

Mount Banks and Banks Wall Overlooking the Upper Grose Gorge

Friday 16th June 2006

Two hundred and two years ago botanist and explorer George Caley, the first person of European origin to do so, stood atop Mount Banks following an arduous journey of twelve days from the Hawkesbury. Gazing into the valley system to the west he declared it would be impossible to cross and even if you did succeed you would find others of a similar nature blocking your path, as was his experience in reaching this point. His assertions of course proved to be incorrect. However, while standing on the ridge leading to the summit and observing the surrounding terrain one is in awe of the tenacity and fortitude of the early explorers. To venture into this country with no maps or knowledge of what lay ahead was an incredible undertaking.

George Caley named this feature Mount Banks in 1804 in honour of his benefactor Sir Joseph Banks. The landmark however has a history of identity crisis. Hamilton Hume who sighted the distinctive double humps from the west when he discovered the Darling Causeway in 1827 named it King George's Mount, this name being adopted by Surveyor General Mitchell. Camel's Back and St George's Mount were other names by which it was known. It was not until 1966 that the name was once again officially recognised as Mount Banks. The Trig Station at the summit still carries the name King George.

While Libby and Keith are wandering with all creatures great and small in the Yorkshire Dales and scaling the peaks in the Swiss Alps the task of leading the group on this walk was left to yours truly. Nine brave walkers decided to take the risk and gathered in glorious weather to follow me to the heights of Mount Banks and beyond.

We welcomed Jan Newman who was attending the first of what we trust will be many walks with the group. With the usual whip now in the unfamiliar position at the front of the group we needed to recruit a replacement to bring up the rear and keep tabs on the walkers. As we had a total of only ten walkers today Geoff Kelly felt sure he would be capable of keeping count confident in the knowledge he still has five digits on each hand.

We set off past the memorial to George Caley and followed the ridge track toward the summit. After a short climb through a corridor of Banksia, Tea-tree and Mountain Devil we emerged onto the heath land of the ridge. The screeching of a Black Cockatoo as it flew along the gully below heralded our arrival. As everyone knows this is a sure sign that rain is imminent, somewhere.

The abundant tiny white flowers of the small shrub *Cryptandra amara* var *amara* decorate the path here as it nestles in rock crevices below the rigid form of the Dagger Hakeas (*Hakea teretifolia*) displaying their pointed beak-like seed capsules among their needle-like leaves. The view to the northeast from this point reveals the domed form of Mount Bell. In the foreground of the ridgeline that runs from Mount Tomah to Mount Tomah South was the almost conical profile of Camels Hump. Below this ridge were several clearly defined horizontal lines suggesting a terraced effect. Hidden in the innocuous

looking gullies between our vantage point and Mount Tomah are several deep narrow canyons such as Mistake Ravine, Thunder Gorge, Caustal Canyon, Gaping Gill and Dismal Dingle.

Continuing along the ridge we were treated to the sight of Broad-leaf Drumsticks (*Isopogon anemonifolius*) many displaying brilliant reddish new growth and a profusion of Conesticks (*Petrophile pulchella*) with their fine light green foliage. Also in this exposed area were examples of the tiny She-oak (*Allocasuarina nana*) with their soft foliage gently moving in the almost non-existent breeze while the Needle Bush (*Hakea sericea*) stood still and stiff carrying its large globular fruit amidst its spiky foliage. The mature red flowers of a few Darwinia (*Darwinia fascicularis* ssp *oligantha*), which hug the soil among the rocks, add a touch of softness.

Soon we climb onto a rocky outcrop which affords magnificent views into the Upper Grose Gorge. The morning sun illuminated the Blackheath Walls and the cliffs below the distant Burra Korain Head. In this light and from this angle Hanging Rock appeared as the prow of a gargantuan ship emerging from Burrumoko Head. Deep in the valley the Grose snaked its way through the shadowy forest.

We soon began to climb more steeply and the terrain changed quite dramatically as we moved from the sandstone ridge to the more fertile basalt soils below the summit. This was only a few small steps for we mortals but a giant leap in geological terms as we moved from sandstone which is around 230 million years old to the basalt which was formed a mere 18 million years ago, a span of around 212 million years – the mind boggles. Here there were Mountain Grey Gums (*Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*), Blaxland's Stringybark (*Eucalyptus blaxlandii*) and in the understorey the Prickly Current Bush (*Coprosma quadrifida*). On reaching a level area where a fallen tree trunk provided convenient seating I decided it would be prudent to stop for morning tea as I could sense a rebellion brewing.

Refreshed and rejuvenated we made the short climb to the King George Trig Station at the summit. The distant views from this point are now almost totally obscured by regrowth, these stations no longer being used for line of sight surveying to other trig stations. This regrowth however provides a pleasant atmosphere around this circular stone structure. Blackwoods (*Acacia melanoxylon*) carrying their convoluted tangles of spent seedpods, Cedar Wattles (*Acacia elata*) and a scattering of Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*) provide a canopy under which the Tree Violet (*Hymenanthera dentata*) grows in profusion. This tall shrub, which was only in bud at this time develops tiny yellow bell-like flowers and was apparently a favourite of our old walking friend Ern Morgan. We walked a short distance down the southern slope of the mount which gave us great views past the cliff line into the valley and across to Katoomba and other towns dotted along the Blue Mountains Range.

The path which leads down the eastern side of the mount has recently been cleared and I was shocked and surprised that no one in the group believed me when I suggested that Helen and I had done the work last week, Helen of course having carried the brush cutter

up from the car park. Actually the staff at National Parks must have got wind of the fact that I was leading the group on this walk and felt it would be easier to do some track clearing and sign posting rather than spend time searching for a group of walkers wandering in ever decreasing circles on the flanks of Mount Banks.

We pass a few wombat burrows, meander through the old picnic area where a couple of tables and a water tank are slowly being swallowed up by the encroaching bush and begin the descent on the eastern face of the mount. The change in vegetation is more gradual in this area but change it does as we descend. The lush vegetation of the basalt soils gives way to the tougher leaved sclerophyll plant forms. The troika of Banksias; Old Man, Hairpin and Heath (*Banksia serrata*, *B spinulosa* and *B ericifolia*) are well represented as are the Hakeas including the *Hakea constablei* which has a rather restricted distribution and has very prominent large, warty, dark coloured seedpods. The most abundant tree cover as we approach the junction with the fire trail is the Blue Mountains Mallee Ash (*Eucalyptus stricta*) with a smattering of Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*).

Turning right onto the fire trail we head toward Banks Wall. This trail meanders around the base of Mount Banks taking us past open woodland and through little pockets of enclosed forest as it undulates over ridges and into sheltered gullies. We pass a clump of white flowered Tea-tree (*Leptospermum* sp) and a couple of examples of the Five Corners (*Styphelia tubiflora*) displaying their gently curved tubular red flowers. A Sourbush (*Choretrum candollei*) stood against the embankment its multitude of tiny creamy/white flowers highlighted against the clumps of grass which hung over the bank like a verdant cascade. Beside the trail stands a large almost cylindrical termite nest having the appearance of an old style post office pillar-box. No doubt any letter posted here would very quickly disappear, not unlike the present postal system some may be unkind enough to suggest.

Suddenly we emerge onto open heath land and laid out before us is that magnificent amphitheatre which is the Grose and Govett Gorges, we are at Banks Wall. What better place could you think of to pause for lunch, especially on a day such as this with a clear winter sky and not a breath of wind. Directly below us is the Blue Gum Forest at the junction of Govetts Creek and the Grose River. Across this vast chasm is Anvil Rock and Perrys Lookdown while further along the escarpment is the prominent form of Pulpit Rock. Du Faur Head, Lockley Pylon and Fortress Hill are other features on show which we have visited on other walks and over our left shoulder Mount Hay looms. What a grand spectacle this is.

In Libby's absence Jan Northam kindly took on the task of providing us with the customary Bushwalkers Cake. She searched for a recipe which she felt would result in a cake similar to that which Libby normally provides and a great facsimile it was. It was such a good copy one could have been excused in thinking Libby had made a cake for this walk before her departure, no idle thought given Libby's thoughtful and generous nature.

Following lunch Allan Cupitt and I made the short walk to Frank Hurley Head while others in the group luxuriated in the winter sun and the surrounding splendour. Although still shown on the Mt Wilson map this short side track is now virtually overgrown. Reaching the stone cairn at the high point of this headland does not provide any enhanced views so it is not surprising the track gets little or no use.

We now head off on the return journey. Just past the junction with the track we had used to descend from Mount Banks were several examples of the Sweet-scented Wattle (*Acacia suaveolens*) the scent of its pale cream flowers very appealing. The more showy golden flowers of the Sunshine Wattle (*Acacia terminalis*) were also present here. We followed the fire trail to return to the car park and this presented us with views toward Mount Tomah and beyond in the afternoon light and a view back up to the summit of Mount Banks. Along the way there was a particular shrub of Mountain Devil (*Lambertia formosa*) carrying dozens of those little horned seedpods all of which appeared to have very self satisfied looks on their devilish faces, any wonder when they reside in a landscape such as this.

There were also plenty of satisfied looks on faces back at the car park after encountering so many facets of mountain bushland and such spectacular scenery under the perfect conditions we were blessed with today; another of those special experiences.