

The Cliff Top Walk at Blackheath – Govetts Leap Lookout to Evans Lookout

Friday 17th June 2005

The waterfall known as Govetts Leap is indeed one of the most dramatically spectacular sights in the mountains. Thus it is little wonder that many myths have grown and persisted regarding the naming of this site. One story portrayed Govett as an escaped convict called Dick the Swell who fell over the precipice when startled by a guard. Later Govett was presented as a bushranger who rode his horse over the cliff to escape the police.

Of course reality is much more mundane and the site was named after the surveyor William Govett who, in 1831, was possibly the first white man to visit the falls, though he made no claim to discovering the site. Not so mundane was his practice of directing his men to lie on their backs and with their feet to push large boulders over the edge. This purportedly was to estimate the height of cliffs though he referred to the “amusement” of observing the initial silence during free fall then the thunderous echoing through the valley as the boulders crashed onto the valley floor. (These stories are related in greater detail in “Back From The Brink – Blue Gum Forest and the Grose Wilderness” by Andy Macqueen).

There was a rather stiff breeze blowing as eight hardy souls gathered at Govetts Leap Lookout to embark on this walk along the Cliff Top Track. Libby was unable to join us today as she is recovering from a recent operation to her knee, we trust the recuperation is going well. Suitably rugged up against the elements (even yours truly decided it was too cool for the usual shorts, though Geoff Kelly soldiered on with naked knees) we set off on this stunning walk which is dominated by majestic panoramas but also reveals some smaller treasures along the way.

Initially the eye is drawn toward the gaping chasm which is Govett Gorge. To the left are the towering spires at Pulpit Rock, vertical pillars rising abruptly from the undulating tree line of the talus slopes below. The distinct lines of Govetts Leap Brook and Govetts Creek meeting at Junction Rock and snaking along the valley floor toward a rendezvous with the Grose River at the Blue Gum Forest occupy the centre of the view. Off to the right the gently sloping almost conical profile of Lockley Pylon acts as a foil to the massive straight-sided form of Fortress Hill both of which sit atop the cliff line. The distant view is dominated by the domed profiles of Mt Hay, Boorong Crag, Mt Caley and Mt Strzelecki. The southern slope of Mt Banks peeks out from behind Docker Head while, framed by Edgeworth David Head and Du Faur Head, the Grose River continues its tumultuous journey toward the Devils Wilderness and its eventual meeting with the Hawkesbury River.

Those who could divert their gaze from the magnificence of the big picture were rewarded with the golden glow of the Sunshine Wattle (*Acacia terminalis*) beside the track. As we descended toward Govetts Leap Brook we were sheltered from the wind and also treated to the sight of the blossoms of the Red Five Corners (*Styphelia tubiflora*) and

an occasional Dog Rose (*Bauera rubioides*) with pink flowers gently bowing from the banks beside the track.

Closer to the brook the Heath Banksia (*Banksia ericifolia*) became prominent carrying many of their honey gold candles at this time. Scattered among these Banksia were many Tea-trees (*Leptospermum* sp) their brilliant white flowers lighting up the scene.

At the stepping-stones, which cross this stream, we are treated to two widely divergent scenes. On the upstream side Heath Banksia and the Pouched Coral Fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*) have grown in such abundance that they have almost completely covered the watercourse resulting in the effect of water emerging from a bright green tunnel. To the right a large boulder has been partly covered with this fern and a silver band of water trickles down this dark rock face and into the brook. The tinkling sound from this falling water combined with the gurgling of the, dare I say it, babbling brook provided very pleasant background music. This was a very soothing, gentle scene.

Turn one hundred and eighty degrees and a quite different scenario is presented. The brook spreads out across a flat rock bed and continues flowing for maybe thirty metres and then disappears over the edge. The only clue from this vantage point as to how far the water falls is given by the scale of the rugged cliff face on the opposite side of the valley. Swirling winds on this day swept curtains of mist up from the falling water adding an aura of mystery to the scene. Looking in this direction presents an awe-inspiring almost foreboding picture.

After a short climb we pause at a vantage point which affords a view of the fascinating vegetation that clings to the vertical cliff face adjacent to the waterfall. One wonders how any plant could establish itself on such a sheer cliff. Indeed a large section has slipped down the rock face causing the track, which can be seen zigzagging its way from the base of the waterfall, to be closed.

We now move into a more exposed environment. The tree cover here consists mainly of the naturally coppiced Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*) whose slender multiple trunks are swaying before the rather strong wind. Below this oscillating canopy there are many examples of both the Narrow-leaf Drumstick (*Isopogon anethifolius*) and the Broad-leaf Drumstick (*Isopogon anemonifolius*) along with the occasional Conestick (*Petrophile pulchella*), none flowering at this time but all carrying many distinctive cones. Also here are some of the more spiky heath dwellers including Prickly Moses (*Acacia ulicifolia*) some of which are displaying their pale cream blossom and the Gorse Bitter Pea (*Daviesia ulicifolia*).

Soon we find a sheltered spot and settle down beside the track for morning tea and to soak up some of the welcome warming sunshine. The predominant Heath Banksia is joined here by the Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*) some displaying a few candles and the Old Man or Saw Banksia (*Banksia serrata*) a few of which are magnificent examples having stunted gnarled trunks. The ubiquitous Mountain Devil (*Lambertia*

formosa) brightens the surroundings with vivid red tubular flowers and hidden among the whorled leaves are the faces of many little horned devils.

A short distance further on a small five-petalled star like flower caught our eye. Although we could not identify it on the spot later reference to the splendid guide of Fairley and Moore revealed it to be the *Billardiera procumbens*. It wouldn't surprise if this small spreading shrub suffered an identity crisis. It was once placed in the genus *Marianthus*, the name was then changed to *Rhytidosporum* and is presently specified as a *Billardiera*. The flower is white with a slight tinge of mauve and at the centre of the star is a circle of golden stamens. Nearby a few flowers were just beginning to emerge on some Egg and Bacon plants (*Dillwynia retorta*) their flat buds opening to two golden wings with a brilliant red centre.

The track soon dipped down into the moister environs of Hayward Gully where the heath plants were replaced by many varieties of ferns and softer leafed vegetation. Here a few examples of Buttongrass (*Gymnoschoenus sphaerocephalus*) were noted. A short boardwalk has been constructed across a boggy area here since our last visit, indeed the whole length of the track has been substantially upgraded in that time with many new guard rails and reconstructed stairways. A short climb brought us back into dryer country and soon we were at Evans Lookout where we enjoyed a leisurely lunch in one of those quaint stone shelter sheds. Here we had protection from the wind and an expansive view into the gorge and of the sandstone escarpments beyond.

Following lunch and while we were taking in the views across Greaves Creek to Carne Wall a helicopter flew into the scene and hovered in what appeared to be perilously close proximity to the rock face. This brought into perspective the immense scale of these honey coloured cliffs for the helicopter looked like an iridescent blue dragonfly hanging in the air. It then darted across the face of the sun drenched sandstone wall before disappearing into the background of the forest as it flew down the gorge.

Now began the return journey to Govetts Leap Lookout which simply entailed retracing our path of the morning. We made the short detour to take in the vista on offer from the Valley View Lookout then enjoyed the ever-changing hues in the valley as the elevation of the afternoon sun slowly became lower. The final climb back to the cars seemed quite steep and someone suggested we were probably missing that little bit of extra energy we usually get from Libby's bushwalkers cake.

A nice touch to end the day was provided by Geoff Kelly. During our usual cuppa he presented two framed photographs (digital of course) of our fifteenth anniversary celebration to Mary, one for her good self and one to be passed on to Libby. Good one Geoff!