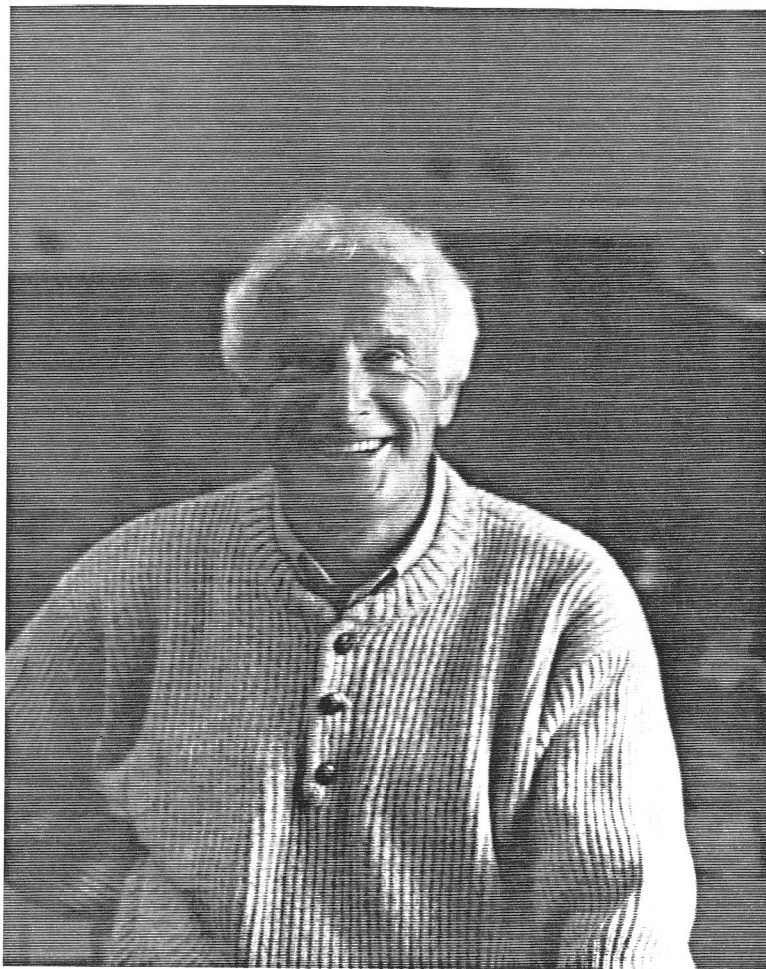


ARTHUR WILSON

Arthur was born in 1928 in Liverpool, England. He served in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, and in 1948 left the RAF and married Doreen (they had two sons). His sister, living in Canberra, encouraged Arthur and Doreen to emigrate too, and they arrived in 1955. As a surveyor's chainman and then a geological fieldhand, Arthur worked on the site investigation for Bendora Dam. Arthur stayed with the Bureau of Mineral Resources (BMR, now Australian Geological Survey Organisation) for most of his subsequent working life, except for four years as a chauffeur at the Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) Embassy. Arthur retired from AGSO in 1993 as senior technician in palaeontology.



Tape 1 Side A

Arthur began at Bendora in 1955 soon after arriving in Australia. He and his wife needed income badly and the field allowance paid by Interior to employees at Bendora was an attraction of the job. Arthur loved the bush too; the whole experience was 'just a big adventure'. He worked under surveyor Bill Tweedie [full name William Morris Hughes Tweedie], and there was a second chainman; they'd return to Canberra at weekends.

At the time, investigation of Site A was winding down and Site C was developing. The work involved putting in lines for the costeans and surveying the dam wall and the top water level. 'Our job was to clear lines of sight [for Tweedie]. Which was not so bad when we got up into the high water mark, but down by the Cotter — I remember distinctly — it was very thick, real thick ti-tree, and it was just with a machete and a brush-hook to clear all the scrub'. Another job was trying to locate a good route for the powerline into the dam; using compass initially, their two attempts were unsuccessful.

Tweedie was 'a good bloke', no-nonsense, ex-Army, big, with a small moustache and an old brown coat. Arthur worked with him 14 months or so. They'd drive out to the Cotter in a jeep with a rag top (cold travelling in winter).

The camp was at Site A on Bushrangers Creek, and the tents had board floors and there was a corrugated iron galley. They took turns to cook, and though trout were caught these were always kept in the kero fridge and taken home to Canberra. A big pot of stew sat on the wood stove the whole time — it was never emptied except once when it got fly-blown and Bill emptied it out 'reluctantly'! The diet was very much a meat one. Lunch was a mutton sandwich and a pannikin of river water. At night time there'd be beer in summer and rum in winter.

BMR geologist John Foweraker was camped adjacent, and Arthur swapped over to work as his fieldhand (better money). The work involved overseeing the costean excavations down to bedrock; the manual work of excavating was done by a roads and bridges gang of Hungarians and Italians, led by a migrant named Oscar, housed at Bulls Head. Oscar was Baltic, heavily built with close-cropped hair. He enjoyed Southern Comfort; on Fridays Arthur and colleagues would have a 'quiet' drink with the gang at Bulls Head.

The 1956 winter was very wet. A flying fox was to be built to assist crossing of the river and Arthur picked up an Irish worker at Kingston who was to do the job. But the man only drank all the grog and had to be taken back to town. No flying fox.

The geological work also involved investigative drilling. The small Mindrill rig was on skids and could be winched around. When porous rock was met by the operators they could tell simply by the revs of the machinery; it was necessary to pour a cement mixture into these places to allow drilling to continue later. John checked the rock core samples and Arthur photographed them. Then a couple of Maltese brothers from the Snowy scheme brought in a bigger rig; they worked long hours. John had broken a leg skiing [at Mt Franklin] and so Arthur did the geological checking of the cores.

All the bulldozer work was done by Ron Wright [also interviewed] and Chicka Archer. Once a road was through to Site C, Arthur walked along the road from camp to C until camp was established at C [the forerunner of the Bendora construction camp].

Tape 1 Side B

Arthur describes how the two operators controlled the dozers when the ground gave way on the steep slopes, using the blade as a brake etc.

Explosives were plentiful. 'Everybody had plenty of dynamite — in fact it used to be stored under Oscar's bed (before they insisted we build a magazine for it...). Everyone had a tendency to be running around with bloody sticks of dynamite and detonators. And they'd crimp the detonator with their teeth. You talk about health and safety now!' The dynamite was for blowing up trees etc. The men would burn dynamite, and sometimes chew it, out of bravado.

Wright and Archer built ramps in order to get height to bulldoze large trees. They also had to be wary of the roots coming out of the ground as the tree fell, which could catch the dozer.

The magazine was built at the C camp. It was not the building off the Bendora Road today. A big boulder at the camp site took a lot of attempts with dynamite before it was reduced to removable proportions. Once the C camp was established, Oscar's gang moved in, as did Arthur eventually.

Arthur liked being in the bush and did not feel he was changing it forever. Nowadays he is more conservation-minded, but then he was a new arrival and it was all an adventure. The Cotter seemed 'a complete wilderness...I just loved it'.

No precautions were taken against pollution of the river. The toilet at A camp was originally a 44 gallon drum sunk in the ground. You had to burn it out weekly. It was a difficult job (best not to be downwind) and Arthur once added too much diesel trying to get a fire going and he blew the dunny up. A Hygeia toilet followed and it was cleaner, requiring cleaning with chemicals. It may have been built over a concrete pit, but if not the waste may have seeped into the water table.

From his first day as a chainman he was called a 'little pom' or 'pommy bastard' by Australian-born workmates, like Joe Gallagher. It didn't worry him. Nevertheless he could identify with European migrants so far from home. The Maltese drillers' brother came straight to Bendora from the migrant ship and suffered such culture shock he had to go back home. He even tried to walk out from Bendora. Yet other migrants 'fitted in'; an Italian who cut the men's hair in his spare time eventually had salons in Canberra.

Arthur met Harry Wark and tells of his intimate knowledge of the Brindabellas. Arthur also knew geologist Lyn Noakes and tells of Noakes' tales of working in New Guinea. Noakes and another geologist Gerry Burton worked at Bendora at times.

John Barrie took over from Foweraker and Arthur picked him up in Canberra to go out to the C camp. Barrie had learned the bagpipes at Scots College and took them with him.

Tape 2 Side A

Barrie drove he and Arthur out to Bendora at top speed — 'it was rally driving'. By now the C camp consisted of 6 huts and a galley. In the evenings John Barrie would play a Scottish lament on the pipes, much to the amusement of the Hungarians and Italians of the roads and bridges gang.

There were no radios so much of the spare time in camp was spent talking. Arthur is saddened by what he sees as the demise of the art of conversation today. There was a dart board in the galley.

The route used by Arthur to get to the camp was via Warks Road. Horses had gone by his time, though they had been used to establish A camp.

Vince Cohen was the foreman carpenter during construction of the C camp huts. An Englishman, he had been at Dunkirk and, responsible for the regimental silver, was being slowed down by the load. The Germans were catching up. So Vince buried the silver under a hedge and evacuated. He was also worried by what the Germans might do to a man with a Jewish name like 'Cohen'.

There was no sense of excitement at Bendora, unlike on the Snowy scheme which was much bigger. 'Everyone just got on with their job.'

There were no women in the Bendora workforce.

Arthur saw a few snakes. He describes several close encounters, walking over snakes and causing a commotion from the people following behind.

Everyone got on well together at the camp. To explain the impact of alcohol in these sorts of situations, Arthur refers to a detailed story from when he was later in the Northern Territory, about a camp cook who got on the drink and got violent. Although there was alcohol at Bendora it did not cause these sorts of problems.

When he first arrived on the Cotter, he did feel isolated. The A camp near Bushrangers Creek was hemmed in by the bush. Once it rained for a week and the men were confined to their tents. It 'got a bit bloody boring'.

The flying fox was eventually built, by Oscar and his gang. The gang first built a fine log bridge, with deck. There was even an official opening, and the men 'cut the bog roll'. But a flood came down the Cotter and debris pounded the bridge to destruction. The flying fox followed. A Murrumbidgee flood that year (1956) lapped the Murrumbidgee bridge at the Cotter Pumping Station.

For Arthur the job was an adventure, but it was not one for his wife Doreen. Seeing her husband only at weekends, she wanted to return to England. But she eventually adapted. After leaving Bendora, Arthur was still away a lot on BMR field trips. He missed his sons' formative years. They later said to him 'when we needed you, you weren't there'. Bendora was 'no good for the family', says Arthur.

Tape 2 Side B

He felt the pay and conditions were good. There was no demarcation; he did whatever job he was asked, as did most of the men. He goes on to mention various aspects of bushcraft as applied to axe-sharpening as explained by a bushman who worked for a time as a chainman at the depot at Acton.

Arthur feels strongly today about those experiences in the upper Cotter valley. Though he saw much of Australia during his BMR work, it is the Cotter that he has an affinity with: 'the mountains with the running water and all those big trees...I used to love it...summer wet days — the smell of it'. While he feels he is not a real Australian because he was not born here, Arthur concludes 'this Australian thing gets into you'.