

After the Fires – Mt Hotham’s Historic Walking Tracks

A lightning strike near Harrietville in January 2013 ignited a bushfire that was to impact on the Mt Hotham Alpine Resort and the surrounding Alpine National Park for many weeks. The fires saw tracks and trails in the region closed for most of the 2012-13 bushwalking season.

Dramatic natural events are nothing new to the Australian Alps. Topography, geology and climate in their extreme forms have shaped the landscape as well as influenced human activity in the region. These influences have both provided and limited opportunities for the development of the region. Much of the history of human activity in this challenging landscape is lost, but an awakening interest in recent years has seen a rediscovery of some of this fascinating heritage. Two walking tracks recently opened in the Mt Hotham Alpine Resort give a glimpse into the European history of this dramatically spectacular landscape.



Only a 1km section of the 12.5km Cobungra Ditch was burnt by the January 2013 bushfires

The discovery of gold at Omeo, Beechworth and in the Buckland Valley from 1852 saw a large and industrious population move into the region for the first time. The first permanent gold mining activity around Mt Hotham occurred from the early 1860s in the Upper Dargo. At Brandy Creek, five kilometres from Hotham, deep alluvial gold deposits were worked profitably for many years. During the early 1880s rich yields from some of the Brandy Creek mines saw a rush to the area, with large-scale investment in the area. The largest company, the Cobungra Gold Mining Co, invested £11,000 in the

construction of a 7½ mile water race and introduction of the latest high-pressure hydraulic sluicing technology. More than 120 men were employed in cutting the race through some of the most difficult terrain in the region. The water race harnessed the abundance of water which had accumulated in the winter snows.



Section of the Cobungra Ditch overlooking Swindler’s Creek, singed by the Harrietville bushfire in January 2013

Today this abandoned mining feature has been transformed into the *Cobungra Ditch Walking Track*. There are stone retaining walls for much of its length. Interpretative signs along the 12.5km walk highlight the walk’s fascinating history, including the race’s construction and the history and influences of gold mining in the area. The walk terminates at the Brandy Creek mine where the devastation revealed by the harnessing of the winter snows is obvious by the starkness of the landscape and the absence of a whole hillside.

The other principal historic track in the Mt Hotham Resort is the *Huts Walk*. This track links three huts, each of which represents an important part of the heritage of the area.

The jewel in the crown is Spargo’s Hut. One of the oldest buildings in the area, the hut was built by local identity Bill Spargo for his prospecting activity at Golden Point in 1927-28. Bill lived in the corrugated-iron and bush pole hut for many years while he eked out a living from gold prospecting and mining.

On Black Friday in 1939, Spargo was bailed up in his hut, surrounded by the raging bushfire. As flames took hold of the building he was able to extinguish them with water from a small ditch which he had cut to the door of his hut. Both Bill and the hut survived, but the hills around him were laid bare.

Not one to waste an opportunity, Bill's prospecting activity was made easier with the removal of undergrowth by the fires. As a result Bill discovered a rich gold-bearing reef which he christened the Red Robin. The first two tons of crushing yielded 173 ounces of gold. So although they nearly cost him his life, the bushfires provided Bill with the discovery of his dreams in what was to become a rags-to-riches story.

Today a walk to Spargo's little cabin is a remarkably engaging experience.

Other tracks, although not yet historically interpreted, can also be quite revealing of the history of European occupation and activity. The Machinery Spur Track, named for the carting of a stamp battery along this route in 1891, takes walkers to the operating Red Robin mine and battery, the reef originally found by Spargo in 1941.

Mt Tabletop, adjacent to the alpine village of Dinner Plain, is another old mining location. Also known as Square Mountain, this area was a route to the mining location of Mayford on the Upper Dargo River Goldfield. The area was also worked for its deep lead gold deposits.

Despite the extremes of the climate, the physical remains of some of the regions heritage still manage to survive. Spargo's Hut has survived the direct impact of two significant bushfire events (1939 and 2003) and, fortunately, the recent bushfire didn't reach the hut. The Cobungra Ditch saw only minor impacts from fire. The majority of walking tracks in the immediate region of Mt Hotham, including the Huts Walk and Cobungra Ditch re-opened again at the commencement of the Bushwalking Season on Melbourne Cup Weekend 2013.

Andrew Swift, Cultural Heritage Officer & Walking Track Manager

Mt Hotham Alpine Resort Management.

Since a young age Andrew Swift has been exploring the mining history of the remote corners of the mountains of North Eastern Victoria. He has given numerous presentations, written books and presented documentaries on the regions forgotten history. Andrew currently works as Cultural Heritage Officer and Walking track Manager for the Mt Hotham Alpine Resort Management Board



Spargo's Hut wrapped in aluminized and glass fabric to protect the building against radiant heat. Fortunately, the fires did not reach the locality and the building was spared again.