

Mt Skene fire lookout tower 1952. OR My First Ride in a Land Rover.

The Mt Skene lookout tower in the Victorian mountains north of Licola was built in 1952. A fellow school boy and I were its first towermen. It is in a prime position and at over 1500 metres above sea level it has spectacular views of the surrounding forest areas. To the east over the Macalister River valley the area is now part of the Alpine National Park.

When I wrote to the Victorian Forests Commission asking about the possibility of a holiday job during the January – February 1952 school holidays before I started year 12 at Melbourne High, they replied that they had a position at Heywood. As a schoolboy I had dreamed of riding in a Land Rover, and working for the forestry seemed a likely way of achieving my wish. Checking the map I found that Heywood was in western Victoria just north of Portland. The work would probably be in a pine plantation and I would have preferred eucalypt forest but I hadn't been to Western Victoria before so it would be interesting. Two weeks before the due date a letter arrived saying I was to report to Heyfield. Heywood? Heyfield? The reason for the change in venue was never explained and I wondered if it was a typing error. No matter, I hadn't been to Heyfield either, so it would be interesting and almost certainly would mean working in eucalypt forest.

Arriving at Rosedale by train I was met and driven north to the forest office at Heyfield then along the attractive Macalister River valley past Licola and into the forest areas beyond, to the forestry camp at Connors Plain. The majority of the forestry workers there were DPs (Displaced Persons) – migrants from Europe following the end of World War 2. I shared a hut with several Polish migrants. Older than me they liked drinking after work (I was too young to drink so could not join in) and, after dinner, they continued drinking and talked animatedly in Polish until very late. I wished they would stop talking so I could get to sleep. In the end I was so tired I fell asleep anyhow. During this time I was joined by Charlie, another student on holiday work. We were told that when the fire lookout tower at Mt Skene was finished Charlie and I would be the towermen.

We worked for nearly a month at Connors Plain and then with two and a half weeks of our holiday work to go we were taken to the Mt Skene fire lookout about 10 kilometres north. The view was spectacular. Its high position allowed monitoring most of the surrounding forest and ranges. The lookout itself consisted of a two storey structure. Downstairs was our living quarters with 2 wire frame beds and a wood stove. A ladder through the ceiling led to the fire spotting cabin above. We did not have far to go to work. The lookout cabin had windows on all four sides for a perfect view of any smoke from bushfires. In the centre was a device for taking the compass bearing of any smoke. A cross bearing on any smoke to the west of us from the Mt Matlock tower and Tanjil Bren to the south fixed the position of any fire in that quarter. I can't remember the other towers we shared bearings with. Our radio schedule each morning confirmed that all the towers were 'up' and in working order.

When we moved in (early February 1952) the building was not quite finished – it still needed painting. At over 1500 metres above sea level it endured severe conditions in summer and extreme conditions in winter, so a good painting job was in order. One morning I woke up with my feet feeling cold. It had snowed during the night and some snow had come on to my bed landing on my sleeping bag through a broken window pane above it – and this was in February. We took it in turns; while one was on fire lookout duty the other one painted the building. There was no water tank so

we were left a 200 litre drum of water for drinking, cooking and washing. Even mashed potatoes did not hide the taste of the petrol that had been stored in the drum before, but there were no side effects. Every few days new stores and a top up of water were brought to us.

The only excitement we had was when there was a fire in the Dargo area to the east. It was far enough away not to affect us but the wireless traffic was intense. On another day a forest inventory team appeared from the Jamieson valley area to the north and we shared our news for a while. Otherwise we were alone with the eagles, the wireless schedules, and the occasional smoke to take a bearing to check with the other towers and report to base. It was a contemplative aspect with an inspiring setting looking over the vast forest covered ranges.

When it was time to return home I was offered a lift in a forestry Land Rover. I accepted this neat solution to the task of finding transport home. What I found out was that the Land Rover had two broken windscreens and was being returned to Melbourne for repair on the back of a truck. As I sat shivering in the Land Rover which was securely held in position on top of the forestry truck at night, I contemplated through chattering teeth, the irony that the cheap travel home at the end of my holiday job also gave me the realisation of my early dream – I was having my first ride in a Land Rover.

Jim Williamson September 2011