Images

The Summit Observatory shortly after its erection (note cairn on outcrop in LH corner) (view north). Source: *Weekly Courier* 17 Aug 1907, p.17.

Present day view across the Observatory site towards The Pinnacle (with trig station) (view south). Photo: Anne McConnell, 2010.

History

Wragges Summit Meteorological Observatory on kunanyi/Mt Wellington was established in 1895. Its construction was supervised by Clement Wragge, who was visiting Tasmania for this purpose, and he was assisted by Mr Kingsmill, the officer in charge of the Hobart Barracks Observatory, and later Government Meteorologist. As there was no road beyond the Springs (at 700m), all the construction materials and instruments and other necessities for the Summit Observatory had to be carried from the Springs by hand on rough bush tracks the additional 700m in altitude and 4 km to the summit. It comprised a hut and a cairn of rocks, the cairn being built to protect the instruments until the hut was built. The hut was timber clad and lined, with a corrugated iron roof, and measured 12ft by 8ft. The entire building, including the roof was surrounded with a wall of the local dolerite rock. The hut housed a barometer and a barograph and all other ‘necessary standard instruments’. It also had a fireplace for cooking and heating and a built in bunk. The Summit Observatory operated until April 1908, when it was accidentally burnt down.

Clement Wragge was an Englishman who was in the forefront of meteorological forecasting internationally. Wragge was responsible for issuing the first Australasian weather charts and forecasts (for each of the colonies and New Zealand) and he began the tradition of naming cyclones. One of his early achievements was the improvement of meteorological forecasting by having bi-level observatories. Wragge established the first bi-level observatory in 1881 in Scotland. After this work he moved to Australia, but prior to leaving Scotland Wragge conceived an interest in trialling a similar system in Australia. One of the sites in Australia that he felt would work well was Hobart (at sea level) with kunanyi/Mount Wellington (at 1,271 m asl) immediately behind. Consequently, arrangements were made between the Tasmanian government and Wragge through the Royal Society of Tasmania to establish an observatory on kunanyi/Mt Wellington to this end, using the government observatory at Anglesea Barracks as the low level station. A mid-level station was also established at the same time at the Springs on kunanyi/Mt Wellington, at the time the end of the Mountain road.

Wragge had also established a bi-level observatory in the Adelaide area in 1884, but Mt Lofty (727m) was apparently not high enough to work effectively, and Wragge was still keen to establish a higher level observatory elsewhere in Australia, hence his interest in Hobart and kunanyi/Mt Wellington. Three years after establishing the Hobart bi-level observatory, Wragge also established a paired set of observatories in NSW (Mt Kosciuszko (2,228m) and Merrimbula).
Description of Place

Wragges Summit Meteorological Observatory survives as an archaeological site. It comprises a low mound of dolerite boulders on a dolerite outcrop (the remains of the cairn) to the northeast of the summit rock pinnacle, a tumbled heap of stones below the eastern edge of the outcrop (remains of the chimney and possibly the drystone cladding of the hut) and an extensive, but sparse, artefact scatter, mainly of fragmented glass and metal of various types, across the flat area immediately to the south.

Significance

The Summit Observatory, paired with the Anglesea Barracks Observatory (the lower level observatory), was the second such high altitude weather observatory and bi-level weather forecasting facility in Australia and the southern hemisphere (but the first to operate successfully), and the third globally, the earliest one being Wragge’s original observatory in Scotland using Ben Nevis (which is a similar height – 1,345m) as the high altitude observatory. The Summit Observatory on kunanyi/Mt Wellington is one of only three in Australia. The Summit Observatory is rare and seminal scientific site at the state level. Although only limited physical evidence remains, its high altitude location is an important indicator of the purpose of the observatory. Also, it has strong associations with Wragge, whose innovations make him one of the foremost meteorologists of his time, and one who had a ‘significant influence on the foundations of Australian meteorology’.

Current Listing

Wragges Summit Meteorological Observatory is not listed on any statutory register or list, but is formally recognised as a ‘site’ under the Wellington Park Management Plan.

Further Reading


Author Information

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