



Was This the First Balloon and Parachute Jump in Tasmania?

Author: P.A.C. Richards, A.M., January 2022

In 1932 Hamilton Stuart Dove a well-known naturalist with a passion for ornithology wrote of an aviation event at Latrobe in the late 19th century which appeared in the Advocate in August 1932.¹

AN EARLY PARACHUTE FEAT.

(By H. Stuart Dove.)

Probably it will be a surprise to most residents of our Coast to learn that there was a balloon ascent and a descent therefrom many long years ago, in the township of Latrobe. Were it not for the interest taken in these matters by two former residents of that locality, Messrs. Koche and Heady, both of whom now have their homes in Devonport, the incident would probably have been completely forgotten.

The aeronaut seems to have been a Captain Webb, who came to Latrobe about 45 years ago, and stayed a few days until the atmosphere was suitable for his attempt. The balloon was inflated on the old showground, almost in the heart of the township; some distance away an excavation was made, and from this an underground passage led to the centre of the ground. On the important day, a large fire was kindled in the excavation, and when, thoroughly going, was covered so that the heated air and fumes made their way along the tunnel, and so into the balloon which was fixed over the outlet. There was no car, but a trapeze was attached below, and above this was a parachute, folded but all ready to expand at the critical moment. When the balloon was full, it took 17 men to hold it down; then the gallant captain seized the trapeze, gave the word to let go and off he soared, doing acrobatic feats on the swinging bar as he went. When well up aloft (perhaps half to three-quarters of a mile) he pulled a cord, releasing the bar and parachute, on which he descended, coming down on Oldham's Hill, the high ground round what is now Hamilton Park. There was a dense grove, of wattles on the hill, and the parachutist was in danger of descending into these, so as he neared the earth he swung his body vigorously backward and forward in the endeavour to work the machine clear of the timber.

This he succeeded in doing, just scraping down the outside of the grove and sustaining a few scratches, but it was a near thing! This seems to be a much greater feat than those of modern days, where the parachutist has a number of patent gadgets to ensure his safety should anything go wrong; the apparatus must have been comparatively crude nearly half a century ago, and the aeronaut literally "took his life in hand" when he made the plunge.



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

WAS THIS THE FIRST BALLOON AND PARACHUTE JUMP IN TASMANIA?

In September 1887 the Daily Telegraph (Launceston) reported on a sensational performance by an aeronaut in Illinois USA who leaped from a balloon at an altitude of 5000ft— only 160ft short of a mile — and came safely to the ground with the help of a parachute. Such, at least, is the story as told briefly in the daily paper.²

¹ *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas. : 1890 - 1954), Friday 26 August 1932, p. 6

² *Daily Telegraph* (Launceston, Tas. : 1883 - 1928), Saturday 17 September 1887, p. 2