



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CAVE GUIDES GABFEST

- Kent Henderson

The first Cave Guides *Gabfest* was held at Yarrangobilly in May 1990. It was a very informal affair, and initially called a *Guides Reunion*, but subsequently the name *Gabfest* stuck. The first event was organised by then acting Senior Guide at Jenolan Sue Hardy, and attended by guides from Buchan, Naracoorte (led by Jo Bauer), Tantanoola, Jenolan, and Yarrangobilly. Neil Kell was Yagby manager at the time, and the great feature of Neil's agenda for the weekend was that there wasn't one! This *lack of agenda* was to become a 'Gabfest' feature for many years.

The event then continued annually until 1994. Each one was largely unstructured up to that point, and revolved around guides simply visiting other locations to view its show caves, accompanied by considerable conviviality... Most of the guides paid their own way to the various *Gabfests*, though there was pressure applied to get their various 'services' to fund attendance. Initially the event was basically 'a weekend', and guide-driven – there was little management input as such.

Indeed, there was no formal structure – no *Guides Organisation* – indeed, one has never been formed. At the end of each *Gabfest* the guides attending would meet and decide where the next event was to be held, and 'appoint' a local guide as 'organiser'. This pattern continues to the present time. Certainly, in more recent

years at least, ACKMA has been a behind-the-scenes facilitator of the event, but it has never taken a direct organisational role.

The second event was held at Wombeyan in March 1991. The attendance list is a bit of a *blast from the past* – those present included Graham Parkes, Dale & Robyn Calnin, (the late) Jim Daly, Pam and Carolyn (from Buchan); Jo Bauer, Robin & Julie (from Naracoorte); Julie Thomas and Robbie (from Tantanoola); Neil Kell and Rebecca (from Yarrangobilly); Andy Lawrence and his wife (from Abercrombie), Ernst Holland, Barry Richard, Antony & Sue Hardy, Nigel & Lyn Scanlon, John Callaghan, Bill & Fran Buckley (from Jenolan); Frank, Steve, Lawrie, Tanya, Gay, and Mick Chalker (from Wombeyan), as well as Armstrong Osborne and Andy Spate..

It is well worth quoting Mick Chalker's report at the time:

*Joe Bauer and her crew arrived on the Tuesday night, and thankfully went straight to bed. Not so John Callaghan, who wanted to start a party immediately... On Wednesday morning after introductions and a few yarns, the South Aussies, John, Bill, Steve Reilly and myself inspected some of the tourist caves.*

*After lunch, we proceeded on an adventure tour of the marble mines, with Steve Reilly as chief guide, saying 'it's okay they don't blast this late in the day!' Arriving back at camp, we were greeted by the Buchaneers, and the last of the gathering had*

arrived a short time later. It was a very long night.

*To cure the hangovers on Thursday morning, a forced march of two kilometres (led by Steve Reilly) was ordered. We ended up standing on top of a four metre waterfall. To the dismay of all, Steve leapt off the top of the waterfall fully clothed, inclusive of pack and camera! His screams of delight included such gems as – ‘Geez, the water’s beautiful and warm!’ Funny sense of humour, has Reilly... Nonetheless, the trip down the gorge was enjoyed by all.*

*After lunch, three groups formed. The South Aussies wanted to see how an Adventure Cave worked (it didn’t work very well as the cold water and panadol were wearing off...). However, after a five hour trip to Basin Cave, they did return. The Buchaneers wanted to see a wet cave, and Steve just happened to know something suitable. They traversed the Junction Cave from the sump to the spring. Carolyn said she loved the squeezes! The final group, consisting of the Jenolanites and several others, did the historical tour in the Wollondilly Cave.*

*Everyone rendezvoused for happy hour, and dinner, and as we all thought, an early night. However, Annette had other ideas! She had found these two thirsty, and starving, musicians who played drums and accordeon. The more they drank, the more they played. A great fun night was had by all, with many hidden talents being revealed! It was agreed by all that the reunion should be an annual event and if possible at a different venue each year. Jo Bauer suggested the next be at Naracoorte Caves during the third week of February 1992. Pencil that in your diary now... the experiences and friendships gained are invaluable. (ACKMA Journal 7, May 1991, page 10)*

So, the scene had been set, at least for the first few years...

The third event was indeed held at Naracoorte in March 1992. The resultant article (ACKMA Journal 9, June, 1992, page 8) commenced with: ‘The nicest thing about the program for the annual Guide’s Gabfest is that there isn’t one.’ About forty attended, and the usual fare of imbibing, headaches and show cave visits was the norm...

Buchan hosted the 4th Gabfest in March 1993. This event was largely organised by (then) Buchan Guide Robyn Calnin (sister of Dale), and again about forty attended. A choice line of the resultant article (ACKMA Journal 11, June 1993, Page 30) was ‘their aim is to breed – a new generation of informed cave guides, well learned in the karst of various areas, and voiced with the greatest interpretative techniques...’

It was onto Jenolan in March 1994 for the 5th Guides event, organised by Sue Hardy and Lynn Scanlon. This get-together lasted four days, rather than the two of the past, and was attended for the first time by guides from every State. Attendance was again over forty. And it was slightly more structured than its

predecessors too, with a few addresses by luminaries such as Dr. Armstrong Osborne. Of course, all Jenolan show caves were visited, and the ‘program’ included a full day excursion to Abercrombie. This was the last annual ‘Guides Reunion’ – in future they were to be every two years...



Scott Melton (Jenolan Caves) giving a presentation – 10th Cave & Karst Presenters Workshop, Mole Creek, 2004

Kelly Hill on Kangaroo Island hosted the 6th Gabfest. Again a four day event, it had forty-one attendees, with few show caves locations unrepresented. But now, for the first time, some structure was put into the occasion. It had a theme ‘Tourism and Karst Management’, several papers were presented, and five workshops held, viz:

*The sustainable Karst Environment; To Adventure Cave or not to Adventure Cave.  
Interpretation – Are caves more than descriptive decorations and pretty lights.  
Monitoring Karst Environments – Why bother?  
Tourism – Scourge or Savior.  
Cave Access - The right of the people.*

There was even a ‘formal’ dinner on the last day. Clearly, the Gabfest concept was evolving beyond its original conviviality. To quote from the resultant article:

*Organisers of Gabfest 96 at Augusta–Margaret River Caves in Western Australia are planning now as Kelly Hill has set the bench mark for future Gabfests. (ACKMA Journal 23, June 1996, page 27)*

The 7th event was at Augusta–Margaret River in March 1998, hosted by the Augusta–Margaret River Tourism Association (AMRTA), and convened by Robyn McBeath and Peter Bell. Despite the distance to travel for most, sixteen participants came from across the Nullarbor, with eighteen locals attending – a total of thirty-four.

However, the somewhat more structured event of Kelly Hill was not repeated. No papers, as such, were presented, and no workshops held, although plenty of caves were visited.

Attendees in discussion – 10th Cave & Karst  
Presenters Workshop, Mole Creek, 2004



The 8th event was held at Wombeyan Caves in 2000, and destined to be the last *Gabfest* by that name. It ran for five days, and was attended by over thirty. In his article on the Gabfest, Dave Smith (a Wombeyan guide) lamented that numbers were down on past attendances, and continued:

*Apparently there are still organisations that either have not heard of Gabfest, or are undecided about its relevance to the guides of their Reserve. After all, the name 'Gabfest' is not self-explanatory when trying to promote a guide's conference. (ACKMA Journal 39, June 2000, pages 3-6).*

Indeed, on one evening a discussion was held, as Dave Smith reports:

*The main focus of the evening was to make a decision on a possible name change of Gabfest. This arose due to concerns listed earlier in this report. After a vote it was decided to keep the name Gabfest because it was catchy, familiar to many guides and was starting to become some sort of a tradition. A sub-title 'Cave Guide's Convention' was added to 'Gabfest' for an explanation of the event and to perhaps highlight the importance of the event for future Gabfests.*

Overall, the Wombeyan event was another great success, but again it was not highly structured. There were a few presentations, mainly 'on site', but the focus was mostly on visiting various caves and karst settings.

For the record, the schedule of past cave guide events is as follows:

13 –14 May 1990	1st Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Yarrangobilly Caves, NSW.
3 – 5 March 1991	2nd Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Wombeyan Caves, NSW.
17 – 18 March 1992	3rd Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Naracoorte Caves, SA.
24 – 26 March 1993	4th Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Buchan Caves, Vic.
14 – 18 March 1994	5th Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Jenolan Caves, NSW.
4 – 8 March 1996	6th Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Kelly Hill Caves, Kangaroo Island, SA.
15 – 20 March 1998	7th Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Augusta/Margaret River Caves, WA.
28 February – 3 March 2000	8th Cave Guides <i>Gabfest</i> , Wombeyan Caves, NSW.
3 –8 February 2002	9th Cave & Karst Presenters Workshop, Naracoorte Caves, SA
24 – 28 May 2004	10th Cave & Karst Presenters Workshop, Mole Creek, Tas.
26 February – 3 March 2006	11th Cave & Karst Presenters Workshop, Margaret River, WA.
10 – 16 February 2008	12th Cave and Karst Presenters Conference, Jenolan Caves, NSW.

And so we arrive at the 9th event, at Naracoorte Caves in 2002, where the *Gabfest* formally became the *Cave and Karst Presenters Workshop*. Over the years various management agencies came under 'pressure' from guides to have their attendance funded. The *quid pro quo* became that if guides' attendance to these functions was to be officially supported and funded, they needed to become more structured and educative. The name change was one *quid pro quo*.

All events from Naracoorte forward have followed this path. Programs, over a number of days, consist of papers and presentations, and workshops, as well as cave inspections (plus the usual conviviality...). This pattern was followed at Mole Creek (2004); Margaret River (2006), and Jenolan (2008) – the latter being styled the *Cave and Karst Presenters Conference*.

What can be said is that the guide events over years have greatly contributed to the knowledge, experience and professionalism of cave guides across the country, not to mention the networking they have engendered. They remain a most important part of the Cave and Karst management scene in Australia.



L to R; Catherine Sellars (Naracoorte), Jennifer Kreusser (Landells, formerly Yarrangobilly), Andy Spate and Katrina Wills (Naracoorte) at the Valley of The Giants, Western Australia, after the 11th Cave & Karst Presenters Workshop, 2006.

Photo: Andy Spate