

The Road To The Hermitage

Robin Bell

Also by Robin Bell:

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Table of Contents:

Dedication:.....	3
Acknowledgements:.....	5
Table of Contents:	7
Illustrations:	9
Introduction:.....	11
Chapter One – The Search Begins.....	15
Chapter Two – First Impressions	19
Chapter Three – The First Weekend.....	29
Chapter Four – Upgrading Begins	41
Chapter Five – Expenses, Expenses.....	61
Chapter Six - Crops	77
Chapter Seven – The Extensions	97
Chapter Eight – Natural Wildlife	127
Chapter Nine – The Climate.....	135
Chapter Ten – Animal Companions.....	139
Chapter Eleven – Time To Move On	153
Epilogue.....	159
Appendix 1 – Locality Map.....	161
Appendix 2 - The Original Farm Plan.....	165
Appendix 3 – The New Farm Plan.....	167
Appendix 4 – Rainfall and Temperature Tables	169
Illustration Credits	171
About the Author	173
Index	175

Illustrations:

My Cottage in the Blue Mountains	12
Bridal Veils Falls, Blue Mountains	13
First View of the Driveway	19
The Farm at the end of the Driveway	20
First View of the Lounge.....	21
The Pot Belly Stove	22
Rain Water Tanks and Battery Shed	23
The Track to the Abercrombie River	24
First Sight of the Abercrombie River	25
Old Hot and Cold Water Tanks	27
Outdoor Toilet and (inset) Toilet Roll Holder.....	31
Massey Ferguson Tractor	32
The Driveway After Grading.....	49
New Electrical Distribution Box.....	53
Applying Sealer to the Lounge Floor.....	56
View of the Renovated Lounge.....	57
Another View of the Renovated Lounge.....	58
Flooded River Crossing	61
The Trusty Landcruiser.....	64
Gathering Firewood with the Landcruiser and Trailer	70
Satellite Dish and New Solar Panels	73
Removing the Old Woodshed	75
Digging Out the Rocks for the Olives	78
Weed Removal from the Dam.....	80
Drainage Trenches for the Olives	82
Young Olive Fruit.....	85
Ploughed Vegetable Garden Site.....	87
Graded Paths on the Vegetable Site	88
Vegetable Garden Beds in Progress.....	89
New Track from the River	90
Vegetable Crops	91
Grape Vines	94
Digging Out the Footings	100
Concrete Poured for the Footings	102
Brick Piers and Part Wall Completed	103
Flooring Sheets and New Water Tank	105
Wall Frames Started.....	106
Roof Frames in Place Over the Bedroom	108
Windows Inserted.....	110
Roofing Sheets over the Bedroom.....	111
Long Roofing Sheets	113

Scaffolding for the High Places	115
Solar Hot Water Tanks in Place	120
The New Stove in the Study	123
The New Study.....	125
River Turtle Discovered in the Olive Grove.....	127
Red Bellied Black Snake.....	128
Blue Wren.....	129
A Selection of Wildflowers on the Farm	131
Sundew Insect-Eating Plant	132
Rainbow After Summer Shower.....	135
The Farm in Winter.....	136
The Abercrombie River in Flood.....	138
Wal and I Take a Break.....	140
Ppetherd Kazara 1548815 - aka Sam	142
Two Muddy Boys.....	146
The New Gate	150
Part of the Great WalSam Fence.....	152
View of Stockholm Archipelago	154
Locality Map	161
Original Farm Plan	165
New Farm Plan	167
Rainfall and Temperature Graphs.....	169

Introduction

Introduction:

I was born in a small village on the East Coast of England in February 1947, during one of the coldest winters in memory. Village life in Suffolk suited me, surrounded by woods and meadows to explore and I spent a great deal of my spare time during summer school holidays working on the local farm helping out with the harvesting, milking and generally making myself useful for a few shillings a week.

After my secondary school experiences I moved to London to begin a student apprenticeship with Ford Motor Company where I became less than entranced by diverse engineering topics such as Hooke's Law and the laminar flow theory of fluids in pipes. I managed to survive five years of this excitement before calling a halt, a decision which I think was welcomed by Ford Motor Company as much as myself.

Faced with material problems such as rent payments and the need to eat, I found myself a job with an insurance company, Phoenix Assurance, and became a trainee underwriting clerk. Talk about going from the sublime to the ridiculous! Thankfully I was saved from a lifetime of fire and accident insurance underwriting rules when I was selected to take part in an office systems training course, conducted by a firm of consultants with the lovely name of Booz-Allen and Hamilton. With a name like that, who could resist?

Six months of intensive training and I was released on the unsuspecting branch offices of Phoenix, armed with a stop watch and my copy of the Booz-Allen and Hamilton standard time measurements. A manual that is still in my possession, I hasten to add. By recording the actions of staff completing various forms, filing documents and so on, we were able to calculate, among other tasks, the standard time to write a letter, stuff it in an envelope and walk to the out-tray. Thus enriched, we could calculate the efficiency of each branch office and make recommendations on changes in procedures to improve efficiency. If the out-tray was two paces closer, then there could be a total time saving of almost 7 minutes and 43 seconds a month.

To relieve the boredom of office life, my fellow organisation and methods analysts (such was our exalted title) would take ourselves to the local pub on the Strand in London most evenings. This fabled pub, called The Surrey, was the home to most of the ex-patriot Australians living in London and on a good night closely resembled what I imagine to be Bazza Mackenzie's living room. Sadly this lively hot-spot closed down and it was on the closing night that I returned to my rented flat with a souvenired glass from the Surrey and the telephone number of an Australian girl.

One thing led to another and within a few months I had taken the decision to accompany the girl to Australia on her return where we would be married. It just happened that the Australian office of Phoenix Assurance was about to set up a new organisation and methods department in their Sydney

The Road to the Hermitage

office, so I was invited to become a founder member of this auspicious new section on my arrival in Sydney.

Over the next few years working with Phoenix Australia I was lucky enough to travel to all States in Australia on branch visits and I gradually became under the spell of that unusual country. Apart from these branch visits I also explored Central Australia in my motorised campervan home, converted from an ex-Government Ford Transit 'bus.



Illustration 1 My Cottage in the Blue Mountains

Changes in my personal life situation resulting from a divorce from my Australian wife in 1988 resulted with my purchase of a small cottage in Blackheath in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. Situated close to Govett's Leap, Bridal Veil Falls and Pulpit Rock, this cottage was an ideal base from which to explore the many walking tracks in the Blue Mountains, an activity that I followed regularly most weekends.

Introduction

However, the proximity to such beautiful natural wonders impressed not only me. On weekends the bush was overrun with hordes of tourists. All too soon my quiet retreat on a gravel road on the edge of the National Park had been invaded by tourists, the road covered with bitumen and the empty blocks of land on either side of my small parcel of paradise cleared and made ready for building. When a new house was built very close beside my house in Blackheath and the new residents moved in, complete with two small, very noisy dogs I started to think longingly about self-sufficiency and solitude.

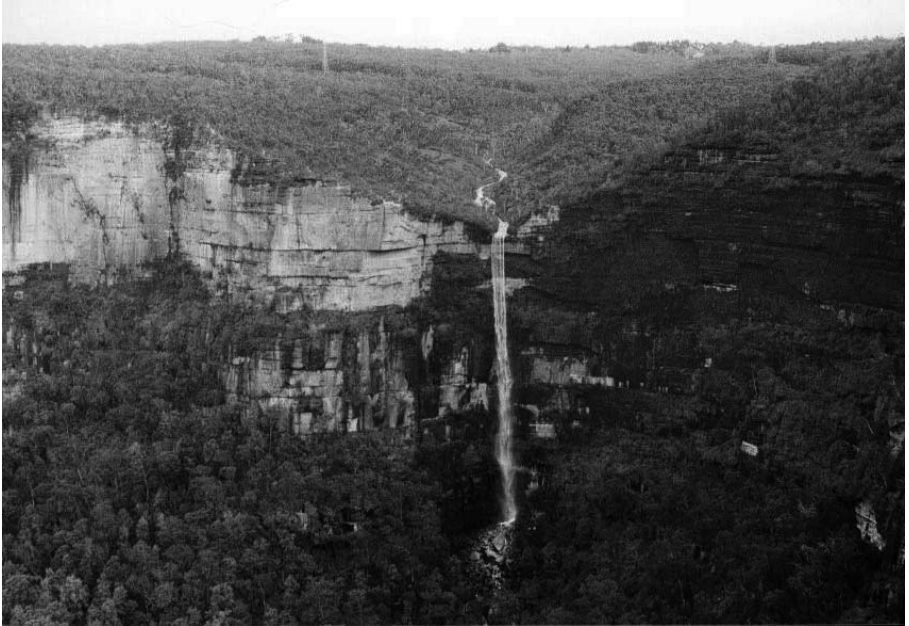


Illustration 2 Bridal Veils Falls, Blue Mountains

I had been living in Blackheath for a couple of years, firstly with my then girlfriend and for the last year or so with just my dog Wal and we had enjoyed the lifestyle. Being able to work from home was a big bonus, of course, as I had no need to take the daily commuter train trip of 2 hours each way into Sydney for work. On the few occasions when I needed to go into the city for work or meetings, I could drive in as I was usually going to be late leaving the city and did not want to be dependent on quite often late running or cancelled train services.

Now, though, the peace and quiet of small village life was being eroded by tourists and in particular new houses springing up all along my

The Road to the Hermitage

previously secluded, tree lined street. It was time to make a decision that would drastically change my lifestyle.