
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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TRACKS BELOW HYDRO MAJESTIC

TOPIC

OUR SEPTEMBER WALK

**HISTORIC TRACKS below
the HYDRO MAJESTIC at
MEDLOW BATH**

21st September 2012

A loud bang and the light was no more, the herd of goats scattered in fear. One of the US soldiers convalescing at the hotel during the Second World War, an excess of time and ammunition on hand, was relieving his boredom with a little target shooting; light fittings, garden statuary and indeed the goat herd all fell victim to this bizarre practice. This is just one of the curious episodes in the chequered history of the Hydro Majestic Hotel and its founder Mark Foy. Today we will explore the maze of tracks and amazing features which lie on and below the escarpment behind this imposing establishment.

Thirteen gathered near the corner of Station and Belgravia Streets at Medlow Bath on a fresh windy morn; scattered clouds darted across the blue sky.

We make our way along Station Street, which parallels the railway line, for a kilometre or so and divert onto the end of the Wonderland Track. The vegetation, mostly above head height, presses in on this track as it contours back along the hillside. Soon we reach a sidetrack identified by an old metal sign



Spring in the Bush

attached high on a tree. (Was it originally attached that high or has the tree carried it up as it has grown over the years?) A series of piercings through the sheet metal spell out the words 'Mark's Tomb'. This track leads us downhill past another similar sign attached to a now fallen tree and below an impressive wind-eroded cliff face to a quite amazing rock formation. A large domed cavern, earthen floored with three wide arched entrances and an elliptical skylight, sits adjacent to a small vertical cliff face. This is Mark's Tomb;

Mark Foy's mortal remains however do not lie here.

Mark Foy stated in his will that a tomb should be constructed at Medlow Bath; provision being made for six caskets. The floor to be slabbed with thick billiard table quality slate and the tomb to be surrounded by an eleven foot high wall with a strong iron-barred gate for its entrance. An acre of land surrounding to be fenced with two barbed wire fences eleven foot apart; the space between to be planted with native shrubs. £32,000 was allocated for its construction from his estate, which was valued for probate at £68,981.

Mark Foy, in the early hours of the morning of 15th November 1950, went to investigate a noise in the garden of his Bayview cottage. He fell, was badly injured and was admitted to hospital; he died that night - aged 85. He was interred in the family crypt at South Head

Cemetery. On 29th October 1951 the Equity Court released the family from the direction in the will that a tomb be built at Medlow Bath. Though his mortal remains were never returned to the mountains his spirit could perhaps be content hovering around South Head for Mark Foy founded the Sydney Flying Squadron in 1890 to popularise sailing on Sydney Harbour and his efforts resulted in the establishment of the now famous 18 Footers.

Back on the Wonderland Track we continue pressing through the enclosing shrubbery, off to the right tantalising glimpses into the Megalong Valley and of the cliffs below Shipley Plateau are seen through gaps in the vegetation. Soon we are at a track junction and we veer left to head toward the rear of the Hydro Majestic. We are now on the Sunbath Track which is far more open.

We clamber over fallen trees and through boggy sections before arriving at the rear of the hotel building. Here we encounter a Blue Tongue Lizard sunning itself, appropriately enough on the Sunbath Track, before we drop down to the right off the main track and pass some large rock overhangs, one of which has been partly enclosed by a stone wall with window. (It is said that church services were held in a cave adjacent to the hotel, perhaps this was that cave.) We now follow an overgrown yet well made track, steps hewn into rock shelves - in one case in a neat spiral, down toward the edge of the escarpment.

We emerge onto an exposed rock platform which affords magnificent panoramic views of the Megalong Valley and of the nearby awe-inspiring cliff faces. We leave our packs here and drop down to a feature known as 'The Squeeze'; a narrow cleft between two vertical rock walls. Contained within 'The Squeeze' are steps leading down to link up with the remnants of the Glen Rosa Track, a track that was reputedly named after a Spanish lady who worked at the Hydro. We pause at the base of the cliff below 'The Squeeze' to take in the grandeur of the cliffines, the rocky parapets high above and the expansive valley views.

Having climbed back up to the rear of the Hydro we return along the Sunbath Track which takes us, believe it or not, to the Sunbath, a once popular feature of the hotel.

Perhaps it is appropriate here to go into a little of the history of the Hydro. In 1851 it was announced that Edward Hargraves had discovered gold at Ophir and he subsequently received a government grant of land at Medlow where he built a grand home, later inherited by his son William. The caretaker and gardener at the Hargraves estate, Murdo McLennan, constructed many of the walking tracks which we are exploring today. In 1891 the elegant Belgravia Hotel opened next door to the Hargraves property. Solicitor Alfred Tucker and his wife Annie Jane also built a home here. Mark Foy purchased these properties in 1902 and combined them with the domed casino building he imported from Chicago to form his Hydrotherapeutic Establishment which opened in the midst of a snowstorm on 4th July 1904. Following the opening of his establishment Foy successfully petitioned the government to change the locality name from Medlow to Medlow Bath, more in keeping with the theme of his establishment.

The establishment did not thrive as a health resort; after a couple of years it became the Hydro Majestic Hotel and it then enjoyed great success. Operatic singers Dame Nellie Melba and Dame Clara Butt performed there; Tommy Burns trained there for his 1908 bout with Jack Johnson. Guests included Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Julius Blau of 4711 perfume fame. Our first PM Edmund Barton died there in 1920.

And so, just as many guests did in the early 1900s, we arrive at the Sunbath. This is a circular compound perhaps six metres in diameter with a stub wall about half a metre in height. The compound had a sand floor and was surrounded by a high brush-box screen. Sunbathing at the Hydro in those days was a segregated affair with different times being allocated for the gentlemen and the ladies. A track leads us from the Sunbath past a Bowerbird's prodigious collection of blue

treasures to yet another rock outcrop with stunning views.

Returning past the Sunbath we make our way to Tuckers Lookout, named of course after the Tuckers whose home was incorporated into the Hydro complex. From this eyrie we get a view along the cliffs to the area of our next destination; the 'Coliseum'. It is marked by a slash of light green vegetation running down from the base of the cliffs indicating a pocket of rainforest.

We now drop down below Tuckers Lookout onto what was originally named Sentinel Pass, a track which led to coal mines in the area. With the establishment of the Hydro, Mark Foy set up the Valley Farm in the Megalong Valley to provide fresh produce for the hotel; the track was improved and extended to provide access to the farm. A flying fox was installed to haul produce up from the farm each morning and kitchen scraps were sent down each afternoon to be fed to the pigs. Guests would also use the track to access the valley for horse riding and hunting or to visit the Megalong Tearooms; a vehicle would be sent to return them to the hotel – all very civilised.

The upper section of this track, now used mainly by rock climbers, skirts close to edges for short distances and no longer has any railings. We descend stairs on the cliffline and arrive at a narrow tunnel which drops us to a steel ladder for the next descent. More stairs and a clamber across a depression that was once bridged leads us to a second tunnel. Here the track to the valley swings sharply to the right while a painted arrow and sign point to the tunnel as the way to the 'Coliseum'. There is a marvellous early 1900s photo titled 'Between the Tunnels' in Mary Shaw's book 'Historic Megalong Valley' of a lady standing on the stairway just above this second tunnel in flowing floor length dress, long sleeves and broad rimmed hat attached with wide ribbon; how times change. There was also a notable lack of vegetation in the area back then.

Having dropped down through the second tunnel the track meanders around the base of

the cliffs along the top edge of the talus slope. The cliffs now towering above us are absolutely stunning in their magnificence. Some are horizontally banded in reds and browns while others are smooth faces of cream and gold, a series of huge level moss-covered rock slabs appear as a giant stairway climbing up a gap between two cliffs. Clinging to parapets atop these cliffs are occasional eucalypts illuminated by the sun as they lean precariously toward the void. At one point I look back to see members of the group dwarfed by the cliffs; minute figures in a gigantic landscape.

Closer at hand the scene is embellished by the mauve/pink flowers of Matchheads (*Comesperma ericinum*) and the pink tinged white flowers of the Dragons Tails (*Dracophyllum secundum*) while a Waratah (*Telopia speciosissima*) is beginning to break into blossom. One cliff face was decorated with abundant clusters of the pure white star-like flowers of the Rock Sprengelia (*Sprengelia monticola*), a delight to the eye. One wonders how these delightful plants can cling to the vertical rock face let alone gain any sustenance; yet here they thrive.

We traverse many environments as we proceed, one minute in parched exposed areas almost devoid of vegetation then into cool enclosed spaces dripping moisture and lush with growth. We round a corner and enter one such moist environment and through a break in the greenery sight a section of dry stone walling; we have arrived at the 'Coliseum'.

What an amazing place this is! Extensive dry stone walls form several flat areas at different levels connected by very well constructed stairways, all protected beneath the overhanging cliffs which soar high above. Time and lack of maintenance have resulted in the collapse of some walling yet it remains a very impressive sight. Even more impressive is a photo, included in Mary Shaw's book, taken soon after the completion of the 'Coliseum' which shows the full extent of the stonework; again the work of Murdo McLennan. Many features of the original work shown in the photo are still easily recognised.

A gentle issue of water drops from a ledge high above to irrigate the lush ferns and mosses at one end of the 'Coliseum' while the opposite end remains bone dry. The remains of a stairway disappear into the gully below the falling water; a track once extended from here to the valley. We pause for lunch in this very special place to soak up the atmosphere and to wonder at its creation, by the hand of Mother Nature and of man.

Our reluctance to leave this shady sanctuary is overpowered by the chill wind now blowing and we retrace our steps around the base of the cliffs, through the tunnels, up the steel ladder and along a track which delivers us to the end of Belgravia Street; a short stroll and we are back at the cars.

So ends another wonderful day walking in this mountain bushland, a walk brimful of outstanding natural beauty, steeped in a history of achievements with touches of pathos and joy; a walk made possible by the endeavours of man, particularly one man – the track builder Murdo McLennan.

John Cardy

OUR OCTOBER EXCURSION

Friday 19th October 2012

Waterside Walks and Vistas, Pagoda Formations, Aboriginal Rock Art, Open Woodland and Heath, Sedges and Rushes

Dunns Swamp in the Wollemi National Park

An excursion rather than simply a bushwalk, this new venue for the group provides the opportunity for partners and members who do not normally bushwalk to experience the beauty of this popular area. While there are a couple of 1 to 2 hour circuit tracks at the site for those who need their hiking hit, there are also some short 15 to 20 minute level circuits near the parking area; or one could simply sit at the picnic area and absorb the tranquillity of this spot. If conditions are favourable and time allows, it is intended to return via the Bogee and Glen Alice road through the Capertee Valley to Capertee to see the afternoon sun

lighting up the cliffs of the surrounding mountains.

Dunns Swamp is a longish drive of approximately 115 kms from Lithgow along the Mudgee Road via Ilford and Kandos; offers of help with transport would be much appreciated. There will be a vehicle rationalisation at our meeting point at Lithgow.

Meet at 8.30am in the Coles Car Park (Bent Street or St Patrick's Primary School end) of the Lithgow Valley Shopping Centre or at Merry Garth at 7.50am.

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. NB: Helen and John will not be available on their landline number after the evening of Wednesday 17th October.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 16th November – Lockley Pylon off the Mount Hay Road at Leura

MONDAY 17th December – Crab Creek Lookout at Mt Wilson followed by the End of Year Christmas Luncheon (As the third Friday in December this year falls very close to Christmas Day it is proposed to bring our walk and luncheon forward to **Monday** to avoid conflict with other yuletide commitments)

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.

12th October at Silva Plana

9th November at The Avenue (meet at Sloan Reserve)

Contact Libby or Beth Raines on 4756 2121 for details