

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BRINDABELLA BUSHWALKING CLUB

**by
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Based on research and information provided by Milton Turner

The Early Years 1969-1977

The Brindabella Bushwalking Club began in 1969 as the YMCA Family Bushwalking Club. A number of parents whose children were YMCA members, hearing of the walks their children enjoyed at the YMCA camp at Sturt Island, decided to take their children on a bushwalk. This was so successful that other walks were organised, involving more parents and children and leading directly to the formation of the club, as part of the YMCA.¹

The first AGM of the club took place in May 1969. Office bearers were elected, a constitution was adopted and participants listened to a talk on the proposal for a national park in the south of the ACT.

In the early years the club held monthly meetings (later three-monthly) and from the minutes of these meetings we learn that a lot of attention was directed to raising money (button days and cake stalls were tried) and to the question of membership fees - some things never change! From the start the club held car camps, pack walks and social events as well as day walks, which were always the focus of its activities. It encouraged walkers to take first aid and map reading courses and to look after the bush.

Shortly after its formation the club had a membership of 19 families. Within two years this had grown to 28 families and three single walkers and by 1975 to 36 families and eight singles.

Initially the walks program covered a three-month period and walks were held on one Sunday of each month. The number of walks gradually increased so that in 1974 there were 19 walks (7 easy, 10 medium and 2 hard) and three camps. Walks were concentrated in the Orroral Valley, Tidbinbilla and Corin Dam-Gibraltar Falls area, but also extended into New South Wales and camps were held in the Snowy Mountains and at the South Coast.

Attendance on walks averaged 18 adults and 12 children on easy walks and 12 adults and 6 children on medium walks. Hard walks were not well attended, although some argued that this was because of poor weather rather than lack of enthusiasm.

¹ Letter from Mr Eric Boyson MBE, a former director of the YMCA in Canberra

The difficulty of finding suitable leaders was an issue from the start. New leaders were assisted by experienced leaders until they gained confidence but in 1975 there were still only eight regular leaders. By 1976 walks were being held fortnightly (on Sundays) and demand was such that 'unofficial' walks were held on some of the other Sundays.

In its early years the club tried hard to recruit new members, although it was not until 1976 that it could afford to place 'a small advertisement' in the *Canberra Times*. The effect was dramatic. On the next walk - to Fitz's Hill - 77 people turned up. This walk made a big impression on club members. John Hardwick recalls:

The first time the club advertised in the Canberra Times for new members we made the mistake of advertising a particular walk, the following weekend. Seventy seven people turned up for Jeff Colwell's walk, complete with rugs, handbags and town shoes. Unperturbed, Jeff set off across Fitz's Hill, like the pied piper except for the flute. Future advertisements referred enquiries to the Club Secretary.

There was consternation among club members at '... the devastation to the undergrowth when groups as large as this tramp through the bush' and 'the tendency to destroy the character of a bushwalk.' Leaders were subsequently advised of 'the need to count the number of walkers at the beginning and end of the walk as well as at lunch time.'

The Committee considered initiating pre-registration, splitting large groups and increasing the number of walks but was finally persuaded that 'our concern might well be premature, that there could be considerable wastage over the next month or so', which proved to be the case.

At around this time further innovations were introduced. These included an orienteering walk (not successful and not repeated), an information sheet for new walkers, establishment of the position of safety officer - John Paynter was the first- and the organisation of exploratory walks, an initiative of Jeff Colwell. These were very successful, with seven such walks taking place in 1977.

The original purpose of the club was to encourage parents to walk with their children and in the early years many children participated, although not very enthusiastically according to some parents.

We tried to involve our two children in FBI walks when they were about 10 or 11 years old but they disliked the hard slog, which was made only slightly more bearable if they stayed up front with the leaders. (Ailsa and Tony Lawton)

We as parents were enthusiastic members but our children, less so. Our two, aged about 10 and 11 at that time, found all-day walks in the bush rather boring, especially if there were not others of their age for company ...but they did enjoy some of the walks when there were lots of other children and especially the car camps, with a fire to sit around at night. (Jeff and Meg Colwell).

In early February 1975 we joined the Family Bushwalkers together with our three children...Our first walk with the club was on a hot, dry February day up to the Rendezvous Creek cave paintings. We walked along the creek for some time looking into the now stagnant pools, to see what form of life still existed there. A dead cow! Hardly life, but of great interest to our two boys, who talked about it for days. Next weekend, struggling to get unwilling children to the meeting place on time I was told - 'we will only come, Mum, if there's another dead cow!' (Colin and Val Boreham)

Even in the early days however, there were sometimes tensions between family walkers and others.

We went on our first bushwalk with the club when Kelly was four weeks old [June 1969]. It was from Smoker's Gap heading towards Billy Billy Rocks.... It was a freezing day, not sunny. There was snow on the ground and we had to climb over a lot of fallen logs. I carried Kelly in an overnight bag because she was too little to put in the back-carrier. We were last back to the cars and by that time most people had left. Even though this was a family bushwalking club, most of the active members were walkers from way back and liked to go FAST. (Leonie Bubb, previously Paynter)

Our first walk with the Club, probably 1970 or 1971, was one led by Ray Franzi to Mt Gudgenby. I phoned his home and asked whether we as a family could attend his walk. I gave the details of our family - children aged 10, 8 and 4 - and Ray invited us to join the walk. I had not heard of this Mt Gudgenby, but the lure of good views was all we needed. I can only guess what the other members of the group thought when we turned up with a four year old. We made it - but I was stiff for several days afterwards, having carried our youngest in my rucksack. (John Hardwick)

Excerpts from the walks reports of the time give an indication of some of the highs (and lows) of the walks, and would be familiar to any current walker.

A beautiful day. Climbed 2000 feet to the top of Coree in two and a half hours. (Dick and Clare Hughes, Mt Coree, 5 May 1976)

Lost half an hour waiting for six members who missed the turn into the parking area and were not seen again. (John Hardwick, Glendale, 8 August 1976)

One walker hurt his knee and an obliging picnicker along the road drove him back to the cars. (Dick and Clare Hughes, Honeysuckle Creek, 5 September 1976)

The Middle Years 1977-1990

In 1977 the club formally separated from the YMCA and became simply the Family Bushwalkers and, after incorporation later that year, the Family Bushwalkers Incorporated (FBI). The separation was friendly and took place because both clubs recognised that the Family Bushwalkers was now sufficiently strong and sufficiently distinct from the YMCA to warrant independent status.

During the decade or so that followed, the club continued to thrive. By 1990 it had 168 memberships and as the majority of these were family memberships the actual number of members was well over three hundred.

The number of activities also increased during this period. In 1977 the aim was to schedule one easy, one medium and one hard walk per month, with a car camp on some of the free weekends. There were 12 regular leaders. The number and variety of walks expanded dramatically throughout this period. By 1979 walks were offered every Sunday and in 1984 some Saturday walks were introduced, as an experiment. These were so successful that they have been retained ever since.

Other innovations during the period included:

- cross over walks (1983)
- introductory pack walks, with prior briefing of new pack walkers (1984)
- moonlight walks (1986)
- joint cycling/walking trips (1987)
- introduction of a new grade of walk - very easy (1988)
- mid week walks (one in 1989 and four in 1990)
- champagne walk to Mt Ainslie (1989)
- three-day navigation course (1990)
- two youth walks (both cancelled through lack of interest (1990))

During this period attendance at social functions became too great for private houses and from 1983 these were held in public venues notably, for some years, the Forrest Bowling Club. The number of social events was reduced from the five per year which had customarily been held up to this time.

After establishment of the FBI in 1977 the number of club business meetings was greatly reduced, being confined to AGMs plus two walks committee/executive committee meetings per year, unless a pressing issue required the calling of a special meeting. This change reflected members' wish to focus on the main purpose of the club - walking.

The concept of life membership was introduced in 1988 to recognise the contribution of early club members with a continuing and active interest in the club.

The minutes of all the AGMs during this period refer to the difficulty of attracting, training and retaining walks leaders. However, the club's success in doing so is evident from the number of activities scheduled for 1990, as follows:

- * 69 day walks - average attendance 12
- * 11 pack walks - average attendance 8
- * 7 car camps - average attendance 13.

There was at least one walk every weekend, and usually two (although no activities were scheduled for December and January).

Excerpts from the walks reports of the time make interesting reading.

Much fallen timber made the walk hard. View from trig not particularly rewarding. (Ray Franzi, McKeahnie Trig, 22 October 1978)

Lost. Arrived Orroral observatory 9.15pm (Jeff and Meg Colwell, Nursery Swamp, 4 March 1979)

Second day enlivened by tremendous storm - rain, hail, thunder and lightning. A number of walkers discovered that Goretex jackets have their limitations. (Mary Lindsay, Caloola Farm pack walk, 7-8 October 1987)

One of the most beautiful day walks I know for coastal scenery, birds and flowers. The bush did not let us down this time either. (Pete Tedder, Nadgee car camp, 2 October 1988).

So do reminiscences supplied by club members.

On my first pack walk, up the Onion in the Tinderry Range [1978] I naively carried a homemade fruit cake to share with others. I soon learnt that weight is precious and didn't do that again. (Rosemary Halstead, nee Fischer)

We became trapped near the Angel Falls [Budawangs 1983] when it started to rain and rocks we wanted to cross became wet and slippery. So we climbed up onto a ridge and set camp as the rain increased. Water was running through my tent most of the night and at one stage I woke up and wondered about a roar from the valley. Next morning we saw the cause. It was the flooded river coming over the falls and cutting us off from any way out of the valley. So we spent an extra night waiting for the river level to go down... The next day we were able to cross and walk back to the cars...I have never been so wet. (Jeff Colwell)

Recent History 1991-2003

The club continued to thrive during this period. By 1999 it had 500 members (320 family memberships) and offered 170 walks. The most recent figures - for 2002 - are

569 members (366 memberships) and 188 walks. Despite concerns expressed regularly at AGMs about the difficulty of finding leaders, exacerbated at this time by the large number of members retiring and then either moving interstate or travelling, there were 37 leaders in 1999.

In 1989 a series of medium-grade mid-week (Tuesday) walks was initiated by Eric Pickering to meet the recreational, social and exercise needs of those retiring from the full-time workforce and others. The mid-week walk program grew as leaders were recruited and changed to Wednesday walks in 1992. In 1997 the National Parks Association joined FBI in the mid-week walks program and the Canberra Bushwalking Club joined in 1997. Now there are walks every Wednesday with leaders recruited from all three clubs and walk details distributed by email. There are frequently more than 20 walkers on these mid-week events.

One of the most important developments during this time was the introduction of the family walks and camps, an initiative of Val Boreham who recognised the need for walks suitable for people with very young children. The first walk was held in November 1996 and proved an immediate success, with 18 adults and 16 children ranging in age from six months to eight years. The family walks and camps have gone from strength to strength. Initially monthly, they are now fortnightly and last year there were 19 walks and 7 camps with an average attendance of 21.

Other recent initiatives included development of a register of club walks (Peter Wellman) and advertising some information on walks on the internet (Allan Mikkelsen). The grading system for walks was modified in 1998 (Colin Boreham) to produce more consistency (less subjectivity) in the description of day walks taking into account walk length, terrain and total climb. This gave intending walkers a clearer idea of whether walks were within their capabilities. With slight modifications this system has been used in all subsequent walks programs.

In 2001 Andrew Walker organised the club's first week long camp (in tents and houses) in the Warrumbungles. The response was overwhelming and so a second week was organised by Peter Wellman at the Grampians, and was equally successful. Watch the program for further developments on this front!

A significant problem for the club during the latter part of the period was deciding how to respond to the public liability insurance crisis which had the effect of reducing the willingness of some members to lead walks and of some landowners to allow walkers on to their properties because of the potential for damages claims in the event of an accident. After a special general meeting in 1999 the club took out public liability insurance with the Confederation of Bushwalking Clubs NSW Inc, which led directly to an increase in club fees. In 2003 the FBI is the largest of all the clubs affiliated with the Confederation.

The bushfires of early 2003 have presented another challenge since they have resulted in the closure of Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla, two of our favourite walking

areas, as well as others. But walks continued, with leaders going to great efforts to investigate other possibilities, so that a whole lot of new walks appeared on the club program.

There were a number of memorable walks during this period. One involved a wild pig attack at Mt Clear which, as noted by Andrew Walker in his President's report to the 1992 AGM 'provided excellent material for the creative abilities of the club's raconteurs.'

Another was a walk to Yankee Hat led by Doug Finlayson on which Olive Buckman broke a leg. Doug remembers the day:

The weather was warm, the sun shone and all was well for the FBI party heading off from the Boboyan Pine Forest car park for Yankee Hat on a pleasant August Sunday, 1994. A family of Italian background had invited some visiting relatives from Italy to join the walk, including four or five young teenagers.

After lunch the party set off back from near the summit down to the cars. There had been rain on previous days and that proved to be Olive's downfall, literally. A minor slip on a wet log was all it took to fracture an ankle bone.

Fortunately there were a couple of stalwarts in the party, including "yours truly" (the party leader) and a very fit Italian soccer-playing visitor named Lou (who spoke little English). They piggy-backed Olive down the ridge through the bush, teenagers charging ahead to pull aside the branches and trees.

Up till that day I'd never been enthusiastic about mobile phones on bushwalks, but this particular day I was most grateful to one of our Italian family visitors. We managed to contact a ranger and he brought his Toyota to the fire trail and met the party. Since then I've been more sympathetic towards mobile phones and fit Italian soccer players on bushwalks.

One walk report of the period stated simply:

Lost Lorraine's car down side of road. (Peter Wellman, Corn Trail, 15 October 1995)

Some disasters were less serious. Under the walks committee report heading 'suggestions for the safe and enjoyable conduct of this walk in the future', the following gems appear:

Keep the condensed milk containers tightly closed in your pack. (Lance Keogh, London Bridge, 3 April 1993)

Don't take cars with inadequate petrol. (Peter Wellman, Mt Franklin-Bendora Arboretum, 25 September 1993)

And some of the walks descriptions were positively lyrical.

Midwinter - beautiful lyre bird songs. Beautiful bush. 35 metre falls are a fine sight. (Philip Bell, Pierce's Creek Falls, 30 June 1991)

Spectacular coastal scenery, red cliffs, heathland, forest. (Andrew Walker, Saltwater Creek, 19-20 September 1992)

Best views on the planet. (Pat and Eric Pickering, Crevasse Canyon, Budawangs, 11-13 June 1994)

The Latest Ten Years 2003-2013

Some things have changed during this period but the club operates essentially as it has always done, with walking as its core function and talking a pretty close second. Membership decreased slightly in the five years to 2008 but it has since stabilised and currently comprises 351 adults and 29 children (277 memberships). Every year about 40 people leave the club and a similar number of new members join.

While the average age of members has increased somewhat during this period, the number of walks and other activities organised by the club remains essentially unchanged. In the most recent year, for example, the club organised 180 walks comprising easy and medium walks every weekend, and sometimes more than one, as well as family, hard and pack walks on some weekends. On Wednesdays it ran very easy, short and medium walks. In the summer it introduced kayaking on Lake Burley Griffin on Tuesday evenings. As more members have retired, the popularity of events away from Canberra has increased. These include car camps, walks from fixed accommodation such as cabins and overseas walking holidays. Social events remain very popular. Pot luck dinners are usually oversubscribed and the annual champagne sunset walk to Mt Ainslie routinely attracts more than 50 walkers.

The club also has an active family group. After a few shaky years initially it is now thriving and runs monthly walks for older children as well as some additional walks for younger children and an annual camping weekend. It owes a lot of its success to Val Boreham, who established it, and its current convenor, Nathalie Jitnah, ably assisted by Annabel Agafonoff, among others.

The following table illustrates changes to membership numbers and walking activities over the life of the club.

Year	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2002	2013
No. walks	12?	26	43	44	87	98	137	188	180
Memberships	19	33	88	154	68	197	285	366	277*

*comprising 351 adults and 29 children

The total number of people participating in walks has not changed much over this period although the demand for hard and pack walks has decreased, reflecting the changing demographic. At the same time the number of participants on short Wednesday walks has increased dramatically. Both the short Wednesday walks and the medium Wednesday walks (conducted jointly with the Canberra Bushwalking Club and the National Parks Association) regularly attract more than 20 people, as do walking trips outside Canberra. Throughout its history, club records show, there has been concern in the club about the difficulty of attracting leaders and dire predictions about the inevitable demise of the club should it fail to do so. These concerns remain, exacerbated by the age profile of existing leaders and the club's undue reliance on a small number of very dedicated and skilled leaders.

The difficulty of attracting younger walkers and new leaders is shared by all bushwalking clubs in NSW and reflects both the wider choice of outdoor activities open to young people and their seeming reluctance to join clubs of any sort.

During the last ten years the club has taken a number of steps to attract new members. In 2012, following exhaustive (and exhausting) consultations and two membership votes the club changed its name from Family Bushwalkers Incorporated to Brindabella Bushwalking Club. Members felt the original name no longer reflected the core activities and membership of the club and was thus misleading for potential new members.

The club also promoted its activities at a number of Canberra functions such as Expo, the Multicultural Festival and through the Heart Foundation's CANwalk activities. It was agreed that these efforts would be more effective if backed by promotional material and so, after research by Lyn and Trevor Willson, the club produced a brochure providing details of its activities, contact details and photos of club walks.

In 2009 Allan Mikkelsen set up a club web site, now being updated and upgraded. It will be interesting to see the effect of these initiatives, but some recent developments are encouraging. A number of younger new members are showing a keen interest and participating in many club walks. Some are leading walks. Although we still rely very heavily on a small group of experienced leaders, in 2013 a total of 56 people led walks.

Club membership provides many benefits. Walks' participants: improve their health; get to know the local area and other beautiful parts of the country; learn about local history, flora, fauna and geology and make lasting friendships. And all of this for \$25 (single) or \$35 (family) a year. It has to be the best deal in town!

Concluding Remarks

The interests which brought people together to form the club in 1969 remain central to its operations today. They are a love of the bush and a desire to enjoy it in the company of like-minded people, and the support, fun and friendship engendered by this common interest. The following excerpts from people's reminiscences of the club over the years illustrate these different aspects of its strengths.

I have wonderful memories of walking in the Budawangs. One Friday evening, having driven in from Sassafras and set up camp some members set off to stretch their legs as it was a full moon. The evening was so beautiful we almost went all the way to Hidden Valley and had to reluctantly turn back to save the walk for the next day. (Rosemary Halstead nee Fischer)

Do you remember the food on one of the gourmet walks to Oldfields hut? I thought my apricot pie and cream was OK until Doug Finlayson started cooking his crepes with cointreau. (Ailsa Lawton)

Pete Tedder used to wear very old khaki bib and brace overalls. He was very fond of them and wouldn't let Ann throw them out. Every few weeks we'd notice a new patch, usually of white and navy ticking. We used to have bets about how long the whole thing would hold together. (Wilma Cole)

I remember in particular Dick Hughes, an Englishman who always wore a collar and tie on walks. He was an entomologist with CSIRO and therefore a mine of information on bugs and insects generally. But also he knew a lot about flora and fauna and birds. Whenever Dick was on a walk, which was often, we could expect an explanation of the natural history of our surroundings. (John Hardwick)

I joined the FBI at a difficult time in my life. Meg Colwell was lovely to me and to all newcomers to the club. (Margaret Cole)

The club has successfully avoided the pitfalls which sometimes undermine similar organisations. It has minimised paperwork and bureaucracy, kept finances to the minimum necessary for effective operation and avoided diverting its efforts into other causes. Its strength lies in its concentration on the purpose for which it was established - walking in the bush - and on the voluntary efforts of its leaders and committee members.

In only one major respect has the club changed since 1969. It now has very few children on its walks. However, with the introduction of the family walks and their immediate and growing success we can hope that a new generation of Canberrans will carry the club into the future. We hope that they will know the pleasure of shared enjoyment of the bush that we have experienced over many years, thanks to the foresight of the club's founders in 1969, to whom we owe a very great debt.