

# FIG TREE CAVE REDISCOVERY AT WOMBEYAN CAVES

- David Smith\*

David Smith in the Fig Tree Cave extension.  
Photo – Mick Chalker.



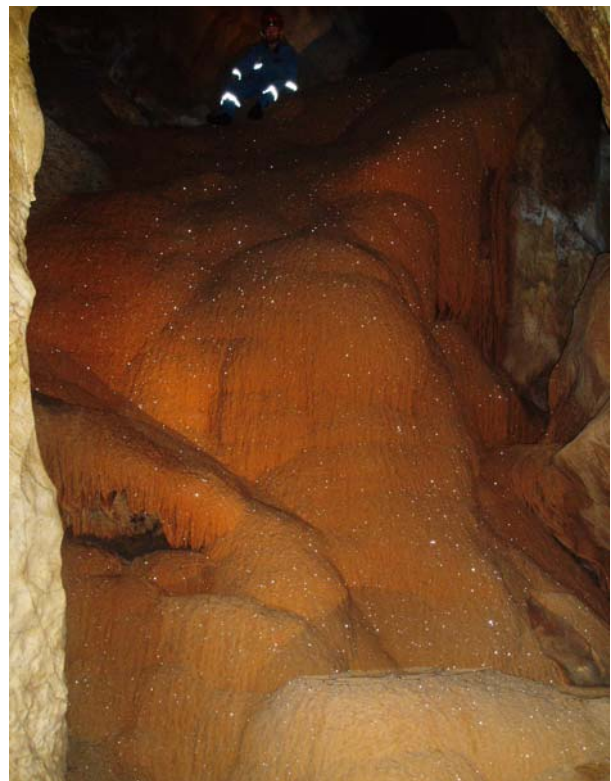
It hasn't rained for months. No useful, soaking rain anyway. In fact it seems to have forgotten how to do anything more than drizzle occasionally. The Wombeyan Creek, at one time a picturesque meander of small rapids and deep pools and home to a vast array of croaking frogs and other animals, has been completely dry for three years. Some of the Casuarinas along the creek are in varying stages of poor health, there is hardly a blade of grass to be seen in a normally vibrantly green valley, and watering one's lawn only seems to encourage every grazing beast in the reserve to leave his calling card – perhaps a tip of sorts for providing them with a bit of nourishment! And there is a mangy looking old wombat that seems determined to dig up every root he can possibly find and turn my yard into an excavation site. In short, it is bloody dry. Rainfall statistics indicate that Wombeyan has had less than half of last year's precipitation for the same period – and 2003 was well below average.

Still, to make the best of a bad situation, the drought has opened up a whole underworld of opportunities (to coin a phrase) for cave exploration. Over the last few years there has been a noticeable drop in water levels of active stream ways and pools inside several of the show caves. Fig Tree Cave (Wombeyan's self-guided cave) is a good example.

Late in June my wife Corin and I visited the sections of Fig Tree Cave used as the venue for Wombeyan's 'Mini-adventure Tour'. This is an active subterranean watercourse of vadose flow which lays several metres below the tourist paths of the self guided tour. Participants of this mini-adventure are able to amuse themselves by rock-hopping, crawling, bridging and squeezing to negotiate the running stream, with the emphasis on staying reasonably dry in the process. This is normally quite challenging for the group it was designed for, but currently, and for the first time in living memory, the stream has stopped running.

In fact on closer inspection there was not a trace of water to be seen anywhere until we reached the terminal sump, some 100 meters or more upstream. It seemed amazing that the water level had been dropping ever so slightly during the course of the drought and then suddenly it had completely drained away – like someone pulling the plug out of an enormous bath tub! The level in the sump had dropped by 40cm – probably for the first time in decades, and crouching knee deep in the water it was possible to see through to a short, exposed extension beneath a duck-under ceiling to the left. Prior to this, many of the Wombeyan Caves staff had assumed that the cave terminated at this point, or at least tapered off in a completely different direction.

Now although neither of us was suitably attired for a swim, the prospect ahead of us looked too inviting to pass up. The only alternative was to disrobe, leaving a dry shirt behind for our return. The sight of two semi-clad humans (one of us a degree or two more aesthetically pleasing than the other) submerging themselves into the icy cave water and gasping for breath would have seemed quite amusing to a fly on the wall or the dozen or so Bent wing bats that camped on the roof. Unfortunately (or fortunately depending on taste) we had not brought a camera with us. The photos which accompany this article were taken weeks later with all caving participants fully clothed of course, so as not to offend the more sensitive audience! (Buggar! – Ed.)



The glorious flowstone in the Fig Tree Cave extension. Photo: Mick Chalker.

After a brief wade we emerged, after some contraction and expansion of body parts, and exclamations like “gee that water’s cold darling” (or words to that effect) into another canyon. The roof here rose and fell abruptly as we crept along, and protrusions of sharply angled roof pendants and jagged cave infill made caution a priority. In places, rock milk stood out in sharp contrast to the sediments and flood debris on the roof above, and there were signs of fluctuation water levels from the floor to the top of the phreatic passageways several meters above our heads.

Calcite rafts lay in fractured plates where they had been delicately lowered to the floor and great effort was made not to disturb them. Water appeared to spring from black river gravels on the floor and bones of large animals, possibly sheep or kangaroos were cemented to the gravel with a calcite glue.

The canyon seemed to terminate at a deeper sump in several places only to be found again by diverting through higher, older passage ways on either side of the active stream channel. Tell tale signs of a previous (and perhaps most recent) trip were noticeable in places; members of the Sydney Speleological Society had scratched their initials onto flowstone in 1959.

This was apparently just a year prior to the discovery of the connection between Fig Tree and Junction caves (by diving) a short distance down stream of where we were now standing. On reflection, perhaps oxygen tanks were required for this section of cave 45 years ago – there seems to have been no shortage of rain during the 1950s and 1960s. On a wall near this inscription, perhaps marked with carbide, was an arrow directing us through a series of abandoned

tunnels which branched off in many directions, mostly and disappointingly terminating at areas of roof breakdown or sediment blockages. Also noticeable was a boot print which had been preserved in the calcareous mud in such fine detail you could almost read the brand name.

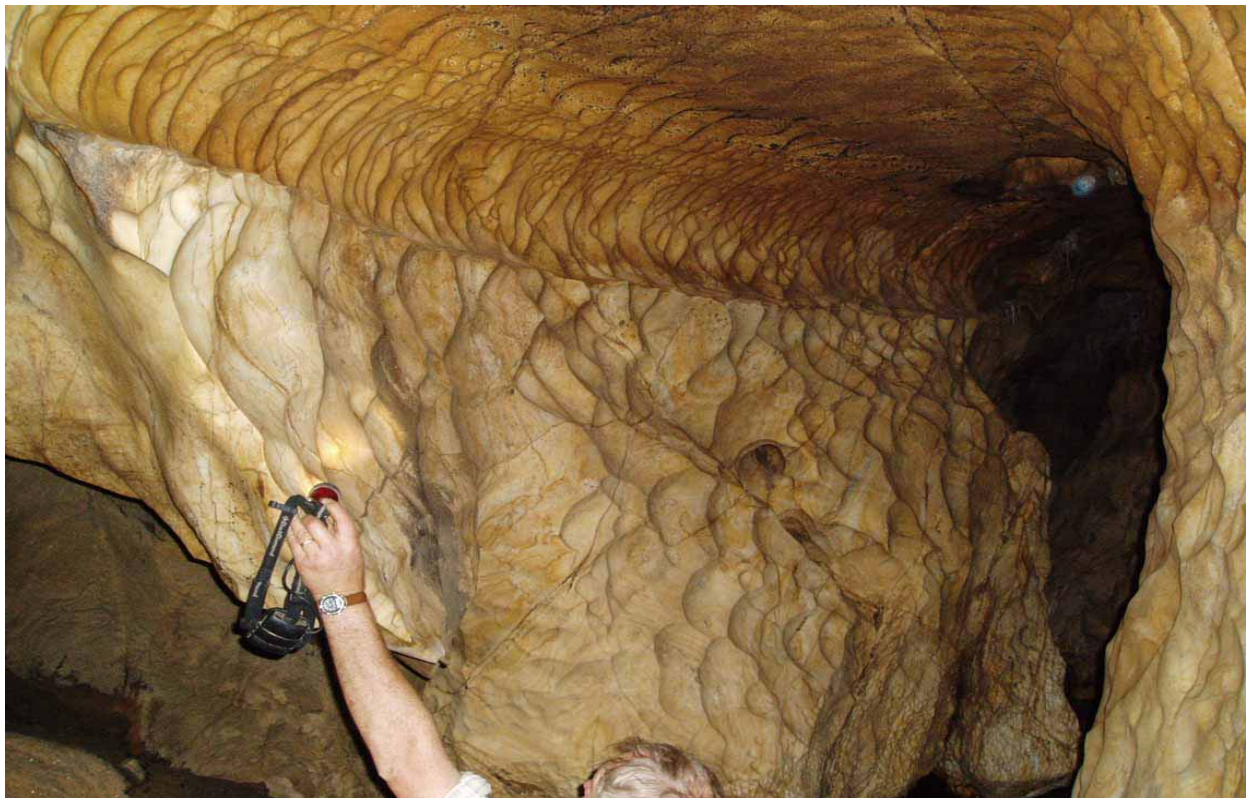
The active vadose canyon opened up ahead of us and in places the roof rose several metres above our heads. The scalloping adorning the sheer-sided walls through this section was text-book stuff and I had not encountered such pronounced examples anywhere else at Wombeyan.

Bridging over a deep, murky looking pool brought us to our ultimate destination – and what a climax it was! We stood in absolute silence and awe before a magnificent golden flowstone some fifteen metres high and sparkling like sequins in our caving lights. As I stood here, eyes as wide as dinner plates and mouth agape, I’d almost forgotten how cold I was!

Evidently this flowstone had been recently active and every microgour on its wondrous, cascading river of crystal was sharply detailed and pristine. Try as I might, words cannot do this speleological masterpiece justice (the photos really don’t either).

But I knew I would have to return and capture it on film – after all, when the rains finally come again it may be another half a century before the next opportunity knocks. But for now it was time to retrace our footsteps to find a warm, dry shirt and leave behind this frozen cascade where it had been hidden for thousands of years.

\* Dave Smith is a guide at Wombeyan Caves



The magnificent scalloping the Fig Tree Cave extension. Photo: Mick Chalker.