

The Zig Zag Track and Farmers Creek – Lithgow Valley and Newnes State Forest

Friday 20th June 2008

The intended venue for our June walk was the Glow Worm Tunnel on the Newnes Plateau however power restrictions meant the worms would not be glowing today so Libby decided we would instead tackle the Zig Zag Walking Track.

Libby explained the change of plans to the ten walkers who gathered at the Zig Zag Railway Station at Clarence. The very heavy overnight rain had passed though clouds still hung low in the sky as we headed off past the railway platform. This track is being incorporated into the 'Furnace Fire & Forge Heritage Trail' being set up to tell the story of the industries of Lithgow and the people who developed them.

These industries of course included the extraction of coal, initially to be burnt in the fires of the early settlers. Andrew Brown used coal while burning limestone to be used as mortar when, in 1837, he built a stone flour mill to be driven by the waters of Farmers Creek. The first major industrial use of coal appears to be in 1851 when the flour mill was expanded and a boiler and steam engine installed to supply power when the creek flows were low. Steam became a full time source of power when the mill was converted to spin and weave wool in 1857. These early exploitations of the coal reserves were the start of an industry which would, to a large extent, drive the future of Lithgow's development.

The railway construction in itself increased the need for coal and other supplies from the Lithgow area and after the first train steamed into the Lithgow Valley on 18th October 1869 an industrial boom was triggered. Major industries quickly sprung up including brick making and pottery, iron and steel making (the first steel to be manufactured in Australia was at Lithgow in April 1900), copper smelting, meatworks and precision engineering works.

Magnificent though the Zig Zag was it took around half an hour for a train to negotiate the inclines. By 1907 it had become obvious the bottleneck caused by operational problems on the Zig Zag necessitated the bypassing of this section of line. This led to the construction of the ten tunnel deviation which opened on 16th October 1910. The Zig Zag then lay dormant until, due to Herculean efforts by volunteers, the Middle Road section reopened to tourists in October 1975.

Today we would walk beside that impressive engineering achievement, the Zig Zag Railway which opened up the valley to the Sydney markets and ports and thus was a major catalyst for the development of Lithgow.

As we began to climb a slight rise we passed a fine stand of Blue Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) their smooth white trunks glowing in the subdued light. Among the younger straight-trunked specimens stood a grand older tree displaying a more spreading habit. Further on the area was recovering from fire and exhibited an open understorey

where regrowth of the vegetation was progressing well. The light green deeply divided leaves of the Crinkle Bush (*Lomatia silaifolia*) brightened the path as did a few clumps of vivid yellow Coral Fungi (*Ramaria sp.*). Silver/grey juvenile foliage emanated from adventitious buds near the bases of fire-damaged trees. A shallow gully contained a swath of regrowth Wattles (*Acacia sp.*), glistening from the myriad water droplets trapped on their feathery leaves.

Cresting a low ridge we emerged onto a hillside of heath. Here many black stems and flower heads of the Strap-leaf Bloodroot (*Haemodorum planifolium*) extend above a carpet of low vegetation containing Dwarf She-oak (*Allocasuarina nana*) displaying red stems of regrowth. Off to the left is the smooth domed profile of Mt Sinai.

Soon we arrive at a rock platform overlooking the Bottom Points and Depot of the Zig Zag Railway. We look down onto a coal train as it glides by on its way to the first of ten tunnels on the main line. (What is it with coal trains and our walks of late?) We decide this would be an ideal spot for morning tea.

From our vantage point we watched the activity at the Bottom Points where windows of carriages were being cleaned and locomotives checked in preparation for the weekend runs. With a blast of its whistle a silver two car 2000 Class ex Queensland Railways rail motor set off to collect passengers waiting at Clarence. While we looked down on this little piece of train buff's paradise a Wedgetail Eagle (*Aquila audax*) circled above.

We then descended to the Bottom Points level passing a quaint little waterfall along the way and followed the access road beside the rail line. This led us to a point which afforded a view of the three spectacular viaducts. These impressive structures with their superbly proportioned arches were built of sandstone from Burton's Quarry in the vicinity of Mt Sinai.

This road leads us to Farmers Creek and we turn right to follow the creek past the Oaky Park Water Treatment Plant. The track hugs the creek bank, crossing and recrossing the waterway at fords constructed with large neatly laid sandstone slabs. What a pleasant shady environment; the welcome sound of gently rippling water, Eastern Whipbirds (*Psophodes olivaceus*) calling and responding to each other and the occasional 'bock bock' call of a frog – bliss!

Presently we arrived at the curved concrete wall of the first reservoir. The group paused at the top of the wall while I was lower down the embankment. Anne Clarke and Libby were discussing the planned route from here and I got the impression I was about to witness a multi-miracle. The plan was to step off the wall, walk across the dam and continue along the creek; this I had to see! One by one they stepped off the wall and disappeared from my sight, not a splash to be heard. Eagerly I climbed the embankment expecting to witness one of those misty slow motion scenes of people advancing in ghostly fashion across the surface of the dam; alas not so, this reservoir had been drained.

We did however experience a miracle of a different type, the miracle of nature's power of regeneration. Having been submerged for many years this now drained section of valley was a sight to behold. The narrow track initially followed a grassy bank beside a tiny stream and then led us into a tunnel of Tea-tree (*Leptospermum sp*) and Bush-pea (*Pultenaea sp*). We passed a weeping rock face embellished with strings of stalactite-like growth then into a more open area where Fuchsia Heath (*Epacris longiflora*) fringed the path displaying their delicate white tipped tubular red flowers. The Roman poet and satirist noted in 20 BC: "Though you drive away nature with a pitchfork, she always returns."

As we continued on toward the wall of the second reservoir we passed through a veritable potpourri of vegetation. Pouched Coral-fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*) lined the track overarched by Hairpin Banksia (*Banksia spinulosa*), Heath Banksia (*B ericifolia*) and the occasional Silver Banksia (*B marginata*) all carrying flower spikes. Heath-myrtle (*Baeckea sp*), Bottlebrush (*Callistemon sp*) and Paper-barks (*Melaleuca sp*) were also present here in abundance.

Soon we arrived at the reservoir that forms part of the Lithgow water supply and settled down on its shore for lunch. What an idyllic spot this is with the sun on our backs, a light breeze blowing and the splendid song of a Superb Lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*) echoing through the valley. The scene before us contained sheer cliffs directly opposite and ragged pagoda formations off to the left, the sculptured form of eucalypt trees silhouetted against the sky, a large triangular rock jutting up from the depths, little islands of rock carrying stunted shrubs; all this captured in undulating reflections in the ruffled surface of the water. One of my former workaholic colleagues used to ask me: "What on earth are you going to do when you retire?" What indeed!

It was decided that rather than retrace our steps we would undertake a journey of discovery and find our way across the plateau, following the fire trails, to return to Clarence. John Meade had control of the map and we assured him consensus navigation would be used - until something went wrong.

We crossed the wall of the reservoir and made the steep climb onto the ridge. From this elevated position we could see the sun glinting off the wet rock shelves on the hillsides and the brown ribbon of a fire trail wending its way along the distant ridges.

Initially the track led us through windswept heath then into open woodland where we walked along an avenue of gold; both sides of the trail were lined with flowering wattle, possibly the Fern-leaf Wattle (*Acacia filicifolia*), the large heads of brilliant yellow flowers on these small dark-trunked trees lit up the forest.

Clouds rolled in and the sky darkened as we made our way through the forest however the rain held off and we emerged onto the Old Bells Line of Road at the water ponds about one and a half kilometres north of Clarence. A stroll along the road and past the sawmill delivered us back to our starting point at the Zig Zag Station.

As is often the case a change of plans can result in unexpected pleasant experiences. That was certainly the case today. This proved to be a wonderful walk where we viewed the amazing results of some remarkable endeavours of man and particularly beautiful examples of the work of Mother Nature.

All right, I'll confess. Power restrictions had absolutely nothing to do with the change of venue today; the glow worms were simply having their rostered day off.

Footnote: An excellent short history of Lithgow and its people can be found in the booklet "Lithgow: The Valley and the People" by Brian Jinks.