

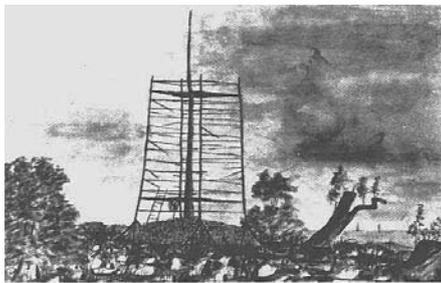
Mt Lofty: A View Down Through the Early Years

By Simon Kleinig

"...at the summit of Mount Lofty, which is 2,400 feet above sea level, you will be rewarded with one of the most glorious views in Australia." Vivienne, 1908.

"Mt. Lofty is a lady, reclining on her lawns,
And giving smiling welcome to all who pass that way.
She clothes herself in modest mist, and never slights or scorns
The many willing worshippers who pass her, day by day."
D.D. Harris, 1943.

Mt. Lofty, that high "bump" on the skyline of the ranges overlooking the city, has been held near and dear by local residents from the very first days of the fledgling colony. Elsewhere in Australia only Canberra and Hobart share with us the privilege of having a mountain destination at their very doorstep, a fact now being appreciated by increasing numbers of Adelaide residents, and for many of us a short, fifteen-minute drive can find us soon tackling the lower slopes of the mountain. The rugged, western slopes of the ranges – known as "the Tiers" in the early days – are impressive by any measure. Although Mt. Lofty lost its true wilderness values within the first years of settlement, a climb to its summit is still a rewarding experience, and the view in all directions is superb. A series of long, time-rounded spurs – seasonally adjusted from summer brown to winter green – radiate from Mt. Lofty down to the Adelaide Plains. These majestic spurs and the deep valleys between them provide straightforward and pleasant access to the summit, and today fall largely within Cleland Conservation Park.



*Mt Lofty Summit,
November 1843*

*[W A Cawthorne Mitchell
Library NSW]*

Today, the Heysen Trail provides ample opportunities to view the mountain – scrub permitting – from a distant perspective at various points along the ridgeline of the Mt. Lofty Ranges, both north and south. On approaching the summit itself, the Trail threads its way through scrub around the mountain's upper contours, requiring a short deviation to attain the actual summit. Mt. Lofty can also be climbed from the Piccadilly Valley, and an approach from this less-visited side gives a wonderful panorama of the eastern side of the ranges. However most people still access Mt. Lofty from the more dramatic western slopes, climbing up from either Waterfall Gully, Woolshed Gully, Chambers Gully or Horsnells Gully. There are three classic views of Mt. Lofty from these slopes: a good close view of the summit can be glimpsed through dense forest on the Wine Shanty Track, another from the ETSA Spur Track directly above Waterfall Gully, and also from Gleasons Ridge above Waterfall Gully Road.

In aboriginal times the Kurna, though largely confined to the Adelaide Plains, appear to have made visits to the ranges during spring and autumn. The purpose of these seasonal pilgrimages was to collect the gum resin of the golden wattle for use in the manufacture of their tools, and to collect the bark of the stringybark for their winter shelters. Possums and wallabies were also hunted to provide skins for sleeping rugs and cloaks for winter protection. This prudent seasonal use of the ranges by the Kurna allowed the game population time to recover and thus provided a relatively steady and assured supply of food.

However the Kurna did not proceed above the 450-metre line in the ranges – the point where blue gum woodland changes to dense stringybark forest – to avoid contact with the neighbouring Permamangk tribe, with whom they practised conflicting religious beliefs and rites. One Kurna tale tells the story of Jureidla, an ancestral giant who attacked from the east and was duly killed. His huge fallen body then formed part of the Mt. Lofty Ranges, his ears being the twin points of Mt. Lofty and Mt. Bonython, with the body lying to the north. Consistent with the confusing practice of European nomenclature at that time, Jureidla was later corrupted to Uraidla, and this name was duly bestowed upon the cosy hills township now nestled unobtrusively behind "the two ears."

Matthew Flinders was responsible for the naming of Mt. Lofty. Sailing across Investigator Strait from Kangaroo Island, Flinders makes this reference in his log of 27 March 1802: "At daylight I



Timber felling in "The Tiers"

*[W A Cawthorne,
Mitchell Library]*

recognised Mount Lofty, upon the highest part of the ridge of mountains which, from Cape Jervis, extends northward behind the eastern shore of the inlet." Three days later, when describing the extent of the Mt. Lofty Ranges Flinders makes a further reference: "There are some considerable elevations on the southern part; Mount Lofty is one of them, and its height appeared nearly equal to that of Mount Brown to the north, or about three thousand feet." (Mt. Lofty is in fact 2,384 feet or 727 metres above sea level.)

Some decades were to pass before Mt. Lofty received its first European visitors. In April of 1831, Captain Collett Barker, his servant, Mills, and a certain Mr. Kent made the first ascent of Mt. Lofty. Kent's notes indicate that they may have climbed up the long backbone of Gleeson's Hill. This is the long spur rising from the Adelaide Plains near Beaumont and directly above today's Waterfall Gully Road, from where they would have gained a magnificent view of Mt. Lofty. They then skirted "the smooth and grassy sides of a deep ravine," which was probably Waterfall Gully. Kent also observed that "The sides and summit of the Ranges were covered in verdure, and the trees upon them were of more than ordinary size." Kent was not exaggerating – "upon the immediate brow of the Mount" the party found one botanical giant with a girth measuring 13 metres (43 feet).

Colonel William Light is believed to have decided on the site for Adelaide when viewing the Adelaide Plains from the hills near Waterfall Gully in 1836. The first recorded ascent of Mt. Lofty by a SA settler came the following year, in April 1837. Bingham Hutchinson, a young man newly-arrived on the Buffalo, was joined at the summit by his servant, William Burt. Clearly an adventurous and persevering pair, they finally reached the summit on their third attempt. Later, Hutchinson described his initial foray into wild, unknown country: "Our first attempt to gain the summit of Mount Lofty, which was represented to me as an undertaking requiring considerable exertion and perseverance, as well as a night's rest among the hills, was by tracing the course of a brook, which flows from a ravine (Waterfall Gully) in the direction of the Mount...our progress was slow, and attended with great difficulty.

In his writings Hutchinson gives us a rare glimpse of how wild the ranges must have appeared around the time of colonisation. On an early attempt to reach Mt. Lofty, Hutchinson and Burt had tried to force their way up to Waterfall Gully, but "the luxuriance of the plants and underwood by the side of the brook, being in many places over our heads, and the lower parts interlaced with creeping plants, made progress slow..."

SA's second Governor, Gawler, arrived in the State in late 1838, and journeyed into the "interior" to make an ascent of Mt. Lofty. By this time timber-getters were already very busy – both legally and illegally – in the stringybark forests on the upper slopes of Mt. Lofty. In 1839 a notable early visitor to the Mt. Lofty region was the ornithologist John Gould, who reported sighting a male Pink Robin in a deep ravine below Mt. Lofty. Ironically, this rare sighting of the bird was probably an accidental occurrence as the species confines its visits to the extreme south-east of SA – as a winter visitor only.

In 1840 a young colonist by the name of Robert Frew – whose name is now commemorated in the suburb of Frewville – sought refuge in the scrub near Mt. Lofty when caught in a thunderstorm. He "came upon a large prostrate gum tree from which there was a little smoke curling." Frew was astonished to find "sitting in the hollow of the tree, twelve natives." Visitors to the region today will no longer find trees of such enormous size. With European settlement came more frequent bushfires and prolific timber felling which changed and modified the nature of the forest forever. No longer the realm of tall, substantial gums and areas of closed forest, today the region merely supports areas of low, open forest with small trees growing in mallee form.

Also in 1840 a stone cairn and flagpole was built on the summit of Mt. Lofty (see illustration). This point was used in the first trigonometrical survey of the State commenced by Colonel Light and carried out by Sergeant Forrest. In the first few years of settlement expansion into the hills was slow and the area was rarely visited. This situation was aggravated by the activities of The Tiersmen, who lived in huts in the steep gullies behind Mt. Lofty. These included horse and cattle thieves who raided the Adelaide Plains by night. Governor Gawler described The Tiersmen as a "very low class of man, lawless vagrants, principally runaway sailors and escaped convicts from the other colonies" who "wantonly or carelessly destroyed almost as much (timber) as they turn to profitable use" a commodity "valuable and in great demand by splitters for making shingles."

In 1885 the present obelisk was built at the summit. Located with great care, the obelisk's primary function was that of a Trigonometrical Survey Station. Formally named "The Mount Lofty Observing Tower," it was used to establish the latitude and longitude of places near Adelaide by utilising a series of apertures set at 60-degree intervals. In 1902 – the centenary of Flinders' sighting and naming of Mt. Lofty – the obelisk was dedicated to Matthew Flinders in a ceremony officiated by the then-Governor, Lord Tennyson. In 2002 the event was again commemorated when a plaque was unveiled at the base of Flinders Column by SA's Governor Marjorie Jackson-Nelson.

Today, despite the periodic ravages of bushfires across the ranges, Flinders Column is still visible from many places on the Adelaide Plains, and stands as a tangible link with Mt. Lofty's interesting early years.

Simon Kleinig

References

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4. "Cleland Conservation Park," Draft Management Plan, 1979.