

A LIGHTING FOR DARKNESS POSTCARD

- Neil Kell

One member of the ACKMA family has been off careering around in the darkened regions of a few Australian caves without the barest thought of writing a card back to 'home'. Eventually this oversight has been pounced upon by Kent. So on a cool wet evening in the north of Tasmania I sit down to contemplate the construction of some sort of storyline to justify my wanderings.

So I begin with the present. For the past six weeks I have resided at Mole Creek in working through the process of taking the relighting design proposal for King Solomon's Cave onwards to the actual task of installing a completely new lighting system. This project was hatched a couple of years ago, and moved forward to the design proposal in July 2003. Due to various unforeseen events, delays crept in stretching out the actual relighting project start time to the last few months of this year. However that was not to be the end of the delays, for the building and construction industry down here is over burdened with business, dramatically slowing the process of engaging sub-contactors.

The project has been split into the current stage of design, specification, purchasing, and locking in sub-contract works commitments in readiness for the second stage of installation, to commence next February. The cave will be reopened for tours over the peak holiday period (January to mid February). I will return in mid February to begin the real stuff of rolling in the new lighting amongst the clutter of speleo-things and electricity-things that King Sols brings to the fore.

Cathie Plowan and I have put in place a number of measures to communicate with the local community on this project. These have included on site meeting with local community representatives, briefing to local progress association, and information plan via local media.

In simple terms the new lighting system will involve the replacement of most switch boards with new ones, housing a new C-Bus control system using the just-to-be-released Clipsal colour touch screen controller. As for the lighting, all will be low voltage 12 volt with approximately 80 dichroic units, and 150 LED lamps. All the walkway lighting will use high flux LED lamps backed up by an uninterruptible power supply system. The initial design had total lamp loading of 2400 watts but this has been upgraded to a total closer to 4000 watts, both significantly lower than the 18,000 watts load of the existing lighting.

Traditionalists in the world of tourist caves will no doubt mutter that the cave will be too dark, but I have to say that the conservation values of minimising lighting and using it efficiently should be obvious to most of the family. And while I am here I might go have a look at a few lighting changes in Marakoopa Cave and Gunns Plains Cave. Now, where was I before this Tassie thing? Ahhh.... yes, the tropics!

Cutta Cutta Cave. I had been there in late 2002 and produced a lighting plan proposal to address

the operational problems of the yearly cycle of flooding dunking the aging lighting system. In this case the wheels of Northern Territory National Parks got some speed up and the project went through to the contact install stage in just over a year, and was close to completion last May, at which time I was summoned for a quick return trip to that faraway and fabulous show cave to close the gap between my original design proposal and the faltering completion stage. In a frantic four days I had to assess the as-installed lighting system, propose solutions to problems, and write a script for the C-Bus system. On the 5th day I was being whisked north to Darwin without seeing the final results, however Justin Perry, the Ranger now responsible for the cave's conservation management, is very happy with the end result.

On the midnight to dawn flight back south I looked eastward into the night sky and wondered when next I might visit the Chillagoe Caves. Finally back home, unpacked (sort of), and enjoying a nice siesta, I was sprung to attention by a phone call from Lana Little. The unpacking turns into repacking with the extras of mobile lighting gear, and within the week I am back in the tropics walking up hill to get into these darned cave things.

Lana had a plan. Donna Cave has a lighting system showing its age, and along with all those mysteriously strong false floors carrying thousands of visitors, a plan to integrate an eventual upgrading of access and lighting infrastructure sounds like a wise move to me. My part of the plan was to provide a proposal for new lighting and a range of options to consider for an electrical system. After two weeks of in cave work I am flying south again with a lasting impression of Donna Cave as 'the false floor heaven'..... or should that be 'hell'. These caves are weird places to work in!

Finally, a brief postscript for those family members who may think that it's only 'family' who talk 'cave'. A few weeks ago the C-Bus programmer in Launceston, who is working on the scripts for King Solomons Cave mentioned a comment made by a local colleague who had just returned from a Northern Territory holiday. He commented on visiting a cave near Katherine with really neat lighting in it. Some times positive feedback comes round, and this time it is from the X-generation!



Neil Kell and Cathie Plowan in King Solomons Cave. Photo: Launceston *Examiner*.

