

History of the Heysen Trail

by C Warren Bonython AO. Patron of the 'Friends'

It is now 18 years since the Heysen Trail was conceived; the first 9, under the State Planning Authority, were a period of enthusiastic planning changing to frustration; the second 9, under the Department of Recreation & Sport, have been a period of steady building of the trail and further promotion of the idea behind it.

The conception came in 1969. At that time a network of walking trails was being established in the Adelaide Hills by the National Fitness Council. Mindful of the long-distance walking trails then coming into vogue overseas -in America the 3,200-km Appalachian Trail and the 4,000-km Pacific Crest Trail, and in Britain the 400-km Pennine Way, I suggested at a National Trust symposium in July of that year that there was now scope for one in South Australia. I was thinking in the context of a trail in the Mount Lofty Ranges, but I also carried fresh in my mind the memory of my trek, completed the year before, along the full length of the Flinders Ranges. The end result was a combination of the two.



*Heysen Trail opening 1993
(C Warren Bonython on left)*

Even if it had been conceded that my suggestion had merit it still might have languished unimplemented for years had it not happened that a Minister of the Crown, the Hon. Murray Hill, MLC, attended that symposium and heard what I said. It is to his eternal credit that he latched on to the idea and took it up with his Government. The sequel, coming out of a Cabinet edict, was the formation in early 1970 of a body called the Long Distance Trail Committee. Its remit was to investigate and develop a walking and horse-riding trail of length and general route now well known to us.

The Chairman of the Long Distance Trail Committee in 1970 was the Surveyor-General, George Kennedy, and the members were Stuart Hart, Albert Simpson and I. (After Kennedy retired in 1971 I became Chairman for the committee's remaining seven years of existence).

So at the beginning, full of fervour and hope, we settled down to planning and establishing the trail under the legislative umbrella of the Planning and Development Act, supported by the staff and financial resources of the State Planning Authority. We decided to concentrate initially on a route for walking only.

An early task was to find a name. There is no single geographical name for the geologically contemporaneous Mount Lofty Ranges and Flinders Ranges areas, nor was it easy to identify any one individual explorer or prominent citizen - in South Australian history whose name could meaningfully be linked with both areas. However, we then thought of Sir Hans Heysen, the great artist, who had perfected the artistic rendering of the gum-tree in the Mount Lofty Ranges and had then brought the glories of the Flinders Ranges to the world's notice. Not a formal bushwalker, Heysen could be a most energetic walker in pursuit of his work.

With "Heysen" as the proper name we next looked for the type name among "Trail", "Way" and "Track". "Trail" had an American connotation and "Way" a restricted English usage. "Track" alone seemed appropriately Australian, but it was compromised in applications like Birdsville Track - a road for motor vehicles. We wanted above all a route characteristically free from motorized transport, so "Trail" was finally chosen.

Our first three years, 1970-72, was a period of confident and enthusiastic planning and data collection. Five very competent and dedicated young officers of the State Planning Authority worked for us. Their labours and achievements - chiefly unremembered now - constituted important spade-work which contributed towards the eventual blossoming of the Heysen Trail after 1978. Posterity ought to know about them and what they did.

Their names were A. Lothian, A.L. Withy, G. Perkin, R.J. Teague, H. Showell and D.D. Brodeur. They field surveyed and mapped alternative routes - mainly in southern Fleurieu Peninsula, they interviewed landholders and they addressed meetings under the auspices of District Councils, including some in the Lower North.

The first obstacle was a general resistance to the innovative Heysen Trail idea and the open hostility of certain councils to it. The latter would raise objections such as the walkers being likely to start bushfires and to perpetrate vandalism (charges which walkers - that most responsible section of the community vehemently denied).

Other fears expressed were over the safety of the property and stock of landholders through whose land the trail would pass. The Committee's assurance that trail-users would be required to observe a set of strict regulations as to their conduct failed to mollify the objectors.

However, not every council was opposed to the trail; the D.C. of Crystal Brook was keen for the route to be varied so as to pass through its area.

The next obstacle emerged in 1974 when the Crown Law Department queried the power of the State Planning Authority to expend its funds on the trail. We conferred with our Minister (the Hon. Glen Broomhill, MP) who as the result agreed to the drafting of a "Recreation Trails" Bill - to cover not only the Heysen Trail but other walking Trails as well. It was duly prepared, but no further progress seemed to be made; we endured a long period without receiving positive information. Meanwhile in 1976 the S.P.A. was definitely told that it could not expend its funds on the Heysen Trail.

A third obstacle then appeared. A shortage in staff numbers forced the S.P.A. progressively to withdraw those staff seconded for development of the trail. Trail planning slowly ground to a halt.

While they were still hoping for passage of the lagging Bill the committee made a desperate effort to get the trail started by constructing and opening a nine-kilometre section within the Cleland Conservation Park, using largely the resources of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Governor, Sir Mark Oliphant, opened it on 1 May 1976.

The Recreation Trails Bill was a comprehensive nineteen-page document. An aspect of its thrust is illustrated by Part IV which opened with - "Public ownership of the land forming the trail is the best means of ensuring the permanence of the trail and its proper management". It was known to be in the Government's legislative "pipeline" late in 1976, but Parliament rose without its being tabled; it was not heard of again. I believe that it was thought to be too controversial politically because it also incorporated the power of compulsory acquisition of land.

The stalemate continued through 1977. I recall meeting in August of that year with the Minister for Planning (the Hon. Hugh Hudson, MP) and John Mant to try to help the trail along, but the Government had other ideas.

On 14 November 1977 State Cabinet, in a milestone decision, accepted a group of recommendations on the "Development and Management of Conservation, Recreation and other Reserves". I learnt this much later, at another interview with the Minister on 30 March 1978, being told that one of the recommendations was that the responsibility for all walking trails should be transferred to the Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport - this to embrace the former National Fitness Council network as well as the Heysen Trail.

So I then made a call on the Minister of Tourism, Recreation and Sport (the Hon. Tom Casey, MLC) to press the points that the Heysen Trail should not be down-graded to "just one of the trails", but that it should be allowed to keep its own identity and that it should be promoted with some priority. I am glad to say he took these points well.

I chaired the thirty-ninth, and last, meeting of the Long Distance Trail Committee on 11 April 1978. Members attending were Ron Caldicott, Terry Lavender, Albert Simpson and D.E. Wilsdon, with Secretary R.E. Vieraitis. (Alex McDonald and B.C. Thompson sent apologies). It was an emotive and nostalgic climax to that first eight years. Two months later - on 13 June 1978, we were formally disbanded. I felt dispirited by all the past frustrations, so I went off on a trek in the Himalayas to forget about them.

There was little to show in the way of a trail, but some of the spade-work done undoubtedly rubbed off to good effect in the second phase soon to be described. I mentioned some in Part 3. In addition the Committee had made a comprehensive survey of potential trail users, had prepared a manual of walking trail design and construction for South Australian conditions and had devised a detailed system for sign-posting trails.

The dark clouds had a silver lining, as you will learn in Part 6 [*the article was first published in 1987 as a series of 6 articles, this sentence was the closing sentence of Part 5*].

In 1978 the Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport went to work with a will on walking trails. The Heysen Trail was to keep its special identity.

The Minister appointed Terry Lavender to plan and develop it, and he has dominated the scene ever since. His skill, enthusiasm and energy began making their mark when permission was given in 1978 to develop a 50-kilometre pilot section between Mount Lofty and Mount Magnificent.

I was delighted when, later that year, the Minister invited me formally to open this section. The ceremony took place at Arbury Park on 19 November in the presence of the Minister (the Hon. Tom Casey, MLC), the Director (B.J. Taylor), former Committee members, the Heysen family, the Mayor of Meadows and, of course Terry Lavender, his helpers and a good crowd of trail-walkers. [As a post-script, ten years later - in July 1988 - Heysen Trail supporters met at this same spot with the Deputy Premier and Minister for Environment and Planning (the Hon. Don Hopgood, MP) to agree on saving the priceless surrounding bushland by incorporating it into the State's national parks system.

This test section caught the public's imagination, and all Government departments supported the proposal. The future of the trail was assured. On 22 July 1979 the Hon. J.C. Bannon opened the section from Mount Lofty to the Barossa Valley. On 18 October 1981 I was again asked to open a new section -from Mount Magnificent to Newland Hill.

Since then further sections have been commissioned - Parachilna Gorge to Wilpena, Wilpena to Hawker, Wilmington to Crystal Brook and Cape Jervis to Newland Head - so that now 780 kilometres of made trail exists.

The cause of the Heysen Trail was meanwhile championed by Dr Derek Whitelock, assisted by Dr David Corbett and Joan Paton, who published it on film and in print.

After 1978 I had little direct involvement, although I have now come closer again in the 'Friends...' movement. The history of the second phase of the Heysen Trail - from 1978 onwards - is not for me to tell. Terry Lavender, the father figure of this era, should do so.

C. Warren Bonython