

AUSTRALIA'S "PREMIER" CAVE SYSTEM ?

- Kent Henderson

In late January, following the Wombeyan Conference Organising Committee Meeting, I went over to Jenolan Caves for the day. And a pleasant day it was, mostly. I hadn't been to Jenolan for awhile (how times flies...sigh). On a previous visit, I viewed the newly updated/re-lit Chifley Cave, and was reasonably impressed. Before I continue I repeat the disclaimer at the front of this Journal. My opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the ACKMA Committee, or its members.

This visit, happily, coincided with a Two Day Workshop being run by the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust (JCRT) for its staff, entitled "Introduction to Cave Science and Interpretation". It was run by ACKMA member, Dr. Armstrong Osborne, and I was delighted to catch up with him and Penny - not having seen either since the Wellington Karst Studies Seminar last February. As one would expect, the two-day course was superb. I was invited to sit through it, but I only had time for one afternoon session, unfortunately. The 40 page booklet/course notes prepared by Armstrong and Penny was outstanding. Armstrong is a riveting speaker and one of Australia's top karst experts. The JCRT is to be highly commended for arranging this extremely valuable in-service training for its staff.

That's the orchids, now for the axes, I'm afraid. My half-day course session involved a field trip and on-site geological interpretation, by Armstrong, through Orient, Ribbon, River and Lucas Caves. In itself, it was tremendous - both the Jenolan staff present and I learnt heaps. However, let's look more closely at what I saw, not what I heard.

I'll start with Orient Cave - "the best show cave in Australia". Certainly, from the point of view of its secondary deposition, Orient Cave is arguably what is claimed for it. In my view, it is total sensory overkill! - the beauty of this cave is hard to beat. However, from a cave management perspective - oh dear. The lighting and infrastructure is, well, appalling. An attempt was made about seven years ago to re-light the cave. When I last walked through Orient a few years back, conduit was everywhere, loosely laid or tied on next to tracking, unhidden. I was told then that this was temporary. Several years on, nothing has changed. It really is a case of missing the features of the cave through being totally distracted by the shocking infrastructure.

But the worst was yet to come... Our group diverted through River Cave, where plenty needs to be done, and onto Lucas - Jenolan's high-volume visitation cave. I was particularly interested to see the new stainless steel railing that had recently been installed in most of the cave. The railing itself was mostly fine, but the attendant infrastructure was absolutely appalling. Clearly, contractors had been used who, while they knew about railing, knew nothing about cave environments, nor did they

demonstrate the normal pride in their own workmanship which one would expect from any half-competent tradesmen. I suspect they did the job (indeed, that is my advice) with minimal, if any, supervision. The uprights on the old railing have been hacksawed off several centimetres of the floor, looking like the stumps of small trees. Old rail joinings have been dumped in the cave for all to see, and even things like broken sanding wheels. Every bit of metal shavings hived of the new railings in construction is still where it fell on the cave floor. Complete cave vandalism. What has happened is inexcusable and the Trust would do well to review the situation closely and ensure that effective supervision of future projects receives top priority.

And yes, there is worse. Couldn't be, I hear you cry. Like Orient Cave, Lucas has virtually all its conduit on the surface next to paths, draping over floors, flowstone, whatever is between points A and B. Huge coils of wiring which Houdini would have trouble unravelling are dotted next to tracking intermittently. Channels have been dug in several places on the edges of tracking, with completely exposed conduit laying in them. Indeed, in some recent work channels have been dug, not through old concrete flooring or compacted sediments, but through calcite flowstones!! Again, complete cave vandalism - this is what one expected (and what happened) 100 years ago, but it is just not on today. In many places light fittings and the cables to them lay on flowstone, unhidden, unsecured. I was, not to put too fine a point on it, totally shocked.

Let's briefly stop, and look at the recent redevelopment of Fairy Cave at Buchan - done not by contractors, but by staff with good cave knowledge. Here we have all mains conduit buried under pathways, where it can be easily pulled through, varied, replaced, together with water piping, telephone lines, the lot. In Fairy Cave, no conduit is to be seen, no lights shining in tourist's eyes - thoughtfully and properly done. And Fairy Cave is a narrow stream-passage type cave - far from easy to work in. Then you have Princess Margaret Rose Cave in Victoria, technically (arguably) the most difficult of caves to light. No visible conduit there. Lake Cave in Western Australia, Yarrangobilly Caves, Wombeyan Caves - the list is a very long one. All very well done. It will be noted Wombeyan Caves are administered by the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust. This poses obvious questions.

Now I didn't have time, during my brief visit, to see Imperial Cave, also recently updated. I am advised it is just as well and that, for example, in the process of redevelopment, path sections were concreted and jack hammered up three times to sequentially put in conduit, water and other cabling. I am told there is an appalling lack of design sense and integrity in the new lighting; when will people learn that good cave lighting is 95%

design and 5% electrical skill? However, as these comments are anecdotal, I cannot comment further. Others have said to me the re-lighting of Imperial Cave is reasonably well done, but given the track record in other caves, I'd need some convincing.

OK. Let's move to the surface. Opposite the Guide's Office is now Jenolan's latest addition – a new public shelter plus paving around the area and concrete bollards next to the road. The total project cost \$1.25 million dollars (the paving alone cost \$400 per square metre, the most expensive obtainable I am reliably advised). What could have been done underground with that sort of money! The new shelter is difficult to describe (see the adjacent photo). It is *post-modernism*; I suppose you'd call it, with two wing roofs. It is, in my view (shared by almost everyone else I have spoken to) absolutely out of place in the Jenolan visual environment – a massive eyesore – concrete uprights and a tin roof. The contrast of it against other Jenolan buildings, such as Caves House, is unspeakably bad. It only has partial guttering, so that in rain those standing inside are likely to get every wet. If its concrete pillars had been constructed (or at least faced), with limestone to match Caves House, and its roof done in matching tiles, it just might have been passable. Even a colorbond roof would have helped.

So, in total, I am left to declare Jenolan, as it stands, not the “premier” cave location in Australia. It is close to a disgrace. In my view millions of dollars have been wasted, tragically, when some thought, proper planning (glaringly absent, as the alleged jack hammering in Imperial Cave proves just in one instance), and proper professional advice could have produced a great result.

The future? The problems I've identified can all be corrected. It will cost quite a bit of money. What is desperately needed is coordinated and sensitive planning, targeted funding (no project to be undertaken unless completely and properly funded), sound professional advice (mostly external and significant staff input. (Some of the staff that have demonstrated real skills and expertise in cave development have been either by-passed or ignored in the whole process.) Tragically, precious little of this has happened at Jenolan in more recent years.

I will add that the current management of Jenolan Caves and of the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust, some officers of which were only recently appointed, cannot necessarily be blamed for what has happened (and very much for what has not happened) over what is now quite a number of years. This article is not aimed at any individual or group of individuals. That said, the JCRT must accept responsibility for past errors and formulate well-defined strategies for fixing the mess.

While I accept that this article may lose some friends, I must also say that I have discussed it with a number of people who have a long and intimate knowledge of, and real commitment, to Jenolan – and they either totally agree with me, or would like to voice even stronger feelings. So, I feel that the only responsible path is to publish it.

Finally, I want to state that I, and those who have pre-read this article prior to publication, are all long-time friends, or even lovers, of Jenolan (in some cases for almost fifty years). A number of us have fought for, or defended, Jenolan and put years of work into trying to make it better. Thus, we write here in sorrow more than anger - but feel it would be irresponsible to continue to remain silent.