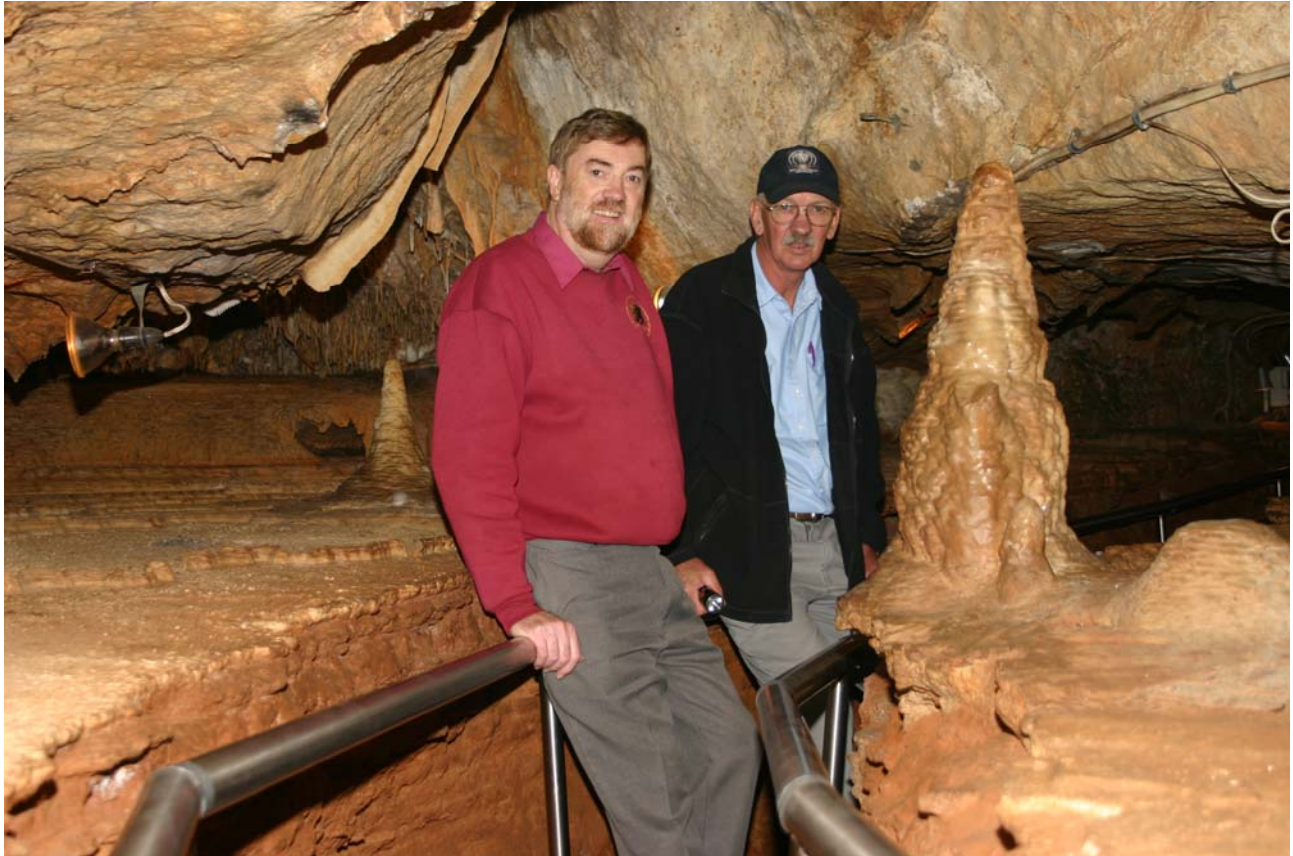


Kent Henderson and Mick Chalker in the Paddy Fields section of Wollondilly Cave. Note the new “low set” stainless steel handrails. The old conduits and fittings in the background will soon be gone.



WOMBEGAN – WOW!!!

– Kent Henderson

It has been five years (I am most ashamed to admit) since I was last at Wombeyan Caves (at the 2001 ACKMA Conference!), so having reason to be in Canberra for a few days towards the end of March, I did a day excursion over to Wombeyan to catch up with Mick and Annette Chalker – and to see all the wonderful things Mick and his staff were up to!

I noted as I drove in that the Caves Reserve was still as beautiful as ever. I was warmly welcomed by Mick and Annette, and after a brief chat, it was off to the underground. Wombeyan has five show cave tours.

Junction Cave was re-lit a few years back using the C-Bus system, although its technology is now “old”, and Mick would ideally like to update it, but it is hardly a priority – it still works well and offers an excellent visitor experience.

Of course, even five years can be considered “old” in terms of the march of modern lighting technology these days. Indeed, technology has actually advanced considerably in just the last twelve months, so Mick is about to use some LED light fittings with an intensity that was not available when he started the current process! The other relatively-recently re-lit cave is Fig Tree – Wombeyan’s wonderful self-guided cave.

Old removed conduit in Korringa Cave



Mick’s current project is virtually a complete make-over of the remaining three – Korringa, Mulwaree and Wollondilly – with new CBus lighting, tracking and railing. After ascending the hill, we first entered Korringa Cave. This cave is now re-lit with the latest C-Bus technology, and it is wonderful! Former areas not featured now are, and the cave has tremendous new perspectives! It has yet to receive its stainless steel handrails, but they are in train.

The “pillar-box” entrance to Korringa Cave
– to be replaced in due course.



On entering, we noted that the steps into the cave were under lit, and Mick made a mental note to use new LED's as track lighting down the entrance/exit steps, only. This will be an exception, as the new feature lighting is positioned to effectively double as track lighting. This is sensible, and these caves lend themselves to this, given some thought – a definite feature of Mick's planning.

As members will recall, Korringa Cave has a “pillar-box” entrance which is, at best, unpleasant to the eye. Mick plans to build a “karst mound” over the entrance, giving it a “natural” appearance, and relocate the door to the rear – something in the mould of the new entrance structure over Ruakuri Cave at Waitomo.



New LED arrays, soon to be selectively installed

After Korringa, we delved into Mulwaree. The first thing one sees is the new sealed steel door – there is also one at the exit – replacing the grated ones of old. The locking on the doors are such as they require a key to get in, but can be opened from within without a key – allowing for visitors to leave at anytime, while preserving complete security.

Neat! Accordingly to Mick, the original entrance to the Wollondilly Cave system was sealed, having been opened/discovered when a cow fell through it. Well, regardless of the veracity of that story, the Entrance Chamber, given the air flow from the old gate, is certainly a dried-off area, and it is Mick's hope that the closed entrance will lead to a reactivation.

The Mulwaree Tour, as many will know, comprises the upper passages of the Wollondilly Cave system. What Mick and his staff have achieved is sensational!! The cave now has stainless steel handrails throughout. Most of the chicken wire and attendant infrastructure has gone, except in a small section near the start of the tour to provide for historical interpretation – and even there new stainless steel railing has been placed in front of the old. The cave has been completely re-lit. Stunning! A couple of previously-lit areas are no longer.



Mick Chalker at the new steel door entrance to Mulwaree/Wollondilly Cave.

The reason is Mick's propensity of not attaching light fittings to speleothem sections (applause!), and where humanly possible, to hide all conduit. Thus, if it is impossible to light a section without so attaching, then it is not lit. However, omissions in lit sections from the past are more than offset by others not previously illuminated. This may not meet with approbation from “old timers”, but ‘there you go’, says Mick. I fully agree. As a result, Mulwaree is very largely devoid of obvious light fittings and conduit – this applies to Korringa and Wollondilly as well, of course. More thunderous applause!! Much of the mains conduit runs through the stainless steel handrails, with secondary conduit skillfully hidden.

The new raised platform and stainless steel railing in the Fairies' Grotto, Mulwaree Cave



But my delight did not stop there! When one gets to the end of the tour – to *Chalker's Retreat* and the *Lost Cities* – the Wow! Factor is sensational! The complete removal of all chicken wire gives the visitor a stunning up close and personal experience of very beautiful and delicate decoration.

I remember the extreme difficulty I had in the past of getting even reasonable photos in this area through the all-encompassing wire – no longer! Not a few “old timers” will have heart palpitations in here, I expect... Bad luck!

Even some of Mick's staff was not happy with the wire being pulled out in what they perceived to be “sensitive” areas. Mick's view is that it up to the skills and interpretation of the guide to control the tour, given that they are greatly assisted in that control by the new lighting, and small groups sizes. No argument from me – to the guides, the responsibility, to be shared with the public.

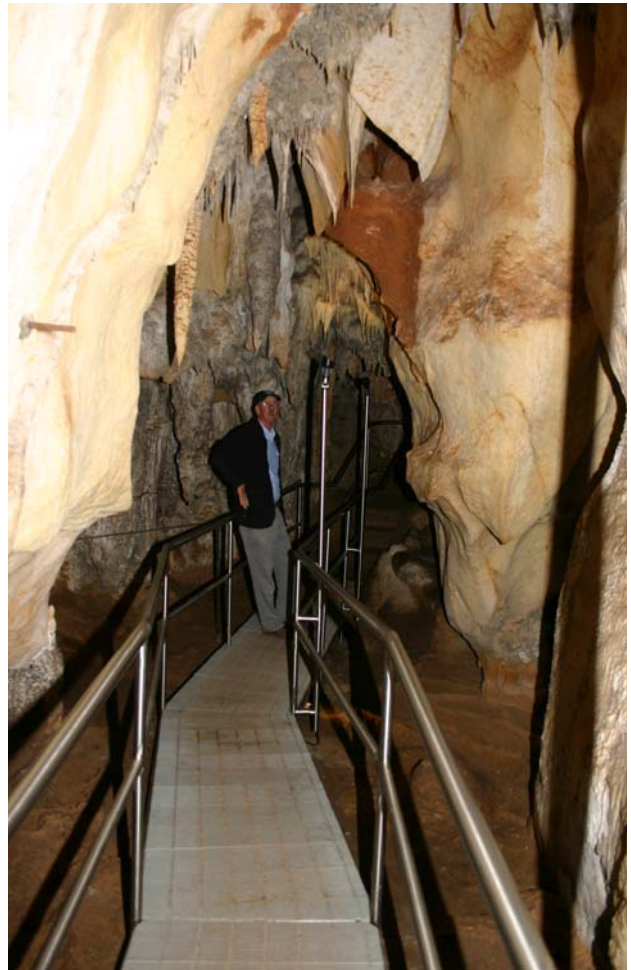


A small section of old wire netting in Mulwaree Cave retained for historical interpretation. Note the new stainless steel railing in front.

And finally, for Mulwaree, we back-tracked to the entrance point (as you do); then off to the final chamber – *Fairies' Grotto*. I hasten to add that I am using the 'old' names for various parts of the caves here only as a reference; they are rarely used in tours today, the focus long since having been shifted (thankfully) from fairies to geology and conservation.

Fairies' Grotto is a small, but visually stunning chamber, profusely packed with up-close decoration. All chicken wire has gone, so now you can see it without distraction (more applause). Mick has had a low platform, based with recycled plastic, placed therein, plus stainless steel handrails of course. That effective 'lift' of the cave floor is excellent, and combined with superb lighting arrays; it is about as goods as it gets! Wow!

So, having toured the new Korringa and Mulwaree, I was heavily salivating for Wollondilly! Again, stainless steel railing is in place throughout the entire cave. We are talking about 900 metres of pathway here – no small undertaking! The tour begins through *Miranda's Cavern*.



Mick Chalker on part of the new tracking in Miranda's Cavern, Wollondilly Cave.

I was gob-smacked! – pretty difficult to do to me as I've almost been in more show caves over the years than I've had hot dinners. Mick and crew have placed a raised walkway through the entire length of this section (again, the same recycled plastic decking). Most light fittings are hidden beneath, although a few sit atop stainless steel poles. The change to this initial section is both dramatic and stunning. The main “old” feature of this section, the *Shark's Mouth*, is no longer illuminated (to the chagrin of some, no doubt) as it was impossible to light without running much visible conduit.

Track work in progress – Paddy Fields Section, Wollondilly Cave



New light fittings on stainless steel poles
– Star Chamber, Wollondilly Cave



We then progressed into the *Star Chamber*, again looking quite different given the updating. Again, its main “old feature”, the *Elephant’s Heads*, is no longer specifically lit. Admittedly, here it probably could have been, even giving the lighting prescriptions to which I have already referred, but there is there much else newly lit as an offset, such as wonderful bedding and sediments.

Onwards to *The Cathedral*, the lighting for which wasn’t yet quite complete, but close. All the main features – *Lot’s Wife*, the *Organ Pipes*, the *Golden Fleece*, and its massive shawls are all highlighted, but with new, definitive lighting – much better than the old. The back lighting of the *Giant Shawl* is particularly wonderful!

The next section is the *Paddy Fields*. Mick had placed in slightly raised, recycled plastic tracking through a fair proportion of the route, as it is susceptible to minor flooding. Problem solved. The stainless steel hand rails on either side of the long cut-through pathway have been placed quite low.

This has two effects, it forces the tourist to hold onto both and stoop a bit to do so. Of course, if one is clutching the handrails, one cannot touch anything else! No flies on Mick! The *Paddy Fields* Section is not yet complete, but will be by the time this article goes to press – indeed, by then Wollondilly as a whole will long since up in its new incarnation.



“Castle Chalker”, at Wombeyan Caves



New railing in Chalker’s Retreat, Mulwaree Cave

Mick Chalker descending the re-vamped entrance into Mulwaree/Wollondilly Cave



As those who have seen the *Paddy Fields* will know, it is incredibly hard to light, inasmuch as it is impossible here to hide conduit and fittings. Mick is planning to use state-of-the-art (almost literally available yesterday) LED arrays – now with the necessary light intensity to do the job. I look forward to returning at some stage to see these in action!

And so to the final section of the tour – *Bat's Retreat*. This section, unlike the *Paddy Fields*, was already complete. It is stunning. This chamber was previously severely under lit, or more correctly, badly lit. Not now. Much ignored in the past is now highlighted, such as a mound of old guano at the rear of the chamber. Rapturous applause again!

Upon exiting the cave, we descended the hill, and had a quick look in *Victoria Arch* – the exit to Fig Tree Cave – where the old “block house” power room has happily disappeared. Great stuff – another eyesore gone to God!

After lunch (many thanks Annette!) Mick took me up the Reserve to look in the new on-site cabins, and to tour “Castle Chalker” (as I called it) – Mick and Annette’s new home abutting the head of the Reserve (on their own land).

I suggested to Mick that when he retires, he build a ‘fire tower’ so he can keep an eye on his successor!

What, Mick retire!!?? Annette would bail out tomorrow, but Mick...well.... There are always new challenges in cave management – don’t expect an invitation to his farewell bash anytime soon.

Of course, Mick’s most immediate challenge is the advent of The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service assuming control of Wombeyan from 1st July. ...but Mick will roll along as he always has, in his quiet and studied way, achieving a very great deal with little noise.

His legacy, when the time eventually comes, will be immense.

Below – a view of new visitor’s fully self-contained cabins in the Wombeyan Caves Reserve.

