
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

Volume 26 Issue 3

March 2016

MERMAIDS CAVE AND COACHWOOD GLEN

TOPIC

OUR FEBRUARY WALK

**MERMAIDS CAVE, the
MYSTERY HOLES and
COACHWOOD GLEN at
BLACKHEATH**

Friday 19th February 2016

Mermaids, goblins and elves, not the first things that come to mind when you set out for a walk in the Blue Mountains; why not tag along and share in a touch of magic and mystery as we undertake two short walks in the Blackheath area.

Sixteen walkers have gathered in Stavelly Parade in perfect conditions under a clear blue sky, so do join us as we set off along a recently established section of the Great Blue Mountains Trail, a shared walking and cycling route between Katoomba and Blackheath. (It is planned to eventually develop the trail from east to west across the Blue Mountains ridgeline.)

A short distance along this trail we arrive at an unmarked track which drops down the steep bank beside the trail, a short length of rope is used to provide a secure support on the first few metres of this track; the loose surface is quite slippery. The track now descends at a gentler grade, zig zagging through open woodland and across rock outcrops. We arrive at a rock platform carrying the remnants of



Autumn in the Bush

foundations for a tubular steel structure, part of which lies on the platform; its original purpose open to conjecture. Cut into the surface of the rock platform is a faint surveyor's traditional broad arrow indicating north. This brings the latent astronomer in some among us to the fore, those having analogue watches mainly. The 12 position on the watch is pointed to the sun, the angle between the 12 and the hour hand is bisected, suitable adjustment is made for daylight saving and the position of north is thus scientifically

determined. This is to check that the surveyor who carved the broad arrow got it right; you will, I am sure, be surprised to learn that he did.

We continue down the track and the tiny bright pink flowers of a Narrow Leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium lineare*) are sighted, held aloft on a slender red stem rising from a small basal tuft of dense tiny leaves; flowers and tuft a delight to the eye. The track is lined with Old Mans Whiskers or Curly Sedge (*Caustis flexuosa*); the sun glints off its fine glossy-green stems as they twist and curl through the ground cover.

A little further on we come across a lizard in the middle of the track basking in the sun. It is totally unperturbed by our presence, obviously reluctant to have its sunbaking disturbed. Its black body colour carrying blotches of pink, cream and yellow with cream bands on its tail

indicate this is a Blotched Blue-tongue Lizard (*Tiliqua nigrolutea*); the species name comes from its body colours: nigro = black, lutea = yellow. Blue-tongues are the largest members of the skink family.

Presently the track leads us down a short steep slope and delivers us to a spot beside a hairpin bend on the Megalong Road; a sign here indicates we are at the start of the Mermaids Cave Walk. Yes, yes, it's true, we could have driven to this spot, but we all much preferred the walk ----- didn't we?

We head down this track, constructed in the early 1880s. Steps, now well worn, hewn into rock outcrops and platforms, lead us to the top of a long set of stone stairs which plunge down a narrow opening between two sheer cliffs. High above us, at the top of this opening, there are two chock stones, one would hope securely jammed, bridging the gap between the two cliffs.

We proceed down the stairs, the temperature becoming decidedly cooler as we descend, and are led into another world. I note that those who have not been here previously stop at the entrance, entranced by the sublime beauty of this cavernous glen.

A horseshoe shaped cliff forms the head of the glen where a small waterfall drops over the cliff edge; a ribbon of water dropping past an intermediate ledge where it ruffles the fronds of a large fern before crashing onto a horizontal platform. It then spreads across a sloping rock face to continue its journey to the pebble-bedded pool at its base. The water then travels underground for several metres before emerging into another small pool to continue down the creek line of moss-encrusted rocks.

Huge moss and lichen shrouded boulders lie on the floor and sloping sides of this glen. An ancient Coachwood (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*) rises from one such monolith, its roots moulded onto the sides of the boulder and disappearing into the soil, its hollowed trunk adding a sense of mystery. There are a few coins scattered in that hollow; the enchanting atmosphere has obviously prompted someone to make this their wishing tree.

On the other side of the creek line a steep footpad leads up to an imposing rock ledge high above the glen; soon Ray Nesci is seen exploring this eyrie, he presently reappears from downstream of the creek having found an alternative exit from the ledge.

We now pause in this entrancing place for morning tea.

This area, in the early 1880s, was initially known as Mermaids Glen, it was however shown on an 1882 map, in a tourist guide to the Blue Mountains, as Mermaids Cave and that soon became the only name used. Why the term 'Mermaid' was applied to a feature so far from the sea is puzzling, perhaps the intoxicating influence of those beautiful Sirens of the Sea is further reaching and more captivating than imagined.

Jan Northam, who has an infectious enthusiasm for things of beauty in the bush, points out a couple of tiny fungi near where she is sitting. One, tiny orange fingers rising from a rock crevice, is a Flame Fungus (*Clavulinopsis miniata*). The other, an almost translucent pale-pink multi-branched fungus, is probably a Coral Fungus (*Ramaria sp.*)

We now follow the path which leads down beside the creek; rustic stone steps take us past a pyramidal boulder upon which two young Dragons Tails (*Drachophyllum secundum*) grow, appearing as miniature trees with weeping branches. We are led through a grove of towering Coachwoods, smooth lichen-blotched trunks reaching for the sky, their canopies blocking out the light to such an extent that there is virtually no understorey nor groundcover. More stone steps lead us down beside a vertical moss-covered wall to a small stream flowing across a pebble bed; these are the waters of Pulpit Hill Creek flowing on to meet the Coxs River about twelve kilometres downstream. We spend some time taking in the grandeur of this special place.

It is now time to leave Mermaids Cave. I pause to take in the beauty of our surroundings. The little gurgling stream, the gnarled and hollowed tree trunks, the splendid sight and sound of the waterfall, the

overpowering greenness of the mossy boulders; this enchanting place does have an intoxicating, spellbinding effect. What was that splashing sound? Could it have been a merm -----?

Back in the real world we now follow a track which has been used for mountain biking, it contours along the side of a gully and leads us to a footbridge crossing a small creek; this creek feeds the waterfall in Mermaids Cave. We now clamber up the face of a couple of rock outcrops and follow the zig zagging track, which has a concave surface due to its use by mountain bikers, and climb steeply back toward the ridge. We pass a timber jump ramp used by the mountain bike riders to launch themselves into the air, that is those who are brave, or foolhardy enough.

Back on the ridgeline we arrive at a tee junction, at this point there is a Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*) beside the track displaying several young candles; beautiful light-green cylinders carrying a spiralled pattern of buds ready to burst forth with a plethora of tiny individual golden flowers.

We turn right at this point and head toward the first of the 'Mystery Holes' we are to see today. There are five of these 'convict pits' in the Blackheath area, although they are commonly referred to as convict pits there is no definitive evidence justifying that name.

Despite extensive research by local historians neither the age nor the purpose of these pits has been determined. They are all very well constructed with dimensions varying from 2.1 metres by 2.6 metres to 3.2 metres by 4.1 metres and up to 6 metres deep. These five pits are close to the route of Coxs Road giving rise to the convict connection; either during its original construction in 1814 or later maintenance and upgrading work during the 1830s and 1840s by convict labour. However, there are a further two pits near Hourn Point south of Mt Piddington, far away from any early road construction, and another two pits south of Medlow Bath.

Suggested uses for the pits include convict accommodation, convict punishment, food

storage, water storage, meat storage, gunpowder storage; none of these have been proven, some have been dismissed. Their existence remains a mystery, and perhaps it is not a bad thing to have a little mystery in life.

Having visited the second mesh-covered pit nearby we make our way back to Stavely Parade via the Grand Blue Mountains Trail, retrieving our rope along the way. We then continue on to the Paul Harris Memorial Lookout at the end of Stavely Parade where we pause for lunch. This lookout, which affords magnificent views into the Megalong Valley, was named in 1955 to honour the founder, in 1905, of Rotary International in America. (Previously known as Greaves Outlook after Councillor John Greaves who owned a cottage in Stavely Parade.)

Libby now organises a car pool and we head down Megalong Road, a touch of *déjà vu* as we pass the entrance to Mermaids Cave, (the walk was much more interesting wasn't it) and arrive at Coachwood Glen. We set off along the nature trail, developed by the Blackheath Rotary Club between 1965 and 1968, which leads us down into Tree Fern Dell, an enchanting shady area beside Pulpit Hill Creek.

At the creek crossing we enter a charming fairyland. The water gurgles down little cascades, slips over minuscule waterfalls, glides across smooth black boulders, flows over a bed of water-worn pebbles and around boulders clad in mosses and tiny ferns. On the far bank stands an ancient forest giant, lichen-encrusted trunk and exposed roots creating diminutive nooks and crannies; ideal dwellings for elves and goblins. Atop the mossy boulders in the creek line stands an exquisite array of small stone cairns, twelve or more artistic creations, some appearing to defy gravity in their quirky design. These fascinating structures are surely the work of the little people; Leprechauns must reside in this magical place, to be sure – to be sure.

The track now leads us away from the creek and up to the Mountain Ash Slope into a more open landscape; here Blue Mountain Ash

(*Eucalyptus oreades*) dominate, strips of discarded bark hang from their branches.

Soon we drop back down to the creek where tiny waterfalls feed reflective pools surrounded by mossy boulders. Lying in the water are several angular blocks of chert, whitish stone with a reddish-brown coating on some edges. Chert is a fine-grained silica used by Aboriginal people for cutting and scraping tools as it carries a sharp edge when fractured; we European settlers crushed it and used it as road base, for example on Berghofers Pass where the remains of a quarry can be seen.

We are now back in the Coachwood Forest and soon encounter Water Vine Corner where there are magnificent examples of the Five-leaf Water Vine (*Cissus hypoglauca*). One thick vine creates a tight spiral as it climbs up the trunk of its host tree, then forms a loop about three metres above ground before continuing into the canopy. Another twists and turns forming loops in mid air above our heads. As we make our way back to the cars the sun illuminates a group of Soft Tree Ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) on the hillside.

We then drive back along Megalong Road; along one of the prettiest stretches of road in these mountains. With cliff face on one side and rainforest on the other, overarching trees form a dimly lit winding tunnel lined by tree and ground ferns. What an appropriately exquisite avenue to lead us away from the magical area we have just explored. Our walks today have certainly added strength to that old adage: "Good things come in small packages"

John Cardy

OUR MARCH WALK

Friday 18th March 2016

Panoramic Vistas, Enclosed Rainforest, Tinkling Bellbirds, Spectacular Cliff Faces and a Craggy Citadel

The Golden Stairs, Ruined Castle, Giant Landslide and Furber Stairs at Katoomba

The group last undertook this walk in 2010; our 2015 attempt was abandoned due to heavy rain during the week preceding. This is a

spectacular yet challenging walk of approximately 12 km with a descent and ascent of about 370 metres with lots of steps. The final ascent however can be made by riding the Scenic Railway if you wish, rather than tackling the Furber Stairs, **but be aware the cost of that ride is now \$16** so, as Joe the Gadget Man used to say: "Bring your money with you".

Meet at the car park in Katoomba Falls Reserve (opposite Katoomba Falls Kiosk and next door to the Caravan Park on Katoomba Falls Road) at 9.30am or at Merry Garth for an 8.30am departure.

There will be a car shuffle to the top of the Golden Stairs on Narrow Neck along the Glenraphael Drive, (refurbished just last year).

Bring morning tea, lunch, 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.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 15th April 2016 – Lions Head Ridge and Lions Head on the Kings Tableland

Friday 20th May 2016 – Leura Cascades, Gordon Falls and Pool of Siloam

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.

11th March – meet at Hay Lane (Sloan Reserve)

8th April - meet at Hay Lane (Sloan Reserve)

Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 for details