
LOOK-BACK TIME

The Beginnings of our Bowen Mountain Site

by John Flavin

1969 was not a good year for our society. The first half of the year was marked by significant tension arising out of a move to suspend our constitution and place the running of the society in the hands of an administrator; the second half of the year saw things settle down, as the constitution was restored and things got back on an even keel – almost. They could not quite get back to normal, as we had the prospect of the subdivision of the Belfield site – our home for sixteen years – hanging over us. That subdivision went ahead and our last meeting at Belfield was in April 1970, after which our Clubhouse (opened by Bart Bok in late 1959) was dismantled.

Looking back, we can now identify one very fortunate happening in an otherwise turbulent year. 1969 was the year that Jack and Marion Crago joined us; and, as we all know, they were to have a great and good impact on our society. Jack and Marion had married just the year before; Marion had lived at Peakhurst, while Jack had acreage on Grose Vale Rd., Grose Vale – an old citrus orchard of some 50 acres. The dismantled sections of our Clubhouse were taken to this property for storage in the hope that, before long, they would be reassembled on a new site. Unfortunately, a new site was not found and the Clubhouse sections became weathered and unusable – Terry Story recalls seeing them a few years later almost hidden by grass and weeds.

Jack's Grose Vale property was visited by members and became an unofficial 'dark sky' site; the local community hall was also used for holding public Open Nights of the type that had been so popular during our Belfield years. Grose Vale is not far from Bowen Mountain and it was this closeness that turned our thoughts to that location as a possible observing site. Marion had been elected Vice-President at our AGM in June 1970, and was very active in scouting around looking for a permanent site to which we might locate. Her search led to an on-site meeting between Club members and some members of the Colo Shire Council in 1971 at a location on Bowen Mountain called the Devil's Hole. The outcome of this meeting was that our Society gained the important support of the Council in trying to locate on this site.

Minister acts observatory site

The Astronomical Society of N.S.W. has been granted a long-term lease of "The Devil's Hole" reserve on Bowen Mountain.

The lease, which will be for a nominal sum, will allow the society to erect an observatory and ancillary buildings to house its equipment, which includes several large telescopes.

Announcement of the lease was made by the Minister for Lands (Mr T. Lewis) at the weekend, following representations by the Liberal candidate for Hawkesbury, Mr K. Rozzoli, on behalf of the society.

Mr Lewis told this paper on Friday that on explaining the submissions made by the society he was satisfied the public interest was not endangered, and had "cut red tape" so the lease could be approved.

For more than 12 months, the society has been making representations through Colo Shire Council and the former local Member, Mr B. S. L. Deane, for the use of the land.

The Lands Department had consistently pointed out that use of the land for an observatory would alienate it from the public.

In putting its case the society explained the area was only being used as a rubbish dump and it was considered to be a bush fire hazard by the local brigade.

Colo Shire Council had supported the application for a lease, and the society hoped in time to develop what would be a major tourist attraction on the site.

One of the leaders in the fight to develop the observatory project has been the society secretary, Mrs M. Crago, of Grose Vale Road, and at a dinner at her home on Saturday, members were given the good news by Mr Rozzoli.

The occasion, which was to honour Mrs Crago's contribution to the society, quickly became a celebration.

Members are already planning to clean up the area and preparing plans for submission to the shire council.

As well as being ideal for an observatory, with a smog-free atmosphere and 360-degree angle of view, it is intended to also develop the site as a picnic area preserving as far as possible, the natural bushland.

Extract: *Hawkesbury Courier*, 8th February 1973.

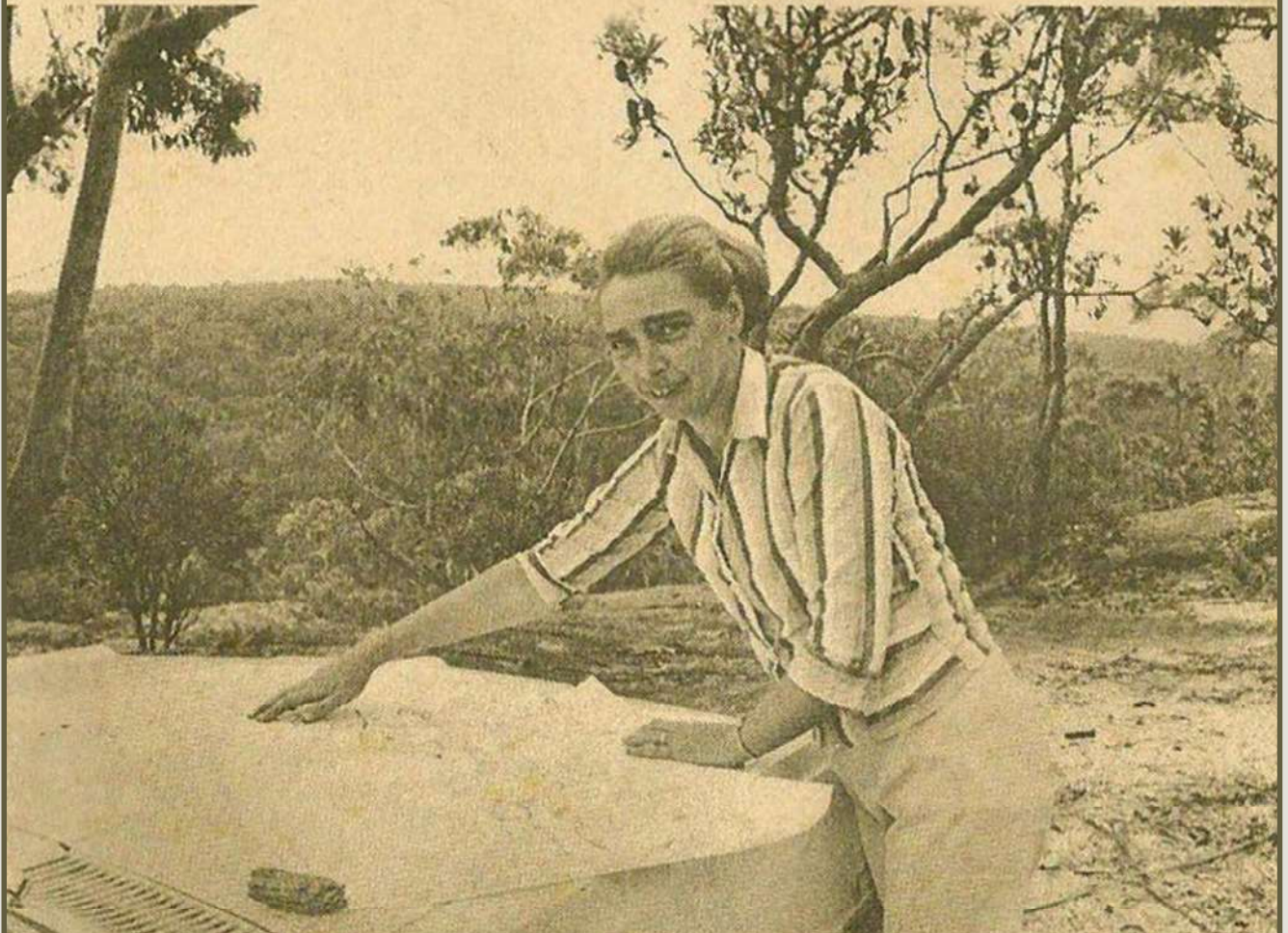
The establishment of our observatory on Bowen Mountain required more than the support of the Colo Shire Council, important as that was. The NSW Lands Department would have the major say on whether we could have the site. There followed a two-year period of negotiation, during which time it often looked as if we were not getting anywhere in securing the Bowen lease. At the September 1972 Committee meeting our Editor Alan Yates, moved:

“That if Bowen Mountain is not resolved by the end of 1972, that the Society cease negotiations and investigate other areas”. Motion passed.

The good news came not long into the new year of 1973, when the Lands Minister at the time, Tom Lewis, decided in our favour. The news was covered by the *Hawkesbury Courier* issue of February 8 1973 (see the scanned news clipping).

The first major hurdle had been overcome, many years of hard work lay ahead in building the observatory – but that’s another story.

Devil’s Hole — future Hawkesbury Observatory



Marion Crago is here pictured at the ‘Devil’s Hole’ site on Bowen Mountain, displaying plans for our future observatory. The picture is from the Windsor and Richmond Gazette of 22 March 1972. As most members are well aware, Jack and Marion Crago were our great benefactors, whose bequest enabled us to build the observatory - named in their memory - on Bowen Mountain. Jack died in March 1980, aged 72. Marion died in February 1983, while on a trekking holiday in Nepal, she was 53.