

Mt Elephant rises from its slumber



Derrinallum mechanic Geoff Henderson is also president of the Mt Elephant Community Management and helping increase public access to the landmark.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]D[/dropcap>errinallum mechanic **Geoff Henderson** is the keeper of the keys to a volcano.

"Here you go," he says while standing in his main street garage, Urquhart Motors, and passing me a keyring with the words "Mt Elephant Gate" written on the tag.

"Just be sure to lock the gate after you," he smiles.

As president of the Mt Elephant Community Management, Geoff is part of a dedicated group that is slowly and methodically

turning one of the south-west's great landmarks into a natural wonderland that can be accessed by everyone.

For while Mt Elephant, just 1km west of Derrinallum, is a comforting sight to the thousands who drive the "back road" to Melbourne, very few people have actually stopped to look more closely, or climb it.

"I think that is the most common thing people say to me," says management secretary **Val Lang**. "They say they driven past Mt Elephant for years, but have never been for a walk on it."



Even on a cloudy day, Mt Elephant (Djerrinallum) has a particular beauty. This is how it appears from the Hamilton Highway north of the mountain.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]P[/dropcap]art of the reason is that up until 2000, Mt Elephant was privately owned by the Eldridge family.

The mountain was scheduled to be auctioned, but instead the Eldridge's negotiated to sell it to the people of Derrinallum-Lismore – a community of less than 1000 people – who raised \$100,000 toward the \$200,000 purchase price. The remaining funds were provided by Trust for Nature, which now holds the

title.

In the 15 years since, the management team and a steady stream of energetic volunteers have progressively worked on restoring the site and promoting it as the geological gem that it is.

“We began with improving the environment itself, with pest management, getting rid of the rabbits, and revegetation, and then looked at improving access for the community, through better tracks and signage,” Val explains.



How the mountain got its European name: the sleeping elephant shape is obvious when looking from the south.
Image: [Front Paddock Cafe & Larder](#).



View from the top, looking east. There is also a rim walk that circumnavigates the mountain and takes about an hour.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]M[/dropcap]t Elephant, so-named for its shape when viewed from the south, is described as a steep-sided volcanic scoria cone that formed at least 20,000 years ago.

At 240m tall, it is one of the highest volcanoes in Victoria and is of national significance. (You can [find more about its fascinating geology here](#).)

According to [Trust for Nature](#), the indigenous name for the mountain is Djerrinallum (or Sirryallum, or Gerinyelam, depending on which European settler wrote it down), meaning “Hill of Fire”, so there are no prizes for guessing where Derrinallum got its name from.

And even for a non-geologist, it is hard not to be blown away – pardon the pun – by the mounds of basalt, scoria and “lava bombs” that can be seen around the mountain: there is nothing

quite like picking up a rock that looks like it should weigh 5kg and find it as light and frothy as an Aero bar.

“Volcanoes are a window to the earth and we are so fortunate to have a range of volcanoes around this area,” Val says.



Derrinallum butcher, the late Jack Borbidge, whose generous bequest continues to fund works at Mt Elephant. Image: *The Life and Times of Jack Borbidge*.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]T[/dropcap]he 30-40 minute walk to the top of the mountain is steep, but spectacular, which means you can take regular breaks to admire the views without anybody questioning your aerobic fitness.

On a sunny day, which unfortunately we didn't strike but it was still well worth the trek, you can see people surfing at

Lady Bay beach in Warrnambool...well, almost...and enjoy a 360-degree sweep of the south-west.

The main walking track is named in honour of a local butcher, the 6ft-something **Jack Borbidge** and his wife **Millie**, who left a substantial bequest to the management committee to enable ongoing improvements at the mountain.

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It is this generous legacy, together with money from the State Government and Corangamite Shire, which has helped fund a new visitor centre that is expected to be built within 18 months.

“It will be a place for visitors, volunteers and the community to use and enjoy and people who are unable to climb the mountain, like young children and the elderly, will still be able to learn about the mountain,” Val explains.

The centre, combined with the mountain now being open every Sunday afternoon, is sure to mean far less people drive past, but actually make it a destination.

“If you walk the full circuit, around the rim, you feel you are not quite flying, but almost – there is a feeling of space all around you which is just wonderful,” Val says.



[box]Mt Elephant is now open for public access and self-guided walks every Sunday from 1pm-4pm. A volunteer will be on site. Free entry. For other times, collect the gate key from Geoff at Urquhart Motors, 13 Main St, Derrinallum, ph: 0419 361 390. For more information, maps, history and activities, visit the [Mt Elephant website here](#).[/box]

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