
Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Bushwalking Group

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RUINS WALKING TRACK AT NEWNES

TOPIC

OUR JULY WALK

**THE RUINS WALKING
TRACK and
PHILOSOPHERS WALK at
NEWNES in the WOLLEMI
NATIONAL PARK**

Friday 15th July 2016

What, you may well ask, does Sherlock Holmes, the discovery of argon, xenon and other noble gases, the Durham area in Northern England and majestic Mountain Blue Gums have to do with a walk in the Wolgan Valley west of Lithgow. Continue on dear reader and these associations, some a little tenuous perhaps, will be revealed.

Bitterly cold windy conditions prevailed in the mountains, and indeed in Sydney, two days before this walk. When fifteen walkers gathered in the car park of the Lithgow Valley Shopping Centre on the Friday morning there was not a cloud in the sky nor a breath of wind, just an invigorating frosty chill in the air; the spirits were indeed smiling upon us. In her usual efficient manner Libby organised a vehicle rationalisation and we set off on the fifty odd kilometre drive to Newnes; the last nine kilometres proved to be decidedly 'odd'.

It is a very pleasant drive to the Wolgan Valley with views across open fields to wooded slopes climbing up to rocky crags. Dropping steeply down from Wolgan Gap we were soon surrounded by towering cliffs; the



Winter in the Bush

multi-hued sandstone illuminated by the morning sun. Proceeding along the valley floor we were entertained by the vast number of kangaroos grazing in the paddocks; one large group was bounding into the distance, spooked by a surprisingly large dog. (I did say in the notice for this walk we may see a roo or two, I was certainly not expecting this number.)

At the causeway over Barton Creek, a very short distance past the gateway to the Emirates Resort, not surprisingly, the sealed road

ends; we now have about nine kilometres left to travel. This unsealed section of the road runs closely parallel to the Wolgan River. Helen and I were at Newnes with a National Parks Association group nine months ago and the road was then in excellent condition. Not today! It is a nine-kilometre moonscape of ruts and potholes, nay craters, deep enough to get lost in; a very slow pace and careful navigation back and forth across the road delivered us safely to Newnes.

We decided to indulge in morning tea before setting off on our walk. Sunny spots were sought, near the causeway across the Wolgan River, in which to sit; even the road was not considered out of bounds.

Concrete stepping-stones then led us across the river as we set off on our first walk for the day. A slight rise took us to a road which runs along the alignment of the per-way for the

railway line which was built between the main western line near Clarence (then known as Dargans) and Newnes to service the oil shale processing works, the ruins of which we were about to explore. A short distance along this road we came to what was the Newnes passenger platform, its present cut stone facing replaced the original timber facing in 1918; the stone being retrieved from the then abandoned coke ovens. The platform once had a waiting room and post office; a footbridge behind the platform led across the river to the residential and shopping area of the village.

Standing beside this now bare structure one could easily imagine ghosts of the past, families waiting for the train to convey them to Newnes Junction on the main line; a trip of just thirty-one miles (fifty kilometres) which took three hours.

The railway, designed and constructed under the supervision of Chief Engineer Henry Deane, was completed in less than eighteen months through almost impossible terrain. Henry Deane had a keen interest in natural history, especially the study of the eucalyptus genus. Here is the link to the Mountain Blue Gum of Blue Gum Forest fame; it was named for Henry Deane in recognition of his work on the genus, *Eucalyptus deanei*.

We continued along the per-way accompanied by the soothing sounds of the Wolgan River rippling across pebble beds and tumbling over rocky cascades; there are several sheltered campsites here. We were now walking in tall open forest, a regrowth forest from the early 1900s when insurance underwriters insisted all trees within approximately one mile of the oil shale works centre be felled.

A short distance past the car park and a locked gate we diverted to the right and the track took us up a gentle incline to the remains of the coke oven bench. What a remarkable sight these ovens are, the domed structure of the beehive kilns, originally hidden within a rectangular bench are now exposed; a long line of back to back brick igloos. The skill and workmanship of the bricklayers was outstanding. Coal, which was mined higher up

the hill, was fed into the kilns via a circular opening in the top of each dome. After three days of firing the resulting coke was quenched and extracted through the arched entrance tunnels of the igloos. The coke was used to fire the Newnes boiler plant and the shale retorts; it was also sold to the Hoskins Steel Works in Lithgow for their blast furnace and used in the copper smelter at Cobar.

The mining and industrial complex here was developed by the Commonwealth Oil Corporation Ltd, a company registered in England in December 1905, its chairman was Sir George Newnes. Thus an area in a valley on the western side of the Blue Mountains and its railway connection to the main line became known as Newnes and Newnes Junction after a successful publisher and editor in England. Among many others he published *The Strand Magazine* (1891) in which Arthur Conan Doyle was first able to have published his Sherlock Holmes mystery series; another odd association with this walk.

We then moved on, passing below the water reservoir which held water pumped from the river and then gravity fed to various works sites, to the Big Wall; a fifteen metre high retaining wall. This substantial wall was built from bricks manufactured in the brickworks on the opposite side of the river, as were most masonry structures here. Bricks from this brickworks were also used in several Lithgow buildings, including the RSL Club.

We then dropped down to the paraffin sheds where again the skill of the bricklayers was on show in the tall narrow arched windows in thick brick walls. Paraffin was processed here which was then used on site to manufacture candles.

Continuing on we passed a pipe about 200 mm in diameter rising from the ground and making a right angle turn. Again the craftsmanship of the workers was on show, the right angle turn was constructed with four riveted segments; it gave the appearance of a knee joint on an ancient suit of armour.

Near here, unusually for this time of day, a large wombat was sighted foraging for food at

the base of a tree, it was unperturbed by our presence until we got quite close; it then trundled slowly down the slope. I assume it was a Common Wombat yet many commented on its rather long nose.

Down on the lowest level of the site, closer to the river, it was more sheltered and moist. Here ferns and mosses grew among the brick ruins. In one area, moss growing on several brick ledges of varying height formed a series of green terraces leading up to a vertical brick wall; a rather attractive sight.

We had now reached the end of the Ruins Walking Track, a track which led us through the remains of an extensive refining complex which operated for about twenty-five years from 1906 producing lubricating oils, kerosene, fuel oils, naphtha, paraffin and petrol from rich deposits of oil shale. And of course, in its early days, up to 1911, large volumes of coke were produced. In its heyday more than two thousand people lived at Newnes.

And now do I hear you ask, what has the Durham area in northern England and the discovery of noble gases have to do with this walk? They relate to co-proponents of Sir George Newnes in the establishment of the Commonwealth Oil Corporation Ltd in 1905. Sir James Joicey was the owner of three collieries in the rich Durham coalfields; he was reputed, at the time, as being the largest coal owner in the world. Scientist Sir William Ramsay was credited with the discovery of argon, krypton, neon and xenon and was awarded the 1904 Nobel Prize for Chemistry for his efforts. Sir George Newnes's association with these two gentlemen probably explains why a book publisher became involved with the mining industry.

We retraced our steps back to the causeway, recrossed the river on the stepping-stones and drove the short distance to Little Capertee camping area where we paused for lunch.

What a spectacular place to dine. A grassy cleared area surrounded by the imposing cliffs of Mystery Mountain, Old Baldy, Little Capertee Creek Cliffs, Hotel Hill and

Eldorado Walls, all towering up to three hundred metres above us. Eastern Grey Kangaroos grazed on the lush grass, another wombat, breaking the rules, was foraging in the middle of the day.

Of course as soon as food was brought into the open birds appeared from out of the blue. The usual currawongs, a couple of magpies and some black birds with red eyes; Graham Tribe enquired as to what these birds were. From a distant view I suggested they may be choughs but to confirm you need to check if they expose white on their wings when in flight. To get a bird to fly you simply chase it don't you, so Graham chased. Choughs however, like apostlebirds, prefer spending a lot of time on the ground foraging and socialising with their close knit families. The chough was reluctant to fly and simply ran along the ground, Graham persisted, it eventually took flight, exposing white beneath its wings; it was indeed a White-winged Chough.

Next on the list was the Philosophers Walk, a circular walk below the cliffs of Old Baldy on the northern side of the river which Helen and I discovered on our stay here nine months ago. We dropped down to a small dry creek on the edge of the camping area and climbed the steep opposite bank past a large wombat burrow. The track then led us across the river flat to an old road formation which took us over a small rise. There is no signage to the Philosophers Track and it is an indistinct path. I turned off at a point which led us up past the ruins of the Managers House - so far so good.

I then followed a path which contoured around the hillside and began to climb a small knoll, it was about then I suspected this was not the right track but felt if we climbed to the knoll we could pick up the correct path; that was not to be. We continued on, contouring around the steep slope into a gully. We climbed this gully in the hope of getting back on track but again there was no sign of the Philosophers Walk. As time was now becoming an issue we climbed back down the gully and zig zagged down the slope back onto the road formation. I was disappointed in not finding the track as it leads past some rather interesting rock

formations and a high knoll from which there are great views of the summit of Mystery Mountain and back to the Newnes Hotel, perhaps we can return one day (after checking the road conditions). Nonetheless the area we explored was through some very pleasant bushland which contrasted nicely with our first walk on the Ruins Track.

Back at the camping area we indulged in the usual after walk cup of tea and sang a rousing happy birthday for Libby; it was her birthday the day before.

With the lowering sun beginning to cast longer shadows across the camping ground it was time to leave this magnificent spot. Having once more negotiated our way over the nine kilometres of moonscape and reached the sealed road it was a very pleasant drive back through the valley. Kangaroos were still present in large numbers and care was needed with some encroaching onto the road verges. One mob appeared to be guarded by a very large buck standing tall watching our progress, nearby a new mother was showing off a young joey in her pouch, several wombats were seen in the fields; quintessential Australian scenes.

So ended another great day exploring a spectacular area in perfect walking conditions. The nine kilometres of potholes we could have done without and not finding the Philosophers Walk was a disappointment but I guess one just has to be philosophical about that.

John Cardy

OUR AUGUST WALK

Friday 19th August 2016

Open Woodland, Rocky Craggs, Expansive Heath and Spectacular Views

Ikara Ridge to Ikara Head, off Victoria Falls Road at Mount Victoria

The group last undertook this walk in 2010. Our November 2015 attempt to this exposed area was abandoned due to heatwave conditions; conditions we certainly will not encounter in August. This is a relatively easy walk of about 8 kms return with great views into the Upper Grose Gorge.

Meet at Merry Garth for a 9.00am departure or at Victoria Falls Road just off the Great Western Highway, about 1km east of Mt Victoria, at 9.30am. A vehicle rationalisation will be made at the Victoria Falls Road meeting point.

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 0400 444 966. Note Helen's new mobile number.

FUTURE WALKS (Tentative schedule)

Friday 16th September 2016 – Deep Pass on the Newnes Plateau

Friday 21st October 2016 – Mount Hay and The Butterbox

Friday 18th November 2016 - Leura Cascades, Leura Forest, Furber Steps

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.

12th August – meet at Queens Avenue / Wynnes Rocks Road

9th September – meet at Queens Avenue / Wynnes Rocks Road

Contact Libby Raines on 4756 2121 for details