

BACK TO WAITOMO

- Kent Henderson

A visit to Waitomo is always a fascinating experience – I have visited the area on three previous occasions. I recall the days when Ruakuri Cave was open as a Show Cave (and may well be again...), when Black Water Rafting was in its infancy – operating from an old shipping container next to the oval. So my past experiences do go back a way... I suppose I am to some extent in a unique position that, in having visited at intervals over the last fifteen years or so, I have noticed changes in batches, rather than as a continuous evolution.

Thus it was that on Friday 9 March I was picked up at Hamilton airport by my esteemed comrade Greg Martin, the DOC District Conservator (and the then Immediate Past President of ACKMA), and driven to Waitomo. The village looked much the same, but I noticed a few new signs, etc....

Awaiting on at the head of the steps to the Museum of Caves was my old friend Peter “A Girl’s Best Friend” (Peter Dimond to the uninitiated – or “Squire Dimond” to the locals, I understand), with a great smile on his face. He immediately apologised that the red carpet was out for dry-cleaning. While slightly annoyed (!), I accepted his apology graciously. He ushered me inside, whereupon I renewed my acquaintance with some of his staff, before being whisked away for luncheon at Black Water Rafting (BWR). I had seen their “new” headquarters before on previous visits, and it was still looking resplendent, the more so for the large throng of backpackers milling around its rooms. I noted with satisfaction that the abstract wooden statue of John Ash still had pride of place in a corner inside the front door.

So it was that I was warmly welcomed by our Vice President, Peter Chandler, and the said erstwhile John Ash, both as exuberant as ever. It was again a pleasure to taste the Epicurean delights of the BWR menu, and catch up with old friends. Greg Martin soon had to leave for Te Kuiti and his professional duties, whereupon Peter promptly deposited me at the Glowworm Cave, where I was to meet, for the first time, the successor of Kate Banbury as the Cave’s Karst Resources (science) officer, Bevan Jenkins. However, first to shake my hand was the cave manager, Robert Tahī, with whom I had shared many a Cave Management Conference, and drink, over the years. Robert is undoubtedly the highest paid parking attendant in New Zealand, and there he was out the front, directing buses and cars, as usual. Levity aside, he is widely respected internationally as a cave manager.

And so to Bevan, a most personable fellow indeed. He promptly showed me over the new (to me) above ground facilities at the cave, and I was quite impressed with the expanded tourist areas – though I thought the kitchen area to be rather small and looking less than ideally functional. Sensitivity to the environment has been clearly achieved with the additions. Aside from that drawback (when is anything perfect?), I could not

conceive how the new infrastructure could have been much better accomplished (I must say in stark contrast to some other above-ground “developments” that have littered at least one Australian cave site in recent years). I was impressed.

Bevan promptly described the interpretative displays that are due for placement in the old ticket office area, and new area signage, to be completed in June this year. All wonderful stuff, which will certainly be a focus of my next visit, whenever that occurs...

We then spent quite some time underground dodging the obligatory hordes of Asian tourists. Bevan went over the monitoring program of the cave, with which I was already fairly familiar, and we discussed future monitoring plans, particularly water monitoring in the stream, and wider catchment monitoring – both crucial to the long-term sustainability of the resource. I was impressed with his knowledge and dedication, but more particularly his enthusiasm.

I was particularly interested in the plans, also to be effected in June Robert Tahī advised me, to fix the flooring in “The Cathedral”. The current wooden slat flooring is most unsuitable in a cave environment, particularly in a wet one such as the Glowworm Cave. As most will be aware wood, aside from being slippery when wet (and thus a tourist hazard in itself), seriously degrades over time, eventually finishing as a black, glutinous “glue”. We discussed drainage at length, possible railing to protect walls, etc, fittings, and others issues. One can only hope we will see the back of the wooden floors in Aranui Cave as well and happily Robert was able to advise me later that \$200,000 will be budgeted for a complete Aranui upgrade next year. Pleasing news indeed.

I also went with Bevan into the *Organ Loft* area, as I particularly wanted to view the lighting therein. During my last visit, I was critical of the lighting angles – I have an aversion to lights shining into tourist eyes – but I am happy to report this problem has been rectified satisfactorily.

Having left Bevan and Robert to their duties mid afternoon, I wandered back to the Museum of Caves and again deposited my soul into the clutches of Peter “A Girl’s Best Friend”, whereupon I promptly looked over the updated Museum displays. I remembered their predecessors well, which were, for the most part, very good indeed. The new Museum refit, as I expected, exceeded past efforts – truly excellent. Still, there is, as with anything, room for improvement, and Peter and I discussed ideas and plans. As is invariably the case, it comes down to money, but Peter is a Past Master at securing grants and funds from many sources. That said, the current displays do have a few minor factual inaccuracies, which Peter assures me will be quickly addressed. Overall though,

most impressive, and an asset of which the Waitomo community can be justly proud.

Lo and behold, as my sojourn through the Museum finished, who should turn up but Bevan, looking for port. I was momentarily perplexed – Bevan didn't look a particularly intemperate young fellow...I mean, he hadn't even been to an ACKMA Conference yet!! However, it soon became clear the ports he was looking for were on the back on the museum's computers to allow them and those in the Glowworm Caves ticket office to be networked. Having thus sighed in relief, I was then to meet Jo Short, the Museum's new education officer. She has a hard act to follow in the just-retired Martha Ash, but my brief chat with Jo convinced me that she is more than up to the task. Fascinatingly, I was able to introduce Bevan and Jo, who had yet to meet!! Perhaps I should return to Waitomo more often, to effect other introductions!!?

My all too brief time at the Museum, for the moment, was terminated by the arrival of Peter Chandler to lead me off on a trip to Black Water Dry Cave. Of course, I was aware that BWR had taken over Derek Mason's operation following his retirement, but I was not fully aware of the name changes. Mason's Wet Cave was now Black Water Dry Cave, and Mason's Dry Cave (as opposed to the former Wet Cave) was now closed. Confused? I think I've got a handle on it all, but God help anyone else!! Black Water Dry Cave, is in fact, quite wet, though the tourists stay dry (hence the name). Your confusion deepens, I know – I'm sorry, I can't help further...!! This particular tour was a PR exercise to take about 8-9 McDonald's Lime workers through the cave. They had a great time. BWR have added a bit to the tour infrastructure since assuming it from Derek Mason, with a bit more (notably some bridge replacement) yet to be done. It is certainly an "up close and personal" glowworm experience, and it will occupy a significant niche in the market.

Upon returning to Waitomo about 7.00 pm, one naturally gravitates to the Tavern. Aside from chatting socially to several others of my acquaintance, old and new, I had a further talk with Robert Tahiri over future possibilities for his operation. We discussed ideas for attempting to level out the peaks and troughs in visitation at the Glowworm Cave, including offering tours, cultural and otherwise, involving Aranui Cave and the Waitomo Karst Walk.

Then it was back to Peter Dimond's home for dinner and repose after a quite full day, but still unfinished!! The omnipresent countenance of John Ash alighted on the Dimond doorstep, and a few hours of inspiring conversation followed, imbibed with some excellent port, before Peter finally pulled the power fuses and John went (reluctantly) home!!

First thing next morning, Peter drove me up to the Chandler Mansion for an 8.00 am breakfast, delightfully provided by the wonderful Libby. I was particularly awe struck with the view from Chandler Estate over Waitomo, and fascinated by the recently constructed "Great Wall of Chandler" (a massive limestone rock retaining wall) – sure to be a key tourist attraction in the future to rival its Chinese namesake!! After repletion, we continued our progress to Castle Watson, with Van happily giving us a quick tour of his estate, whence we departed for Palace Ash, a bit further up the yellow brick road. We interrupted His Grace mowing the lawns (clearly a servant's day off), but espied another through the windows busily vacuuming. Actually, the servant turned out to be Martha Ash, but undoubtedly the normal hired help will turn up again eventually.

After a restful period at the Museum, I was picked up by John Ash, who took me on a tour of several local karst surface features, finishing up with a stroll along the Ruakuri Karst Walk. When I was last in Waitomo, it was not quite complete, so it was great to traverse the finished product. I have visited karst terrain in many countries and the Waitomo Walk, in my view, is easily the best of its genre I have seen. Superb!

Back at the museum later in the afternoon, Greg Martin turned up to join us and several other ACKMA personages for a chat about the Associations' NZ operations. After pre-dinner drinks at the Tavern, it was then onto a sumptuous repast at the Waitomo Hotel, famed as the venue of the fondly remembered 1997 ACKMA Conference Dinner. The food, wine and company on this occasion were no less memorable. Resplendent at the table were Peter Dimond, John and Martha Ash, Pete Chandler (Libby had to baby sit...sigh...), ACKMA Life Member Dave Williams, Clare Holden, Warren Holden together with his lovely partner Dee, and myself. Many a tale was intermingled with some excellent NZ vintages!! During the course of the repast, Peter Dimond casually (?) and enthusiastically (?) signed a nomination as President of ACKMA for the coming year. As is now history, he was subsequently elected unopposed to this supreme office, amongst universal acclamation.

And so to the Sunday, my departure day. First up we called again at the Chandler Estate to enable me to photograph the "Great Wall", which I had forgotten to do the previous day. Then to the Museum to tidy up a few matters before Peter Dimond kindly conveyed me to Hamilton airport to fly home. All in all, it was a great couple of days, catching up with old friends, and meeting several new ones. I am particularly grateful to Peter Dimond for once again putting me up, and putting up with me! See you next time, Waitomo!