

# Mysteries at Baker's Swamp, NSW

## Compiled by Deb Carden

On 4 August 2019, Orange Speleological Society (OSS) members, Bruce Howlett (Trip Leader), Club President Denis Marsh and members, Ian Curtis, Gareth Thomas and Deb Carden, visited Baker's Swamp karst (about 20 kilometres south of Wellington Caves). It had been several years since Bruce, Denis and Ian had been to the site and they wished to check cave tags against club maps and records.

A search of OSS archives subsequently unearthed dates of previous OSS visits to Baker's Swamp and this has provided an historic summary. Of interest is that there have been some palaeontological and invertebrate investigations at the site.

Of human interest is an article that Bruce had found on Trove, which he read out as the party stood by a particular cave. The 1882 *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* (article included later) sheds some light on the discovery of human bones found in a Baker's Swamp cave, around 1867. A mystery remains though – who really was this man?

### A potted history of OSS excursions to Baker's Swamp karst. Scientific investigations are noted.

- 20 May 1956: First visited. Bakers' Swamp is recorded then as having an apostrophe after the 's' (plural).
- 1977: A trip to Columbine is mentioned in the Secretary's book at the January 1977 meeting. No details; no trip report (T/R).
- 27 March 1977: T/R plus a mud map to the area in Descent #2 1977 (John Druery).
- There is no further mention of trips in the 1970s and 1980s.
- 1985: In the Australian Karst Index the area is spelt with an apostrophe. Only one cave is listed: BS1 Baker's Swamp Cave.
- 2 and 3 January 1998: An article (ed Denis Marsh) on a trip to the Baker's Swamp area in OSS Newsletter No 6 in January 1998.

Columbine (aka Lake Cave) (BS 9) and Baker's Swamp Cave (BS 1) are mentioned and described. Lee Thurlow "has been spending a bit of time in this area, has located a number of small caves and trying to locate others."

There is a second article in the same newsletter, "Bone Deposits Found in Bakers Swamp Cave", stating that scientists visited the cave in January to investigate. It noted that, "Lee Thurlow will be taking a group of palaeontologists and geologists into the cave again on 18 February '98 to do some

further investigation and sampling. They include Dr Lawrence Sherwin (Geologist, Department of Mineral Resources), Dr Armstrong Osbourne (Department of Geology, University of Sydney), Dr Peter Mitchell (Head of Physical Geography, Macquarie University), Dr Mike Augee (Palaeontologist, University of New South Wales), and Andy Spate (Karst Investigations Officer, NPWS)."

- March 1998: In OSS Newsletter March 1998 there is a Baker's Swamp Report by Lee Thurlow and an appended newspaper article and photograph from the Wellington Times, 20 February 1998, headlined "Amazing Cave Discovery - experts fear plundering of fossil site". Lee Thurlow and David Westbury took a group of professional people to Bone Cave (BS 7) and Columbine Cave (BS 9) (on 18 February 1998). As well as the aforementioned Drs Sherwin, Osbourne, Mitchell, Augee and Andy Spate, the group included Ms Kay Oxley and Ms Liz Morgan from the Department of Mineral Resources. After exploring the caves and speaking to the property owner, it was suggested that maybe OSS could put a gate on the Bone Cave with the help of the property owner.

- 4-5 April 1998: Denis and Bruce visited the area looking at Euchareena, Stuart Town and Baker's Swamp.

Bruce's T/R: Members present - Denis and Bruce. "We met with the property owner and went to the 'Bone Cave' to discuss and plan the installation of a gate to protect the bone deposit. We investigated several locations within the cave but none proved to be suitable. It was decided to construct the gate at the cave entrance. A design was agreed upon and will involve the filling of part of the entrance in addition to the gate".

- June 1998: Monthly meeting recorded: "A trip is proposed to Baker's Swamp on 16th May to fit a gate on Bone Cave. D. Marsh T/L. Will need cement, steel."

The gating was undertaken, with the property owner supplying the steel and Denis doing the welding in situ.

- 6-7 March 1999: A trip to Baker's Swamp (no T/R) as part of the National Heritage Trust Project (NHT). It was an ASF-funded project to locate and record all limestone areas in New South Wales. Bruce was the organiser with Peter Dykes.

**NOTE:** Andy Spate advises he and Stefan Eberhard investigated various sites in New South Wales searching for invertebrates. Article published and sent to cave clubs.

- 5 July 2003: T/R to Stuart Town (Merrimount), Rip 'n' Rain and Baker's Swamp. BS 1 entered and described. BS 40 doline visited (In OSS Newsletter February 2004).
- 4 August 2019: T/R x 2 to Baker's Swamp. Members Present: Bruce Howlett (T/L), Denis Marsh, Ian Curtis, Gareth Thomas, Deb Carden (Ian and Denis; Gareth has photographic data).

The site is a drought-affected, nearly grassless paddock with limestone outcrops, hollows and shallow caves. Close to the boundary, we found the wired entrance of BS 2 into which Denis and Gareth clambered. They estimated 6-metre depth and found three frogs, a fragmented turtle carapace and a plastic flower pot at the bottom. A few metres' further on was BS 3, bottomed again by Denis and Gareth. A similar descent depth, though slightly more challenging. Nearby, BS 11 is a shallow, unpromising one-metre drop that was summarily dismissed as having no potential.

Further on was Lake Cave, BS 9. Before we entered, Bruce produced his mobile phone and read out the interesting historical newspaper article he had found on "Trove", featuring a rural worker who used to spend time in the cave when on the "rantan" (see article below).

Upon descending, the older OSS members found the cave drier than remembered, though Ian estimated the lake to still be about a metre deep. Gareth got excited about some oolites and Denis about a handful of small, unidentified bones.



**Top**—The bones found in Lake Cave

**Above**—Dennis Marsh (right) in BS 8; Ian Curtis near BS 31 and Deb Carden approaching

A trog along the nearby creek for a hundred metres or so didn't find caves or numbered features, but large carp were observed swimming leisurely in the shallow blue-green creek water. Bone Cave (BS 7) was located nearby. The entrance was unusually bright green with ferns and moss and the cave was breathing moist air. The second mystery of Baker's Swamp is that there was no sign at all of the cave gate. Bruce, Denis and Gareth climbed inside, observing there was no evidence of recent entry and few bones were seen.

When not climbing into holes in the ground, we trogged the paddock, locating and GPSing tagged holes:

**BS 24:** Wire-covered slot near Bone Cave. Not much potential.

**BS 25, BS 26, BS 27:** Three features near each other but no enterable holes.

**BS 28:** The same.

**BS 6, BS 31:** Two vertical limestone slots a couple of metres apart, linked below. Not descended. Ladder or rope required.

**004:** A shallow depression, wire-covered, no potential. GPSed.

**BS 12:** The "CO<sub>2</sub> Cave". Denis and Gareth went part way down before Denis stalled above a descent that would have needed a ladder or rope access. Bruce had some figures suggesting 18-metre cave length with vertical range of 10 metres.



**Inspecting the entrance to CO<sub>2</sub> Cave—4 August 2019**  
Left to right—Dennis Marsh, Deb Carden and Bruce Howlett

**BS BS 13:** A slot that Gareth descended to a small solution hole that went nowhere.

**BS 14:** Not much.

An untagged, similar feature nearby.

**BS 4:** A relatively large, blind doline on the top of the hill.

Day's end concluded in the Mumbil pub, washing down the dust of the day.

## March 1, 1882: Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal (New South Wales 1851-1904)

WELLINGTON. STRANGE DISCOVERY. The Gazette of Wednesday contains the following report of evidence taken at an inquest before the local Police Magistrate, on view of human bones which had been discovered in a limestone cave in the locality:

Constable Healey produced a portion of the skull, the left thigh bone; the right shin bone and one of the wrist bones of a man, which had been discovered in a cave. There were some other pieces of bone and part of two bottles—one the bottom of a porter, and the top of a pickle bottle. Constable Healey had visited the cave, but was too large a man to get into it.

William Gough, a fencer, stated he had discovered the bones in a cave shown to the Magistrate and Dr. Rygate. He found the bones about twenty feet from the entrance. He first saw the thigh bone, then the shin, and subsequently the skull. He had been accompanied by a man named Dow, and on a previous occasion tried to explore the cave; but having no light, they had to return. He reported the matter to Constable Healey, at whose request he and Dow again entered and found the smaller bones and portions of bottles, and the rotten remains of twigs, which might have been as a bed. Only small men could get in, and they only with difficulty.

Dr. Rygate said the remains were those of a man of about 60 years of age, about five feet nine or ten in height, the head had a peculiar formation, being very large and narrow. Deceased must have been dead many years.

Sydney England, a selector of Blathery Creek (who had not had heard Dr. Rygate's evidence) said he had been 33 years in the district, and had been overseer of Narrigal station about 15 years ago, when Mr. Manwell was proprietor. He recollected the disappearance, about that time, of a hutkeeper named William Martin. He was a man of about 50 or 60 years of age, rather decrepid [sic], of light build, and had a long narrow face and high forehead. He believed the skull produced corresponded with Martin's head, though he would not swear it was. Martin was a hutkeeper for a shepherd named Lynch, with whom he lived two years. They were on good terms. Reported the disappearance to Mr. Manwell, who said "Oh, he'll soon return: I owe him £14 for wages." Martin never did return to claim his wages, and witness never heard of him again. He had been drinking for two or three days before his disappearance.

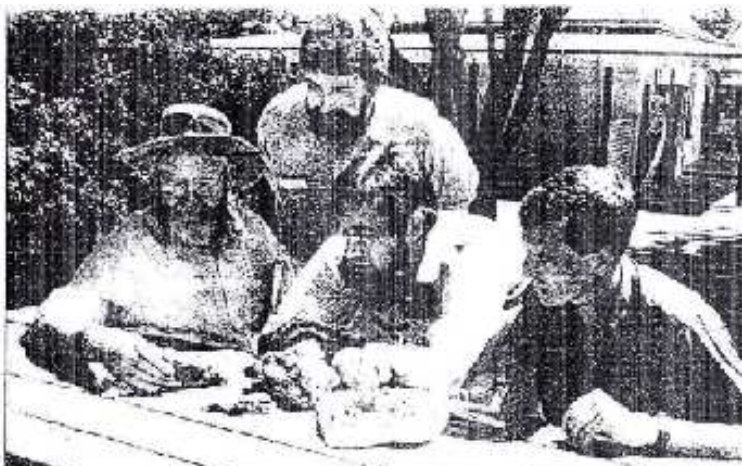
Sergeant Chiplin stated that he, with constable Hayes, had explored the cave, but with great difficulty. they took candles down, but could not keep them burning, and could make as careful search. The cave is entered by a narrow passage almost perpendicular for ten feet, and an angle of 45 degrees for the next 15 feet, when the cave commences about 12 feet wide. The passage in is only just wide enough for one man, and at one spot only large enough for a small man. The cave continues to open out until it is about 25 feet, wide, but the floor still sloping downward till it reaches water. A considerable portion of the roof and sides were covered with stalactites. The sides were and shiny and broke easily, as if recently under water. There was a bed of nearly white sand near the water, and towards the roof an aperture like the entrance to another cave. There was a draught of air as if there was some second inlet from the open air.

The Police Magistrate gave it as his opinion that the remains were those of William Martin who disappeared about the year 1867, but there was no evidence to show as to the cause of death.

Sergt Chiplin intends to give the cave a searching examination, but so far as the human remains are concerned, little more will be gained. It is most probable that Martin discovered the cave and used it as a living place while drinking or a place of deposit for his money. It is very improbable that he met his death by violent means. The rotten twigs indicate that he made it a resting place, the bottles that he indulged in drinking strong liquor, as there must have been water there; and the fact of his having been drinking for two or three days, probably induced him to avoid his employer, and while in the cave he either got drowned, or died from the effects of foul air. There is reason to believe there are other caves in the neighbourhood, and as those in Wellington are so fertile in remains of scientific value, it is to be hoped Mr. Ramsay, the Curator, will extend his operations to Narrigal; though it will be well to warn him that unless he and his hench-man Sibley, undergo a training process, and so get rid of their superfluous flesh; there may be some danger if either tries to enter this Narrigal cave, that one or other will find himself converted into a "stopper".

One of the witnesses stated that there were large quantities of animal bones ???[unreadable]??? &c.

WELLINGTON. (1882, March 1). Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal (New South Wales 1851-1904),



Believed concerning bones from the cave are NSW Parks and Wildlife Service cave investigators, Officer Andy Jones, Wellington District Association manager David Marsh, geologist Armstrong Dobson, and local caving enthusiast Ian Thomas.

## Amazing cave discovery Experts fear plundering of fossil site

Recently discovered the location of a cave in the Wellington district which contains human bones, a large amount of fossil bones of various kinds.

The cave is situated on the western side of the Wellington district, and the site is situated on the western side of the Wellington district.

Although the Wellington district has been known of the cave location it had been not to purchase the information.

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**Two newspaper articles about Bakers Swamp (I couldn't resist the one on the left—the photo of our President reminds me of how he was when I first met him some 31 years ago ... Editor)**

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to Ian Curtis for the 4 August trip report and the details from which the potted history was compiled; to Bruce Howlett for the Bathurst Free Press article; to Denis Marsh for comments and copies of newsletters; to Gareth Thomas for photographs.