

THE BEAUTY OF BUNGONIA

- Kent Henderson

In the countless visits I have made to Wombeyan Caves over the last 15 years or so, I have repeatedly passed the sign to *Bungonia State Recreation Reserve* as I drove through Goulburn. On each occasion, always in a hurry, I made a mental note that next time I must diverge there. But I never did.

Finally, my time came. After the Sunday morning *Radon Meeting*, the day after the ACKMA General Meeting in June, my chauffeur, Andy Spate, decided we simply must visit Bungonia Caves prior to returning to Canberra, and my plane back to Melbourne. Who was I to dissuade the foremost expert on the area? I mean, if you are going to visit a palace, who better than the king to show you around?!!

Well! The karst!!! The Bungonia gorge is close to the most spectacular karst feature I've seen. The views are truly breathtaking - that is, until you cast your eyes at a particularly ugly limestone quarry at one end across the gorge. Sigh...

Bungonia is, of course, the favourite caving area for most NSW speleo clubs. Many of the caves are vertical, and some are amongst the deepest in Australia. The area became a *water reserve* in 1872, and was further reserved for its caves in 1902. Early attempts were made to create tourist caves, but CO₂ problems and the vertical nature of most of the caves made this difficult. Thus, they have long since been the preserve of cavers.

Upon arrival, Andy dragged me to the Visitor's Centre, where we had an interesting chat with Brian Richardson, the District Ranger. To my

horror I promptly discovered Brian wasn't an ACKMA member, and after severely chastising Andy for this oversight, swiftly relieved him of his membership fee. Brian did demur initially, until I evoked the spectre of our Sicilian treasurer descending upon him, whereupon he rapidly cowered towards his wallet! Wise man.

After the obligatory tour of the karst, and considerable *ooing* and *arring*, we donned the requisite gear and headed into Grill Cave. Assumedly it was named for its grill-like gate, long since in a state of disrepair, and a relic from the early days when it was, briefly, a tourist cave. Grill Cave is one of the few largely non-vertical caves at Bungonia. I think *Babies Bottom Cave* would be a better contemporary name for it. There is not a rock in it not polished by eons of clambering cavers. If it ever possessed secondary deposits, these have long since vanished. Still, it is a cave not without geomorphic interest, and clearly a good training ground for cavers.

The main vertically-trogged caves in the area are Drum, Chalk and Mass Caves, among others, I'm told. Despite its huge caver pressure, Bungonia is clearly a well-managed location, considering its usage. Several caves are bat maternity and roosting sites, which are closed during key breeding seasons. So Andy, I was impressed - many thanks for the diversion! For those who haven't experienced the karst landscape at Bungonia, let alone the caves, do not be like me in bygone days - drive in, not past!