Did a printer’s mistake name a waterfall?

Keith Painter

It’s well known that the naming of the River Lett at Hartley is attributed to a mis-reading by a surveyor of a notation made by the surveyor-explorer George Evans in his notebook. Thus “Rivulett” became River Lett.

There’s a small waterfall at Mount Victoria that may have got its name by a simple printer’s mistake! More of that later, but first —

If you take a walk on the south side of Mount Victoria, you may see signs for Fairy Bower. But just what is Fairy Bower? And where is it? For it seems to have flitted here and there!

Unfortunately the meaning and location of “Fairy Bower” has been confused by its use in:

- “Fairy Bower Picnic Area” — near the railway line and Toll House;
- “Fairy Bower Track” — from the picnic area to the footbridge at a track junction;
- “Fairy Bower Track” — from Mount Piddington to the footbridge junction;
- “Fairy Bower Creek” — for the creek which starts below the picnic area;
- “Fairy Bower” — for the general area encompassing the gully south of the picnic area and the gully east of Mount Piddington;
- “Fairy Bower” — an area east of the track from the picnic area, as marked on the council sign map at Mount Piddington (Figure 1, red circle);
- “Fairy Bower” — a small glen containing a waterfall and pool (now silted up), just off the track from Mount Piddington to the footbridge junction.

The fairly recent (c2009) introduction of the name “Grotto” on the map and signage has not helped. Figure 1, blue circle, and Figure 2.

I believe the last-named location in the list above is the original Fairy Bower, while the name has also been used to describe the two gullies east of Mount Piddington and south of the Fairy Bower picnic area through to Coxs Cave and beyond to Dunns Leap.

Let’s see what evidence we can find to support this deduction.

Earliest references

The earliest reference to Fairy Bower found in a search on Trove was in April 1882:

The beautiful site and surroundings of Mount Piddington have been “improved” by thoroughly denuding the place of the sweet-smelling peppermint gum trees, and erecting on the extreme brow of the hill a

Figure 1. Council map at Mount Piddington shows Fairy Bower in the bush! And it has “Grotto” where Fairy Bower should be.

Figure 3. “Grotto” instead of “Fairy Bower” on sign at junction of Coxs Cave Circuit tracks below Mount Piddington.
somewhat unsightly-looking large shed, which is to be covered with galvanised iron. Fancy our tourists toiling up the hill on a hot summer’s day, and resting under such a “shade.” Would not the gum tree’s shade have been much better than this “improvement on nature?” The same work has been carried on at Fairy Bower and down the road to the Gorge. In the short space of a few weeks valuable shade giving trees have been cut down, the sides of the road made miserably bare, the charm of wild nature, smoothed down into that of a turnpike road, and the whole hill side left unsightly. The destroyer seems to have been thoroughly ruthless in his work, leaving no little shrub here and there—with stately gum between—to redeem the barrenness of the aspect. The labour of years will not restore the injury that has been done in a few days. It is to be hoped that we have seen the last of this modern style of “improvement on nature’s handiwork”—that it will act as a warning in dealing with the yet untouched sites of our mountain reserves.

(There may have been other such attacks, but I was not able to track them down.)

The second reference which I found is from September 1883 and is actually a poem by Douglas Sladen. See Figure 3.

The third-earliest reference describes the journey through Fairy Bower from Mount Piddington to Coxs Cave via Witches Glen:

Fairy Bower is reached by a well-defined track from Mount Piddington. In the descent the tourist cannot fail to be charmed with the magnificence of the scene, so wild and yet so beautiful. Tree ferns from three to twenty feet grow in profusion, while smaller ferns, moss, and lichens are to be had in almost every nook of this fairy land. Seats are placed at intervals all along the route to Cox’s Cave, and here the weary laborer may be often seen resting from his labours. The Witches’ Glen is a lovely spot, here one may sit, and away from the busy world gaze with rapture on the scene. Every step taken in Fairy Bower presents some fresh beauty. A small brooklet flows down the valley, and finally loses itself in the Kanimbla. (Nepean Times, 15 Dec 1888, p4 c5, Trove#101004407)

Other references

1. The Geographical Names Board database listing for Fairy Bower just has “Glen east of Mount Piddington”. This is correct. See Figure 4.
2. The NSW State Heritage Register listing has:

   Mv051 : Track Fairy Bower and Old Railway
   Track

   The gully known as Fairy Bower has semi-rainforest vegetation and an attractive grotto to the west of Fairy Bower Creek. It is approached from Mount Piddington Lookout, at the end of Apex Avenue, Mount Victoria. A steep twisted track descends on the south-east side of Mount Piddington and soon reaches a T-junction. Although it is possible to reach Fairy Bower in either direction (since it is a circular track), it is recommended that the track to the left (north-east) be taken.

   The track winds down along the line of an unnamed tributary creek: after some distance the grotto lies off to the left (north). The track then joins Fairy Bower Creek and goes south along its valley on rocky slopes. (environment.nsw.gov.au/heritage-app/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=1170698)

   This listing is not quite correct either, but it’s fairly close. It suggests that the gully (probably meaning the one down from the east of Mount Piddington) is Fairy Bower and describes the original Fairy Bower as “an attractive grotto”, and “the grotto lies off to the left (north).”

3. Council signage and map.

   The true Fairy Bower has sometimes been called the “Grotto” and the new signs installed in 2009 by Blue Mountains City Council have unfortunately adopted that name.

4. The Blue Mountains Geographical Encyclopaedia has this description:

   Fairy Bower is within the headwaters of Fairy Bower Creek, approximately 400m east of Mount Piddington, Mount Victoria. A descriptive name given to this fern covered glen which has a small waterfall and a creek flowing through it. (Fox, Brian; Keats, Michael OAM; Fox, John, Blue Mountains Geographical Encyclopaedia, Keats Holdings, St Ives, 2018).

5. Halbert & Ellis in Sandstone Caves of Mount Victoria have numerous references to Fairy Bower, particularly the section on what they called “Fairy Bower Cave” (pp9-12). The book has an extensive listing that shows Fairy Bower is well documented with photos on printed postcards, pp12, 135-141. (Halbert, Erik & Ellis, Ross, Sandstone Caves of Mount Victoria, Sydney Speliological Society, Broadway [Sydney], 2011.)

Fairy Waterfall

I included portions of Russell’s 1882 map in History Hound No. 2. I’m repeating it here in Figure 6 this time with the enlargement focussing on “Water Fall”. The red

Figure 5. Beautiful old stone steps on the track near Fairy Bower.
John Fox photo.

Figure 6. An excerpt from Russell’s 1882 map showing the sidetrack to “Water Fall”.
National Library of Australia, online download nla.obj-567085631. (Third edition 1885.)
circle highlights the short sidetrack to the base of the waterfall.

At the time of Russell’s book the waterfall seems to have had no name.

In March 1895 Katoomba’s newspaper *The Mountaineer* (which began publication in September the previous year) began publishing a column called “The ‘Mountaineer’ Guide to the Blue Mountain Sights”. For Mount Victoria the list seems to have been based on Russell’s map and included “Mount Piddington, Fairy Bower, Fern Cave, Witches’ Glen, Fern Tree Gully, Fairy Glen, Waterfall, Cox’s Cave” (*Mountaineer*, 1 Mar 1895, p4, c2, Trove#194840040).

### The printer’s mistakes

In November 1895 the type must have been reset (something which had to be done regularly for frequently reprinted columns of letterpress lead type) and a comma was left out after “Fairy Glen”, so the list became “... Fern Tree Gully, Fairy Glen Waterfall, ...” (8 Nov 1895, p4 c2, Trove#194842570).

So we now have “Fairy Glen Waterfall”.

In June 1897 the format of the *Mountaineer* column underwent a major change, and the word “Glen” was somehow omitted so the list became: “Mount Piddington, Ferris’ Cave, Witches’ Glen, Fairy Bower, Fairy Waterfall, Fern Tree Gully, Cox’s Cave” (18 Jun 1897, p4 c6, Trove#194839609).

So this combination of printer’s mistakes could be how the name “Fairy Waterfall” came into use!

(As an old “compositor” (typesetter) I was responsible for a few notable errors in my apprentice days!)

Note that “Ferris’ Cave” has been added to the list. And further along in the text is “An easy way out is indicated at the foot of the glen”. This means that “The Easy Way Out” track from the junction footbridge to the Toll House had been made by this time.

Fairy Waterfall (*Figure 7*) is on Fairy Bower Creek about 200 metres from the footbridge at the junction of the track from Fairy Bower Picnic Area and the track from Mount Piddington via Fairy Bower. Between the bridge and “The Corner” there is an unmarked track going down to the left. The first few metres don’t look like a formed track but a short distance further and you realise that you are on a constructed track.

The “steps” in the rock at the waterfall are layers of chert, which can also be seen in the cliff to the right. (For information about Mount Victoria chert see my books *The Chert Bubble, Volumes 1 and 2*.)

Part of the side-track to the waterfall has been built up with a rock wall. And as Russell’s map shows this little track was built before 1882.

See *Figure 8* and pages 20 to 22 in my bushwalking guide *Great Walks at Mount Victoria (Pocket Pal)* — www.mountainmistbooks.com

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*Figure 7. Fairy Waterfall.*

*Figure 8. Map of Track to Fairy Waterfall. From p20 of Great Walks at Mount Victoria (Pocket Pal) by Keith Painter, Mountain Mist Books, Raglan, 2012. Buy it online from www.mountainmistbooks.com*
Fairy Glen

Another name on the Russell map is Fairy Glen which seems to apply to the Fairy Bower Creek valley upstream of Fairy Waterfall.

It used to be fairly easy to leave the track just past the old dam and follow the creek down almost to the waterfall. But after a severe snowstorm in 2014 the snow froze on the trees and the weight and the wind brought down many trees in this area.

Tree Fern Gully

Another feature on the Russell map is “Tree Fern Gully”, which is the area below Fairy Waterfall. Some beautiful tall treeferns are found here. Figure 9.

Figure 9. Tree Fern Gully.