

Cathedral of Ferns, The Ramparts and More - A Smorgasbord of the Delights of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine

Friday 17th October 2008

Firstly, and most importantly, an update on our dear leader Libby. Having been back at home with her cherished and loving family for several weeks has been very therapeutic for Libby. She continues to make a good recovery, slow but sure. Being welcomed back into her beloved garden by the kaleidoscope of vibrant spring blossom and delicate unfurling foliage surely would have given Libby a huge boost. Thanks to the dedication of the medical and nursing staff at Bathurst Hospital and to Libby's faith, fitness and tenacity, she is on the path to full recovery. We all have you constantly in our hearts and minds Libby.

Fortunately for this writer Friday 17th dawned as a perfect spring morning, a beautiful clear sky and a gentle zephyr whispering through the foliage of the trees. I had promoted this walk as an experience of shadows and sunlight and an overcast misty day may well have put a dent in my credibility. However Lady Luck smiled upon us as seventeen gathered at Cathedral Reserve for the first course of this moveable feast. We welcomed Jenny Rich who was joining us for the first of what we hope will be many walks with the group.

The track onto Lambs Hill West was bathed in dappled shade provided by the tall open forest through which it climbed. Masses of golden blossom of the abundant Bush-peas (*Pultenaea sp*) lined the path which was dotted here and there with the lilac flowers of the Native Indigo (*Indigofera australis*). Higher on the hill were a few examples of the Rough Bush-pea (*Pultenaea scabra*) with their wedge-shaped leaves and their deep yellow flowers sporting touches of red.

As the track levelled off we were treated to the sight of a magnificent stand of Rough Tree Ferns (*Cyathea australis*) against a background of tall eucalypt trunks. So often in the Australian bush, when your eye is drawn to some 'big picture' attraction there is something in miniature form yet of equal beauty closer at hand. That indeed was the case here when one of the sharper-eyed members of the group spotted a Greenhood Orchid (*Pterostylis sp*) at our feet. We turned right to head down to the Cathedral of Ferns and high above us the sun illuminated a large white swath of Wedding Veil or Traveller's Joy (*Clematis aristata*) festooning the canopy of a trackside tree.

Diverting from this sunlit track we entered the enclosed shadowy world of the rainforest. Here we are among moss covered buttressed tree trunks draped with Rock Felt Fern (*Pyrrhosia rupestris*), gently contorted Soft Tree Ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) and thick sinuous vines climbing skyward seeking the sun above the dense cover of foliage. The bird life was rather active here and Grey Fantails, Thornbills and Golden Whistlers were among those sighted or heard. A Whipbird darted across the forest floor but remained too elusive to be clearly viewed.

We made our way to the 'Giant Tree', that magnificent ancient Brown Barrel (*Eucalyptus fastigata*) which has towered over this pocket of rainforest for hundreds of years. Unfortunately it appears to be coming to the end of its long life as it now carries only one or two live branches. We moved back into the enclosed atmosphere of the Cathedral of Ferns, slowly meandered down the hill through this enchanting little haven and returned to the cars at the reserve.

A vehicle rationalisation magically happened without any input from me and we headed for Mt Irvine to partake first of morning tea beside the tennis court and then indulge in the next course of this smorgasbord of walks.

It was a very pleasant stroll north along Mt Irvine Road under the shade of the overhanging trees. Passing the properties 'Kookatonga', 'Panui' and 'Irvineholme' invoked thoughts of those three young men who pioneered the settlement of Mt Irvine. Basil Knight-Brown, Harold Morley and Charles Scrivener, all students of the Hawkesbury Agricultural College, took up land here in 1897. The difficulties they must have encountered in establishing their homes and productive farms and orchards here is hard to imagine.

We moved onto the Eastern Fire Trail and doubled back to head south toward the access to 'The Ramparts'. This trail meanders through beautiful open forest containing Brown Barrels (*Eucalyptus fastigata*), Blue Mountains Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) and some wonderful examples of the Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*). Tantalising distant glimpses through the trees on the left are on offer across to the ridge which carries Bells Line of Road.

Bright yellow flowers of the *Goodenia* light up the edge of the trail and how else but 'spidery' could you describe the flowers of the Pink Spider-flower (*Grevillea sericea*) that add a touch of brightness to the scene. As we progress along the trail the tree cover begins to change and Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*) with their coarse deeply furrowed fibrous bark become dominant. Here the understorey beside the track contained a group of that elegant small tree the Blueberry Ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*).

Soon we reach Humpy Creek, so named because Basil Knight-Brown and Harold Morley built a humpy from turpentine bark beside this source of running water in 1898. This enabled them to live close to their properties while they cleared land and built more permanent shelter. Lucy Knight-Brown, Basil's mother, became the first woman to live at Mt Irvine when she came to live in the humpy and care for her son while 'Painui' was being built.

Arriving at Painui Creek we leave the fire trail to head out to 'The Ramparts'. We drop down into this magical creek line where lush green shrouds of moss envelop almost every surface and the gentle tinkling of the flowing water provides a pleasant musical accompaniment. Thanks must be expressed to Pam Cave, the owner of 'Circadia', the property through which this section of the creek flows, for kindly allowing us to experience this entrancing little glen.

After a short distance we climb from this shady environment into more open sun drenched country. We generally continue following the creek line as we indulge in a little gentle 'bush bashing' through this now trackless area. We pass rock faces bedecked with Dragons Tail (*Dracophyllum secundum*), skirt around imposing *Angophora* with root systems moulded onto rock faces and duck beneath the eerily contorted limbs of many gnarled Old Man Banksias (*Banksia serrata*) with Big Bad Banksia Men peering out from among their foliage.

Presently we are back above the creek, now with a precipitous drop to the water far below. Soon we climb to an intriguing rock outcrop carrying a small pinnacle surrounded by a sea of velvety moss. The pleasant fragrance hanging in the air heralds the large drifts of Pale-pink Boronia (*Boronia floribunda*) spread across this area; in glorious full flower they amply demonstrate the reason for the choice of 'floribunda' as their specific name.

A couple more twists and turns through the low shrubbery and we emerge onto the rocky crag known as 'The Ramparts'. This wide expanse of undulating sandstone has vertical sawtooth plates of ironstone running over the humps alluding, in my weird imagination, to the shields on the spine of a dinosaur. The only small pool of water on the outcrop contained several axe grinding grooves demonstrating that the original inhabitants of this area were also attracted to this place.

What a sublime spot to have lunch; expansive views across Bowens Creek to the Bilpin area, the deep gorge of Painui Creek immediately below and the line of Bowens Creek Road snaking down the hillside opposite. The many twists and turns in the road are an appropriate metaphor for the tortuous history of its construction and subsequent maintenance but that is a story too involved to relate here. After the opening of the road in 1935 the local children would gather on this rock outcrop when visitors were expected. On sighting a vehicle commence the descent on the Bilpin side they would run home and announce the impending arrival before the vehicle could negotiate the steep and twisting route.

Alison Halliday found the undulating nature of this rock to be a trifle hazardous when she accidentally let an apple roll from her pack. She was wise enough not to try and chase it as it swiftly bounced toward the edge, leapt into space and crashed to the ground far below, giving a different connotation to the term 'apple crumble'. Being a slow learner I subsequently did the same thing; let an apple roll that is, not leap over the edge.

There were some unusual small shrubs growing in the rock crevices here. John Meade and Jenny Starkey identified them as being (I think) *Darwinia peduncularis*, a rare and vulnerable species having only an isolated occurrence in the Blue Mountains. It has tiny cream to white flowers in pairs with red bracts that fall off as the flower opens.

After some time luxuriating in the warming sun and taking in the expansive views it was time to gather for Geoff Kelly's group photo and then to make our way back to the fire trail.

Though Ray Harrington was not walking with us today he had invited the group to have afternoon tea at 'Chalumeau', his and Kathy's lovely property close to where we started the Mt Irvine section of this walk. We left the fire trail at Ray's back gate and made our way up through the garden to the house. This is a beautiful property at any time with its exotic trees and majestic distant views but clothed in its fresh spring finery it is outstanding.

Following refreshments below the shady pergola we visited the studio where we viewed just a small sample of Ray's works of art. During this walk we had admired the many and varied wildflowers put on show by Mother Nature. Here in the studio we admired a large and magnificent still life floral arrangement painted by Ray in the style of the Dutch Masters. A truly inspiring and eminently appropriate way in which to conclude the day; a day spent tasting only a tiny sample of the feast of delights on offer at Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine.