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# Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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## BOWENS CREEK ROAD BILPIN TO MT IRVINE

## TOPIC

### OUR JANUARY WALK

**BOWENS CREEK ROAD –  
BILPIN to MOUNT IRVINE**

**Friday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2014**

**A complete waste of money!**

A magnificent tourist road, the scenery shall rival any road in the State.

It is a dangerous road, not suitable for tourist traffic. It is too narrow and there are steep unfenced drops in several places.

The Blue Mountains Shire and the Colo Shire cannot bear the expense for maintenance of this road.

The Department of Main Roads is not responsible for the maintenance of this road; it is a council road, not a main road.

(The Dept of Main Roads incidentally had no problem, three years later, in using a quarry along the road to source stone and sand for repair works on their Bells Line of Road, trucking it up the hill and causing damage to this road along the way.)

The statements paraphrased above, the first when a grant was announced in 1928, the second made at the opening ceremony on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> January 1935, the third by the NRMA a week later, the fourth and fifth within months, indicate a rather troubled birth for this road after a gestation period of thirty-



Summer in the Bush

eight years; indeed a portent of the troubled life ahead for this road.

Seventy-nine years and five days after its birth we gathered at the start of this now semi-retired road. Following yet another heroic effort by Libby in organising a rather long and complex car shuffle, eighteen walkers were at Bilpin while sufficient cars were at Mt Irvine to transport us back to the cars left at Bilpin. I heard someone ask Libby how she managed to achieve all this without the use of a computer – how indeed! (In Libby's

absence about six months ago I had trouble getting the group from Faulconbridge to Springwood; about two kilometres.) Many thanks to those who provided cars for the long shuffle - you know who you are; I'm still not sure if I am aware of everyone involved.

The cloud cover which earlier in the day gave some promise of protection from the sun had by now dissipated - unperturbed we set off below a clear summer sky, initially shaded by the overarching trees. The first kilometre or so of the road is still in use servicing several fine-looking properties; soon however we arrive at a barrier preventing the passage of vehicles other than, as tell-tale tracks reveal, trail bikes.

We pass the first of many inscriptions carved into the stone walls beside the road; the characters '1W' perhaps 150mm high, their meaning lost in time. Then we pass, on the

left, a small wind worn cave displaying a smooth domed ceiling decorated with concentric lines of ironstone banding. To our right a deep gully carries a tributary of Bowens Creek. Across this gully dark sandstone outcrops break the cover of foliage on the hillside provided by the eucalypt crowns. In the near distance the light green of the cleared grazing land on Mt Tootie contrasts with the grey/green of the forest cover.

Freda mentions that she has heard of a rather large cave on the right hand side lower than the road; we arrive at a large rock outcrop on that side and she and Libby investigate. They find the cave which provides a pleasant shady spot for morning tea. There are in fact two caves here, a small shallow cave and around the corner an elongated deeper cave. Both caves are decorated with the most amazing array of tafoni – pitting, hollowing and honeycombing formed by weathering processes and erosion of the sandstone, mainly on the ceiling but some also on the walls.

The larger cave also contains several hand stencils. There was some debate as to whether they were in fact of Aboriginal origin; a couple looked doubtful but two or three appeared to me to be genuine. There are many sites in this area containing axe grinding grooves; one, I realised too late for the group to visit, on a rock platform just across the road from these caves, so Aboriginal use of the caves was almost certain.

Also ‘decorating’ the walls here are marks left by later visitors. Deeply engraved into the rock were the initials RL and JF and 1936 AD - obviously wanted to make sure we did not assume they were here in the years BC. The same initials with dates varying from 1936 up to 1943 appeared elsewhere in the cave written in a red medium; frequent visitors apparently.

As we continue down into the gorge perhaps we should look at a little history of this road.

In 1897 Charles Robert Scrivener surveyed a route from Bilpin across Bowens Creek to Mt Irvine, blazing trees along the way to mark the course. Charles suggested that the area should

be declared a nature reserve however the government of the day declined. He then suggested to his son Charles, a student at Hawkesbury Agricultural College that he should apply to take up land at Mt Irvine. Young Charles and two of his fellow students, Basil Knight-Brown and Harold Morley took that advice and on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1897 an area of 1,000 acres was applied for and approved by the Lands Board. They developed their properties into productive farms and orchards but had difficulty in getting their produce to market via Mt Wilson and Bell; the route across Bowens Creek being only maintained as a foot and bridal track.

After much agitation and many submissions from the residents of Mt Irvine and of Mt Wilson, £6,000 was granted for the construction of a road from Bilpin to Mt Irvine on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1928; a condition attached was that 100 men be employed through the State Labour Exchange.

“A waste of money!” thundered Colo Shire Councillors.

It is not clear what, if anything, happened between July 1928 and 1933 when the State Government approved a sum of £22,000 (perhaps prodded into action by the Great Depression) and 100 unemployed men were brought onto site. Work started in August 1933 and construction was carried out from both the Mt Irvine and Bilpin ends; it is said a total of 300 to 400 men were employed during the term of construction.

The road was officially opened on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1935 with a ceremony held on the Bowens Creek Bridge. JG Lockley who wrote under the name of Redgum for the Sydney Morning Herald spoke of the beauty of the area and wrote an article on the opening of the road and the area in general. (Lockley Pylon was named for JG Lockley in recognition of his contribution to the saving of the Blue Gum Forest.)

An interesting face in the crowd at the opening ceremony was that of Francis Edward de Groot. Apparently he couldn’t resist being present when there was a ribbon to be cut; he

didn't bring his sword on this occasion. (de Groot used to often visit friends at Mt Irvine.)

Almost immediately maintenance of the road became a bone of contention; Blue Mountains Shire and Colo Shire both claimed they could not afford to carry out the necessary work. Colo Shire had very few ratepayers in the area and pointed out the main beneficiaries were residents of the Blue Mountains Shire. Both the Lands Department and the Department of Main Roads insisted the road was a council responsibility. This proved to be a very large bone of contention; indeed it is still being gnawed at today. I assume there was no pun intended when in the 1980s it was said that this road had gradually been going downhill.

And so we continue our journey through history as we descend the first of the three legs of the zig zag leading to the creek. Here, due to seepage, the cliffs on the left of the road are quite moist. In this environment the Forked Sundew (*Drosera binata*) thrives, at this time displaying a host of pure white five-petalled flowers supported on long thin stems. The forked leaves of this carnivorous plant are curled at their ends and are covered in fine glandular hairs which produce a tacky fluid; sticky fingers reaching out to snare unwary insects.

Soon we reach the first of the landslips, about half the road width having collapsed due to the torrential downpours twelve months ago. The damage of course being exacerbated by years of neglect with culverts, gutters and under-road drains not being cleared. There was worse to come.

We pass two spectacular rock overhangs, the first containing a plethora of thin golden wafers of sandstone, the second having a concave rear wall in various tones of yellow, gold, ochre, buff and brown. At the next hairpin bend there is a view down to Bowens Creek where there are quite distinct lines of demarcation between the light green fingers of rainforest reaching up the side gullies and the canopy of the drier eucalypt forest occupying the higher ground.

Longitudinal ruts now run down this middle leg of the zig zag, soon becoming deep furrows, then even deeper channels. We then reach a major landslide commencing above the road, taking out the road as it coursed down to also take out the road at the next leg and continue toward the creek; a giant scar on the landscape.

At the next hairpin a side road extends away from the bend, perhaps to the site of the quarry visited by DMR trucks to cart stone back up to Bells Line of Road along this road in which they had no interest in helping to maintain. It is amazing just how compartmentalised the responsibilities and obligations of organisations become - no room at all for the common good.

Heading down the final leg of the zig zag we pass the lower end of the large landslide, the view up and down this huge rubble-filled cleft indicates just what can be wrought by the wrath of nature.

The environment begins to change now as we enter the domain of the Coachwoods (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*), Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*) and Cedar Wattles (*Acacia elata*); the cool of the rainforest is most welcome.

Soon we are at the barricaded Bowens Creek Bridge, the barricade however has been breached and we walk across the deck. It is amazing to see how high the floodwaters had been and the amount of debris which has been deposited on and adjacent to the bridge.

We divert into the shade of the rainforest upstream of the bridge where we settle down for lunch; some choose a shady spot above the creek while others elect to dangle bare feet in the cooling waters. There were several examples of the Pepperbush (*Tasmannia insipida*) here displaying copious quantities of small ovate berries, at this time still in a green state.

Rested, refreshed and refuelled with Libby's bushwalker cake we are ready to tackle the Mt Irvine side of Bowens Creek Road; it is all uphill from here. We pause near the site of one

of the caves in and near which the work gangs camped; a couple of us fought our way through Lawyer Vine (*Smilax australis*) and thick ferns to inspect the cave and the steps cut into a rock outcrop for access.

As we climb further along the road we pass the marks left by members of the work gangs. Names and dates carved into the rock faces, assertions that they were here and made a contribution.

On gaining elevation the view back across the creek revealed the extent of the scar caused by the larger landslide along with several other smaller landslip blemishes on the landscape.

We were now walking in rather open country, exposed to the hot sun. Nearing our destination Libby suggested it might be wise to bring a couple of cars down to pick up those who wished to call it a day. Peter and Mick volunteered to do the honours and we were all soon at the cars, thus ending a walk through history where both the results of man's endeavours and of the forces of nature were on display. We had a very welcome afternoon tea before making our way back to our starting point at Bilpin.

While some headed for home a few of us called into the Apple Bar to slake our thirst with an icy cold apple cider; a splendidly appropriate way to end a day walking in 'The Apple Country'.

John Cardy

## OUR FEBRUARY WALK

**Friday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2014**

**Grand Vistas and Enchanting Rainforest, Spectacular Cliffs and Lots of Waterfalls**

**Valley of the Waters, National Pass, Slacks Stairs, Wentworth Pass**

**NB:** This is a change to our schedule. The Grand Canyon Track will be closed from 20<sup>th</sup> February for some months for refurbishment work.

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The group's only previous venture along Wentworth Pass was in July 2010. We will be

**descending** Slacks Stairs which consist of a series of nine steep steel ladders/stairs, all with handrails and most having safety cages, from the National Pass to the valley floor. Then we will follow Wentworth Pass back to the Valley of the Waters. This is rated as a hard walk but as it is only around 5km we will be able to do it at a fairly relaxed pace. There is a descent and thus an ascent of 400 vertical metres around this circuit – only 50 metres more than the planned Grand Canyon walk. The wonderful scenery along the way and the touch of adventure make this walk well worthwhile.

**Meet at the Conservation Hut Car Park at the end of Fletcher Street in Wentworth Falls at 9.00am or at Merry Garth for an 8.00am departure.**

Bring morning tea and lunch only and plenty of water. **Freda has very kindly invited us all back to her nearby home for a scrumptious Devonshire Tea and insists you don't need to bring a thing.**

**Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 (after 7pm) or Helen and John Cardy on 9871 3661 or on mobile 0418 646 487.**

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## FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2014 – Blue Gum Forest – Perrys Lookdown to Govetts Leap Lookout

**Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> April** – Wollangambe River and Joes Canyon (**NB: 18<sup>th</sup> is Good Friday**)

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## 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.

**14<sup>th</sup> February** – Meet at Hay Lane, Sloan Reserve

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**Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 for details**

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