

Camping trip to Bendethera 1987

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From time to time, the Moruya Historical Society organises day excursions to historic sites in the area. On October 10/11 the Society broke new ground with an overnight camp near the site of the old homestead at Bendethera.

Bendethera is best known for its limestone caves. The farms which were carved out of the river flats below the caves are now absorbed into the Deua National Park, and soon there will be little to show that they existed.

Brian Turnbull, a founder member of the society, arranged that his friend of

many years, Kerry Reid, would lead the expedition. Kerry has a knowledge of the area which goes back to boyhood and years of working at and around Bendethera. Throughout the weekend, he was kept busy, answering members' questions about the life led by the pioneering families, particularly the Georges and the Rankins, who opened up this area.

These early families would have been amazed at the mountain of equipment and provisions which grew up at the Museum rendezvous on Saturday morning. Tents, camp beds, sleeping bags, gaslights, barbecues, folding tables and chairs, wine casks, packed Eskies, vegetables - it was clear that this expedition was prepared for any contingency.

Peter Fenson from Canberra and Laurie and Rose King had been given honorary temporary membership in return for four wheel drive transport. Kerry provided a Landcruiser and trailer and Reg Endall his truck. The convoy took the Sugarloaf road to the point where the steep drop down to the Deua makes four wheel drive essential - at least to those who want to bring their vehicles out again. Here the truck was parked, and fifteen people and the mass of gear packed into the remaining three vehicles. It is at about this point that the old bridle path from Bendethera to Moruya crosses the fire trail access.

Cattle, pigs and turkeys were driven up the precipitous mountain side, eventually to be shipped to Sydney. Turkeys were persuaded along the path by a trail of corn dribbled from a sack carried by the leading horse.

The Bendethera flats are now a mass of tussocks, with the grass between cropped short by kangaroos and wallabies. Black stem wattle creeps in on all sides. The homestead is completely gone, its site marked by white acacias and oaks. Four stumpy corner posts and broken rails mark the grave of one of the George children. A stone oven is backed into a hillside and there are still a few straggling fruit trees. Over the rise, one can still see the old race course. There is a well defined irrigation trench, originally taking water from Con Creek. Men and women worked hard to make a comprehensive farm here in what is surely be one of the most beautiful valleys in the State.

Our camp was established beneath large she-oaks beside the river. Three goannas arrived to establish claims to

any food left lying around. Most people went on a short expedition upstream. Several ladies, including our 75 year old honorary life member, went skinny dipping, all gentlemen (or, at any rate, all true gentlemen) having left the vicinity. Kerry told fishermen's tales of fifteen pound perch, caught in that very stretch of the river. Reg and Laurie cast lines to test the present stock, but fortunately were not dependant on success for their evening meal. Ann Norfolk and Andy McKenzie had volunteered to look after catering.

Pre dinner drinks, served with pate and nuts led on to chilli con carne with potatoes baked in the camp fire, served with sour cream and salad. There was discussion as to whether a tea bag dunked into water boiled over a camp fire really counts as billy tea. Laurie and Rose had brought along a guitar and two fine voices to lead the singing. A wind rustled through the casuarinas and the river bubbled in the background. No one missed TV.

Reg appeared out of the darkness, dripping wet from head to toe. He had gone up stream to retrieve a fishing rod and had taken one too many steps at the top of a fifteen foot cliff and ended up to the deep pool below at the bottom of which now rested the expensive rechargeable torch borrowed from a neighbour. It is a sad reflection on human nature that the assembled company found this episode very humorous - Reg had plenty of offers of dry clothing, but of sympathy he had none.

Late in the evening, half the company took off in the four wheel drives to see what animals showed up in the headlamp beams. The flats were alive with kangaroos and wallabies, and five wombats were also spotted.

Sunday morning's reveille at 5.30 was the sound of firewood being split for early breakfast. A low cloud hid the mountain tops and sprinkled a fine misty rain which soon cleared. Cholesterol laden bacon, sausages and eggs were heaped on fried bread and Andy fried up the balance of the baked potatoes to produce his own version of American hash browns. The unused chilli con carne was placed carefully beneath a bush as a new culinary experience for the goannas.

The river, in the grey morning, looked considerably less inviting than it had when it seduced the ladies on the previous afternoon. Clive Norfolk was the hero of the hour as he stripped to his Y-fronts and, spurred on by comments of doubtful humour from the onlookers, dived to retrieve Reg's neighbour's torch which lay in six feet of water below the cliff which has now been named "Endall's Leap". The torch was not working.

At 8am, the expedition set off for Bendethera Cave. This involves a four kilometre walk and frequent crossings of Con Creek, ending in a very steep climb to the cave entrance. Three lyre birds appeared. The Bendethera wattle *Covenii* covers whole hillsides in the limestone area.

Bendethera caves were a source of income to the George family. In 1980 Benjamin George received a salary of £50 per year to look after them. Early visitors of that time seem to have been more interested in the prospects of silver mining than in the preservation of the area. The main cave shows signs of that indifference with almost all the accessible stalagmites and stalactites broken off. Nevertheless, it is an exciting and beautiful cave - 250 metres deep, up to 30 metres high and up to 25 metres wide.

Not all members made it to the far extremity. As Kerry pointed out, it is sensible not to go beyond the limits of confidence, and the journey is not easy. Bats droppings on steep gradients make a poor foothold. At the steepest place a wire rope on steel stanchions stops short of the top, and Kerry brought along a rope to bridge that gap. Initials and dates going back seventy years were written in bats droppings on the extreme wall, apparently as permanent as spray paint.

As the party returned to the main cave entrance, pulses racing, bottoms, elbows and knees a rich bat brown, it met the Whiffin family, including four small children, age three and upwards, all set to ascend. Later these delightful children caught up with our expedition over lunch and it was clear that they had skipped around like gazelles over slopes which had set older hearts thumping.

Nevertheless, there was great sense of achievement as the final meal of rissoles and salad preceded the formal thanks to the organisers and to Kerry by President Tom Grace. On the long drive home we concluded it had been a weekend of interest, laughter and friendship as well as an historical first for the Historical Society.

Answers to the crossword

Across: 1. Evans Street. 9. Elm. 10. Andromeda. 11. Races. 13. Eyebrow. 14. Annual. 16. Oyster. 18. Battery. 19. Medal. 20. Rebuttons. 21. Out. 22. Red Rose Café.

Down: 2. Vim. 3. Nears. 4. Sodden. 5. Rookery. 6. Execrated. 7. Henry Albert. 8. Hayward Lott. 12. Constable. 15. Abetter. 17. Pylons. 19. Music. 21. Off.