

Heysen Trail Meanders

By John Lindner, Bendigo Bushwalkers

Over the last 3 years, a small group of walkers from Bendigo - members of the Bendigo Bushwalkers and the Bendigo Outdoor Club - have embarked on the project of completing the Heysen Trail at a rate of about 200km a year.

Of course the recent publication of the two guidebooks has assisted this quite substantially, but we still find the old strip maps useful. Nevertheless, the planning of the daily walking stages was quite complex, and a little hit and miss when you have no prior knowledge of the country.

The lure of the long distance walk - I first saw the Heysen Trail when we were driving the Brachina Gorge Geological Trail in July, 2004. This 20 kilometre transect through 150 million years of depositional sequences is geological interpretation at its most exciting.

Just south of Trezona campground, in the flat country where Brachina and Elatine Creeks join, marker number 4 for the trail describes the 600 million year old siltstones and shales of the Brachina Formation. In taking a short walk to a site a little south of the road, you find yourself on a narrow foot track. This track wanders off tantalizingly, and you suddenly realise you are on the threshold of what could be a great adventure: where has it come from and where is it going? At that moment the germ of the idea was hatched, and three years later we have come half way to Cape Jervis from Parachilna Gorge.

In July 2005 we walked from Hawker to Parachilna Gorge (114km, 11 days), with a car meeting us at intervals to resupply food and water. However rendezvousing with a vehicle has its logistical problems and it changes the "feel" of long pack-carrying walk in unexpected ways. This section has valleys full of Callitris pine, grand River Red Gums on the creeks, the

majestic summit of Mount Aleck (not climbed yet), the ramparts of Wilpena Pound on the climb to Black Gap and then more wide valleys to Trezona and Aroona before the final leg in the shadow of the Heysen Range. It is always exciting to me that a huge geological sculpture like Wilpena Pound, which perhaps could so easily be a landscape cliché due to its overuse in so many visual formats, never fails to exert a sense of wonder and power. The quality of the walking experience on this section was unsurpassed, and we think we might take a "break" in 2008 and do it again.

In August 2006 we walked from Hawker to Mambray Creek, Mount Remarkable National park (192km, 17 days). This was an exceptionally arduous section and nearing the end,

the party even refused to diverge to climb the sacred mountain which had lured us for so long - they just wanted to stop at all costs. Highlights were the

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Yourambulla Range just out of Hawker, the huge Willochra Creek valley, Buckaringa Gorge with its enchanting



The essential and entrancing Flinders Ranges, waves of rock arcing away into the distance. This view is from the northern end of the Heysen Range near Parachilna Gorge, and shows the distant and quite low ABC Range (upper left corner). The trail is located in the valley between these two ranges.

Yellow-Footed Rock Wallabies and awesome geology, the Mount Arden Range, Eyre Depot with its monument to so many passing early explorers, Dutchmans Stern, Mount Brown and Alligator Gorge. We cached food and water depots before we began walking and had no back-up vehicle. The whole feel of the walk was quite different, as we just had to solve any problems that arose ourselves. On this remote section we met only a small group from Adelaide who were nearing the end of their own Heysen Trail odyssey, comprising a long series of day walks. They very thoughtfully left us some cans of beer at our Eyre Depot water cache.

In September and October 2007, we walked from Spalding to Melrose (180km, 14 days). This was a completely different walking experience, being largely through a human modified landscape, with its vast areas of crops (wheat, barley, canola, fava beans, field peas, lupins), extensive grazing lands, managed forests and water harvesting schemes. We again cached our food and water



John Lindner sits in front of huge stromatolite fossils, up to one metre wide and 630 million years old, in the Trezona Formation just near Old Elatina Hut ruin. The fine layers are the result of inorganic debris, such as sand and mud, being deposited on the successive gum-like mats produced by cyanobacteria

before the walk: our depots were concealed under piles of rocks, in hollow trees and stumps and in holes in the ground, and we made quite sure nobody would find them. A friend asked me whether we took a GPS reading for each one - I assured him that when your life depended on it you did not forget where such vital supplies were hidden.

1860's and 1870's. In passing through the townships, visiting local museums, talking to farmers and reading of formal interpretive material, your understanding of this sweeping and productive landscape is enriched and deepened. This becomes an essential part of the walking experience.

The demanding physical aspect of a long walk compels you to simplify life, surely one of its most attractive aspects

The central spine of the Flinders Ranges and the Mount Lofty Ranges provides the unifying geological theme of the Heysen Trail. Its geology, landforms, drainage systems and vegetation, very different from those in Victoria, provide endless scope for investigation. South Australia also has a unique history of land survey (the imposed pattern of Counties and Hundreds), township development, pastoralism and agriculture, especially the latter's great expansion in the



Old scarifier located at "Yandowie" on a rich and very productive part of Never Never Creek. The remains of such agriculture equipment ("the ploughs that broke the plains") are found at intervals along the trail and are constant reminders of the agricultural heritage of the area.



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Ruins of an extensive farming settlement at Bundaleer Gardens on Never Never Creek. They included a main house, a partly underground cellar, and barns and sheds. This evocative place was a testimony to the hard work of the early settlers.

A long stint on the Heysen Trail may become an important part of the development of a philosophy of walking or outdoor living. The demanding physical aspect of a long walk compels you to simplify life, surely one of its most attractive aspects: you must get a good rest each night, eat well, drink plenty, have a daily bowel motion, understand where you are going and how long it will take, and above all, co-operate as a mutually supportive group of people with common aims. Ordinary civilised life is just jammed up, cluttered and trivial by comparison.

I have always found that such walks bring about changes in yourself. While you may acquire new knowledge about a region, you are also constantly challenged: "Why are we doing this?", "What is the essence, indeed the compulsion, of the trail, behind, now and ahead?" Although these may appear simple questions, they have changing perspectives and are full of promise even if they have no final "answers". A long walk is a journey, a quest for a new outlook, with fundamental physical and spiritual dimensions. To undertake such a walk merely to be able to return and proclaim to others that you did it is hardly adequate as a motive.

Landscape is not just scenery. It obviously has a spatial dimension as you grapple with landforms, topography, vegetation cover and water availability. You examine and re-examine many notable points from other points as you make your steady progress. Crossing landscape has depth in time. There are daily changes in weather conditions. It is an imaginative encounter with the past as you unravel a spool of previous human experience, using the evidence of occupation, impacts and artefacts. You not only recreate the struggles



These wonderful bush posts were part of what we called "Woodhenge", the remains of a large stock yard on the south side of Mount Brown in the beautiful woodland at the headwaters of Mount Brown Creek.

and achievements of former periods (buildings, farming technology, water harvesting and storage, forestry), but you try to understand the pressing challenges of the future (population decline, consolidation of land holdings, climate changes, the future of cropping). There are endless mysteries and stories, mostly half-finished or hinted at, some fully explained. ●



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