

The crowd at Brian Clark's "retirement" function.



## THE LIFE OF BRIAN

- Kent Henderson

As many ACKMA members will already know our Immediate Past President, Brian Clark, has retired as District Ranger/Manager of Naracoorte Caves after seventeen years in the role. He left Australia at the start of February to take up a two-year appointment as Manager of the Mulu Caves in Sarawak, Malaysia. That said, he has taken two years of unpaid leave from the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, so he may return to it in some capacity in the future.

I have known Brian for most of those seventeen years, having initially met him at the 1987 ACKMA Conference in New South Wales – the first for both of us. I am not going to say much about him professionally or personally here, that is covered below by others – particularly Elery – other than to record my appreciation for the tremendous job he has done, our long standing friendship, and to note the wide respect in which he is held. We have shared great times over the years, many most memorable.

However, it is his contribution to ACKMA, and to wider cave and karst management, upon which I particularly want to dwell. Brian has been at the forefront in the ongoing development of ACKMA, as Convenor of our 1999 Conference at Mt. Gambier, more latterly as our President. His Presidency in some ways encompassed a number of issues more difficult than his predecessors in the role, and he came through with flying colours.

He has been a tower of support to the Committee, and individually and collectively to many cave managers and cave people over the years, and a very central part of the support network that is one of ACKMA's greatest strengths.

Yes, he will still be involved in the future, yet I am certain all members will join with me in thanking him for his tremendous efforts not only at Naracoorte, but in support of the great ideals we all

share. We all wish him well, and know that Mulu, as with Naracoorte, will finish far better than he found it, after he has passed through.

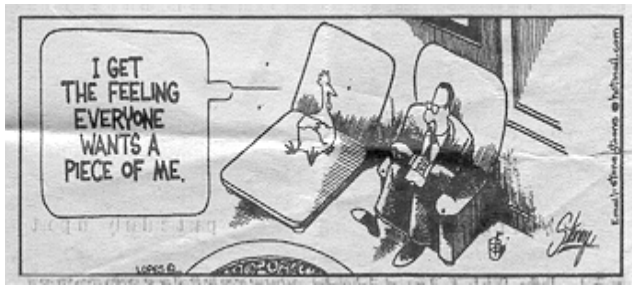
A "farewell" function was held at the Naracoorte Education Centre on Saturday 19 January. About 60–70 local Naracoorte people, who came to pay tribute to Brian, attended it. Prof. Elery Hamilton-Smith, Dr. Grant Gartrell and myself represented the ACKMA Committee. It was a wonderful (and in true Brian style, very late!) day. As we all know, Brian likes a party!

During the day, I conducted interviews with Brian, and three other key associates. These are recorded below. I did interview Brian once before, back on 7 October 1995 at the Official Opening of the Bat Cave Teleview Centre – one of Brian's many achievements. It is interesting to re-read that interview seven years on (see ACKMA Journal No. 21, December 1995).



ACKMA members at Brian's "retirement".  
L to R: Kent Henderson, Steve Bourne, Brian Clark, Elery Hamilton-Smith & Grant Gartrell.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN CLARK & Others



**When you first took up the manager's job as Naracoorte in September 1985, what did you see as your first challenges, both professionally and personally?**

My opinion when I first arrived was that caves were holes in the ground, that you poured tourists in at one end, and took dollars out the other end – they were just a black hole. However during my first six weeks, two guides that worked here at the time, Tim Hodge and Jo Bauer, conned me into going into the extension of Alexandra Cave (not open to the public) one night. Tim bashed my ear on how important it was to protect areas like the Alexandra extension. It was in that couple of hours that I realised that caves were fragile environments that anyone could damage. I was pretty dismayed with what was then happening at Naracoorte. Caves were being treated as a playground, and something had to be done to change that. As a result, I got hooked, and never got to leave until now – seventeen years down the track!

**What did you see as your immediate challenges?**

My first main challenge was to turn the guided tour program around. In those days there were three guides on every day no matter what, and they were doing the same three tours, day in, day out. Therefore they were bored, and consequently they were boring. So the first thing I attempted was to revitalise the tour program. I took advice from the likes of Elery Hamilton-Smith and Andy Spate, and I proceeded to alter the working culture of the caves.

At the same time, I looked at re-marketing and re-positioning the caves, and as an initial step I organized an Official Opening Ceremony for Blanche Cave one hundred years after the beginning of guided tours. That was Easter 1986. It was at that time I met a man called Bruce Leaver, who was then Director of National Parks. He put a few thoughts into my head, the main one being that Naracoorte Caves should be run as a business.

As a result, we managed to arrange for the caves to be self-funding, to treat the staff as shareholders, and to give them the incentive to build visitation by giving them increased work opportunities. That was the strategy – to change the guides from being boring, and thus change the tours from being boring, and so increase visitation on a business basis. So that was the first big challenge.

My second main challenge was to educate the caving clubs that Naracoorte was not a playground, and that they had some responsibilities. That was a long and ugly battle, and a battle of wills. But the issue was that the caves had to come out the winner. We do have a pretty good relationship now. The caves are respected, they are not treated as playgrounds, and this has extended into the general community – farmers who own karst in the area have adopted the same philosophy. There is still adequate caver access, it is just that some caves are off limits. That said, activities in open caves is highly regulated – to provide opportunities for recreational caving, but also to protect the caves for future generations.

**How did you go about changing the culture of guide interpretation?**

First of all it was exposing the staff to experts like Elery, Rod Wells, and a lot people who had been involved in research programs of all sorts, to give them as much information as we could find – at the same time to convince them that just because they have the information doesn't mean they have to use it. So that when they are asked questions, they do know the answer, and develop a culture of we the site presenters (we long longer call them cave guides) have the information, we are proud of what's here,



Steve Bourne (left) presents Brian Clark with his retirement "gold watch".



Site Presenter, Liz Reed, with a group of Children inside Naracoorte's new Education Centre.



We present things in the manner of “this is what we currently think, it is not what we know”, and that way really encourage visitors to ask questions. If we have a guided tour today where the site presenter isn't asked at least six questions, the tour is considered a failure. And staff really feel that, and immediately ask what they did wrong. Thus, by giving staff the information, coupled with the courage to say virtually nothing, they are empowered to generate a memorable visitor experience through their interactions.

**How did find you cave management standards when you arrived and what did you seek to change?**

The previous manager to myself wanted to be everyone's friend, and that led to the playground atmosphere. You can't be everyone's friend; you have a responsibility to protect the caves. There were pretty ordinary things happening with guiding tours, and that was changed fairly quickly. As for cave management, I didn't know anything about it when I came here, I just had lots to learn. A major challenge was undoing the history of what people's expectations were. People had been allowed to do as they like, and that included staff. I had to be a bastard for a while to change things, so I was a bastard for a while.

**What capital improvements did you think were necessary back then?**

Apart from fixing the pretty archaic cave lighting, which we progressively achieved, the primary thing was protecting the caves, and that itself meant changing the cave lighting. It wasn't until the world heritage possibility came along that we saw the major capital improvements that we've seen in the last five years.

**Staff development and Training, has that been a big issue with you?**

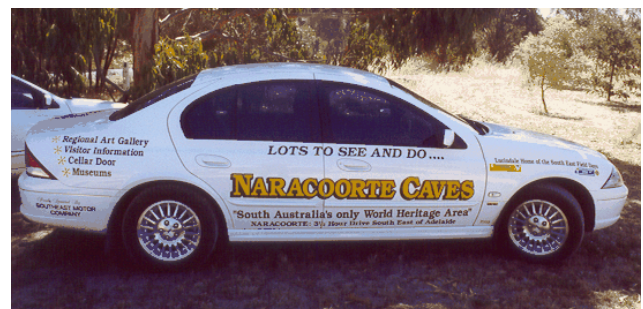
It was our biggest issue, and one that we have really focused on. Front line staff is our business. Their training program is intense with any new person to start with, and never finishes. It is an ongoing process, and we have some sort of development program in place at least every six weeks.

**What do you consider to have been you main achievements in your time at Naracoorte?**

Developing a philosophy in staff to strive to be the best, to acknowledge that we will never know it all, and to get them to understand that what we believe today will change tomorrow, and thus we need to modify what we do on a daily basis. We have changed Naracoorte from just another limestone cave system to a major education resource, both for schools and the community at large.

**What are the three or four actual events that have given you the most satisfaction during your time at Naracoorte?**

I think the first was the opening of Blanche Cave at Easter 1986, when we lit the cave in candlelight. That was memorable. Then the coming of the Olympic Torch – that was spectacular, the opening of the Wombani Fossil Centre, and the opening of the Bat Centre.



Brian's Manager's Car?  
This wasn't definitively established....

The recently-constructed steps in Cathedral Cave, Naracoorte.



**If you had your time over again, is there anything you would have done differently?**

I would like to have made fewer enemies perhaps! There are few things I might have done with a bit more tact and diplomacy, but nothing I would have done differently as far as outcomes go.

**World Heritage Listing was a major achievement for Naracoorte Caves?**

World Heritage Listing is pretty substantial accreditation for any site in the world. It was pretty special.

**What induced you to leave Naracoorte and move to Mulu, and what do see as the crucial issues you'll face in your new role?**

The challenge. The opportunity came along unexpectedly, and the offer was too good to pass up. The crucial things are improving site presentation, which will again involve working heavily with staff, developing community appreciation for what they've got, and how they can impart that to the

international market. The keys will be developing a good interpretative program and the skills in the staff.

**What else to you hope to achieve in your time at Mulu?**

Certainly to see increased annual visitation from the 12,000 it is now to 50,000, which is targeted for five years time. I'd certainly want to see in place a substantial capital program to improve infrastructure, to develop staff site presentation well beyond what they are currently providing, and to help the Malaysian government and people understand the asset they have got and the wonderful opportunity it presents.

**Can you see any ways that ACKMA can assist you in the future?**

Definitely. The support I have had from ACKMA and its members over the years has been absolutely invaluable. I've always had a bunch of mentors that have helped me immensely. I will certainly be using that network – probably on a weekly basis for a year or two!

**INTERVIEW with David Hood, a Past Chairman of the Naracoorte District Council, and a former Mayor of Naracoorte.**

**David, you have been an associate of Brian for many years, what do you consider to have been his achievements?**

Firstly, his achievements aren't only just at the caves, but also at Bool Lagoon, which is several thousand acres of reserve here. Brian achieved the board walks, and the council working in conjunction with Brian realised that it was to everyone's benefit to achieve these things. Brian supplied the materials, we built the roads, and we did things very cost effectively and economically.

**So, there was obviously a great partnership built up between the Council and the Caves?**

Yes, it has been a wonderful philosophical partnership, based on the fact that we'd all benefit, so we went into bat for a common cause, for the development of the caves – which we were only too willing to assist with funding.

**I assume Brian played a major part in the community?**

A very big part. It was a matter of working through the political system, which meant we all had to work together. We achieved a major part of the funding through the Greater Green Triangle Regional Association, through the State Government, and of course locally we contributed only too willingly to build a great educational facility for people to visit.





**What do you consider to be the local community perceptions of Brian's achievements at Naracoorte Caves, and for Naracoorte in general?**

He is held in very esteem throughout the community, and those who have worked with him realise it is all a matter of planning. If you don't plan you never achieve, and Brian was willing plan all the way along, to test and think about new things. He even came on trips with us to NSW to look at new road building techniques we may be able to use, as one of many examples. He was willing to learn with us, and we were willing to take him along in our work as well.

**Do you think he'll be missed?**

Very much so. It is very hard to replace someone who has such a commitment, and the breath of forward thinking he possesses. One thing about Brian is he constantly seeks to understand the big picture nationally, which a lot of others never come to terms with. He is a true visionary.

**If Brian was standing in front of you now, as he was about to leave Naracoorte, what would you say to him?**

I hope you come back!

**INTERVIEW with Micheal Aldersey, former Chairman of the Upper South East Consultative Committee**

**What involvement did you have with Brian in the twelve years of your Chairmanship?**

I worked closely with Brian getting the caves complex under way, particularly the Wonambi Centre. Some of it was quite controversial because the caves had been known for over 100 years and many of the local families played in them as children. Likewise, some of our fathers and grandfathers used to harvest bat guano – it was a commercial product. As a result, they had their own ideas of how the caves should be managed. For example, some of their fathers planted pine trees on top of the caves. We coming later discovered that the massive water take up from these trees were drying the caves, and it took a lot of sensitive local negotiation to reverse this, and restore them to normality.

**What role did Brian play in that process?**

He handled the negotiations, and the Consultative Committee acted as go betweens and facilitators between dubious local families and the National Parks administration. He handled the task very well indeed, and has negotiated with a lot of local landowners, so that the whole district has moved forward in the new millennium – otherwise we'd be stuck in the 1950s.

**What do consider Brian's main achievements from your perspective?**

The international recognition of the caves, and the creation of this incredible complex – the Wonambi Fossil Centre – we have today, the educational centre, and the management and care of the caves themselves. Brian has had a lot to do with the advancement of science at the caves, particular in his association with Professor Rod Wells of Flinders University, and the fossil deposits here. In addition, Brian was also senior ranger for many other National Parks in the region, and he has nurse-maided a new concept in national park management, namely cooperative management with neighbouring landholders, in the sense that parks are managed cooperatively. The fences between parks and private lands are removed. Such matters as firebreaks, weed eradication, and rabbit and fox control – all these things are far more usefully done in a partnership.

**What do you consider to be the local community perceptions of Brian's achievements at Naracoorte Caves, and for Naracoorte in general?**

When he came here the National Parks Service was held in very poor public regard, particularly by landholders. The massive land clearance that occurred after WWII removed most of the natural native land cover in this area. The remaining patches which the farmers didn't want were suddenly, 20 years or so ago, turned into National Parks, because it was recognised "Hell, we've destroyed the bloody lot". A lot of ill feeling occurred, as access to these areas for traditional practices such as cutting fence posts, etc. was then no longer available.

The new entrance track to the self-guided Wet Cave at Naracoorte.



### **How did Brian overcome this antipathy?**

Just by being calm and logical. He most definitely succeeded. Now National Parks are accepted by the rural community, and old bones of contention are now comfortably handled on a cooperative basis. There hasn't been a letter to the local newspapers slinging off at the National Parks Service for many years.

### **If Brian was standing in front of you now as he was about to leave Naracoorte, what would you say to him?**

That's difficult. I'd say to him, keep being yourself. He, in combination with the community, has achieved a lot. The modern European type Australian has a great capacity to destroy every natural thing, and it is only through a conscious and cooperative effort that we are going to preserve things. Hence National Parks, and the very careful management of this marvellous cave system. People of calibre of Brian Clark are essential in that, and we have been most fortunate to have had him here.

### **INTERVIEW with Steve Bourne, the new Naracoorte Caves Manager**

#### **During your time at Naracoorte, what do you consider to have been Brian's main achievements in cave management?**

His ability to source funds, his vision to develop the infrastructure, to look beyond cave tours to things a bit out of the ordinary. He worked outside the square

with a lot of people, like universities and local government, to make this happen. Making things happen is one of his greatest abilities.

### **How would you describe Brian's vision?**

Brian wanted to grow Naracoorte Caves, and at the same time present something different to cave tours. To do that required different thinking. He wanted to make a real difference, and he's achieved that.

### **What would you rate as Brian's main achievements?**

The development of the Bat Cave Teleview Centre – a unique facility, the Wonambi Faoosil Centre, and also his lifting the standards in cave protection and interpretation.

### **You are taking over from Brian as Caves Manager, what do you consider to be your future challenges?**

To take proper advantage of the structure already in place. We have a wonderful educational facility, and by educational I don't just mean for school groups – we are here to present caves, and the whole biodiversity of the region to the wider community, to educate people to take what they learn from here back with them. I think Brian would be delighted if he came back here in future years, and heard we were putting a 100 schools through a year.

### **What would you describe as Brian's legacy to Naracoorte Caves?**

Undoubtedly the infrastructure, his ability to put things here, and other thing that will hang on is the high standards of cave protection.



Display in the Wonambi Fossil Centre at Naracoorte Caves.