
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

Volume 23 Issue 5

May 2013

GLOW WORM TUNNEL NEWNES PLATEAU

TOPIC

OUR APRIL WALK

The PAGODAS and the
GLOW WORM TUNNEL on
the NEWNES PLATEAU

Friday 19th April 2013

Ankle length skirts, short button-up boots, stylish hats and white gloves; not what one would normally associate with a bushwalk on The Newnes Plateau. However a wonderful photograph exists of a group of elegantly dressed ladies standing on the platform of Newnes

Railway Station on a winter morn in 1925. In the background the engine of the train which is about to transport them out of the Wolgan Valley belches smoke and steam into the chill morning air. Today we will first drive, then walk, along part of the alignment of the railway line travelled by those ladies eighty-eight years ago.

For some of the twenty-two walkers who gathered at the Zig Zag Railway car park at Clarence there was a slight degree of trepidation. The forecasters had predicted strong winds and possible heavy showers and the state which the road to the Glow Worm Tunnel can sometimes be in lingered in the memory bank. Both these concerns were quickly dispelled however. Though the breeze was indeed bracing, the skies were clear and following a vehicle rationalisation efficiently organised by Libby we soon discovered the road was in excellent condition; probably the



Autumn in the Bush

best this writer has ever experienced. Meeting two oncoming fully laden logging trucks on the narrow gravel road did cause some momentary white-knuckle driving while these mechanical behemoths thundered past. Then, following a short delay when we encountered a couple of huge graders working, thus explaining the good condition of the road, we arrived at the car park just beyond the No1 Tunnel; an unusually smooth and pleasant trip across the plateau.

We set off along the railbed, built up quite high in this area, which soon comes to an abrupt end where a trestle bridge has long ago collapsed. This impediment is bypassed via a footbridge and stairway through a narrow cleft in the rock face which returns us to the railbed. Having passed through a cutting we soon left the rail alignment once more when we turned right onto the Pagoda Track. This provided a link to the Old Coach Road and led us through a small gully below vertical rock faces, their bases decorated with clusters of deep green moss. Views were also obtained from this track across to high vertical cliffs with summits scalloped against the skyline; dark weathered rock faces with narrow horizontal cream and orange bands of wind-worn sandstone.

Soon we were at the Old Coach Road and turned right for the short climb up to pagoda

country. What an astounding sight. Hundreds of pagodas clustered along the near hillsides; grey domes of sandstone decorated with closely spaced horizontal ledges of ironstone. Present on some are yawning mouths of gold, where the wind has eroded caves into the soft sandstone. On pagodas closer at hand details of contorted ironstone ledges could be seen; so thin and protruding to such an extent they appear to be defying gravity to remain self-supporting.

As is Mother Nature's wont, on these rugged windswept formations she has decreed a delicate small flower shall grow; the Pagoda Daisy (*Leucochrysum graminifolium*) with its tiny bright yellow 'paper daisy' flowers. One was noted, as we walked up the hill, not in its usual dry environment on the rock formations but trying its luck on the roadside. We settled atop one of the pagodas for morning tea; some opting to shelter from the keen breeze, others taking in a prolonged view of the magnificent panorama.

We then made our way back along the Old Coach Road which wends its way down a shady gully protected by tall open forest; there was a lush ferny groundcover. Along the way we passed a spectacular wind-worn cave carved into the base of a tall angular cliff face and were entertained by the tinkling chimes of the bellbirds and by a host of other birdsong.

As the road swung to the left and descended more steeply a helicopter passed by shattering any thoughts that we were a million miles from anywhere and views opened up to farmland pastures and a homestead in the valley below. Soon we were at a junction of several tracks. We were back at the railway alignment coming from the Glow Worm Tunnel, another track drops down past the site of the Wolgan Valley Colliery to the Wolgan River, another leads on to the site of the Newnes Shale Oil Works. Libby gave a short description of the layout and we set off along the railbed toward No2 Tunnel.

It was shortly after this that a new pastime for this group came into being; it was called 'Where's Wayne?' We rarely misplace

walkers in this group but - Where's Wayne? As we headed toward the tunnel from this junction of tracks Wayne correctly informed me, as the Whip, that he was having a 'pit stop' and would catch up. I glanced back several times and wondered after a while - Where's Wayne? But I was not too concerned. On reaching an amazing cave above the track I decided to climb the bank and take some photographs while Wayne caught up, the track being plainly visible from the cave I would see if Wayne passed. After making my way back down the bank I could not see anyone on the track in either direction so - Where's Wayne? Perhaps I was so distracted by the beauty of this wonderfully sculptured cave that he had passed without notice.

Hurriedly I caught up with the tailenders in the group - "Where's Wayne? Has he passed you?" They weren't sure but did not think so. Someone made their way toward the front of the group and came to Wayne's better half, Cheryl; he was not near the head of the group so - Where's Wayne? Cheryl felt it would perhaps be a good idea if we could find him as he had recently retired and she had a long list of jobs for him. While the group waited I, and a couple of others, retraced our path to determine - Where's Wayne?

Soon I heard a series of plaintive calls of 'Hello' emanating from the track far below the railbed. A series of shouted exchanges determined that - There's Wayne! On returning to the track Wayne had inadvertently taken the track leading down to the Wolgan River instead of following the railbed; Wayne took the low road while we took the high road.

We were soon reunited and no harm was done; in fact a few of us got a little extra exercise. We were able to make light of this incident however it did highlight just how easy it was to become separated from the group; for my part I will not be moving too far ahead in future when someone pauses for a 'pit stop'.

As we continued along the track there were numerous reminders that trains once travelled this route. The occasional timber sleeper protruded from the ground, there were

remnants of coal along the line and substantial stone retaining walls and culverts were passed, and of course there were the sheer rock faces which had been shaved to allow the line to hug the cliffs.

The line was built of course to service the shale oil works at Newnes, named after Sir George Newnes, British Industrialist and Book Publisher who formed the Commonwealth Oil Corporation in 1905 to exploit the shale reserves in the Wolgan Valley. The line was commenced in April 1906 and remarkably, for the terrain traversed, completed in November 1907; in charge of its construction was Henry Deane.

Apart from his great contribution to railway design and construction, Henry Deane was passionately interested in natural history. He had a keen interest in the study of Eucalyptus trees and co-authored several papers on the subject with JH Maiden (later Administrator of the Sydney Botanic Gardens). Maiden named the *Eucalyptus deanei*, that icon of the Blue Gum Forest in recognition of Deane's work on the subject.

When we paused for lunch it was obvious that now, as always when sites such as this are abandoned, nature is reclaiming the land. Where coarse ballast, hardwood sleepers and double-headed steel rails once lay trees and shrubs are returning. (Those rails incidentally were pulled up, cut into suitable lengths and shipped to Europe for use as beach defences during World War Two.) Prominent among the trees now regrowing are the Grey Gums (*Eucalyptus punctata*) displaying orange and yellow patches of new bark where large flakes of old grey bark have been discarded. A small vine twines its way through an understory shrub, one of the Milk Vines, possibly the Scented Marsdenia (*Marsdenia suaveolens*) carrying umbels of minute five-petalled white flowers.

From our lunch spot we had spectacular views into the Wolgan Valley. The buildings of the Emirates Resort were visible in the foreground dwarfed by the imposing presence of what appears as a single monolith rising from the

valley floor, yet a feature which has been given two names – Donkey Mountain for the eastern end and Mount Wolgan for the western extent. In the background are the lines of vertical cliffs enclosing this verdant valley.

Having mentioned earlier that we rarely misplace walkers I should note that at this point we had indeed gained two. Jeanie and Allan Cupitt had by now joined us. They were unable to meet us for the start of the walk as they were organising repairs to their car which had a disagreement with a kangaroo the day before. They were not sure what was the most gruelling; the stoush with the roo or the encounter with the representative at the insurance company call centre.

After lunch we soon left the dry exposed environment of this section of track as we moved into the narrow gorge from which Tunnel Creek flows; an area of lush growth and moisture. Here there were King Ferns (*Todea barbara*) growing along the creek line with their broad fronds and stout trunks and clumps of Umbrella Ferns (*Sticherus flabellatus*), their parasols of delicate fronds arching over the edge of the gurgling creek. Suddenly we were in a forest of Soft Tree Ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) through which the gaping mouth of the No2 Tunnel could be seen; the entrance of the Glow Worm Tunnel.

Standing at the huge portal of this four hundred and twenty five metre long tunnel which curves away into the darkness one cannot help but have the greatest admiration for the workers who drove it through with only the most rudimentary tools, by modern standards, at their disposal. Today however we are here to see an amazingly delicate and I'm sure unimagined consequence of their labours of long ago - the tiny glimmering larvae of the Fungus Gnat.

Torches at the ready we made our way into the gloom. Looking back from a short distance inside the tunnel gave an enchanting vista of the tree ferns illuminated by daylight and framed by the dark arched portal; a very pleasant version of tunnel vision. Soon the light at the entrance diminished as we made

our way through the tunnel and finally disappeared altogether when we reached a point of the curve where no light was visible from either end; preferred Glow Worm space.

Torches off and standing quietly the tiny points of light began to appear, scattered at first but then the ceiling sparkled like the night sky and low on the wall clusters of light appeared. Presently a mass of pinpoints formed a wide band near the junction of the vertical wall and the curve of the ceiling, stretching off in each direction. What a privilege it is to see them in such quantities; a wondrous sight.

The Fungus Gnat (*Arachnocampa richardsae*) lays eggs onto the walls of the tunnel, they hatch into larvae (the Glow Worm) in about three weeks and immediately begin to emit light, they grow to about thirty millimetres in length over a few months. They then go into a pupa stage, which lasts about twelve days and the gnats emerge. The adult flies are rather short lived, the males last about four days, the females even less; I do hope they make the most of it.

It was with some reluctance that we left this delightful scene and made our way out of the tunnel to emerge into an exquisite fern glade and then made our way back to the cars. So ended a great day exploring the best endeavours of nature and of man, which make this such a unique area.

'The Shale Railways of NSW' contains photos of the interiors of the 1st class and 2nd class carriages used on the Wolgan Valley Railway. 1st class looks like a 'gentlemen's club', 2nd class has bare timber slab seats. The caption for 2nd class states "The second class carriage, the one that saw most service on the Wolgan Valley Railway." Odd how such a simple statement inadvertently says so much.

John

Cardy

OUR MAY WALK

Friday 17th May 2013

Open Forest and Heathlands, a Prominent Rock Formation with Expansive Views and the Upper Reaches of the Wollangambe

Lunch Rock and Wollangambe River near Bell

This is an easy to medium walk of about 10km on a combination of fire trails and mostly good tracks, though somewhat overgrown in places, through overarching understorey and enclosing heath. The 360 degree views from atop Lunch Rock are impressive.

Meet at 9.00am at the Bell Railway Station on the Sandham Road side of the line or at Merry Garth at 8.30am for an 8.40am departure.

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 21st June – Numantia Falls and Victory Track at Faulconbridge

Friday 19th July – Box Creek Falls and Morong Falls in the Kanangra Boyd National Park

Friday 16th August – Coxs Road and Lockyers Road at Mt York

BUSH CARE

Bush Care is held on the second Friday of each month from 9am to Noon. Any help would be very much appreciated.

10th May at Wynne Reserve

14th June at Waterfall Reserve

12th July at Founders Corner

Contact Libby or Beth Raines on 4756 2121 for details