

PERISHER HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Issue 5 Summer 2010/11

Australian Timbers used in Skis

Most skis used in Australian ski resorts today are overwhelmingly imported from North America and Europe. However, prior to post-war globalisation and the development of light-weight synthetic laminates, most skis were crafted in Australia from local timbers. Early skis were generally carved from a single piece of wood, the properties of which included a durable straight grained timber (preferably light) that did not warp or splinter when worked with a rasp and treated with a preservative, but which could also be bent at the tip and maintain its shape when cured.

The first skis used in Kiandra were crafted from the straightest and tallest timber in the Snowy Mountains, Alpine Ash (*Eucalyptus delegatensis*). Early reports made reference to 'snow shoes' being made from the local Mountain Ash, but it is likely this nomenclature was used in a general sense and did not refer to the true Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) that grows on the lower slopes in the Victorian highlands. There is nothing to suggest that wood other than Alpine Ash was the primary source of timber for making skis in those early years around Kiandra, however, it is possible that non-local wood



Alpine Ash (Eucalyptus delegatensis)
– arguably the timber used to make the first skis used at Kiandra in the 1860s and easily procured in the areas surrounding the goldfields.

from planks and panels of discarded crates, broken carts and housing material may have also been used. Both Alpine Ash and Mountain Ash were available to those crafting their first skis further south.

As interest in snowsports grew and people started to invest more time preparing for their skiing adventure, different timbers were utilised in the manufacture of skis, often by individuals who wanted the reward of skiing on their own hand-made creations. The motivation for some was also the cost of importing skis from Europe and the limited availability of skis in Australia. Some people also imported wood from overseas to make skis.

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New Life for Kiandra Courthouse

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(Reproduced from *Resort Round-up* – Issue 32, Summer 2011)



Kiandra Courthouse as seen from the Snowy Mountains Highway prior to the commencement of the restoration project (photo by Simon Allender).

The 2011 snow season heralds an important milestone in the history of Australian snowsports. In 1861 the first accounts of organised skiing were recorded to have taken place in Kiandra, introduced by Norwegian miners partaking in the Kiandra gold rush. One-hundred and fifty years later, this recreation is now an industry, although it has long since moved on (and mostly south) from its origins as a sport in the Kiandra goldfields. Nevertheless the Kiandra Courthouse and Chalet remains an enduring testament to Kiandra's connection with the birth of recreational skiing in Australia and Kiandra's subsequent history as an early and popular skiing destination. As well as being part of Kiandra's skiing past, the building is connected with the history of Kiandra's township, gold mining and the Snowy Scheme.

The Kiandra Courthouse, built in 1890 was Kiandra's second courthouse and police quarters. It was constructed to plans of

the Colonial Architect's office in Sydney and was one of many small and stately government buildings being built across NSW in the prosperous 1880s.

The construction of such an impressive courthouse and police quarters in Kiandra well after the 1860s gold rush was representative of the hope the government had in the enduring wealth of Kiandra's gold deposit. By 1937 however, mining in Kiandra was essentially over and the building, which had already ceased use as a courthouse, was officially decommissioned from police use.

From 1937 until 1943 the former Kiandra Courthouse entered a quiet period of use as a private residence. In 1943 it was taken over by keen skiers Wally and Evelyn Reed who took advantage of Kiandra's long standing ski reputation to establish it as the 'Kiandra Chalet'. During their tenure, the Reeds made only moderate changes to the

building, including enclosing the front verandah as a bar area and adding some family accommodation and a sun room at the rear.

In 1953 Harvey and Joyce Palfrey took over the Chalet from the Reeds and tied their fortunes to Kiandra's proximity to the construction sites and camps of the Snowy Scheme. In 1959 the Palfrey's purchased a liquor licence and the bar, accommodation and ski business renamed 'Kiandra Chalet Hotel' subsequently boomed. The building was expanded and transformed into an extensive alpine-style resort complex that completely covered the original 1890s structure.

After many busy years, it was clear by 1969 that Kiandra's fortunes were changing. The Snowy Scheme was finished, Kiandra was gazetted into Kosciuszko National Park, skiing interest and infrastructure was gradually moving to Mt Selwyn



Restoration of the Kiandra Courthouse has attempted to return the building to an earlier version of its history (image courtesy of the National Library of Australia).

and the permanent township population, which had been dwindling since 1915, was down to only a handful of residents.

In 1971 a consortium took over the lease of the Kiandra Chalet Hotel but a disastrous snow year in 1973 ended the venture. From 1974 the building was used for worker accommodation by the Department of Main Roads, now the Roads and Traffic Authority, until it fell from use in 1999. For 10 years the building, though familiar and much loved by local

communities for its history and associations, was boarded up and sections of its deteriorating 1960s functions progressively removed.

In 2009 the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service commenced a long term program of restoration works aimed at establishing the Kiandra Courthouse and Chalet as an interpretation centre along with an exhibition space for local history, café and rest facilities. At the end of May 2010 the completion of

the first stage of works, which restored the courtroom and reconstructed the front verandah, was celebrated with a public open day. The final restoration plan for the Courthouse will incorporate both 1890s and 1960s building styles.

For more information on the ongoing revitalisation of this important building please go to www.flickr.com and search on the term 'kiandraproject'.



The front of Kiandra Courthouse as seen from the Snowy Mountains Highway during winter 2010 (photo by Jennifer Hewitson).



The first phase of the Kiandra Courthouse restoration included re-establishing the verandah and the removal of the paint to expose the original brickwork (photo by Jennifer Hewitson).



The Kiandra Chalet showing the addition of 1960s fabric to the original 1890s building (photo by Barry Wrenford).



One of two internal rooms refurbished. This is the chalet room, the other restored room is the courtroom at the front of the building (photo by Jennifer Hewitson).

Johnnie Abbottsmith: a mountain legend

Johnnie Abbottsmith, 'Abbo' to his friends, was born in 1918. The son of a surveyor, he first came to the Snowy Mountains in his teens, working as geologist's offsider for a gold mining company around Cooma. He then went on to work at the Hotel Kosciusko, first as a grease monkey in the engine room and then as a ski instructor. Between winters, the young adventurer made a couple of trips across the Pacific with the Niagara Steamship Company and worked with a mining company in Canada's remote north-east.

With the outbreak of war in 1939, he joined the AIF and, as a member of the famed 'Rats of Tobruk', saw action in North Africa and the Middle East. He also had a stint as sergeant in charge of equipment and ski instructor with Colonel Bob Savage's ski troops in the mountains in Lebanon. In 1942 he was badly wounded at El Alamein and shipped back to Sydney – "unfit for combat". However, this did not stop Johnnie signing on with the US Small Ships Service operating in the islands north of Australia.

In 1946, back as a ski instructor at the Hotel Kosciusko, he met and married Phyllis (Phyl) Taylor, a fellow staff member. The Abbottsmith's first home was Betts Camp, where they lived while Johnnie was employed by the Kosciusko State Park to install radios in mountain huts.

The next year, inspired by several meetings with Antarctic explorer Sir Douglas Mawson, Johnnie signed on as a diesel mechanic with the Australian Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) to establish a base on Heard Island. As a member of the 14 man team



Johnnie Abbottsmith – one of the revered 'Rats of Tobruk' and member of the 1st Australian Ski Corps School during World War II (photo courtesy of John Davis).

that spent just over a year on the island, he also took part in exploration, mapping, geological and wildlife studies, and carried out weather observations. The ingenious snow melter he designed and constructed was still in use in 1953. To mark his contributions to the expedition, Mawson named a glacier on the west side of the island the Abbottsmith Glacier.

Back in the mountains, Johnnie worked for the Water and Irrigation Commission measuring river flows and heights. This experience, coupled with his knowledge of the area and weather work on Heard Island, made him the ideal choice to establish and operate the Snowy Mountains Authority (SMA) Weather Station at Spencers Creek. While at Spencers Creek he had a dog team to help him get around in the winter and he built a wind-operated generator to supply some power

to the building, probably the first alternative power produced by the SMA.

He also had some fun with the guests at the nearby Chalet at Charlotte Pass. Not only did he carve out a giant's path down the slope in front of the Chalet by making two parallel runs on one ski, two or three metres apart, he would often be seen to shoot over Pulpit Rock after making snow depth readings at the Pass, stocks under one arm and making entries in his notebook as he skied down the slope. As John Davis says in his memoir, Johnnie was "not too bad on skis, being on the state team...on a couple of occasions".

By 1952 it was time for the Abbottsmith family to leave the isolation of Spencers Creek and move to Smiggin Holes. With four children, access to schools and other services was becoming more important. Johnnie built a house at Smiggins, left the SMA and built the first Perisher-Smiggins ski lift, which commenced operation in August 1952 and ran until 1959. The sled dogs moved to Smiggins with the family and, with this all-breed team, Johnnie started the first Smiggin Holes to Perisher transport service. As the number of lodges in Perisher grew, he acquired an ex-Chalet snowmobile, pensioned off the dogs and in 1953 started the area's first motorised over-snow transport, which he ran until 1956.

In 1955, Johnnie had built and was experimenting with a portable rope tow at various sites in Perisher Valley. That winter, for the first time, he successfully hauled a skier up a hill in Perisher by mechanical means, other than

by snowmobile. The following year he built the Village Tow in the Telemark Basin and, with Svere Kaaten, the Tow Hut Tow (later known as the Big Tow) at the northern end of the valley. Both tows had lots of problems in the heavy winter of 1956 but ran fairly smoothly the following year.

Members of the early lodges in Perisher Valley - Snow Revellers, Telemark, Orana, University, CSIRO, Cooma, Warrugang, Kandahar and Sydney - came to rely on 'Abbo' for help with construction and supply of firewood during the summer. His ingenuity and pragmatism solved many problems in the then 'isolated' valley.

Not only a pioneer in the areas of over-snow transport and ski lifts, Johnnie also devised a system for providing weather reports from the snowfields. Each Monday, he took a roll of film showing snow cover and conditions at The Chalet, Perisher and Smiggins, delivered it to the post office at

the Hotel Kosciusko and posted it to Dick Gilkes at Sydney's first ski shop. Dick had the film processed and displayed the pictures before the next weekend.

With the growing size and complexity of the Perisher-Smiggins area, Johnnie decided to leave Smiggins and establish the Snowline Caravan Park, first at the Creel and later at the edge of the new Lake Jindabyne at the junction of the Kosciusko Road and the Alpine Way.

To keep some connection with the snow, he acquired the agency for Evinrude snow cruisers and in 1965 made a skidoo run on poor snow from Kiandra to Thredbo in eight hours, a record that possibly will not be broken.

Johnnie eventually retired, cutting his ties completely with the mountains. He and Phyl roamed the country from Coober Pedy to Cape York and had many adventures, such as mining for opals at Andamooka and being



Johnnie outside The Village Ski Tow in the Telemark Basin, Perisher Valley (photo courtesy of John Davis).

part of the Bi-Centennial Camel Race from Alice Springs to the Gold Coast.

Although Johnnie Abbottsmith, truly a mountain legend, died in 1989, the Abbottsmith name lives on in the mountains. Phyl now lives in Queanbeyan, daughter Fay (Pendergast) and family in Jindabyne, Garry near Queanbeyan and Diane (Hampshire) in Bombala.

Based on John Davis' memoir titled "A History of the Early Development of Perisher-Smiggins", with some additional information from ANARE and the National Library of Australia.

History Book

The PHS has recently commissioned the writing of a history on the development of skiing for those areas accessed by the Kosciuszko Road. This is a most significant milestone.

The initiative for this publication came from Andrew Harrigan - NPWS Manager, Visitor and Business Services Section - who recognised the lack of an easily accessible publication documenting the history of the Perisher Range resorts. Two years ago he approached the PHS suggesting the need to fill this gap and offering NPWS financial assistance to produce a book on the subject. NPWS have

since subscribed \$20,000 toward the project which was kindly matched by Perisher Blue with another \$20,000. The PHS has also allocated \$10,000 from its budget, ensuring that funding for the publication is secured.

Until recently, one of the challenges was to select and engage an appropriate author. Fortunately our dilemma was solved by the generous offer from Peter Southwell-Keely, the KAC club historian, to write the book for free. In 2009, Peter completed a wonderful book documenting the first one hundred years of Kosciusko Alpine Club, "Out on the Tops" - a great read (if you

don't have your copy go to www.kac.org.au).

The aim of the project is to provide some history on all areas and establishments along the Kosciuszko Road including the resort areas of Charlotte Pass, Guthega, Perisher Valley and Smiggin Holes, and to present this information in an affordable book, well-illustrated with photographs.

Any suggestions of people who should be included and/or interviewed for the book project are welcome, so please contact the PHS if you have someone in mind.

Perisher Cup

The Perisher Cup competition was initiated by the NSW Ski Association the year after it was formed in the early 1950s and is now conducted by Cooma Ski Club. With Anthony Evans (Cooma) as enthusiastic Convenor, the event has grown significantly in recent years. Originally an inter-club event, entries are now accepted from other groups. Thanks to these enthusiasts for keeping the event alive.

The Perisher Cup is a team event with four participants, each of whom competes in three events:

Cross Country 4x2 km relay - all times to count;

Giant Slalom - best three times to count; and

Jump - best three jumps (by three different competitors to count).

The Perisher Cup weekend provides another occasion for clubs to prove their credentials as supporters of the sport of skiing. We are looking forward to a time when we can resurrect the 'Perisher Pot' for the most improved team.

Below are last year's results. A complete result sheet will be posted on the PHS website.

Results of Perisher Cup 2010

Perisher Cup – Open event

- 1st Guthega
- 2nd Cooma Stallions
- 3rd The Man From Snowy River
- 4th Sundeck

Perisher Bowl Women's Team

- 1st Cooma Chicks
- 2nd Canberra Alpine B

Perisher Plate

- 1st Technology B
- 2nd Cooma Degenerates

Fastest Man on Mountain – GS

Rupert Winkler - Guthega

Fastest Women on Mountain – GS

Emily Frain – Canberra Alpine

Get Ready – It's on again!!

58th Running of The Perisher Cup

17-18 September 2011

Motivate your club, Rally
your team, Book your
accommodation

Clubs – start
your managers!

Managers – gather your
competitors!

Research Hint

Is your club publishing a history? A number of clubs have celebrated their 50th birthday with the production of commemorative books, booklets, videos and photo albums. Perhaps PHS has some useful resources or information that could assist your project or vice-versa; may be you have some useful information that you could share with the PHS so this can be broadcast through our newsletter and on the website.

Just the other day PHS received this interesting hint passed on to us by Narraburra Ski Club.

"We are researching our history as a club, so we can put together an album of early photos of building the lodge in 1964-65 and other information about the registration of the club as a Co-Operative. We have found that you can request searches at the Registry of Co-Operatives and Clubs Incorporated for things like the Application for a Co-Op, List of original Directors and of most interest a list of original members. I'm not sure if you know about this service, but mention it in case other Club Co-Ops would like to do the same.

The initial request can be made by email at Registrysearches@services.nsw.gov.au or to the supervisor at annette.robinson@services.nsw.gov.au. There is a fee for the search. It cost us \$40 for 12 pages."

Kosciuszko Huts Association

- They are doing great work in maintaining heritage huts.
- Have you considered supporting their work?
- Would you like to offer practical assistance with hut re-builds?
- Super people doing a super job.
- Become a supporter and join as a member.
- Have a look at <http://khuts.org> for details and an interesting read.

150 years of Alpine Skiing in Australia

2011 marks an important anniversary for skiing in Australia. In 1861 Kiandra was in its second year as a gold rush town and many miners had reached the conclusion that lode had been pretty much picked over and there was no easy gold to be found. So as winter approached many left for other opportunities in the belief that what was left was not worth enduring a harsh snowy winter for.

However, it is well documented that during the winter of 1861 the remaining residents of the Kiandra tent-town found skiing down adjacent slopes their outdoor recreation of choice. They had made skis from local timber with

a strap arrangement over the instep. Pictures by Charles Kerry survive today as testament of those early skiing years. A legacy of this goldmining 'play-time' is the snowsports industry that we enjoy today...and look how far we've come!

Together, the PHS and the Thredbo Historical Society (President Alan Fredericks) have lobbied for the issue of a commemorative postage stamp to mark the occasion. Whilst we await confirmation, indications from Australia Post are that this will happen. No doubt there will be many celebrations to mark this important anniversary during the coming winter.



The start of a girls' snowshoe race, Kiandra (original image by Charles Kerry).



Tobogganing at Kiandra (original image by Charles Kerry).



Kiandra – where it all started (original image by Charles Kerry).



Kiandra mail run (original image by Charles Kerry).



Using skis like a toboggan (original image by Charles Kerry).



Skiing in the main street of Kiandra (original image by Charles Kerry).

Annual Dinner – The Chalet at Charlotte Pass

Come one, come all to The Chalet at Charlotte Pass for the fourth PHS Annual Dinner, to be held on Saturday 11 June 2011 (June long-weekend).

The Chalet has a long and enviable tradition of sensational partying and I am sure we can help keep it alive in 2011. Invitations are posted and e-mailed to lots of people from our mailing list but be assured all are welcome - the more the merrier. So when bookings open be quick; every year the event grows in popularity and places are limited.

The dinner will be held regardless of weather conditions and the ticket price will include Skitube (kindly donated by Perisher Blue) and transport to and from The Chalet from Perisher Valley.

Australian Timbers used in Skis

Continued from front page...

The following list of native timber species from which skis are known to have been carved has been collected from the literature, oral histories and from skis in museums and collections. However, if you know of skis being made from any other native timber, please contact the PHS to share your knowledge. We can place this information on the PHS website. Any stories that may accompany hand-crafted skis are also welcome.

Eucalyptus cypellocarpa –
Mountain Grey Gum

Eucalyptus delegatensis –
Alpine Ash

Eucalyptus regnans –
Mountain Ash

Corymbia maculata (formerly
known as *Eucalyptus maculata*) –
Spotted Gum

Acacia obliquinervia –
Mountain Hickory Wattle

Acacia melanoxylon –
Black Wood



Acacia melanoxylon (Blackwood) is a wide spread wattle species that grows as a tall shrub/small tree.



Corymbia maculata (Spotted Gum) is a very popular hardwood that grows on the east coast of Australia. The skis that Bert Gardner donated to the PHS were made from this species with toe-plates retrieved from the ruins of the Hotel Kosciuszko following the disastrous fire.

New Members

The PHS extends a warm welcome to the following new members who have joined since the last newsletter was published in Winter 2010.

Paul Anderson*

Peter Aynsley

Darryl Collman*

Garry Fischer*

Alan Fredericks

Karralika Ski Club

Richard Macready*

Geoffrey Mettam

Gina Pinkas

John Sim

Sundowner Ski Club

Bruce Vizard

**5 year individual membership*

Very late start to the season not the first ...

Our 2010 snowseason did not kick-off in earnest until early August, however, spare a thought for the early tow operators and skiers in Perisher Valley when The Big Tow, Cooma Tow and the new T-bar were all ready and waiting for the approaching 1959 winter. Unhappily, 1959 was recorded as one of the latest seasons in memory, with the road still open up to The Chalet at Charlotte Pass in the second week of August (noted in John Davis' memoir, "A History of the Early Development of Perisher-Smiggin").