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A photograph of the southern terminal of the ropeway.

Old ropeway dug up on daring adventure

A long-forgotten engineering feat in the Blue Mountains was back in the spotlight this year, reports JENNIE CURTIN.

It was an ambitious, even audacious plan – to string a three-kilometre wire ropeway across Katoomba's rugged Jamison Valley, attach a series of metal buckets and use a kind of pulley system to bring mined oil shale to the escarpment above.

Even today it would pose enormous challenges, but this scheme was being planned in 1889, well before mechanised cranes and helicopters were available to help with construction.

Against the odds, however, the Bleichert Aerial Ropeway was completed (named after the German who devised the scheme) and for six months it ferried the precious oil shale out of the valley.

But success was only short lived. Within six months, the rugged terrain which put enormous stresses and strains on the pulley system proved too much and the ropeway collapsed. Dozens of the coal buckets, each weighing about 300 kilograms, plummeted to the valley floor, leaving broken ropes swinging from the 47 wooden supporting towers and ending the dreams of Katoomba Colliery.

Now, after 120 years, a small federal government grant and an arduous field trip, the ropeway's remains – which lie partly on Scenic World land and partly in the National Park – have been fully documented. The aim

is to have the whole thing heritage-listed.

Peter Shadie, CEO of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, was one of the intrepid team of historians, archaeologists, bushwalkers and National Parks workers who scoured the Jamison to find as many relics as they could.

For a total of seven days, the team trekked through and around very steep terrain to uncover, photograph, measure and record 362 individual items they found. These included a large number of buckets, tower poles, ropes and myriad parts of the mechanism which kept the whole thing moving.

For Mr Shadie, it was a very worthwhile project but also an exciting adventure.

"It was fascinating," he said. "For me it was an *Indiana Jones* meets *Time Travellers* type of adventure. There is this amazing array of mine shafts, landslips, buckets and mysterious rusting parts of the old system down there."

Not to mention cold weather and rain to contend with. The team embarked on the project in mid-winter last year.

"Several of us said - mid-winter, are you kidding?" Mr Shadie recalled. "But then we discovered it's much better because the leeches aren't active, or the snakes."

It was also pretty arduous walking in and out each time, though occasionally they used

[making news]

the Scenic Railway to save their legs. "We were able to walk out the way we came in or we would follow the Ruined Castle trail back around," Mr Shadie said. "The team did climb out a couple of times back up the Golden Stairs which was a bit of a grind."

The four archaeologists who accompanied them were from the Federated Archaeological Information Management Systems Project, which is developing digital tools, including mobile phone apps, to make it easier to collect and record data.

Director of the project, associate professor Shawn Ross from Macquarie University, said the trip gave the team the chance to test their own tools in the field.

"It was very valuable for us to go out and actually use the software," he said.

Mr Ross has most recently been doing large-scale archaeological work in Bulgaria, so he was used to some physical activity in his job.

"But walking in the Jamison was one of the more challenging environments I've ever walked in. Parts of it were very steep and all of it was overgrown," he said.

Mr Ross is responsible for photographing the relics, which again presented some problems.

"From a photography perspective it's fairly dark under the canopy down there so every-

thing had to be shot on a tripod. And setting up a tripod on a 30-degree slope was something else."

His colleague, Penny Crook, an archaeologist from La Trobe University, said the ropeway was not only historically important, "it also has aesthetic and social significance, as well as research potential".

She said she was fascinated by "seeing it in its context, seeing the scale of the inclines and the effort needed to get it up and running".

Philip Hammon, whose family built and still operate Scenic World and who has spent many years researching the ropeway's history, also joined the team a couple of times.

"It was a great benefit to have someone like Philip Hammon there," said Mr Shadie. "He could really help us understand all of the bits there. I knew about the mining heritage of the valley in general but I didn't know much about the ropeway itself."

Mr Hammon, whose book *The Burning Mists of Time* chronicles the history of mining in the Jamison, also proved invaluable in helping to pinpoint some of the major features, including the so-called tension pit - literally a hole in the ground used to re-tension the cable and keep it taut.

"I've been aware of the ropes that were



Some of the remnants from the Jamison.



Georgia Burnett, a PhD archaeology student, John Merson, founding director of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, Peter Shadie, CEO of the institute, archaeologist Penny Crook, Chris Banffy, NPWS ranger, and Philip Hammon after a presentation of the findings of the aerial ropeway survey project.

across the track forever and then when we were building [at the Scenic Railway] back in the 80s, it went through where the top station was and we found bits of bolts and ropes and wheels," Mr Hammon said. "That engendered my curiosity."

Some years later, during further work at the railway, he found a piece of rope which encouraged him to uncover the full story of the ropeway.

Mr Hammon has made the steep descent into the Jamison several times to seek out remnants that have lain hidden for more than a century.

Unfortunately, many items have been stolen, he said. "It's a real shame that people just can't leave things alone."

This team did leave things alone. They conducted a surface archaeological survey so only cleaned away leaf litter and dirt to allow the artefacts to be photographed and measured in situ.

They were also accompanied - and helped enormously - by very experienced walkers from the Springwood Bushwalking Club as well as by wise heads from National Parks, who ensured they got in and out of the

rugged country safely.

Chris Banffy, a Katoomba-based National Parks ranger who went with the team, said the sheer scale of the infrastructure was "amazing".

It was also one of the first economic activities in the Mountains.

"There was no tourism at that time. It was mainly resource extraction. In essence, this was the start of Katoomba, this mining heritage was the major key play prior to tourism kicking in," he said.

He was tickled to find the remains of many of the cottages built by the miners near the Ruined Castle.

"And they all had buckets [from the ropeway]. When it collapsed they used the buckets to store water."

The World Heritage Institute has applied for another small grant to prepare a submission to have the aerial ropeway placed on the NSW Heritage Register. Listing will help ensure this unique part of the Mountains' story is preserved.

Philip Hammon and Phillip Pells' 2009 book, *The Burning Mists of Time*, is available at Megalong Bookshop in Leura.



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