

# More than saving the Silverpeaks

Dunedin's main traditional tramping area is in the dissected hill country north west of the city. It is generally referred to as the Silverpeaks after the 777 metre high Silver Peak. The Otago Tramping Club was formed in 1923 as the result of people enjoying the area wishing to share it with others. All the area is below bush line but a long, largely deliberate, human fire history had resulted in the ridges being largely in snow tussock. In the early 1970s farm development was starting to modify the outer areas but the central core was intact. More recent repeated burning and grazing had held back forest regeneration from the bush remnants in the gullies. With today's protection forest succession is rapidly taking place with clumps of young silver beech right to the summit.



Looking from Silverpeak 777m to Pulpit Rock in 1967.  
Trampers enjoyed a narrow animal track along the ridge. *KDM*





The essence of the Silverpeak tramping experience. *KDM*







An unwelcome new reality.  
The remaining unscarred ridge-tops became the focus of our attention. *KDM*

It all happened in March 1974 without warning. A heavily bulldozed road appeared up Long Ridge to Pulpit Rock and across to Silver Peak and down both sides of the silver beech of the 'Painted Forest.' The Otago Catchment Board later said it was unaware that the area was used for recreation and had put in the firebreak roading with public resources on behalf of Mt Allan Station. The run holder was the Chairman of the Taieri County Council. Personally I never felt comfortable with him making a series of pro-forestry press releases prior to selling to private forestry interests a couple of years later. Now aware of the area's tramping significance, the Otago Catchment Board shelved plans for extending the firebreak road north along Rocky Ridge to 'The Gap.'

Otago Tramping Club life member Bruce Moore and I raised this roading issue as urgent to the recently formed Otago Land District Walkway Working Party, serviced by the Department of Lands and Survey. My brother Bruce and Bruce Moore were the initial Federated Mountain Club representatives on the Working Party. The FMC representatives provided the bulk of the resource and recreational knowledge. It was an active and enthusiastic group until after nine years public land options ran out. There was little headway with private land. I soon went on to be the main FMC rep and served a total of 12 years. Lands and Survey was a few years later superseded by the Department of Conservation and an Otago Walkway Committee formed. We had to save the remaining spine of the Silverpeaks from



Swampy Summit to Gap Ridge and the twenty-three tracks and routes that radiated from it.



Heading north along Rocky Ridge. *KDM*

A sub committee within the OTMC had been steadily working to change the Silverpeak land designation. Only ratepayers were allowed planning input. Fortunately the club owning the 45 ha Ben Rudd property on Flagstaff gave us that right.

For several years prior the previously named Otago Tramping Club had a sub committee concerned about the prospect of the entire Silverpeaks being put into private venture forestry. Club member and Dunedin Metropolitan Regional Planner Donald Patterson was prominent in our efforts. My role post-1974 became to contain roading, prevent illegal bulldozing and to get formal Walkway protection for the main Silverpeaks spine. My tactic was to gain walkway status and so obtain better protection for the land either side in case a Silverpeaks Scenic Reserve proposal didn't gain traction. Others pushed for a reserve by combining Dunedin City Council Water and Timber Reserve, DCC water catchments, parts of adjoining farm runs, private forestry and rationalising a plantation boundary with the Forest Service. Gratitude is expressed to Wenita Forests for surrendering it's Pulpit Rock slopes of the old Mt Allan Station. In March 1982 the Dunedin City Council formally approved the Silverpeak Walkway. In total it took 14 years to become scenic reserve.



Lands and Survey had to be pushed rather hard to include 'ABC Cave' with its natural accommodation plus its attractive silver beech and snow grass catchment. Their reluctance seemed based on it being a bit more work for them. As an insider, my brother Bruce helped to sort this out. He undertook a landscape and recreational survey for L&S. This proved a basis for boundary rationalisation. Today the ABC Cave catchment is a key part in the main-two day Silverpeaks tramping circuit. As usual Richard Pettinger was prominent in supporting background work.

In 1974 I presented in Wellington, on behalf of the Otago Walkway Committee, the case for a Silverpeaks Walkway. The route was to run along the ridge from Swampy Summit, to Hightop, along Green Ridge to Pulpit Rock, to Silver Peak, along Rocky Ridge to the feature 'The Gap', thence down Gap Ridge and out to Steep Hill Road. Implementation followed.

In January 1975 senior reserves ranger Bill Hislop and I had a Walkway inspection with Land Rover Club Committee members of the ridge from Swampy Summit to Hightop. Their annual club 4WD outing down this boggy ridge had seriously damaged the line of the developing walkway. The main attraction seemed to be having 16 of their 18 vehicle convoy bogged down at once. The club agreed to stop using this route.

The next area of concern was around Hightop. The Forest Service was constructing a road south from Double Hill with the intention of traversing the summit of Hightop before exiting north along the old Mountain Track. On a field inspection



Skiing at the start of the Swampy-Hightop ridge, viewing the Silverpeaks (Dave Levick). KDM



with the NZFS I got them to agree to align their road well below the summit to save the walkway route. It also saved the Forest Service from planting pines where there was likely to be considerable wind and snow damage.

At that time Charlie Robinson had a sheep-only grazing agreement with the Dunedin City Council for Hightop, Green Ridge and I believe the river flats of the old Waikouaiti River Water and Timber Reserve, to the Gap and Yellow Ridge area. Inept DCC administration allowed the progressive arrival of a herd of semi-wild rodeo horses, cattle, and boxes of matches with resultant gorse introduction and spread, followed by bulldozing. There was even a large area of gorse establishing around a horse 'camping area' kilometres away down remote Rosella Ridge. A major reason for the extended bulldozing up Yellow Ridge near 'The Gap' appeared to be to make pig hunting easier for Mr Robinson and friends. Around this period those with permits to hunt on Forest Service land and DCC Reserve experienced vehicle tyres being deflated. There was an associated court case.

A report commissioned by the DCC on illegal grazing (by post-L&S consultant B Mason) revealed the new stock-proof fence to the north having 'convenient gaps and weaknesses'. The fence defined the new boundary brought about by land swaps to form the growing Silverpeaks Scenic Reserve. As is standard practice between neighbours Mr Robinson had input into the new shared boundary construction. For some years after a strong smell of cattle lingered in the reserve when climbing the track to the former Yellow Hut. This track and the new Cox Hut are on the current two-day Silverpeaks circuit.

While doing an inter-agency inspection there was a sizeable herd of semi-wild rodeo horses on Hightop. One senior DCC Officer approached the man with them who identified himself as Charlie Robinson's son and asked him why he had horses illegally there. The reply was that they were not his and that they belonged to the Waikouaiti Rodeo Association. The Officer turned and drifted away. I was disgusted. Charlie and his family were office bearers in the Waikouaiti Rodeo Association. Imagine how much future damage, money, work, and voluntary time could have been reduced had the Officer firmly stated. "Well pass the message on. The Waikouaiti Rodeo Association will be receiving a formal order to remove the horses within two weeks otherwise they will be disposed of. By the way the cattle will also be included." A pattern of abused rights could have been broken and a later tragedy may have been averted.

*Feeble local body compliance when dealing with the rural community, coupled with bullying of those who dare to speak up, is sadly a reoccurring theme within my writings.*

The DCC Water Department was adamant that it needed a firebreak road encompassing the whole Silver Stream and Powder Creek Water Catchments. In conjunction with Forest Service field officers, DCC staff, the Assistant Commissioner of Crown Lands, Walkway Rangers, the DCC Water Department and



myself we had a field inspection at Hightop. To me this was just another case of creating an 'empire' on the office map, trying to justify it, and being able to have a nice 4WD outing for the administrators a couple of times a year. The experienced Forest Service field officers said outright that what was proposed would 'never stop a fire and be of little use for anything else.' In all there were three other attempts to bulldoze Green Ridge towards the Catchment Board road at Pulpit Rock.

On Hightop unauthorised bulldozing appeared on the south side of the summit and then swept down to the newly established Forest Service road. This was put in most likely to allow vehicle and stock passage. It was possible that this was testing the waters prior to going along Green Ridge. The Walkway Committee had just finished building a carpark and main track entrance. Trampers can moan endlessly about encroaching roads but we could not discourage them from using the scoured-out, boggy, bulldozing. This starts at today's signposted Silverpeaks entrance. The attractive traditional summit plateau route fell into disuse.

A teacher from Greymouth wrote to the Otago District Walkway Committee.

"On Thursday 12 May (1983) I took two boys aged 12 and 14 into the area starting from Steep Hill Road, and found the bulldozer tracks (Gap Ridge section of the walkway) confusing, branching off with dead ends and in extremely poor muddy condition."

On May 22 the bodies of three 16 year old high school boys were found in a snow drift in a bulldozer cutting a short distance south of 'The Gap.' One was the son of a work colleague who had frequently heard me talk about my adventures in the Silverpeaks. My youngest brother Peter was in the Search and Rescue party that found them. They died in the severest blizzard for at least 36 years. The un-signposted, confused bulldozing by the adjoining farmer Charlie Robinson on his lease areas, on public road reserve, and adjacent DCC reserve, would most likely have been a factor in the boys' rather slow pre-storm progress. They would also have had a tiring struggle under the conditions in crossing new barbed wire fence barriers that the Walkway Committee was not able to sort out.

Mr Robinson states in the *Otago Daily Times* (23/05/83) :

"There are no signs at all. We want to see signs up saying people can be caught out."

From the July 1983 Walkway minutes."Several draft (walkway) agreements have been sent to Mr Robinson and every time he finds something to object about in one of the conditions. Because of this no signs (nor track markers or fence stiles) have been erected at northern end.'

Mr Robinson's request to be a Hon. Walkway Ranger was declined as the committee considered him 'not appropriate.'