

The Bon Accord Spur

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BON Accord—Mount Hotham, the two are regarded nowadays as inseparable, almost synonymous. Many skiers have forgotten and others, perhaps, do not know, that the Bon Accord Spur has only in recent years become the accepted approach to Mt. Hotham. Since 1925, when Hotham really first became open to skiers, a few sadly dis-

illusioned individuals and still fewer enthusiastic tourers have struggled up the road each year from the Omeo snowline. Until 1933, however, the vast majority approached Mount Hotham via St. Bernard Hospice, usually with an overnight stop at the Hospice and a late start next day with rucsac somewhat heavier than on arrival. If the

Hospice could be reached by car it was, and no doubt it still is possible to make the journey in one day in reasonable comfort. Usually, however, the cars would have to be left several miles down the road (perhaps below Buckland Gap) and the arduous slog up the road, plus the cheery comforts offered by host Barney Rush, left one in no frame of mind to hurry on. Furthermore, the route from St. Bernard to Hotham, while pleasant though strenuous under good conditions can be really hazardous with poor weather or snow. There is no doubt that skiers attempting to keep to a schedule or forced on by lack of accommodation at St. Bernard took many risks. One short section on the south end of Mt. Blowhard can, due to wind and ice, or both, be as dangerous as any spot in our Alps.

By 1931 the University Ski Club had decided to make Hotham the venue each year for its main party and championship meeting. As the parties grew larger it became evident that the risks would increase and also that overnight accommodation at St. Bernard would become more inadequate. Consideration was thus given to the possibility of an alternative approach—one which would eliminate the six exposed miles between St. Bernard and Hotham. A very brief investigation revealed that the Bon Accord Spur was the only alternative. The feasibility of using this was in considerable doubt as reported by S. S. McKay in the Ski Club of Victoria Year Book, 1930.

A better track existed, cut and maintained by the Mines Department, on the Champion Spur. This left the old St. Bernard Mines Department track just below Washington Creek and climbed by an easy grade on to the Razorback which it joined some distance on the Feathertop side of the Big Dipper, which is the lowest point of the Razorback. This, consequently, was a longer and more exposed route and was considered unsuitable.

It was known that tracks had been cut on the Bon Accord Spur many years earlier. In fact at one time there were four mining batteries operating in the vicinity. The Bon Accord Mine Manager's residence was on the Spur some little distance above the present bridge across the Ovens. The remains of the old battery can still be seen. This battery, built by an American engineer, was unique in that the wipers (or cams), the

wiper shaft and the stamps, were all wooden—the stamps being shod with iron. Advocates of a road from Harrietville to the foot of the spur will be interested to learn that the storekeeper used to deliver supplies by horse and waggon well beyond the present crossing. The vehicles kept to the bed of the river the whole way and fragile goods, which included many bottles of a well-known Tasmanian beer bearing a picturesque green label, were packed in large casks, presumably with the bung in—assurance made doubly sure. However, signs of the good old days have now practically disappeared and it takes an old identity such as Mr. Frank Wraith, to whom the writer is indebted for much of his information, to locate them.

The residents of Harrietville, in the light of past experience, said that the spur was too hard on horses and that they would refuse to pack goods on it. Despite this, on the 3rd June, 1931, after a solemn warning by a small deputation of locals, the writer left Harrietville on foot with a forty-five pound rucksack and a pair of skis. Mr. Vic Wraith kindly acted as guide along the old St. Bernard track to the foot of the Bon Accord Spur, which was reached at 10.30 a.m. The Ovens River was flowing very strongly and the only way across was by a log below the junction of Washington Creek. The creek also was high and difficult to cross. The foot of the correct spur was distinguished by a large hollow tree in which was the remains of a pack-saddle. Vic pointed out this tree and saw me safely over the river. After crossing Washington Creek the old pack saddle was duly located, and the climb begun. The aneroid reading at the river was 1900 ft. There was no sign of the old track and consequently no alternative to climbing straight up the ridge as the country is too steep for traversing. In one or two places old tracks were discernible where they zigged or zagged across the spur and on each occasion attempts to follow them around the grade were defeated as they just vanished on the steep sidings. No doubt these were the remains of the old sledge tracks used for carting ore from the mines down to the batteries.

At about 3300 ft. thick scrub was encountered and pushing straight up the ridge through the scrub with pack and ski was quite an experience. The Bon Accord Hut

was reached at 2.15 p.m. Altitude 4400 ft.

This hut was built in 1929 by the State Tourist Committee, the material having been carted down from Diamantina. It replaced a rough hut built some years earlier by Lawler, of Harrierville. There was no tank and although a search was made for it 200 feet below the hut, no water was located. The first water since leaving the river was found at Diamantina Hut at 5 p.m. Hotham Heights was reached after dark at about 6.30 p.m.

It was obvious that a large party could not use the spur that winter and so parties went as usual via St. Bernard. In 1933 the Victorian Railways acquired Hotham Heights and as a result of a suggestion made to Mr. Brascher, then Superintendent of Railways

Refreshment Services, the old track was reopened. That winter a large University party went in by the "new" route, although the majority came down via St. Bernard or Feathertop. Subsequent improvements, particularly on the portions just above the river, have made it a good riding and pack track right to the snowline.

The further refinements of a sledge service introduced by Eric Johnson and a staging hut at about 5200 ft. have turned the Bon Accord into a highway adequate for the present limited accommodation at Mt. Hotham. Let us hope, however, that the development of Hotham village will soon make the Bon Accord quite inadequate and that the traffic will warrant the keeping open to cars of the Omeo or even the St. Bernard road.