St Bernard’s Hospice, Gold and Skiing

Alluvial gold was discovered in the Livingstone Creek, near Omeo, in 1852 and the population of Omeo had exceeded 300 persons by 1857. Gold was also discovered on the Dargo High Plains at Grant and Crooked River. By 1861 there were around 500 people at the Dargo High Plains diggings and 350 at Omeo and Swifts Creek.

As the Ovens River Valley and Beechworth were important goldfields with good links to Melbourne, bridle tracks were quickly cut to link Harrietville in the Ovens Valley with Omeo and the Dargo High Plains.

The track junction was at Mount St. Bernard (1540m altitude) and a hospice was built there in 1863/64 with log walls and shingle roof. It was run by ‘Mother’ Morrell and ‘Sailor Bill’ Boustead and provided food and overnight shelter to travellers.

Between May to November, access beyond the Hospice was difficult particularly when ice formed on CRB Hill, Mount Blowhard and other exposed slopes.

Quartz reef mining had supplanted alluvial mining in the Omeo District by 1882 and heavy machinery was needed to crush the quartz and release the gold. To facilitate this the track from Harrietville to Omeo was upgraded with the first buggy journey using the new road, in April 1883.

A second building was constructed at the Hospice to accommodate the increased numbers of road users. A flock of European mountain goats provided meat and milk, whilst vegetables were grown at Mount St. Bernard to augment the wheat and wine brought in by pack-horse from Harrietville.

There is only sketchy information about skiing at Mount St. Bernard in the 1880’s and 1890’s. Mr. R. W. Wilkinson tells us, in a 1934 Ski Year Book, that he hired a packhorse in Harrietville for a half-crown (two shillings and sixpence) to take his belongings to St. Bernard for a winter holiday. ‘The skis at St. Bernard were of split woolly-butt, shaped and well turned up at the point, with leather boot-top fastenings for our feet but innocent of heel straps. Armed with a pole, long and strong, we journeyed to Hotham and Loch (seven and nine miles
away respectively). Our only waxes were soap and floor polish.” “When there was bad weather on top, we followed the old Bairnsdale track down the Dargo for many miles, a sheltered and beautiful trip, with its richly verdured and diversified gullies under snow”. He also states that the lessee of the Hospice worked a mine on the Dargo in the winter as well as keeping the Hospice open for the few winter visitors who spent one or more nights there.

It is quite likely at this time that skis were being used by miners for both access and recreation on the winter snows on the Dargo High Plains and elsewhere in the Victorian Alps, but very little information has been recorded in easily accessed records.

Once the coaches stopped running from Harrietville in May each year, the mail between Harrietville to Omeo was conveyed on foot through the snow, with the mailman and his dog making the five day return trip once a week and staying over-night at the Mount St. Bernard Hospice and at Cobungra Station.

Tom Roberts, a leading Australian impressionist, visited the Hospice in early winter 1889 to paint the mailman on his trip to Omeo through the snow. (Photo 1) Roberts completed this painting at the actual site and not in a studio. From top of the CRB Hill, you can readily identify the location on the Great Alpine Road (looking towards Mount Hotham) from where Tom Roberts captured this scene. The direction and length of the shadows cast by the mailman and the trees, suggest the time was about 9am to 10am,
which is consistent with the mailman having set out earlier that morning from the Hospice, bound for Omeo.

The first recorded winter ski crossing of the Victorian Alps was made in 1900 by the Petersen brothers, Peter and Harry. Leaving their mine at Square Mountain (marked as Petersens’ Mine in Figure 1.) they travelled on home-made skis to Brandy Creek where other miners were working underground through the winter. They crossed Mount Hotham and descended the Bon Accord Spur into Harrietville the next day. They returned up the St Bernard road then down into the left branch of the Dargo River and through miles of rough country. They then climbed out of the Dargo Gorge and returned to their mine. (Hull, 1990).

In 1925 the Hospice was sold to Barney Rush and refurbished to meet the growing demand for winter accommodation created by the increasing popularity of skiing. Photo 8. is a postcard Mick Hull received in May 1932, confirming his group’s booking for the Hospice photo, but the skier is holding a steering pole, suggesting the photo may have been taken in the 1920’s or even earlier.

Mick Hull had visited the Hospice in the summer of 1929 and, after a week learning to ski at the Buffalo Chalet in 1931, did so again in July and August 1932 and in August 1933.

His party drove to Harrietville and hired horses to take them to the snowline near the Hospice. The horses walked briskly up the steep road for about two hours until they began to flounder in wet snow halfway up their legs near the eight-mile post (13km) from Harrietville. The skiers dismounted, “tied the stirrups across saddles, leaving the reins slack enough and turned the horses downhill with a slap on the rump. Off they went with harness jingling, bound for home and a feed.” They skied the remaining 5 miles (8 km) to the Hospice with their packs on their backs.

In his book “Mountain Memories”, Mick Hull speaks highly of the skiing at the Hospice. Its ski slopes were quite sheltered, so that if a blizzard were to be blowing from the north, one simply skied in comparative comfort on the southern slopes. There was also a variety of tours that could be
made, such as to The Twins, Rene’s Lookout and toward the Dargo High Plains. During Mick’s August visit, his group attempted skiing along the Hotham road from St. Bernard, but their skis lacked metal edges and they were stopped by the ice on Mount Blowhard before they could reach Mount Hotham, their goal.

Enthusiasts had been skiing at Mt. Buffalo since the 1890’s using Staker’s Track for access onto the Buffalo Plateau and staying in the hut shown in Photo 9. This “old hut” was located near to the site where the Mt Buffalo Chalet was built in 1910 and was later demolished by the Authorities. Pioneer skier R.W. Wilkinson tells of an early morning ski trip in the 1890’s from the “old hut” to the Horn, with its magnificent panoramic view of the Victorian Alps.

From its opening in 1910 until the 1950’s, the Buffalo Chalet was the most easily accessible ski resort for Victorians, offering train travel from the main population centres to the foot of the mountain at Porepunkah and a connecting bus that took skiers and skaters to the door of the Chalet. In 1910 it had twenty times the amount of on-snow accommodation then available elsewhere in Victoria and introduced large numbers of Victorians to both winter sports. Many of Victoria’s ski pioneers of the 1920’s to the 1950’s, learnt to ski on the Buffalo Plateau.

Victorian on-snow ski accommodation had also substantially increased in 1925 by the construction of a 28 bed commercial lodge at about 1500m altitude in the snow country below Mount Feathertop. Known as the Feathertop Bungalow, it was operated by a company seeking to build a major recreational complex on Mount Feathertop, but the company could not obtain long term tenure of the land and the Bungalow was sold to the Victorian Railways, who operated it until it was burnt down in the 1939 fires.
The increasing traffic on the Great Alpine Road caused the Country Roads Board (CRB) to build a stone cottage on Hotham at about 1800m altitude, which was christened ‘Hotham Heights’ when opened in December 1925. Bill Spargo was the local CRB overseer who, as part of his CRB road maintenance duties, also managed the cottage, firstly for visitors during the seven months of each year when the road was open and then, from 1928, it operated for 12 months of the year with Bill Spargo as full-time accommodation manager.

With the Great Alpine Road seasonally blocked by snow, winter access to Hotham Heights in the 1930’s, either involved horses (Photo 12), or a long cross-country ski trip with packs.

‘Hotham Heights’ was able to cater for 20 visitors at a time. The Victorian Railways took it over from the CRB in 1933 so that it could be operated in conjunction with the Feathertop Bungalow and the Buffalo Chalet, with integrated travel and catering arrangements. The 1934 Ski Year Book said “Until Mount Bogong is more fully explored, Hotham will probably be regarded by skiers as having the best snow “ with a long snow season.

The Friday 13 January 1939 bushfires devastated the Victorian Alps. The Mount St. Bernard Hospice, Feathertop Bungalow and ‘Hotham Heights’ were all burnt to the ground, fortunately without any fatalities. Half of Omeo was also burnt down, including the hospital and many businesses in Day Avenue, including the three-storey Golden Age Hotel. Of the three destroyed buildings in the snowfields near Mount Hotham, only ‘Hotham Heights’ was replaced. Amazingly, a larger Hotham Heights Chalet was completed by the Victorian Railways in time for the opening of the 1939 ski season on the King’s Birthday weekend in June 1939.

Photo 13 shows the rebuilt chalet with some of Hotham’s famous ski runs in the background. They are (from left to right) Australia Drift, Harris’ Horror and Avalanche Gully.