

The Mt. Buller Lodge Story

The lodge was designed by Malcolm McColl, a prominent alpine Architect, who had also designed the Cleve Cole Memorial Hut on Mt. Bogong for the S.C.V. in 1937.

Construction of the first M.W.C. lodge was carried out entirely by club members (sometimes in extremely difficult conditions) over a period of 10 years (1949-59) under the dedicated supervision of Charles Wilkinson, a non-skiing club member.

Finance for the project was obtained through voluntary loans from members. Some loans were repaid by revenue derived from the lodge operation, but many loans were made donations by the members concerned.

Although not fully completed, the new lodge was officially opened by the club president, W.R. (Reg) Mann, on the 28th February 1951 and a large group of members and their friends from other clubs attended the ceremony. This was the culmination of a magnificent effort by many club members who gave so freely of their services and made such generous contributions in money and materials.

The next 20 years saw Mt. Buller progress in leaps and bounds. The road was continually improved and many new ski tows were installed by Bull Run Enterprises (blue lifts) and Ski Lifts Mt. Buller Pty Ltd (orange lifts). It is also interesting to note that the first club ski lift in Australia (a rope tow) was installed on the Bourke Street ski run by the S.C.V. in 1949.

This was the golden era of club lodges and a special bond and friendship existed between the seven club lodges in the Cow Camp Lane area, namely Monsanto, Omega, M.W.C., U.L.L.R., Chamois and Muski. In those days the area was quiet and secluded with none of the noise and activity which was to come with future development.

In the early years, attendance at the lodge in the ski season were mainly men only weekends with the occasional mixed groups, but gradually men only attendance fell away and from about 1962 onwards, mixed groups became more popular and midweek bookings began to increase.

The lodge was always well maintained by a dedicated band of hut and ski committee members who also implemented many improvements to make conditions more comfortable and increase the operating efficiency for the benefit of members.

The Struggle For Survival

Rumours predicting possible changes to the village centre and the Cow Camp Lane area at Mt. Buller began about 1968. However the first positive approach to the M.W.C. was made in 1973 by Ernest Forras, who then owned Kooroorra Hotel. He suggested in a letter to the club that they consider redevelopment of the M.W.C. site in a joint venture with Omega, Monsanto and U.L.L.R. ski clubs, but the scheme did not eventuate due to planning and financial difficulties. The club then proceeded with plans to extend and improve the lodge facilities in 1975.

The M.W.C. was first approached by the Mt. Buller Committee of Management in March 1978. They indicated a desire to obtain an amicable transition from existing older club lodges to modern premises which would be more compatible with the proposed redevelopment plans for the village centre area. (In those days Mt Buller was controlled by the Forest Commission.)

Our club, along with others in the area, made it known that they would strongly resist any plans to alter the character and appeal of their immediate surroundings. This attitude upset the then secretary of the committee of management, Mr Gerry Gannon, who in an article in The Sun's Weekend Magazine, described the clubs' stance as "offensive" and indicated that possible eviction could not be ruled out, unless a reasonable degree of co-operation was forthcoming.

In a letter from the C.O.M. to the club on 3rd May 1978, it was suggested that our site would possibly be required for some future public utility development, but should this be the case the club would be compensated with alternative accommodation equivalent in capacity and without capital cost except where additional requirements were requested.

This was the beginning of a never ending series of negotiations and meetings with committees, developers, architects and other clubs which continued over the next 8 years. It was a time fraught with disappointment and frustration as scheme after scheme was abandoned for various reasons.

Then on the 9th December 1986, a meeting was arranged with a Mr Adam Adams at his office in South Yarra. Mr Adams was a well known developer on Mt. Buller, who had built the Arlberg Hotel and Twin Towers complex on the Rourke Street ski run and had recently acquired the Kooroora Hotel. He proposed to set up a multi-storey complex on the site occupied by the Chamois ski club which would include M.W.C., Chamois and Muski clubs.

However, the newly formed Alpine Resorts Commission (A.R.C.) who had taken control of all Victorian ski resorts, disagreed with certain aspects of Mr Adams development proposal and although he submitted further plans, they were not well received by the clubs as they were of a multi-storey, concrete type construction which would destroy the natural beauty of the Cow Camp Lane area.

About this time the M.W.C. was contacted by the Grollo Group, who expressed interest in developing our site. They had previously redeveloped the U.L.L.R. site to the south of our lodge and had built a complex which was a combination of club lodges and apartments. Ironically, M.W.C. should have been included in that development, along with U.L.L.R., Omega and M(Monsanto) ski clubs, but we were excluded at the eleventh hour due to a bureaucratic bungle.

On the 28th May 1987, Gerald Morton and Brian Shimmen from the Mt. Buller Lodge Committee of the M.W.C. attended a meeting with Rino Grollo at his office in Chifley Drive, Preston. After some discussion, Rino stated that he would be prepared to develop the M.W.C. site to approximately 65 beds, consisting of 2 ski clubs (one for M.W.C.) and a 20 bed extension for the new U.L.L.R. lodge which he now owned. The complex would be of two storeys only and the design would complement the natural environment as far as possible.

For the first time the Mt. Buller Lodge Committee felt that they were dealing with a developer who would actually produce results.

However still more problems arose when the A.R.C. did not accept the plans and permit application lodged by Grocon Pty Ltd (Part of the Grotto Group) and even indicated that future developments in the area would probably be given to Adam Adams.

Part of the reasoning behind this remarkable decision appeared to be that the then Chief Executive Officer of the A.R.C., Dr Ron Grose, was determined to implement a policy of high density development on Mt. Buller. Fortunately, Rino Grollo, along with the M.W.C. and other clubs, disagreed with that policy and did not accept the A.R.C. decision.

Rino Grollo, with help from the M.W.C., initiated legal proceedings against the A.R.C. and took the matter to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal who on the 21st April 1988, issued a planning permit in favour of Grocon Ltd.

The A.R.C. still continued to make life difficult by putting the M.W.C. site to Public Tender and requiring that the site be developed to 125 beds. However the tender was eventually awarded to Grocon Pty Ltd on the 19th August 1988 after no other bids were received.

The first plans for the site were prepared by Architect, Peter Parry-Fielder, but these were abandoned and a new set was produced by the firm of Curuow Frieverts and Glover, based on concrete block construction. However, the project was deferred for various reason until after the 1989 ski season.

In December 1989, Rino Grollo advised that a new lodge of approximately 16 beds was for sale in a complex which had been built by the Belmore Ski Club in Breathtaker Road. Rino suggested that we inspect the lodge as it might suit our requirements. Unfortunately for many reasons, the premises were not suitable as a club lodge. Once again the building project was deferred and Rino Grollo was having second thoughts about the whole development due to the tough economic times caused by the recession.

The new Chief Executive Officer. of the A.R.C., Mr Philip Bentley who took over from Dr Ron. Grose, was very keen for the development to proceed and gave certain financial concessions to Grocon Pty Ltd as an incentive, but also insisted that they proceed with the project without delay.

Early in February 1991, Rino Grollo revealed that he now proposed to simplify the lodge construction and had asked Architect, Peter Parry-Fielder, to modify the current plans for a more economical design based on an all-timber construction.

These plans were duly completed to everybody's satisfaction in April 1991 and indications were that the project would now proceed.

On 2nd May 1991, we were advised by Rino that Muski was interested in a development on their site and may be prepared to consider a dual development with M.W.C. Although we were not really interested it was apparent that Rino favoured this scheme for economic reasons.

Plans were drawn up by Peter Parry-Fielder, with a party wall between the two lodges and the M.W.C. layout was very similar to the plan for our own site. Negotiations between Muski and Grotto appeared to be going well, but on 21st June 1991, Muski announced that they had permission from the A.R.C. to build a 40 bed lodge on their own site and would prefer this to a dual development.

Rino Grotto tried very hard to entice Muski into the dual scheme, but to no avail. So eventually on the 16th September 1991, he confirmed that the new M.W.C. lodge would be built on lease A of the M.W.C. site in the summer of 1992. However he indicated that Grocon Pty Ltd would not be involved and that his own company Mt. Buller Investments Pty Ltd would take over the project. He also stated that M.W.C. would now have to contribute \$40,000 towards the building cost. This meant that with the cost of fitting and furnishings, the club would have to find at least \$75,000 to finance the project.

A special General Meeting of the M.W.C. was held on 5th December 1991, to decide if the club should proceed with the construction of a new lodge at Mt. Buller and Gerald Morton, the Mt. Buller Lodge Committee Chairman, presented all the necessary information to the meeting. After a lively discussion, he put the following motion to the meeting:

"That the club Executive provide finance from existing funds to the value of \$65,000 for the construction of a new club lodge at Mt. Buller in accordance with the agreement between the M.W.C. Inc., and Mt. Buller Investments Pty Ltd and that the meeting authorise the club Executive to sign the agreement on behalf of the club members"

The motion was seconded and a vote taken which resulted in 63 in favour with 7 abstaining.

Construction of the new lodge commenced on 15th December 1991 and the project progressed smoothly. There were some variations to the original plans, such as the provision of a plant room and the construction of an entry ramp from Stirling Road, which made access much easier.

In order to raise the money required to fit out and furnish the lodge, a notice of intent form was placed in the club circular inviting members to contribute with a loan or donation. The response was excellent and sufficient money was raised to cover the club's share of the total building costs.

Gerald Morton supervised the lodge construction on behalf of the club and liaised with the builder and architect throughout the project. Construction reached lock up stage late in February and the lodge was completed by the end of April 1992, including the installation of bunks and furniture.

The new lodge was formally opened by the club president, Frank Feltham on Sunday 31st May 1992. Nearly 100 members and friends arrived for the occasion and it was quite evident that all were greatly impressed with the new building.

The club now has an attractive modern lodge situated in the village centre close to the ski slopes, plus the security of a 35 year renewable lease with the A.R.C.

Recent indications show that the new lodge is proving to be extremely popular, not only in the ski season, but also in the spring, summer and autumn months where the lodge occupation has increased quite markedly. Many members are now taking the opportunity to introduce their families and friends to the many attractions of the high country. Activities include horseriding, tennis, cycling and 4WD touring.

Future ski seasons on the mountain will have more reliable snow cover with the introduction of snow making facilities. The first stage was installed in 1994 with great success. The lift company intends, that within two years, Mt Buller will have the best snow making system in Australia with the capability to cover not only beginner and intermediate runs but also some of the more advanced ski slopes.

The Melbourne Walking Club has enjoyed a close association with Mt Buller for over half a century. This historic link should continue well into the future because the mountain and its immediate surroundings has appeal for both skiers and walkers, as well as those who simply wish to relax in the beautiful and invigorating alpine environment.

Gerald Morton