

Mt Airly and Mt Genowlan in the Capertee Valley

Friday 21st July 2006

This was an occasion when we not only ventured once more into the Australian bush but also journeyed back in time. The route we would follow today was dotted with remnants of the lives of the men and women who settled in this area to extract kerosene shale from within the bowels of Mt Airly.

Eight walkers met at Merry Garth and travelled to Lithgow where we rendezvoused with a further seven participants on this invigoratingly fresh morning. We welcomed Libby back to the fold following her trip to explore mountains of a different nature on the other side of the globe. The fifteen walkers were accommodated in three cars following a vehicle rationalisation, many thanks to Libby, Fred Roberts and Allan Cupitt for providing the transport to Capertee. As we headed off the clouds were breaking and the sun was lighting up the distant hills.

On the approach to Wallerawang Power Station we crossed the railway line. It was the extension of this line from Wallerawang to Capertee in May 1882 which triggered detailed investigation of the Capertee area by prospectors. In 1883 a group of five men discovered workable deposits of kerosene shale and subsequently a German syndicate, the Genowlan Shale Company began mining on the eastern face of Mt Airly. Drays were used to cart the shale over bush tracks to the Capertee railhead for transport to Sydney. It was then shipped to Germany for use in gas enrichment. One can imagine the stark contrast of those dray journeys compared with the few minutes it took us to cover the distance of about ten kilometres from Capertee to the mine site, only the last three kilometres being on unsealed road.

As we approached the starting point for our walk a tiny stone hut was sighted nestled in the bushland, probably only a one-room building but what an idyllic hideaway. As the journey from Lithgow was approximately forty-five kilometres and some walkers had a long trip prior to that it was decided morning tea would be in order before commencing the walk. The tranquil scene before us was scattered with evidence of occupation both of long ago and of more recent times. Across the grassy creek flats the tree covered talis slopes rose to the vertical sandstone cliffs of Mt Genowlan. The remains of a few stone structures could be seen among the trees while the ubiquitous abandoned truck was being slowly swallowed up by the bush, hopes and dreams being absorbed into the landscape.

The walk today would follow the route of the old tramway constructed to transport the shale from the mine adits. As stated earlier a German syndicate first worked the deposits. They sold their holdings to the Australian Shale Syndicate in 1895 due to the 1890's depression. The Australian Kerosene Oil and Mineral Company obtained the lease and mining operations continued into the early 1900's.

Soon after commencing the walk we encountered the remains of long abandoned cottages. The first just a few ragged walls defiantly resisting the forces of nature, the

second a little more complete with chimney still intact and carrying a steel extension flue sitting at a jaunty angle. Beside the track in this area was a fine example of a Blueberry Ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*) festooned with hundreds of dark blue berries. The next 'cottage' was even more complete being a large rock overhang that had stone walls built to enclose the front and form an entrance doorway. Native bees had taken up residence here building an intricate pattern of honeycomb on the ceiling. The view from this spot gave us our first glimpse of Tayan Pic. The conical form of this one thousand one hundred and fifty four metre high peak was just visible in the distant haze.

Continuing on we passed a huge flat-faced elliptical shaped slab of rock standing vertically beside the track and nearby was a magnificent example of the Kurrajong (*Brachychiton populneus*). Its thick lower trunk was gnarled and black and its lower branches carried huge clumps of mistletoe (*Notothixos cornifolius*) a type which only attaches itself to Kurrajongs.

Soon we were at another remnant of the past, a stone chimney and fire place on which there was a collection of various artefacts; pieces of china, glass, enamel utensils and iron fire grates. Helen Freeman added to this collection on our return trip with pieces of china she rescued along the track including a portion of what would have once been an elegant cup with handle intact. Beside this chimney is a peach tree which was struggling to flower on our last visit in 1999. It has now given up all struggles, probably a victim of the long dry spells during the intervening years. Just uphill from this spot is a water trough carved into a rock outcrop, no doubt once used to quench the thirst of the horses which dragged the skips along the tramway.

Grey Gums (*Eucalyptus punctata*) were prominent along the track displaying smooth orange patches where old bark had been discarded and at a lower level Blackthorns (*Bursaria spinosa*) abound carrying at this time clusters of tiny heart shaped seedpods. Also prominent were the She-oaks (*Allocasuarina* sp) bedecked with conspicuous dark cones. Closer still to ground level the Red Five-corners (*Styphelia tubiflora*) add a touch of colour to the scene with their abundant clumps of flowers. There were several examples of the Port Jackson or Rusty Fig (*Ficus rubiginosa*) in this area, some with roots winding their way across rock faces and down through crevices and cracks to reach the soil. One superb tree with a trunk close to a metre in diameter had started its life atop a rock outcrop, its roots radiating down the rock face creating an effect which bonsai enthusiasts spend half a lifetime trying to replicate. Our bonsai guru, Ray Nesci climbed up the bank for a close inspection and in my twisted imagination it looked like "The Revenge of the Trees" – a huge perfectly formed tree towering over a bonsai man.

Rounding a turn in the track we sighted the first major remains of the mining operation, a tall brick chimney still standing proud although some brickwork at its apex looked a little fragile. Near this point we left the track to investigate a curiosity spotted by one of the group. Two steel cables, one perhaps fifty millimetres diameter the other somewhat smaller, lay on the talus slope above the track. The curious thing spotted was the deep grooves these cables had worn into a large sandstone boulder over which they passed. There were several grooves cut by each cable up to two hundred millimetres deep. It got

‘curiouser and curiouser’ for a little further up the hill the larger of these cables passed right through the trunk of a large eucalypt. The tree had presumably grown up under the cable, picked it up in a fork of the trunk and over the years encased the cable, a curious sight indeed.

It was good to have Fred Roberts and Geoff Kelly with us today as they both worked in mines and also have an interest in historic mines and railways. They were able to explain some of the possible functions of the various constructions before us; the operation of the ventilation shafts, the boiler powering the winding engine, etc. We spent some time exploring these structures trying to imagine the scene a hundred or so years ago with all the hustle and bustle of the workings. The ‘Occupational Health and Safety’ rules of the day were quite simple; in the event of a mishap the safety of the men “depended largely on their getting away at speed out of harm’s way”!

The track then wound into a shady gully where ferns and Spiny-headed Mat-rush (*Lomandra longifolia*) covered the hillside. Beside the track in this protected environment was a large old tree stump the top about at eye level. It was completely clothed in lichens and mosses of various forms and colours, the lichen covering the top gave the appearance of a miniature forest of tiny conifers. The track then climbed a fairly steep pinch and turned west along a dry creek course. Here beside the track were giant sandstone tors draped in lush moss. The cliffs behind these giants contained some quite large caves. A short climb brought us to the western escarpment of Mt Airly presenting us with a magnificent view toward Sofala and beyond, what better place to pause for lunch.

The view directly below us was onto Torbane Creek wending its way through sparse pastures on its journey to meet Oaky Creek. In the distance evidence of present day mining could be seen and a high voltage transmission line marched across the landscape, however these manifestations of the necessities of modern life were fairly unobtrusive in the grandeur of the vista before us.

Following lunch some time was spent in a riveting examination and appraisal of groups of droppings scattered around the area. Too small for wallabies, too short and stumpy for possums, too long for rabbits, definitely not a carnivore one of the more inquisitive and intelligent members of the group declared. Someone suggested it could be goats and there was a general murmuring of agreement (similar to what you see and hear in parliament) for no one else had a clue. Lo and behold on the return journey some wild goats were seen scampering up the hillside, they were wild because we disturbed them.

The rest of the walk was to retrace our outward journey. The afternoon light presented us with a clear view of Tayan Pic. This mountain which resembles Mt Fuji “is on odd occasions covered with a glistening mantle of snow” – what a magical sight that must be.

On arriving back at the cars we indulged in afternoon tea with the added attraction of a birthday cake for a belated celebration of Libby’s birthday and an early celebration for George Knott.

This was another fantastic walk filled with much of the best the mountains have to offer. Towering cliff faces, wooded slopes, expansive landscapes, open forests and enclosed cool areas. Added to this of course were the remnants of human endeavour we encountered along the way. I always experience an indefinable feeling when bushwalking in areas displaying evidence of prolonged human occupation in the past, be it rock carvings and sharpening grooves or dwellings and work sites. There is something sublime yet intangible left behind when the landscape has been touched by humanity.

Note: Historical information and a couple of short quotes in this article were gleaned from “The Shale Railways of NSW” by GH Eardley and EM Stephens. An excellent record of shale works in NSW.