Old ropeway dug up on daring adventure

A long-forgotten engineering feat in the Blue Mountains was back in the spotlight this year, reports JENNIE CURTIN.

It was an ambitious, even audacious plan—to string a three-kilometre wire ropeway across Katoomba’s rugged Jamison Valley, attach a series of metal buckets and use a kind of pulley system to bring mined oil shale to the escarpment above.

Even today it would pose enormous challenges, but this scheme was being planned in 1889, well before mechanised cranes and helicopters were available to help with construction.

Against the odds, however, the Breichert Aerial Ropeway was completed (named after the German who devised the scheme) and for six months it ferried the precious oil shale out of the valley.

But success was only short-lived. Within six months, the ropeway’s tension was enormous, causing the system to groan and strains on the pulley system proved too much and the ropeway collapsed. Dozens of the coal buckets, each weighing about 300 kilograms, plummeted to the valley floor, leaving broken ropes swinging from the 17 wooden supporting towers and ending the dreams of Katoomba Collieries.

Now, after 120 years, a small federal government grant and an arduous field trip, the ropeway’s remains — which lie partly on Scenic World land and partly in the National Park — have been fully documented. The aim is to have the whole thing heritage-listed.

Peter Shadie, CEO of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, was one of the intrepid team of historians, archaeologists, bushwalkers and National Parks workers who scoured the Jamison to find as many relics as they could.

For a total of seven days, the team trekked through and around very steep terrain to uncover, photograph, measure and record 362 individual items they found. These included a large number of buckets, tower poles, ropes and myriad parts of the mechanism which kept the whole thing moving.

Mr Shadie, it was a very worthwhile project but also an exciting adventure. “It was fascinating,” he said. “For me it was an Indiana Jones meets Time Travellers type of adventure. There is this amazing array of mine shafts, landmarks, buckets and mysterious rusting parts of the old system down there.”

Not to mention cold weather and rain to contend with. The team embarked on the project in mid-winter last year.

“Several of us said — mid-winter, are you kidding?” Mr Shadie recalled. “But then we discovered it’s much better because the leaves aren’t active, or the weeds.”

It was also pretty arduous walking in and out each time, though occasionally they used...
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