

# WHERE ARE WE AT? – A REVIEW OF AUSTRALASIAN SHOW CAVES

- Kent Henderson

The assembly area at Ngilgi Cave, Yallingup



ACKMA was founded at Yarrangobilly Caves during the 7th Australasian Conference on Cave and Karst Management in 1987. While cave management, and more importantly the ensuing increase in standards at all levels, did not begin when ACKMA was formed, I tend to the view that, over the seventeen years that has since elapsed, our organization has had a most positive effect on what has occurred during that period.

Certainly, the ACKMA Conferences held every two years, in bringing together cave management professionals, and cave interested people, to contribute their knowledge, has been vital. However, beyond that, I believe it has been the shared vision engendered over that time, together with the myriad of close personal and professional relationships that have been built up – and endured – over those years, that have been the primary source of our collective success. But how far have we come? Are we getting there? I think, undoubtedly, it is fair to say we do know where we are going...

My purpose here is review what has happened over the last seventeen years with something of a critical

eye, which by its nature must be somewhat subjective. I will confine myself to looking purely at the development of our show caves as possibly the most obvious form of measuring success. There are, of course, many other measures – some of which I will briefly allude to in my conclusion.

## NEW SOUTH WALES

**Wombeyan Caves** has been managed over the entire period by Michael Chalker, first under the Tourism Commission of New South Wales, and latterly under the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust. Mick has been an outstanding manager, and has achieved a very great deal during his long tenure. His reflective, considered nature has disarmed many a 'superior' over the years, and bit-by-bit he has attracted a cumulatively large amount of funding for capital works. Indeed, most of the over-ground facilities at Wombeyan have been erected during his time – the dormitories, the kitchen area, the on site vans, and the office area to name the most prominent.

Below ground steady progress has been made. Junction Cave has been re-lit to a high standard – the first to use the C-Bus system. Tinted Cave has been developed, and Fig Tree Cave has been almost re-lit, with only a small section left to complete. Significant improvements have been made in Wollondilly Cave and recently, a new sewerage system installed in the Reserve.

**Jenolan Caves** has seen a succession of managers over the period, with the long tenure of Ernst Holland as the main on-site personage being the most prominent. Above ground, little has changed over the period, although given the heritage nature of the area, this is possibly not unreasonable. There is a new ticket office constructed within an existing building, plus a small interpretative display area therein, together with a controversial shelter shed opposite, surrounded by much new paving. Given its self-promoted mantle as 'Australia's Premier Show Cave System' one may have expected more would have been achieved. Jenolan does need, in my view, a full 'Museum of Caves' on site.

Underground, improvements have been mixed. It is only in recent years that a re-lighting program has been seriously undertaken – but certainly better late than never. Chifley Cave was the first to be re-lit, although some on-going (and still incomplete) work has previously occurred in River Cave. The Chifley re-light is satisfactory in my view, but little in the way on cutting edge technology was used – more could have been achieved. This was followed by the re-lighting of Imperial Cave, and all reports

have been, at best, mixed. Latterly, Lucas Cave has been re-lit, and happily reports of its re-development have been very complementary. Three upgraded caves out of nine seems something of an under-achievement, but to be fair perhaps, it has many more show caves than other location.

**Abercrombie Caves** has pretty much been the domain of Barry Cubbitt for most of the period, with a few senior managers coming and going. The Grand Arch has seen a few disastrous floods over the period. New electricity mains have been installed, and the Cathedral Cave lit (re-lit) and opened, and currently the Grand Arch bridges are being restored.

Some lighting improvements have been undertaken, but nothing holistic. Above ground there is a new Office/Reception area. Given that Abercrombie is somewhat 'remote', and has a relatively low visitation, it could be perhaps be argued that the improvements that have occurred are fortuitous. In any case, nothing can take away the sheer majesty of its Grand Arch.

**Yarrangobilly Caves**, through various on-site managers over the period, such as Neil Kell, and just recently Peter Bell. During the time span, in fact quite 'early', Jillabenan Cave was re-lit (and very well so for the era), to be followed by Jersey Cave to very much the 'state of the art' – the first effort by Neil Kell. Plans are now afoot to re-light the self-guided Glory Hole Cave. Given a perceived 'lack of interest' in Yarrangobilly by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Yarrangobilly has fared very well in terms of underground updating. Above ground little has changed over the time, other than a coat of paint for Caves House.

**Wellington Caves**, administered by the Wellington Shire Council, has done very well over the time, a testimony to that Council's interest in its caves as the region's main tourist attraction. Early in the period, Gaden Cave received a new entrance and significant upgrading, which was 'state of the art' at the time, but no so today.

The superb development and opening of Wellington's Phosphate Mine was top shelf indeed, and a credit to all involved. The Cathedral Cave still remains to be re-developed and re-lit, but this project is prominent on the Council's agenda. Above ground there have been many improvements in landscaping, and a new office/visitor's centre developed in an existing building.

**Carey's Cave**, near Wee Jasper, is now managed by the Goodradigee and Goobarragandra Reserves Trust, and is under lease to a private operator, currently Geoff Kell. No significant capital expenditure has been undertaken either above or below ground in the period, but given the relatively low visitation and income the cave attracts, this is understandable. That said, the current underground infrastructure is adequate, if now somewhat dated. Ratings: 1987 \*\* 2003 \*\*

## VICTORIA

**Buchan Caves**, in East Gippsland, has seen significant improvements over the last seventeen years. Underground, Fairy Cave has been mostly re-lit, and very well so – largely thanks to the efforts of staff over many years using drip-feed funding.

Sections of the Royal Cave are imminently to be re-lit. Above ground there have been many advances. The Reserve features new administrative offices, Visitor's Centre, guide's room, and much else. While more needs achieving, the 'performance' has been solid.

**Princess Margaret Rose Cave**, in Western Victoria, at the start of the period, was appallingly lit with 32v lighting. It received an excellent visitor's center quite a few years ago now, and has since been re-lit – very well so. Other than, perhaps, undated interpretative displays, it is hard to envisage further capital improvements.

## TASMANIA

**Mole Creek Caves**, in Northern Tasmania, possesses two show caves of great quality, neither of which have been re-lit in the period, although there have been some minor underground improvements. That said, the current lighting, while somewhat dated, is adequate. King Solomon's Cave is slated for a complete re-light early in 2004, and hopefully Marakoopa Cave will follow. The above ground infrastructure is largely unchanged over the period.

**Gunn's Plains Cave**, near Ulverstone, has been largely leased to various concessionaires over the time. Its internal infrastructure and lighting is, again, adequate, if now dated. Given its relatively small visitation, it is probably unlikely that pots of money will be thrown at it in the foreseeable future.

**Newdegate Cave**, near Dover in Southern Tasmania, has seen a recent complete upgrading and re-lighting. This was preceded by the development of an excellent boardwalk to the cave, and latterly a new Visitor's Centre, with an adequate, if not expansive, interpretation area.

The new lighting, designed by Neil Kell, is cutting edge, and has turned Newdegate from an 'average' cave into an outstanding one. All that is needed now is improved sewerage, a sealed road, and a karst walk to top it all off. All are foreshadowed (albeit 'at some stage').



The Bent Wing Café, Naracoorte Caves

## SOUTH AUSTRALIA

**Naracoorte Caves** in South Australia's South East, up until recently was managed by Brian Clark, until succeeded by Steve Bourne when the former moved on to manage Mulu Caves in Borneo.

The developments at Naracoorte have been legion over the last seventeen years. Brian's ability to attract funding has been incredible, although he was certainly assisted by the caves gaining World Heritage status.

Over the period all show caves have been re-lit, the Bat Cave Televue Centre and the Wonambi Fossil Centre constructed, a new entrance dug into Victoria Fossil Cave, Wet Cave developed and opened, and a new fossil research facility developed – just to list the major advances. In all, Naracoorte Caves is undoubtedly now a world-class facility.

**Englebrecht Cave** in central Mt Gambier is a mostly water filled cave which has been newly developed in the period as a show cave by the *Lifeline* organization, to support its charitable work. It now consists of two well-lit and developed chambers, and is run by volunteers. It is certainly an excellent community asset.

**Tantanoola Cave**, between Millicent and Mt. Gambier, is a single chambered show cave of great beauty. It was re-lit before the founding of ACKMA, certainly to the highest standards then applying.

Its infrastructure is somewhat dated today, but still more than adequate, although regrettably its fixtures and fittings do not lend themselves readily to updating. The Visitor's Centre at the cave entrance, while serviceable, also precedes ACKMA, and aside from somewhat updated displays, it remains unaltered.

**Kelly Hill Cave** on Kangaroo Island is something of a gem. It was re-lit in the mid eighties by Roger Collins and Herb Stichel, then the management team. They have had numerous successors since. At the time, their lighting efforts were state-of-the-

art, and have stood the test of time, in my view – a rarity indeed. What always impressed me about this cave is that throughout the tour, not a light bulb can be observed from the track. Still, it could benefit further from the advances in lighting now developed twenty years on.

## QUEENSLAND

**Chillagoe Caves** in far north Queensland features three show caves, for many years expertly managed by Lana Little, and fresh in many minds after the ACKMA Conference thereat earlier this year. Considerable new above ground tracking and infrastructure has been installed to Donna and Trezkin Caves in recent years, and a bit within the Royal Arch Cave.

The lighting and infrastructure within Donna and Trezkin, however, has essentially not been updated in period under review, but hopefully funding for it will materialize at some stage.

**Capricorn Caves**, north of Rockhampton, were originally developed and run by the Olsen family, until purchased by Ann and Ken Augusteyn early in the review period. They have made major developmental advances over the time, with new boardwalks and tracking, some new lighting, and an extensive Visitor's Centre, with an excellent interpretative section. As effectively Australia's only privately owned cave, they have achieved much from their own resources.

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**Crystal Cave**, at Yanchep, north of Perth and operated by CALM is, in my view, something of an embarrassment. Its infrastructure, lighting and general management (it remains Australia's only cave with a significant *lampenflora* problem, for example) is not up to general Australasian standards.

Fortunately, a lot is now being done to remedy that situation and we are seeing a total redevelopment in progress. There is a lot of new landscaping going on including a well designed fauna viewing area; a cleaning up and restoration of Silver Stocking Caberet (basically completed); redevelopment of the lakes in Crystal Cave; an experimental aquarium display of stygofauna in Crystal; planning for total relighting and consideration of removing the 'earthquake shelter'; better quality guiding; and a gradually improving visitor centre and shop.

**Ngilgi Cave**, at Yallingup, south of Perth, is managed by Liam Kinsela, who has been at the helm for quite some years now. A cave of great beauty, particularly in its lower sections, it has seen significant improvements under his tutelage.

The internal ticket office has long-since been removed, and significant new lighting and tracking installed. Given the size and vagaries of the cave, and the fact that, while ongoing, infrastructure

funding is not profuse, there are many years of redevelopment ahead.

The show caves of the **Margaret River** region have for several years been managed by Robyn McBeath, and their development over the period has been outstanding. Mammoth Cave has been re-lit, its tracking replaced, and it has been developed as a unique self-timed tour.

Lake Cave has also been skillfully re-lit and redeveloped, with the wonderful *Caveworks* Visitor Centre (and its attendant superb interpretative facility) erected at the head of the Lake Cave doline.

In Jewel Cave at Augusta significant new tracking has been installed, and within the next few years it will be re-lit, the car park moved, and the above ground infrastructure replaced.

A relatively recent development at Margaret River is the opening of two formerly visited caves as show caves. **Giants and Calgarup Caves** are managed by CALM, in the person on Anne Wood.

While they are unlit, and toured with hand-held lights, significant infrastructure has been installed in both caves, consisting mainly of raised boardwalks. Much more remains to be achieved, given appropriate funding, but the progress thus far has been solid.

## **NORTHERN TERRITORY**

**Cutta Cutta Caves**, near Katherine, are managed by the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, but are currently under private lease. Cutta Cutta Cave was opened in 1967, while Tindal Cave saw its first visitors in 1992.

Both are well developed and adequately lit, particularly the latter, which saw the 'light of day' through the advice of such as Ernie Holland and Elery Hamilton-Smith, amongst others.

## **NEW ZEALAND**

**Waitomo** possesses two show caves currently, although it is hoped the Ruakuri Cave will come "back on line" in the foreseeable future. The world-

famous glowworm cave has had significant capital thrown at it over the period, with a complete re-light, and significant track upgrades.

While I think some sections of tracking could have been done better, it is nonetheless a cave developed to high standards. Aranui Cave has also seen a significance upgrade in the period, with virtually all the old "Chicken wire" that used to inhabit it, removed.

**Te Anau Cave**, in Fiordland on the South Island, is a shining light in cave management. Neil Collison and his staff have seen this fabulous 'glowworm' cave completely re-lit to match its already excellent infrastructure. It is, truly, a wonderful show cave experience.

**Kawiti Glowworm Cave** at Waiohio, north of Auckland, is a small privately owned operation. The cave is quite well developed with tracking and handrails, though devoid of lighting – tours are run with hand-held lights. Little has changed in the cave over the period, though it does possess a superb karst walk.

## **CONCLUSION**

Whether one accepts my axes and orchids concerning Australasian Show Caves, or not, one thing is clear – at least to me. With very few exceptions great strides forward have been made over the last seventeen years.

Given that I have seen a large number of show caves in many other parts of the globe, I can readily state that Australasia easily leads the world in show cave development, and management.

I have purposefully restricted myself to assessing the physical development of show cave sites, simply because such is relatively demonstrable.

What is also clearly the case, though far harder to quantify, is the huge strides forward almost all sites have made in guide interpretation, professionalism, and the general augmentation of the visitor experience. We have much to be proud of, but yet much more to do – no one can sit back in self-satisfied glory quite yet!