

THE ASCENT OF VIDLER'S CHIMNEY

John Stephenson (23-10-1954)

Examinations were at last over and a feeling of reckless ease was in the air. The four of us had plans – we were to attempt an ascent of Vidler's Chimney on Mount Lindesay.

Mt. Lindesay is a 4,000 feet peak in the Macpherson Range, on the border of Queensland and New South Wales, about 65 miles south of Brisbane. It is a spectacular peak, rising nearly 3000 ft. from the surrounding country, and being capped by a double cliff line 600 ft high.

The mountain was first climbed about 1880 by two of the early local settlers. They initiated the route by which the mountain was always been climbed since – the eastern buttress. This route is a steep one, but well provided with trees which permit a relatively easy though dangerous ascent. Up to 1953 no other route had been made – for 70 years Lindesay had withstood any attempts to find an alternative route.

On December 26th 1928, Lyell Vidler, a young climber from Brisbane, a student at the Technical College, visited the mountain along he had been up several times before and was fascinated by the chimney on the unclimbed Northern face. The chimney is a vertical gash in the lower band of cliff and is the only breach on that side. It is about 300 to 350 feet high, very steep, and 5 to 10 yards wide; it is really little more than a steep gully. Vidler was eager to attempt it and in trying alone, as he did, he completely disregarded all canons of safety in mountaineering.

He was killed.

No one knows how he fell or exactly when. He neglected to advise local farmers of his intentions and was not immediately missed. Five days passed before his shattered body was discovered at the foot of the crevice. In a patch of tall rainforest, within a few yards of the base of the chimney now named in his honour, Lyell Vidler is buried.

Most people who have climbed Lindesay since Vidler's death have seen his grave, for one passes it on the way to the base of the usual route. The grim reminder of the grave has possibly, deterred many from attempting the chimney. Very few attempts had, in fact, been made up to the time when we decided to try, and none of these had been successful.

It is interesting to imagine how far Vidler climbed before he fell. It is most probably that he had not gone far. The chimney is treacherous from start to finish and any stable climber would realise the very great objective danger.

Our party consisted of four young climbers.

John Comino was a young Applied Science student. He was our strongest climber, having a number of fine climbs to his credit, and we looked to him for any severe pitches we might meet. George Ettershank was a Pure Science student and had not been climbing for very long... Any lack of experience was offset by his keen enthusiasm. Ron Moss had graduated a year before as a Mechanical Engineer. Like Ettershank, he had not been climbing for very long, but showed a natural ability for the sport. I was a Science graduate, doing honours in Geology. I had been climbing for several years and had had the good fortune to have been on a number of climbs with Comino, usually acting as his second.

At 6 am. On the morning of the 19th December 1953, we left Brisbane in George's Renault. It was only a week to the day from the 25th anniversary of Vidler's death.

An 80 mile drive brought us to the base of our mountain. We ate a snack – and we were off.

Out of condition as we were, the long grassy slopes which lead up from the road to the base of the cliffs seemed interminable. It was hot and some hours passed before we drew level with the northwestern corner of the big cliffs. This is a most spectacular buttress, and, facetiously, we worked out a most impossible route as we rested and contemplated it. There is not a single ledge to break the abruptness on this side.

We followed the base of the cliff around towards Vidler's and at one point, noted the cliff seemed lower than elsewhere, and looked reasonably climbable – we kept the locality in mind. We were intent on Vidler's Chimney, but in the case of an early defeat, there was this alternative.

Suddenly, we were at the grade, and rising behind it was the chimney. It was almost 11 am. And we continued about 50 yards to quench our thirst at a spring. Refreshed, we returned and paused at the grave once more. We took off our hats and stood, bareheaded, silently, for several minutes. This would help stabilise our judgements on the climb.

We started, it had been a dry spring season that year – almost a drought, but as we clambered up through the rainforest, there were several big flame trees in full bloom.

We scrambled up into the chimney and very presently met the first step in it – a crumbly wall about 50 feet high. This defied all our attempts and so we decided to traverse out of the chimney to the right. We roped up. Swing holds provided an easy lead and a straightforward pitch up the rib edge next the chimney took the leader 90 feet up to a good belay on a tree overhanging the chimney. We climbed as a dingle team, joining our two ropes. When Comino joined me at the belay, he took over the lead.

He traversed along a ledge and after an awkward stretch above the wall of the chimney on uncertain holds he entered the chimney again, directly above the first step which we had thus bypassed. From here on, as he continued upwards, cascades of dirt from his efforts on the earthy rock began to come down. After about 70 feet, a loose traverse took him out of the chimney again, but on the opposite wall, to a comfortable belay on a large tree.

The next pitch was straight up, on the left edge of the chimney. The long roots of trees higher up allowed the negotiation of steep, smooth rock. Comino then gained a point provided with numerous trees – almost a terrace, and immediately alongside the chimney. With some difficulty, for the route deteriorated badly with each climber, we joined him one after another. It was about 1 pm.

At this point we were only about 80 feet from the top of the chimney, which is a small saddle between a pinnacle set away from the main face and the face itself. Here the crevice is entrenched, with square walls up to 15 feet high. We examined the face above us, but though some possibilities were presented, we all agreed that our best chances of getting up still lay in the chimney. The chimney was broad – about 15 feet, and it maintained a steady angle of about 50 degrees. Its loose earth supported only vines and small shrubs, but it looked as if it should go for at least 50 feet where there seemed to be something of a stance. Above this, it steepened and was blocked by two big 15 foot chockstones, the upper one of which marked

the top of the chimney. These chockstones overhang the chimney and this final section looked doubtful, but we thought we could see light through underneath the chockstones and this might indicate a way up.

We had some food and discussed the situation. Finally, at about 2 pm, I climbed 20 feet up the face and from a good belay, lowered Comino the 15 feet into the chimney.

He soon found the situation uncomfortable. The severe unbroken slope he stood on disappeared steeply back down the 200 feet odd drop to the bottom, and was not reassuring. The whole way is devoid of any obstruction and an unchecked slide would mean a quick fall down the whole way. The floor of the chimney was dirt and Comino kicked footholds for his feet. While he stood in one such fabricated foothold, and kicked another, the first quietly crumbled.

Even while digging holds with his hands, the slight vibration loosened his feet. He was on the left side of the chimney, but the wall next to him was almost smooth and offered no assistance. Slowly and unsteadily, he made his way up. After 40 minutes he had gained only 30 feet and was still 20 feet below the stance at the foot of the chockstones, he decided to descent, but immediately found this harder and more risky than ascent.

We waited anxiously while he struggled on. Strong as John was, he was tiring from his exertions, and as he climbed higher, the consequences of a slip steadily mounted. It took him another 50 minutes to reach the stance.

The stance was a fallacy, with no belay. Comino was able to hollow a platform big enough to sit in, crouching under the first chockstone. A small tree nearby which we had intended to use as a belay was loose. Comino was tired and did not feel prepared to continue, the attack or attempt a very hazardous retreat, until he had enjoyed a long rest.

We debated. I still felt there was a change in the chimney for the ascent – I was certain Comino had attached it rather too cautiously. Also, on the opposite wall of the chimney, about 15 feet below him, there appeared to be a lead out of the chimney. This would work out on to the edge of the pinnacle which hems in the chimney on this side. We had already climbed a portion of this edge at the bottom of the chimney, and we might be able to force a route to the top of the pinnacle in this way.

George, in his turn, lowered me into the chimney just as I had lowered Comino. Comino unroped and held the rope only in his hand, for had I fallen, roped to him, he would have been dragged down – two men falling would have been almost impossible for the belay man to hold. In my turn, I floundered in the chimney. My confidence left me soon after I started on this sickening stretch – everything moved. I decided to cross the chimney and try the opposite side to that which Comino had ascended. I finally managed to cross and at once the tension was relieved. Holds on the wall for my hands allowed me to gain height more easily and I presently reached the point of the lead out of the chimney.

I followed this. In 20 feet, as a ledge, it went out to the buttress edge of the pinnacle. From here to the top of the pinnacle climbing looked severe, with extreme exposure, and I concluded this possibility was worse than even the chimney.

I went back to the chimney and climbed up to Comino. I was still fresh and hoped to find some way up, or at the worst, some belay point from which it would be possible for Comino and myself to descend. I started

off, but the increased angle of the chimney called for greater caution. The rock was crumbly but compact enough to fashion holds.

As I passed up behind the first big chockstone, in the gloom ahead I saw a strong looking root – here was a sound belay! I literally scabbled up to it and finally reached it with one hand. Anxiously I tested it. It was dead and crumbled like a shell between my fingers!

Ahead, the semi-cave I was in narrowed into darkness. The question arose whether to attempt to return before the situation got completely out of control, or to continue on the off chance that there was a way out of the cave.

In actual fact, I was able to make a quick decision – I was almost sure I could not descend without strong changes of a fall. The whole situation was developing something of a flavour.

The steep floor of the cave was dank and musty, and everything seemed dead – everyone of the numerous rootlets on the walls was dead. Almost feverishly, I scraped and scabbled up foot by foot, half expecting to come off at any moment. Heaven knows what George, who was belaying me nearly 70 feet below, was thinking. I had disappeared from sight and the rope must have been going out in spasmodic jerks. Even Comino could not see what I was up to.

Suddenly, I was able to see around a corner – I could see light. So there was a way out! It was a small – only a foot in diameter and I had misgivings as I clawed up to it – would I be able to enlarge it and crawl through? At last I reached the hole. It was floored with earth and I began to burrow.

Through the hole I could see grass and trees in sunlight which were on the opposite side of the saddle at the head of the chimney. Comino complained bitterly as the efforts of my excavations rained down past him. I vividly remember this language when a block of rock a foot square I was getting out of the way got out of control and went bounding down close to him without much warning.

Finally it was enough. Rather done, I squirmed through the little tunnel and stood on easy ground to breathe good air again. In turn, the others came up the rope and squeezed through the hole. A short scramble brought us to the narrow crest of gap above the chimney.

The chimney had been won! It looked spectacular as we peered back down it.

It was almost 4 pm. Above us the pinnacle rose 40 feet. It had never been visited by anyone and George took over the lead to attempt it. It was tricky, almost perpendicular pitch, but he managed it and we quickly joined him on the summit. The outward face is sheer and quite unbroken for over 300 feet. We made a small cairn to record the visit and then returned to the gap by roping down off the pinnacle.

Time was getting on; we still had to get down. To do this, we had to ascend to the terrace between the two cliff bands that cap Lindesay. Once on the terrace, we could traverse eastwards and come onto the usual route which we could use for the descent.

We were 80 feet below the terrace. Georg accomplished two successive determined leads and then we joined him of the terrace. Here, in an overhang of the final cliff band of Lindesay there is a delectable cave. Not very deep, but provided with a flat verdant floor and with pure running water – a remarkable thing to find within only 200 feet of the summit. The water was delicious.

With the light beginning to fade, we made our way along the standard route. We hurried down the cliffs and on through the rain forest, finally scrambling down the grassy slopes to the road. It was quite dark by the time we reached the car.

Then, the long drive home, with the big mountain steadily falling back and silhouetting against the stars.

Vidler's chimney had at last been climbed.