

Coxs and Lockyers Roads – Mt York to Hartley Vale and Return

Friday 15th June 2007

Thirteen, considered by many to be an unlucky figure proved just the opposite for the thirteen who gathered at Mt York for this walk. The heavy rain and blustery winds of the last few days had subsided and the sun was trying valiantly to pierce the remaining cloud cover. A car shuffle from the Lawsons Long Alley Track Head delivered the group to the end of Mt York Road.

Libby gave a brief history of the various roads which had been constructed to provide a suitable route down the western escarpment to the valley floor. Following the Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson expedition which reached Mt York in 1813 William Cox was commissioned to construct a road across the mountains. The section we would walk today, the steep Coxs Pass, was completed in December 1814. Lawsons Long Alley which provided an easier grade was constructed during 1822 – 23. Work on Lockyers Road, designed to give improved access to the valley was carried out in 1828 and 1829 but was never completed due to work gangs being transferred to Victoria Pass which was completed in 1832. This route remained in use until the advent of the early horseless carriages which couldn't handle the steep grade and suffered the embarrassment of requiring the assistance of a few strong steeds to complete the climb, eliciting I'm sure a few horse laughs. Berghofers Pass, which had sharper curves but gentler grades, was opened below Victoria Pass and was used until 1920 when the advent of more powerful vehicles enabled Victoria Pass to be brought back into use and of course it remains the main route west.

We initially made our way to the Mt York Lookout to take in the views across the valley. The conditions today presented a magnificent vista. On the valley floor the muted morning light was reflected off the mirror-like surfaces of the many recently replenished dams and the pools of casual water lying on the flats. The farmhouses scattered below us appeared as though part of a diorama and traffic could be seen but not heard as it hustled along the Western Highway and The Gap Road before disappearing into the rising mist and low cloud which hung over Hassans Walls and Browns Gap. This veil of mist and cloud shrouded the higher peaks of Table Mountain, Mount Bindo, Mount Arthur and Mount Blaxland and formed a swirling backdrop to this bucolic scene. There is something very calming about being removed from, yet still able to observe, the hurly-burly of everyday life.

Setting off down Coxs Pass we soon diverted to a rock outcrop which afforded a more northerly view into the valley toward Collits Inn which was built in 1823 to cater for traffic on Lawsons Long Alley. Looking down onto the Inn must have prompted thoughts of food for we settled down here for an early morning tea.

Continuing down the slope we encountered the first of many examples of the work carried out by the convict road gang. Gutters, culverts and cutaways to form a bench for

the carriageway of the road bear testament to the skills and tenacity of the men for they would have had only primitive tools at their disposal.

Soon we divert once more to the left to view a spot which is used by abseilers, an elevated rock ledge that gives fine views into the valley and of the nearby cliff line. As the group was moving away from this spot and I was waiting to take up my usual spot at the rear of the group where I make sure everyone is keeping up, Rob Bearup pondered aloud as to what I would do, as the whip for the group, if he happened to slip over the edge and plunge into the valley. I am not sure whether it was any comfort to him when I stated it would be no trouble at all; I would simply have to cross him off the list.

We duck through a short tunnel formed by a large boulder which has wedged itself between two huge sandstone tors. Trickle of water run down the rock face here irrigating the clusters of Rock Felt-fern (*Pyrrhosia rupestris*) and the clumps of minute filigree ferns which cling to the vertical walls. A steep stairway leads down to the base of the cliffs used for abseiling and gives us access to a series of large wind worn caverns. The sandstone surfaces here, being constantly refreshed by the action of the wind, are a golden honey colour. Large angular chunks of stone appear as gargantuan bars of honeycomb confectionary.

Back on the Coxs Road alignment we pass between high cliff faces clothed in a variety of mosses, lush and brilliant green following the recent welcome rains. Those rains have also brought out that delightful earthy aroma which is always present when the bush is dripping with moisture. The face of one of these cliffs has more reminders of the convict work gangs; a vertical row of three mortices cut into it to accommodate rails of a stock fence. A little further on there is a moss garden at the base of a cliff, the mounds of moss being interspersed with tiny clumps of silver/grey lichen appearing as dwarf trees. We encounter another section where there is evidence of drainage gutters and deep rebates cut into the rock to accommodate timber bridge beams.

Soon we pass beneath a large Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*). The beautifully curved lichen encrusted trunk supports a head of gracefully weeping branches which carry a multitude of spent flower spikes; a lovely sight. This tree formed an archway which led from the area of steep cliff faces and monolithic boulders to the crest of a ridgeline that continued through open woodland as it dropped steeply into the valley. Many trees here are decorated with bright yellow lichen that contrasts markedly with the lustrous green mosses which adorn the embankments.

Presently the track deviates from the line of the Coxs Road and traverses some open flat country now spongy underfoot after gratefully absorbing the recent rains. A few grey kangaroos, disturbed by our presence, lope lazily into the cover of the woods. As we walk along the edge of a small plantation of Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*) we sight a few of those fairytale mushrooms, the Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) with their distinctive white-spotted red caps. In the middle of the track a little further on fungi are once more to the fore where a group of Earthstars (*Geastrum sp*) are clustered, tiny spore-filled globes sitting atop leathery star-shaped bases. The only other warm colour here is provided by

the pale cream flowers of the Prickly Moses (*Acacia ulicifolia*) and the hot pink blossoms of a single Narrow-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium lineare*) pushing up through the rejuvenated grasses.

Having descended about two hundred and forty metres from Mt York we now begin the return ascent via Lockyers Road. This route rises quite quickly from the valley floor. In the early stages informally placed large boulders have been used to retain the low side embankment of the road while skilfully constructed formal sandstone block walls have been employed as the embankment becomes higher. It is near this point that construction of Lockyers Road was abandoned and the work gang transferred to the Victoria Pass route favoured by Major Mitchell.

As noted earlier in this newsletter, following the crossing by Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson, many people became involved in planning and providing a suitable route down the western escarpment. There were three Governors during the period; Lachlan Macquarie, Thomas Brisbane and Ralph Darling, the Surveyor George Evans, William Cox of course, Lawson himself who became Commandant over the area west of Mt York, the Surveyor General Major Thomas Mitchell and Major Edmond Lockyer.

The conversation, in their laconic slang, between two of the convict workers on hearing the news of the road being abandoned may have went something like this:

“Hey matey, did ya hear we’re gonna be sent to another job?”

“Eh! Why are we nay gonna finish this great wall, china?”

“It’s ‘cause of the bosses. Too many bosses ----- in tha colony.”

Some things never change.

From this point of abandonment the route reverts to a narrow track which soon climbs up steep stairs between some gigantic sandstone bulwarks that protect the lush, moist little gully between them from the harsher elements. We are now in more open country as we climb steadily out of the valley. Presently we divert onto a long rock outcrop where we stop for lunch. From this elevated position we can look across to the Mt York ridgeline and our starting point for this walk approximately one and a half kilometres away. Adjacent to this rock outcrop are two mature examples of Old Man Banksia (*Banksia integrifolia*) growing tall in this relatively sheltered spot; a magnificent sight.

As we continue our steady climb toward Mt York Road the weather gods decide we have been given enough respite from the inclement conditions and light rain begins to fall. We don our rain gear, a couple of umbrellas are produced and we carry on unperturbed. It is quite pleasant walking in the bush in light rain such as this, colours of leaves and bark are intensified and there is a markedly different atmosphere. We pass many low, pagoda-like rock outcrops along the way, some pockmarked with tiny caves while others carry the distinct horizontal patterns typical of rock having sedimentary origins.

Soon we are in an area where the bush is burnt on the left hand side of the track but untouched on the right hand side. It was here that back burns were carried out to prevent the fires of last November from escaping in this direction from the valley below. We turn left now and follow a path which runs parallel to Mt York Road as we head toward the Lawson Track Head. Beside the path here are a couple of brilliant orange Coral Fungi (*Ramaria sp*) their tortuous mass of tiny branches presenting a splendid display. As we walk adjacent to the 132kV transmission line I am prompted to think, perhaps for a nanosecond, what it would be like to be back working in that field. Arriving back at the vehicles left earlier in the morning we clamber aboard and are transported to the end of Mt York Road.

While indulging in the usual end of walk cuppa in the shelter shed I pondered the magnitude of what had been achieved by those early explorers, surveyors, designers and by no means least, the largely unsung construction gang comprising only thirty convict workers. They commenced work at the Nepean River near Emu Plains on the 18th July 1814 to build a road, twelve feet wide, across the mountains. By early November that same year, only three and a half months later, they had reached the western crest at Mt York. On the 7th November (must have given the convicts a holiday) they commenced work on Coxs Pass and completed this section on 15th December, that is thirty-nine days later; unbelievable! If the job were being done today it would be at least eighteen months before the necessary forms had been received from the relevant consent authorities. As we walked over to the cars Libby pointed out a large tree in the park displaying a scar from tip to toe, the result of having been struck by lightning. I couldn't help thinking this was a metaphor of what perhaps our society needs regarding some of our practices today.

So we headed home through the gentle rain, well satisfied with our exploration of these historic roads and looking forward to future walks along other paths in other places.