

WAITOMO MUSEUM OF CAVES REDEVELOPMENT

- Glen Bailey and Peter Chandler

The Waitomo Museum of Caves was originally opened to the public on its present site in 1982, and subsequently enlarged several times for display and education room. Over the last ten years visitor surveys had been coming up with the same conclusions. Visitors were quite happy with the museum but they wanted more about the tiny insect that put Waitomo Caves on the map – The New Zealand Glowworm – *Arachnocampa luminosa*

Two years ago the museum board decided to do something about it and after much discussion it was decided to seek expressions of interest from professional design organisations. While keen amateurs and Chris Templar constructed much of the material in the museum on a part time basis, it was acknowledged that we could no longer attract the volunteers to undertake such a project alone. The board also decided to seek corporate sponsorship. Much time and effort was spent on the quest for a large company who would underwrite the whole deal. Despite all efforts we made little headway in the boardrooms and offices of those we approached.

At this stage the expressions of interest arrived and the board burned the midnight oil deciding who should be the chosen designer. Eventually an organisation called *Natural Lines* was chosen and we began negotiating with their designer Chris Gaskin. The original brief had been to fill a fairly empty space at the back of the museum. However, Chris Gaskin came back to us with a powerful argument. "You need to change the layout of the whole museum", he said, "to make flow". He produced an eye-catching model with curved moulded walls, to make his point.

After another round of lengthy discussions the board decided to proceed. A budget was set, and contracts were signed. Peter Dimond (the Museum manager) would handle the project management and *Natural Lines* the design. After the implications of the budget sunk in those lovely curved walls had to go. They were too expensive however a pleasing compromise was arrived at.

Raising the budget was the next issue. This time we went down the more traditional track and applied for a wide range of grants from trusts organisations and government sources. Eventually the required sum was raised. It was a tiny amount compared to the millions hoped for initially, but with clever management it could be made to do the job.

Next we had to decide what we wanted in the new display area. The intention was to return the best of the existing material but to repackage it in a more modern setting. Plans were drawn. Text was written and quotes were negotiated for the hardware required. There was also the lengthy process of tracking down photos and artefacts, and dealing with ownership and copyright.

Next was the difficult, but necessary, step of closing the museum – from the 16f May 2000. Admission became free, due to many displays being disassembled. On 29 May the displays were closed so that a major clear out could proceed. Cavers and locals joined together and every single display was soon gone. Some panels were retained in storage in the education room. Never before had we seen it empty. The material to be kept was carefully catalogued. The waste timber ended up as firewood for the Hamilton Tomo Group hut.

A steam of materials arrived from the various suppliers. The main casings came from a joinery factory in Hamilton. Peter Dimond solved major problem after minor problem, and slowly the displays took shape. Most of the work was completed by professionals but there was still plenty to do at the regular working bees. Norm Fleming, Peter Dimond and Dave Smith spent endless evenings reinstalling the original textured cave ceiling among other things. Museum staff was also roped in.

The museum had been closed with only the information centre being open to the public for near on three months. In the off season, this had been the only window of opportunity, despite Curator Ann Stubbs, along with husband Alister, plus John and Martha Ash, wintering in the Northern Hemisphere. Assistant Curator Libby Chandler stood in for Ann.

The displays were open again to the public on 17 August, with a few finishing touches to be completed before the official re-opening on Saturday 7 August. A group of around 150 supporters gathered to hear the guest speakers. Representatives from the District Council and the major grant organisations spoke. Finally, the displays were opened by Shane Arden, the Member of Parliament for King Country – Taranaki. Guests later attended a very pleasant dinner at the Waitomo Hotel.

The visitors were generally impressed with the new lay out and liked the mix of new and old. The comments in the visitor book have been universally positive. Thus, the new displays have proved successful, much to the credit of Chris Gaskin, Peter

Dimond the rest of their team. You might think the story ends there, but we are already talking about the second part – a new audio-visual show which

will fully focus and expand on the Glowworm theme, which was the catalyst for the whole development.