

Hi,

I have been scouring the net to find out the fate of the Mt Skene lookout and am dismayed at its state of preservation. I was indeed surprised that it had been abandoned.

I started spotting as a student at Melbourne University way back in 1960 if I remember correctly? I drove myself to Heyfield on my trusty Vespa motor scooter where it was parked for the two to three month duration of the spotting season. From Heyfield, I was taken to the lookout by Land Rover complete with food supply for a week or two, my personal effects, sleeping bag etc.

My first posting was on Mt Useful, then a hut only. The following year, 1961, much to my surprise and delight, I learned that a new steel tower was to be erected and I was delegated builders assistant. Being relatively agile and a skier, bush walker and somewhat athletic was a great bonus, I quickly learned how to climb the growing steel structure, not unlike a power transmission tower, bolt the various members together as we ascended to the ultimate top platform. Those were the days well before occupational health and safety!

In the 1962 spotting season, I was advised that the Skene had not been allocated a spotter and I was very keen to man it, a great situation, very isolated and at the time accessible by Land Rover only. I loved that posting and the solitude, although the occasional electrical storms could be frightening, the 100 foot antenna for the then TRP battery powered transmitter was like honey to a bee when it came to attracting static electricity associated with the build up in the atmosphere, especially before a lightning strike. The antenna had a glass enclosed earthing device which would allow discharge to earth when the charge build up exceeded a given level and it would glow a neon red in the dark as the antenna's charge built up before the imminent lightning discharge. Watching it was quite nerve wracking and several very close lightening strikes within 1 hundred meters of the hut were more than a little exciting to witness as the event build up monitored on that little device.

In 1962, a close university friend, Colin Eggleston, son of the then chief Justice, and his partner Dimity took over my vacancy on Mt Useful. We would cooperate as was the spotting process between towers, cross referencing likely lightening strike 'smokes' etc. and were able to keep in touch via the then ubiquitous TRP radio in off peak times. The old TRP was subject to severe atmospheric interference and would die soon after dark and in inclement weather and the huge dry battery pack would not last for very long.

The TRP required a very long wire antenna strung between tall poles which sometimes had to be stayed when fierce winds rattled them loose.

In 1963 I was again allocated the Skene lookout by which time I had become very confident and friendly with the Heyfield Forests Commission staff and and regional representative Ed Stucky and his wife who lived in a commission house in Licola. In inclement weather Ed would come up to the tower and rescue me for a few days to stay with him in Licola to go fishing up into the Bennison High Plain or he would deposit me at the Connors Plain forestry camp to work with the grader driver clearing road drains, road grading etc. as an assistant greaser and refuelling dogs body. To my joy, I was also on occasion allocated a spare Land Rover with which to chase up loggers where I would get involved in seed collection for reafforestation. That was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with land Rovers.

Whilst on Skene in 1963, Colin radioed me from Useful advising that he had a radio specialist from the Forests Commission, Norman Taylor, then visiting on Useful and testing a new VHF transmitter. I could expect to see him soon at Skene. This visit developed into a life long friendship with a most interesting, skilled and intelligent man and his delightful wife and children. Several years later, Norm decided to resign as the chief radio engineer for the Forests Commission and devote the rest of his life to the legal profession and in that endeavour, my friend Colin on Useful and his father the chief justice were pivotal. Norm graduated and became an Arbitration Commissioner of some note. There are many interesting stories to be told about him, but they belong to another forum. After Retiring, I helped refit his 60 foot steel hulled ketch and crewed on it in the Whitsundays with my eldest daughter.

My year 1963 on Skene also saw me replace the upper level tower heavy timber framed windows with louvres in light steel frames, a great improvement on ventilation in the heat and improved visibility. With the benefit of hindsight I do wonder if the louvres were all that well suited to winter conditions however, although I imagine the hut would have rarely, if ever, been occupied then, the location being so remote.

During my two three monthly summer stints on Skene, not one hiker or 4x4 enthusiast passed by or called in. I was also responsible for the installation of a kerosene refrigerator which I purchased and donated to the Skene 'B&B'. The Forests commission were happy to cover transport from a second hand dealer in Melbourne by train and then by Land Rover up to the lookout. That refrigerator was an interesting device, it had to be understood and adjusted with great care. With too high a flame the flue would fill with an awful choking

carbon deposit. Set correctly but at the highest non smoking level, everything inside would freeze solid which I discovered to my dismay on first installation, my fortnight's supply of greens, salad and eggs were frozen solid.

The lookout had no designated toilet then, it was a matter head for the bush when the urge demanded. That did not appeal, so I devised a short 'long drop' without any screening made out of a timber packing case suspended over a hole I excavated on the hill side overlooking Mt Wellington beyond. That was a superb spot to contemplate on sunny and windless days, not quite so superb in bad weather however.

But when one is young, who cares?

Walter Kiessling

Architect, FRAIA retired.