Tracks & Trails in the

MEEHAN RANGE

A Brief History of Human Use

Historical Overview
&
Recreational Implications

for the

2015 Meehan Range Management Plan

Peter H MacFie Historian & Dulcot Resident

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Introduction

The following document is an amalgam of several reports on the Meehan Range Historic Tracks drafted over a 30 years period – some private and others as a consultant. Included was a proposal for a Meehan Range National Park. All arose from moving to Dulcot in 1973, when no-one knew where Dulcot was and its streets were rambling fences which sheep wandered through regardless. The Coal River Valley was in drought, paddocks yellow and gardens non-existent, with residents relying on tank water. The Mud School was a ruin. Above the hamlet was the sheep run of the Meehan Range, known locally as *Nichols' Bush*. An elderly Peter Murdoch lived at *Milnathort*, Chloe Hanslow at *Summerhill*, George Hanslow in the Federation schoolhouse.

Despite the quiet, in the memories of remaining families in and near Dulcot - and many who had left - an oral history tradition survived. My empathy for and knowledge of the district grew from talking, listening and recording these elderly locals who had lived nearby since their ancestors arrived at Dulcot before the 1850s. From these session came the stories of the hills and tracks on which the old people, as children, had walked and run.

This was coupled with use of archival sources to complement the field work. As a result, I saw my first convict records in the State Archives - beginning with Dennis King (the grandfather remembered by Alf and George King) then my own ancestor Hector MacFie.

With the passing of that generation, and the changing nature of the Meehan Range, with broad-acre housing on bush blocks, the need for managed recreational activities seemed imperative. Combining the historical tracks with these future needs seemed a logical way forward.

My historical studies were followed with draft attempts at combining history, heritage and land management. These publications are listed in the overleaf bibliography- as are some British publications on the same issue- where the 'Right to Roam' debate has a longer history.

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- Alf King
- Eileen King Batt
- Mavis King neé Miller
- Peter MacFie & Fred Duncan

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A Meehan Range and Recreational Management Bibliography

- 1982. Oral History and the Demise of Folk Culture in the Richmond District, Tasmania, (Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers, Sept 1982) (Social history of the Coal River Valley including the Meehan Range, and especially Dulcot.)
- 1988. Dobbers and Cobbers: Informers and Mateship among Convicts, Officials
 and Settlers on the Grass Tree Hill Road, Tasmania, 1830-1850, (THRA, Sept 1988)
 (Intrigue among the gangs, overseers and settlers including use of the bush, during
 construction of the Grass tree Hill Road.)
- 1992. Stock Thieves & Golfers, Clarence City Council.
- 1995 'Historic Roads and Trails of the Eastern Shore, Part 1' (unpublished)
- 1997. 'The Meehan Range- a Brief History of Human Use' (for Jamie Wood, Clarence City Council consultant, and Sinclair Mertz)
- 1997. 'Dulcot Landcare Proposal'. (unpublished)
- 1999. 'Evidence to the Urban skylines and Hillfaces Project.' (DPEW)
- 2001. 'Mt Wellington Range as a Cultural Resource Part 2.' Historical component. (for deGryse & Assoc for the Mt Wellington Authority)

In England and Scotland the historic use of trails, some originally cattle walking routes, are now legalised as Rights of Way. Handbooks on these trails are available for walkers.

- Alan Blackshaw, 'Our Right to Roam', British Countryside Commission News of May 1991, no 49. (Reveals the need and suggests some solutions to overcome restrictions on access over private property.)
- Haldane, A R B *The Drove Roads of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1952.
- *Scottish Hill Tracks*, published by the Scottish Rights of Way Society., 1995, first published in 1947.

The Need and Value of Historical Trails

Running either side of the Derwent River, the Meehan Range on the eastern shore and Mt Wellington Range on the west act as backdrops for the opposite communities.

But while the Mt Wellington Park has become a formalised recreational and ecological resource for the greater Hobart community, the Meehan Range has not had the same recognition from local government.

This may in part be from the gradual change from a rural community to a residential & suburban one. On the eastern flank of the Meehan Range the two are still at times, uncomfortable neighbours.

With the growth of the eastern shore as a residential area, little thought seems to have been given to the development of similar low impact extended walking and recreational trails in the Meehan Range.

The Meehan Range offers examples of trails traditionally used over the last 200 years; some may date from aboriginal, use over centuries prior to European settlement.

In Britain and Europe, such trails have existed for centuries- some based on cattle and market trails extending from Scotland to Midlands towns and London. Others are pilgrimage trails. After years of lobbying, 'Right to Roam' legislation was initiated which recognised the legal status of such trails in Britain.

At present the legal status of historic trails in Tasmania is uncertain- those in the Meehan Range even less so. However, with growing interest in history and recreation, opportunities exist for developing a system of historic trails throughout the state.

The Meehan range as an Ecological and Cultural Entity

The Meehan Ranges.

East Risdon was the site of the first European settlement in Tasmania in 1803. The hills behind the first base of European settlement in Van Diemen's Land, the Meehan Ranges were the site of the first encounters and clashes with Aboriginal Tasmanians, and the first domestic buildings of the settlers.

These hills were named after James Meehan, the surveyor in the first formal surveys which alienated aboriginal land to the British settlers in 1803-4.

Meehan was an Irish-born political rebel and former convict who had taken part in the 1798 uprising against British rule in Ireland. He returned to survey in VDL in 1806-7 and in 1812-13. (In 1812 he surveyed the Kangaroo Bay area near Bellerive including the early land grants to Richard Morgan and other Norfolk Islanders which is now .)¹

Two Climates, Two Histories.

The Meehan Range has two aspects - east toward Pittwater and west toward the Derwent River. These aspects also have two distinct topographies and two climates. While the west has a narrow band of land beside the Derwent River, now heavily urbanised, the eastern slopes are essentially rural, although becoming subdivided into large commuter blocks.

Traditional Use.

When the Range was part of a rural existence, they were used in a relaxed manner by some land owners - though not without conflict. Farmers permitted access to wood-carters and shooters. Workmen walked cross country to shear or harvest as labourers on the larger farms while their children crossed the Range to and from school – and both used the tracks to visit relatives on either side of the Range. These routes often followed traditional paths, such as the Risdon Creek Bridle Trail between Risdon and Dulcot. (see below)

Subdivision in the foothills.

From the 1980's, the foothills and the Range itself began to be subdivided, and the break-up is changing permanently their natural and historic features. New commuter-based residents bring urban attitudes to entry onto private property. They are not familiar with the old traditions. Such attitudes and cars have lessened the need and opportunity for cross-country walks.

¹ Stock Thieves and Golfers: a History of Kangaroo Bay and Rosny Farm Tasmania 1803-1998. Peter MacFie, 2002. Published by Clarence City Council.

Recent History.

To protect good quality rural land and the rural nature of the approaches to Richmond historic village, this subdivision is only occurring above the Richmond Road. South of the Eastern Outlet the same concern is ignored and subdivision is occurring without apparent control on essentially arable land.

New Needs.

Now however a new need has arisen, a recreational need for walkers and mountain bike riders. These traditional routes and walk-ways can and should be available to residents of both sides of the Range. In so doing, they are following in the tradition of the districts, and returning to descendants of former residents the traditions their ancestors began- and in so doing, improving the health of the community - plus reestablishing face to face contact with old and new community members.

British Models.

Based on British examples² where walking trails, including sections over private land, are a feature of the countryside and rural traditions, a similar status needs to be given to the Meehan Range Trails. This article reveals the need and suggests some solutions to overcome restrictions on access over private property.

² Blackshaw, Alan. Our Right to Roam. Countryside Commission News, May 1991, No. 49.

The Meehan Range - A Brief History of Human use

1. Human History of the Meehan Range

Access across the Range was made by Aborigines and settlers; the latter probably taking advantage of the old routes established by Aborigines.

Aboriginal Use.

Local tribes of the Moomairemener people were known to have used the area.

Conflict.

The well-known 1803 clash between the military and aborigines at Risdon was part of a series of clashes in the Meehan Ranges. In 1804, Surveyor James Meehan refers to Aborigines stoning his party while trying to erect white survey markers in the Meehan Ranges and to the Aborigines pulling the flags out of the ground.

At present no archaeological survey to identify Aboriginal occupation of the Ranges has been done, but - based on scant available knowledge and some current local knowledge - such an examination would reveal significant sites and insights.

European Settlement.

With European settlement, the ranges were alienated to a number of settlers. Large land grants were often leased however, and tenants then appropriated as small farms. The hill country of the Meehan Range was adapted as sheep runs attached to larger land grants, where sheep and wildlife shared the bush.

Small sections of fertile soil on the foothills and on plateaus were used by small-scale settlers - often emancipists or former convicts - for crops and orchards. These settlers have been identified as "Fringe Farmers" for their habit of taking up land on the verge of larger grants and in the foothills of hill country such as the Meehan Range.

Stock Theft Trails.

During the first 30 years of settlement, stock theft was rife in south-eastern Tasmania, as the Colonial Government's purchase of meat for convicts and soldiers made mutton a profitable enterprise – especially if stolen.

The gullies of the Meehan Range was used extensively as a conduit to walk stolen flocks from the southern Midlands to slaughter-houses for sale to the Colonial Authorities in Hobart Town. Numerous examples of small farmers charged with these offences – for example, the family of Richard Morgan - indicate the use of the Range for this purpose. The small farmers, who were nearly all emancipists, seem to have been in collusion with more prominent settlers, including the likes of Rev Robert Knopwood.³

³ Stock Thieves and Golfers: a History of Kangaroo Bay and Rosny Farm Tasmania 1803-1998. Peter MacFie, 2002. Published by Clarence City Council.

2. Historic Trails & Roads.

Aboriginal Use.

The Moomairemener people using the Derwent-Coal River district appear to have crossed from the Derwent to the rich game 'reserves' of the Coal River-Pittwater valley. They also collected shell-fish along the eastern shores of the Derwent- as well as Pittwater – and also hunted wallabies, possums & the (now extinct) Tasmanian emu.

Probable Routes used

The old routes from the Derwent to Pittwater probably crossed the Range along the routes followed later by the first settlers.

- From Kangaroo Point across the Mt Rumney saddle to Pittwater.
- From the Derwent River at East Risdon over the Meehan Range saddle alongside Risdon Creek (now Belbin Rivulet) to Pittwater.

Early Settlement Trails

Half-way Hill Trail

From Kangaroo Point across the Mt Rumney saddle (now Tunnel Hill) to Pittwater (Aboriginal settlement)

The Risdon Creek Bridle Trail.

From Risdon along the Risdon Creek (now Belbin Rivulet) route. (Aboriginal settlement) This led to the short-lived *Risdon Creek Inn* being built on the Richmond Road - bypassed in 1834 with the opening of the convict-built Grass Tree Hill Road.

Post-settlement period saw a variety of uses of the routes by settlers, some formal, others informal. Some routes followed those of aborigines as above. Others used routes for commercial access (eg the Break Neck Hill Coach Road), while others were made by residents and children moving to work and school from their homes. The former Bellerive Sorell Railway Line offers another recreational use.

Post Settlement Roads and Trails

Break Neck Hill Coach Road Route.

Crossed over from the Half-way Hill route to Pittwater, diverting north over the hill that bears this name to join the Richmond Road alongside Cross Rivulet at *Craigow*.

Grass Tree Hill to Dulcot Trail.

This route crossed private land via 'Downham Town' to Dulcot School.

Craigow to Grass Tree Hill.

Used to access farm work at Craigow.

Bellerive-Sorell Railway Route.

The embankments of the former Sorell railway which runs through the Meehan range are still visible in many places, and if managed could provided a useful recreational route. (Part of the line on Mt Rumney (behind the former *Three Trunks Inn*) is apparently used by riders and walkers.)

3. European Settlement - Cultural/Economic Uses

The natural assets of the Meehan Range were exploited by settlers.

Timber.

Once covered by larger trees than now survive, saw-pits were evidence of this. Land near Dulcot was assigned to Charles Degraves, son of the ship-building firm founded by his father, Peter.

Wattle Bark.

Bark from the black wattle was stripped from trees in the hill and sold for tanning.

Firewood Carting.

A continued use has been for fire-wood, both for domestic use, but earlier to power the cross-Derwent steam ferries and farm traction engines also driven by steam. These machines were used in chaff-cutting and other functions.

Sheep- Grazing.

The ranges have been traditionally used as a sheep run by large land owners. eg *Uplands* (McKays) had an adjacent sheep run, as did *Craigow*. Between Dulcot to Grass Tree Hill and Gunners Quoin, Bassett Dickson of *Glen Ayr* (now *Strath Ayr*) held a sheep run. The Dulcot end of the Meehan Range was later acquired by the Nichols family, and known as '*Nichols' Bush*. . ' This was subdivided c 1980 by Justin Nichols, becoming known as *Boldrewood Park*.

Shooting.

The range is home to kangaroo, wallaby and possums. Depending on seasonal factors, the wild-life at times 'invades' the farms. During the orcharding period of the district, farms had acres of apricots, apples and pears. (*Craigow's* 70 acre apricot orchard was the largest in the Australia c 1920.) Parrots were either shot or trapped to sell to sailors aboard windjammers i.e. the large sailing ships. Possums were hunted with their fur sold to skin merchants. Rabbits were at times in plague proportions and also trapped and skins sold. Hares still populate the district, and like rabbits are lethal on the bark of young trees.

Farmers formerly encouraged controlled shooting in the Meehan Range. To small fringe farmers and rural labourers, game meat provided a way of supplementing income, especially in drought years.

Alf King recounted yarns involving hunting in the bush of the Meehan Range.

Post 1997 Uses.

Horse-riding and bush-walking have been restricted to the Flagstaff Gully side of the Range, based around the Red Gate Reserve.

Meehan Range Tracks Remembered c1890-1950

Oral History Sources

Introduction.

After arriving to live at Dulcot in 1973, I was gradually introduced to some elderly residents - and former residents. While Belle Backhouse was born in 1890 (and lived to 100), Alf King and brother George King were born in the 1890s, while their first cousin Eileen King Batt, was born in 1906.

They lived in an era when children walked to and from school, while fathers also walked to work on farms across the Meehan Range, and regarded owning a horse as a luxury.

From Craigow to Shelstone, Grass Tree Hill c 1900⁴

In 1980, Belle Backhouse, daughter of Albert Backhouse, lived in a cottage on *Craigow* where her father worked, and remembered walking with her sisters cross country from their Richmond Road home to the top of Grass Tree Hill to visit Phoebe King. She was their teenage friend who managed the house, *Mayville*, for her widowed father, Ted King, and her brothers Son, Alf and George.

.....we'd stay the night. We'd walk up that way, through the bush. You turn up there by the mile tree. It was all bush. We didn't get scared, not when there was two or three of us. We used to get scared down by the willows, by the creek there were some willows, and they always used to say there was a ghost there. We always used to be frightened there!!⁵

From *Mayville*, Grass Tree Hill to Dulcot School & Home Again c 1900 -Alf King Remembers 1977⁶

When interviewed in the late 1970s, brothers Alf and George King were living on lower Grass Tree Hill Road, only 3 kms below where they had lived as boys before World War I. Alf recalled the cross country route taken by classmates from the top of Grass Tree Hill to school at Dulcot, a distance of 4 miles.

Tracks across the hills allowed their father Ted, and other parents to travel from Grass Tree Hill to work at *Craigow*, *Uplands* and other farms around Cambridge. Both Alf and Eileen his cousin remembered this track.

A mile below the Kings' home on Grass Tree Hill, the school party would be joined by other children from Downham Town, the unofficial name given by locals to a small secluded settlement first occupied by families of that name.

⁴⁴ Peter MacFie interview, Tape No. 1, Belle Backhouse, 10/4/1980

⁵ Peter MacFie interview, Tape No. 1, Belle Backhouse, 10/4/1980

⁶ (Peter MacFie Interviews: Tape 1B, 21/3/1977, and Tape 19, 14/5/1978)

Alf King recalled:

We came 'cross through *Nichols' Bush.* and we used to come down the track. You all walked that time a day. We had no other way to go. Most kids now when they go to school they don't walk a yard. But we used to walk, and we'd make stilts and walk for miles, and enjoy it! Run like greyhounds! Well I went to school there (from) the old place in the pine trees on top of the hill, down through Downham Town. On the way to school - all the different places we used to stop at - climb trees....Go like greyhounds! Yes! 'home on very hot days , there used to be some big water-holes, used to strip off and "Bang!", into 'em!! There was myself, (brother) Leo, Madge Genders, Kathy Williams, Eddy Williams and Mona Williams - and back home to work. ⁷

1979. Eileen Batt neé King Remembers – born Dulcot 19088

Eileen Batt neé King spent her childhood alongside the Belbin Rivulet with her single mother, Mary Ann King. She recalled other tracks. These took various routes from Dulcot to Risdon, allowing Eileen to visit her, Uncle and Aunt Sargant as well as Uncle Ted King on top of Grass Tree Hill.

THE BOLDREWOOD SUBDIVISION9

I believe it's going ahead, up on Nichols place? (i.e. Nichols Hill) Well I never thought in my life time I'd ever see that built. on!!

ITS NOT MUCH GOOD AS FAR AS THE GROUND GOES, IT'S JUST THE VIEW.

I didn't even realise that there was a view! From living where we were on the creek and going to Blackburn's and Fenner's, I didn't realise. I went up over the hill from our place to Grass Tree Hill, over to Uncle Ted's (Kings) place, at the top of Grass Tree Hill. We often walked over there. There are some nice caves in that hill, and man-ferns. That was a nice walk, but of course that was a bush walk.

DID YOU GO THROUGH DULCOT?

No. You know where our place was? Well, straight up over Nichols Hill, diagonally right through there. There was a track. The men walked through from Risdon that used to work at *Craigow*, and they used to have a track. It was quite a long track.

There was another track through where Uncle Johnny's place is through to Risdon Vale, and I walked through that. I remember it got covered over once. — I remember Uncle Ted going through with an axe and blazing the trees through so that we wouldn't get lost. We used to walk over to *Sargant*, my aunt's place. I was only little. We'l. We'd often walk through there.

I was only thinking. When I was a kid, Mother was wonderful to me, really she was. She was never: you can't do this and you can't do that!' where there were things like getting on horses and riding them; getting up on the

⁷ Peter MacFie Interviews: Tape 1B, 21/3/1977, and Tape 19, 14/5/1978

⁸ Peter MacFie Interview with Eileen King Batt 19 June 1979.

⁹ Peter MacFie Interview with Eileen King Batt 19 June 1979.

haystacks and sliding down a getting all the thistles in the back of your legs. I never got into any trouble for any of that! Mother was really wonderful.

We used to do one walk there to East Risdon; and then of a Sunday sometimes we'd go on another walk past Chloe Hanslow's place to the right of Murdoch's property, straight down there to the water (i.e. the right of way Pittwater) but this side of *Greenfields*, down over the empty paddocks. And there was a little creek that ran through there. In wet weather it ran a bit. We used to go down there sometimes to get the white pug clay for cleaning fireplaces. We'd walk down to the back and have a paddle down on the beach, and on the old trees that had fallen into Pittwater there and come back and pick out the marl with a little hoe thing, and put it in a bag and carry it home to clean the white fire-place.

There was another one just down from the old schoolhouse (i.e. Mud School). Just as you turn up into that on the right hand side, here. But they didn't like us doing that. Because it was going back towards the footpath. That was a decent road once, but it washed away with the flood. It got that way you couldn't take a horse and cart through there; then the council widened it. Is that old mulberry tree still there?

YES, THERE'S TWO OF THEM?

There was a marl heap between the stable and the little orchard at the bottom. Just near the mulberry tree on the rise of the hill. There were mulberries and 2 or 3 quite big lilac trees, and a little grave with violets growing on it.

Post World War II Tracks - Mavis King Recalls c 1947

In the 1940s, Mavis King neé Miller and husband Alf King, lived first in a tent on Grass Tree Hill Road during War time privations until Alf saved enough to build a weatherboard house, *Sunnyside*, above the Malcolms Hut Road intersection. As a young mother, Mavis recalled the journey home after visiting her mother across the Derwent River in Hobart, taking her small daughter Margaret in a pram. Returning by ferry to Geilston Bay, when no other lift was available, Mavis then pushed her pram & child up over Grass Tree Hill Road. Stopping at *Mayville* for a break with her in-laws, she continued down Grass Tree Hill Road until coming to Downham's Road, where she took a short cut downhill to her temporary tent home.

MAVIS KING: When we were first married and had Margaret I used to wheel her in the pram over to Lindisfarne. Go over to town to Mother' place once a week. Take Margaret down in the pram and do my shopping and hers.

Come back on the two o'clock ferry from town - go into Chaffey's grocer shop and buy a few groceries, wheel her back home and come through the bush up there at the corner. Down near that sharp turn at the top of the hill - Athol Downham's. Roadup to the right there. I used to go through the track, and I used to grab a gum sapling with this hand and hold the pram with the other, going down the hill. Sometimes I'd be back at 12 o'clock at night.

Sometimes I'd come out on the Richmond Bus, get off at Malcolms Hut Road and go your way. Sometimes get home at twelve o'clock that night. Distance didn't worry me. 10

1991. Grass Tree Hill to Dulcot Walk Recreated.

Peter MacFie & Fred Duncan

Led by botanist Fred Duncan & historian Peter MacFie, in 1991an attempt was made to re-create the route taken by Alf King and his former Dulcot school mates to their school at Dulcot. Sadly, Alf had died in 1980 so Peter used his description of the route taken through Downham Town to Dulcot. Along the track, Fred described the ecology of the dry sclerophyl bush and grassland.

Route.

- Fred Duncan's Adult Education group met at the site of the former convict barracks on Grass Tree Hill, adjacent to a spring and water trough. The history of the unique Grass Tree Hill Road Station was outlined-based on Peter MacFie's Dobbers & Cobbers article.¹¹
- Driving over the top of Grass Tree Hill, the site of the former *Shelstone Hotel* relabelled *Mayville* by the King family. (demolished c 1984) was indicated. This was the starting point for the King's daily trek to school at Dulcot.
- Downham Town. We parked our cars in Downhams Roadthen walked to the bottom of this dead-end.
- Crossing Nichols' Bush. Having gained permission to cross this sheep run, we
 followed the course of the creek/watercourse, until reaching the Boldrewood.
 subdivision, then cut up to the newly sealed extension of George Street.

¹⁰ Peter MacFie Interview Mavis King in Tape 4: Alf King 13/4/1977

¹¹ Dobbers and cobbers: informers and mateship among convicts, officials and settlers on the Grass Tree Hill Road, Tasmania 1830-1850: Peter MacFie: Papers and Proceedings: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Vol. 35, No. 3, Sept 1988: 112-127

Meehan Range Management Plan 2015

To Follow Up

- Lou Hanslow is the only local left who knows these trails from first-hand experience.
- These need to be walked with him.
- A Map needs to be drafted indicating the routes.
- The 1947 aerial photograph will be a great help.

Meehan Range Management Plan

These then need to be integrated into the Meehan Range Management Plan.

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