

# RIVER CAVE CENTENARY AT JENOLAN

- Rob Whyte

The replica of the original exploration boat



It was April of 1903 and the face of Jenolan Caves was about to change forever. From the time the caves had been made part of a reserve in 1866 the area was under the control of the Wilson family – first Jeremiah and then his brother Fred. Exploration had largely focused on the northern side of the Grand Arch yielding the Imperial, Chifley (Left Imperial) and Jubilee Caves just to identify the show caves. Admittedly Fred had discovered in the 1890's the route from the Grand Arch up into the Lucas plus in 1900 he had found the Mafeking Chamber. Fred was offered other opportunities in Western Australia though and so it was time for the Wilsons to leave Jenolan. A new caretaker was appointed and that person was James Carvosso Wiburd or 'Voss' to most who knew him.

Some will suggest that Voss Wiburd had gathered around him a few guides, in particular Jack Edwards and Robert Bailey, and that they had been exploring in secret, concealing their discoveries until the Wilsons left. Whether this theory is right or not, what is known is that history records that in 1903 a route was found that led from the Exhibition Chamber in the Lucas Cave and into the start of the River Cave, and that the man who was given credit was Voss Wiburd. 2 August 1903 was the date recorded when Jack Edwards made the first, somewhat undignified crossing of the River Styx, initiating a series of incredible discoveries that eventually resulted in the Jenolan series of show caves expanding to include the River, Orient and Baal caves.

To commemorate the event the Jenolan Caves Historical & Preservation Society (JCHPS) initiated a centenary celebration on Saturday 2 August 2003. The highlight of this event for most was the tour of the River Cave where the emphasis was on what was known of the exploration. In preparation for the event a replica of the original boat used to cross the river was constructed and floated in the Pool of Reflections, where the original had been used to cross and continue exploration.

Preparation for the centenary prompted a great deal of research to try and refine the Society's

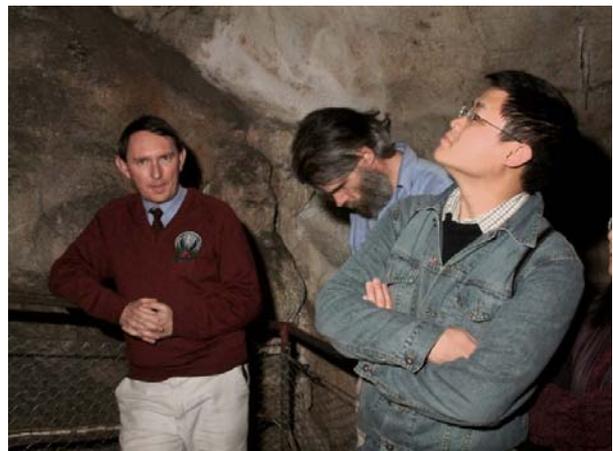
understanding of what had occurred one hundred years ago. The boat was a case in point. Many photos were examined of the original craft that helped highlight a few key points. The most important was that the craft had undergone several refinements along the way. The initial design had used round oil drums strapped to a packing crate. Examination of the photos indicated how unstable the craft was as it was possible to discern water marks well up the sides, as well as up the trousers of the occupant. Certainly we know the first attempt to cross was very unstable as the craft simply threw Jack Edwards into the river – whereupon he simply clutched a length of timber to help him swim to the other side. Later on the round drums were replaced with square drums although this design only seems to have been used in the Cerberus Cave.

The design that was constructed for the centenary naturally had to be tested and it was found to be every bit as unstable as the original. One needed to position oneself quite precisely as leaning too far off centre led the craft to start to dip the top of the box close to the waterline and hence flood the craft. The tanks, whilst held taut, normally had an uncanny knack of floating out of their restraining straps once someone had boarded. Propelling the craft also proved a challenge and certainly not something for someone in a hurry.

The tour of the cave was led by Rob Whyte and Robert Lindsay. The tour group was quite a mixed bag, boasting members from JCHPS, speleo clubs SSS and N&HVS, guiding staff, Rob Whyte's Jenolan e-mail list, plus members of the public.

Prior to the tour the two Rob's did a run through the cave to consider the format and in the course of this more information came to light. One discovery was the signature of Jeremiah Wilson well past the gate that separates the River Cave from the Lucas.

There had been much discussion as to whether Jeremiah had gotten to this point as some rock had to be removed to create the path. Obviously he had which meant that the slope leading up to the Minaret was definitely known in the 1800's.



Rob Whyte (left) leads the tour.

Ted Matthews steering the replica boat



Earlier research had turned up a reference that said the early exploration had penetrated the rock pile in the Lucas Cave and that after some time exploring the discoverers had stood in the Tower Chambers to be surprised that they were about 20m above the river. This seemed to discount the popularly held belief that the way the Tower Chambers had first been entered was a direct assault straight up from the river.

During the course of the River Cave exercise guide John Callaghan managed to uncover one of the ladders made for exploration at Jenolan in the late 1800's by Bathurst merchant Edmund Webb. The ladder, only wide enough for one boot per rung, could be bolted to others to make a longer ladder. The ladder was found under some rubble at the top of the Bear Pit and is now placed beside the path for public viewing.



The replica boat in the Pool of Reflections

The members of the public, who knew nothing of the exploits of the guides of 1903 had a wonderful time, not at all objecting to a glossing over of geology in the interest of concentrating on the history. When they had purchased tickets they thought it was just an ordinary cave tour but came away feeling they had stumbled across something extremely special and quite different from any tour they had ever been upon.

After the tour (and dinner in Caves House) a presentation was made by Keir Vaughan Taylor on diving within the rivers that flow through the caves. This gave an excellent roundup to the day

whereby the initial discovery was recounted and now modern discoveries and opportunities were discussed. Once again members of the public were present to hear the presentation. A suitable finishing touch was the map that was displayed from SUSS which showed a passage leading from below the rockpile in the Lucas up and around to the Tower Chambers – evidently the passage that Voss Wiburd used. Much more has been learnt about the history of this cave as a result of the centenary celebrations.

Thanks are extended to Caves House for the use of the Kanangra Boyd convention facility and the Caves Reserve Trust for access to the River Cave. As part of the centenary JCHPS have reproduced an early guidebook to the River Cave which is available for \$7.00 (inclusive of postage within Australia). Anyone wishing to order a copy of the guidebook can write to JCHPS C/- Jenolan Caves NSW 2790 enclosing a cheque made out to Jenolan Caves Historical & Preservation Society.



The JCHPS dinner at Caves House



The Jeremiah Wilson signature



The tour leaders, Rob Whyte (left) and Robert Lindsay

