
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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ASGARD SWAMP AND SURROUNDS

TOPIC

OUR OCTOBER WALK

ASGARD SWAMP, THOR
HEAD, A COAL MINE AND
COKE OVEN AND ASGARD
HEAD - Near Mt VICTORIA

Friday 21st October 2011

The heavenly realm of gods and goddesses connected to earth by a rainbow bridge; this is the Asgard of Norse mythology. A heavenly array of scenic wonders; this is the Asgard of Blue Mountains reality. The diversity of the terrain we are to experience today is stunning - tranquil woods and serene marshlands, spectacular vistas and dramatic cliff-lines; the Norse god Thor would be thunderstruck.

Twenty-one walkers gathered in glorious conditions for this walk; the first for the group at this venue. It was a blue blue day. A few scattered clouds floated across an azure sky; the still air, warmed by the morning sun, was filled with birdsong. The brilliant colour of the sky was carried through to the surrounding bush; blue being the dominant hue of the profusion of wildflowers lining the track.

Dotted Sun Orchids (*Thelymitre ixioides*) held their delicate flowers aloft on slender stems, soft blue petals with the upper three carrying darker blue spots - a delight to the eye. Native Iris or Purple Flags (*Patersonia sp*) were spread through the ground cover in abundance,



Spring in the Bush

their showy but short-lived three-petalled blooms induced to open by the sunny conditions. Blue Damperia (*Damperia stricta*) carried clusters of crinkled-petalled flowers and delicate blue blossoms of the Slender Violets (*Hybanthus monopetalus*), appearing to each have just a single petal, peeked out from among the leaf litter.

Rich and varied natural resources of food, diverse ecosystems in a limited space and a relatively favourable climate once made this area a prime occupation site for

Aboriginal people. Adjacent to the coal seams exposed below the cliff lines were outcrops of chert, an ideal mineral from which to fashion cutting and scraping tools.

To European settlers the coal and oil shale were far more desirable minerals. The track we were following as we made our way downhill followed the route of a tramline proposed to carry coal and/or coke to Mt Victoria from the six adits driven into the coal seam between Thor and Asgard Heads. It is unclear whether a tramline was ever built. Benching, which is evident on several rock outcrops along the track, would however indicate that work had at least started on this proposal.

The track leads us down to an arm of Asgard Brook which we cross via a collection of small logs which have been placed in the shallow water. We then climb a slight rise which takes

us into open woodland consisting mainly of Hard-leaved Scribbly Gums (*Eucalyptus sclerophylla*). This is a magical display. Smooth white trunks blotched with shades of light and dark grey; the sheen of the satiny bark interrupted by the erratic doodlings of *Ogmograptis Scribulata*, the larvae of the Scribbly Gum Moth. Some of the beautifully sculptured and contorted trunks are deeply scarred by fire; dark hollows and deep cavities adding an enchanted forest touch to the scene.

Soon we divert to the left and arrive at Pagoda Rock which stands on the edge of Asgard Swamp. The view across the expanse of sedges and rushes of the swamp, including Spreading Rope Rush (*Empodisma minus*), Razor Sedge (*Lepidosperma limicola*) and Yellow-eye (*Xyris ustulata*) is to a stunning copse of Scribbly Gums which border the far edge of the swamp; trunks and branches leaning and bending every which way. To see these ghostly gums en masse is something very special. In the distance is Thor Head, our destination after we partake of morning tea while relaxing on and around Pagoda Rock.

Back on the main track a small cairn within a hoop of iron marks a rather indistinct track which leads off to the left. The remains of a house associated with the mining activity in the area lie a short distance along this track. A low mound of roughly dressed sandstone blocks, some with arched segments hewn into them, and scattered fragments of window glass; forlorn reminders of hopes and dreams of the late 1800s.

The track, at times barely visible, meanders up the hillside under the canopy of fairly open woodland, the blue 'colour of the day' being maintained by *Damperia*, Slender Violets and Sun Orchids; there is no indication in the dappled shade of this environment of what we are about to encounter. A sweep to the left and a short scramble between some rocky outcrops and a magnificent panorama opens up as we stand on a wide rock shelf; below us the gaping chasm which is the Upper Grose Gorge. On the other side of this yawning gap are the magnificent vertical sandstone walls below Wikinson Hill, Jinki Ridge and Dalpura

Head. Rock outcrops and jutting pagoda formations dot the slopes leading up to the skyline ridge where the occasional glint of sun reflecting off vehicles travelling along the Bells Line of Road catch the eye. From far below us the sound of rushing water rises from the Grose River.

Some elect to remain here and absorb the magnificence of the scenery laid out before them. The beckoning summit of Thor Head however entices the rest of the group to make the short steep climb to the pinnacle. From this lofty eyrie the view is even more stunning. The line of the gorge can be traced from the Kamarah Bluffs in the west down past Rigby Hill (our destination for the December walk) until it meets Govett Gorge and swings left to disappear behind Edgeworth David Head.

When it is possible to drag oneself free of the pull of this view, a short stroll from the cliff face leads to a rocky outcrop which gives a view back across Asgard Swamp to Pagoda Rock, our morning tea spot now far below. This outcrop is embellished with the most amazing ironstone sculptures. Slender vertical spines twist and turn as they run across the expanse of flat rock, impossibly thin ledges defy the forces of gravity as they reach out horizontally before curving and curling into wildly fanciful shapes.

In this elevated and exposed environment a few hardy plants cling tenaciously to life, dwarfed by the scarcity of nutrients and the battering of the winds. One plant that stood out was a small weather-beaten example of the uncommon Tea Tree (*Leptospermum macrocarpum*). Its thickish gnarled trunk lay low on the rockface snaking along a ledge for protection, short wind-clipped twigs carry large flowers; creamy-lemon petals surrounding a glossy light green centre. Large silver/grey seed capsules from the previous season, almost metallic in appearance, still cling to the shrub.

A few in the group scrambled down the slope to the west of the rocky headland. They were rewarded with the breathtaking sight of the sheer cliff face dropping vertically below Thor

Head and the wind worn cave and sandstone overhang bearing, to my perhaps over-vivid imagination, the appearance of the head and snout of a bull elephant seal.

Reluctantly we leave this special place, make our way back down to the main track and continue on toward Asgard Head. We clamber over several trees that have fallen across the wide track which soon peters out and becomes a narrow enclosed path. A few Waratahs (*Telopea speciosissima*) shine like beacons in the bush; one beside the track had been visited by birds or perhaps a sugar glider which had neatly nipped off most of its cluster of tiny flowers in search of sweet nectar. The Broad-leaf Drumstick (*Isopogon anemonifolius*) is also present here, their bright yellow globular flowers just bursting into bloom. Soon we scramble up beside a large rock outcrop, contour along the hillside and arrive at a rock platform low on the cliff face of Asgard Head.

What a vista is laid out before us here. We are looking directly along the line of the Grose River; a stretch of water visible below the tree cover mirrors the brilliant blue of the sky. The broad talus slopes angle down from the base of majestic sandstone cliffs. The humps of Mount Banks, the knoll of Lockley Pylon and the dome of Mount Hay sit above the distant line which borders this grand prospect. Nearer to hand is the branch of the gorge which carries Victoria Creek. The waters of this stream can be clearly seen plummeting down the Silver Cascades before dropping over the curved cliff edge to form Victoria Falls before they disappear from sight as they make their way to blend with the Grose River.

A wonderful spot to pause for lunch. Mother Nature has even provided a table decoration in the form of the abundant pink blossoms of a nearby Heath Milkwort or Matchhead (*Conesperma ericinum*). We really do dine in some amazing places.

Following lunch we make our way back toward the main track and pause at the sidetrack which leads down to the Mackenzie Coal Mine. Here some decide to continue straight back to the cars while the remainder

descend the three hundred metre long track to the mine.

This adit is one of six driven into the coal seam at the direction of Walter Mackenzie and Thomas Garret around 1881. Walter and his brother John, sons of a coal mine owner in the north of England, came to Australia about 1862. Walter, a doctor, first settled in Maitland and John, a geologist, first went to the south coast.

Seeing the successful development of the oil shale mining ventures in Hartley Vale and the increasing demand for lighting oil and candle wax, the Mackenzie brothers explored the geologically similar upper Grose Valley. They discovered seams of oil shale and claimed they were viable, however they were never worked and in fact proved to be only about 450 millimetres thick.

When John Mackenzie returned to government employment in about 1875 Walter became involved with a businessman and politician of dubious repute, Thomas Garrett, member for Camden and an undischarged bankrupt. Together they decided to exploit the coal seam located just above the shale deposits discovered by the Mackenzies. Around 1881 they arranged for six adits to be driven at various places between Asgard and Thor Heads; one of these is the mine entrance we will visit today.

Walter Mackenzie died in 1886 and R Sands and Company took over the leases. It was this company which proposed building a tramway to Mt Victoria and built the coke oven we will also see today. It has been stated some excellent coke was made in this oven, though there is conjecture that it was in fact never used. The whole venture never really got off the ground, probably due to the downturn in the economy in the late 1880s. The leases over this area changed hands a number of times after 1891 and up until 1925, however they were last worked, and obviously only to a very limited extent, in 1908.

Today the mine is a dark dank tunnel only a little over a metre in height and not much wider; mosses grow on the walls near the

entrance and tiny orange stalactites formed by seepage hang from the ceiling. These tunnels hold a strange fascination, beckoning to be explored. Fred Roberts however, who worked in mines for many years, warned of the danger of blackdamp in unventilated shafts, air in which oxygen has been replaced by carbon dioxide and can quickly prove fatal. The nearby coke oven is being slowly reclaimed by the bush yet is still intact enough to display the fine workmanship in its construction. Built with dressed sandstone blocks and firebricks it is a credit to those involved, especially so the still sound domed ceiling with its chimney opening.

Back at the old Mt Victoria Cemetery where we paused for a cuppa I reflected on the grandeur and beauty of these mountains. William Scott, the first Government Astronomer once said; "The mountains to the west of Sydney Town are a great brown ugly affair". William had obviously never visited Asgard Swamp and Thor and Asgard Heads. One hopes that his observations of the stars and planets were more accurate than his view of these mountains.

John Cardy

OUR NOVEMBER WALK

Friday 18th November 2011

Wide Mountain Vistas and Deep Valley Views, Wildflowers in Profusion and an Optical Illusion

Mount Hay and Butterbox Point off the Mt Hay Road north of Leura

The group last visited this venue in November 2006 on a day when a bushfire had just jumped the Darling Causeway into the upper reaches of the Grose Gorge. This area has beautiful heath lands leading to the wooded slopes of Mt Hay; a side track leads us to the spectacular ramparts of Butterbox Point. This is a relatively easy walk with a fairly gentle rise of about 180 metres from the carpark to the summit of Mt Hay; you can choose not to go to the summit if you wish. It is then mostly downhill back to Butterbox Point and to the carpark.

Meet at Leura on Mt Hay Road in the 'dip' just past Churchill St at 9.30am or at Merry Garth at 8.30am.

There is no direct access to Mt Hay Road from the Western Highway at Leura Primary School. When travelling from Sydney it is necessary to approach via the roundabout above the new tunnel, turn right and travel back down the hill to Mt Hay Rd via Britain St or Victory Lane and Churchill St. Those travelling from the Katoomba side should also approach via this roundabout. There will be a vehicle rationalisation at the meeting point for the 14km drive to the track head. Four-wheel drive vehicles would be most welcome. Bring morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea and plenty of water.

Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 (after 7pm) or Helen and John Cardy on 9871 3661 or on mobile 0418 646 487 if you need to leave a message.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 16th December – A morning walk to Rigby Hill followed by end of year Christmas lunch at Merry Garth.

Friday 20th January 2012 – Happy Valley at Mt Wilson.

BUSH CARE

Bush Care is held on the second Friday of each month from 9am to Noon. Any help, even for a short time, would be appreciated both by the other workers and by the native vegetation.

11th November 2011 at Silva Plana

9th December 2011 at Wynne Reserve

Contact Libby or Beth Raines on 4756 2121 for details