the track weaves between limestone outcrops for we are on the roof of the Devil's Coachhouse, just inside the narrow band of limestone within which this magnificent cave complex has evolved. A short stroll further on and we are at Carlotta's Arch looking down onto the Blue Lake, a spectacle one could never tire of no matter how often it is viewed. Over the ridge we look down on the Caves House complex with the hustle and bustle of tourists but we are headed for quieter more serene environs.

We headed for the stairs which lead down to McKeowns Creek and along the way Alan Cupitt, who is a part time guide at the caves, pointed out one of the adventure cave sites and regaled us with tales, both factual and mythical, relating to the cave system. We paused at the Peephole which affords a view into the vast chamber of the Devil's Coachhouse, an awe inspiring sight. On reaching the creek we are in yet another entirely different environment.

Here, though no surface water flows in the creek except in times of very heavy downpours, there is a lush moist atmosphere. The track crosses and re-crosses the creek which is enclosed in a verdant tunnel of Kurrajongs (*Brachychiton populneus*), Blackwoods (*Acacia melanoxylon*) and Hickory (*Acacia implexa*) at this time carrying tangled clusters of spent twisted seedpods. The banks beside the track are decorated with

masses of Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum aethiopicum*) while shrubs are draped with long flowing ribbons of Hanging Moss (*Papillaria* sp). Stinging Nettles (*Urtica incisa*) are thick on the ground in this area providing lots of luxuriant greenery even though they do carry a sting in their tail.

A scree of fragmented limestone on the high side of the track is interspersed with moss beds and ferns producing a fascinating effect among the larger boulders, many of which are cloaked in exquisite lace-like shrouds of moss. Above this sublime scene a Kurrajong clinging tenaciously to the cliff top has grown into a perfect Bonsai form as, to a slightly lesser extent, have several other stunted Kurrajongs further along the cliff face. We had to restrain our Bonsai Guru, Ray Nesci, as he refused to believe he wouldn't be able to find a pot big enough to accommodate them.

Soon the valley widened considerably and we chose a spot near a flat open area, once used as a playing field, to take advantage of some convenient logs and settle down for lunch. The weather held until after lunch and we then made our way through gentle showers back to the northern entrance of the Devil's Coachhouse. One could never grow weary of simply standing in this space, dwarfed by the scale of this huge cavern and taking in the grandeur on show. The path meanders through huge boulders which are strewn on the floor, water droplets plummet from the tips of stalactites clinging to the ceiling, entrances to mysterious passages can be seen high on the walls while shafts of light spear through the irregular apertures in the roof. As Libby's birthday fell on the day before this walk the group decided to take advantage of this theatrical setting to sing an impromptu happy birthday in her honour. Even the acoustics of this magnificent space weren't good enough to lift the performance however the sentiments were sincere.

As we made our way to the Grand Arch our day of quiet seclusion was suddenly at an end as we encountered the masses of tourists taking advantage of the school holidays to visit this magical area. While having a cuppa at the carpark before heading off on our homeward journey we were treated to the sight of a pair of Lyrebirds gliding from high up the hill on the Oberon side making their musical call as they passed overhead. A delightful note on which to end yet another wonderful walk!