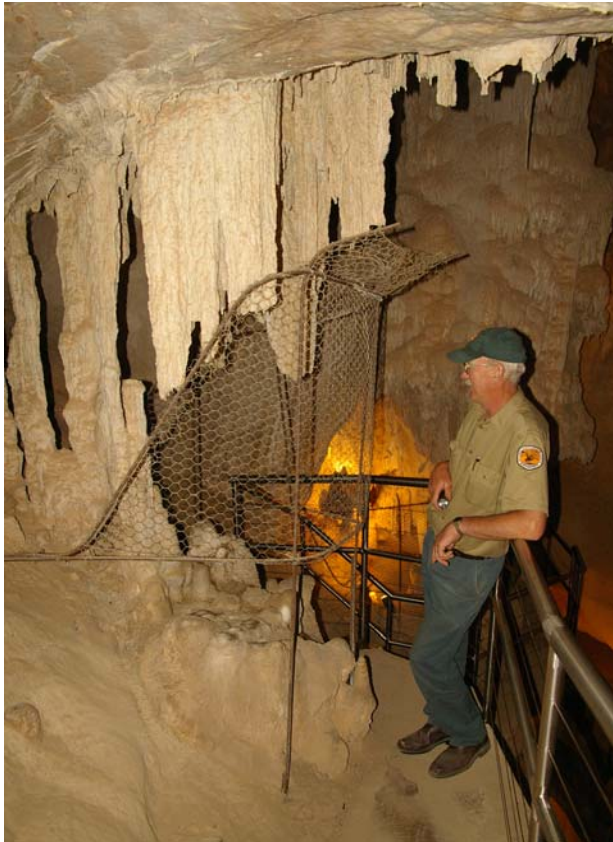


A COLOSSUS RETIRES

– Kent Henderson, Elery Hamilton-Smith, & Steve Bourne

Mick Chalker underground. Photo: Steve Bourne.



Kent Henderson said:

A cave colossus retires – Michael Chalker, who has been at Wombeyan Caves almost from time immemorial, retires on 14 March 2008, after nearly thirty years on the job! I first came across Mick in 1985, when I rocked up to Wombeyan for the first time, saw all the show caves and met him. My immediate thought was ‘what a nice bloke’. There are thousands who agree with me – I could not conceive of Mick having even one enemy in life. I offered to write a ‘tourist book’ on the caves, which was published as *The Wombeyan Experience* later that year. So began a 20+ year friendship. There are many ‘tales’ one could tell about Mick – many a night spent over the years sitting late into the night over innumerable ales on his front patio, at ACKMA Conferences and many other cave events.

I recall, on one of my earlier visits to Wombeyan, Mick taking me into Taralga ‘for a few drinks’ at the pub. Late in the evening, after we’d had more than several, Mick suggested it was time to move on. I was grateful of the opportunity to get back to Wombeyan. What I didn’t realise then was that there are two pubs in Taralga, and Mick’s ‘moving on’ was simply from one to the other! I have no idea what time we got home (well into the next morning), and I wasn’t feeling exactly robust the next day,

though Mick was hale and hearty. That’s Mick – very little worries him.

But his laid-back style, that he never fusses, does not mean he’s not switched on! I have never met a better or more thoughtful and dedicated cave and karst manager. Mick never makes a ‘noise’, never makes ‘demands’, never gets in your face. He is the epitome of the quiet achiever. He is never in a hurry – the story of the tortoise and the hare comes mind – we all know who won that race...and Mick has won plenty. Mick’s achievements have been legion. Virtually all the above ground and below ground infrastructure at Wombeyan has been achieved on his watch – the crowning achievement being the now almost total below ground upgrading of the lighting and infrastructure at Wombeyan to world’s best standards.

His cave and karst knowledge is vast, and he has always been delighted to share it. He has long been a mainstay of ACKMA, serving in many capacities and as our esteemed President from 1995-97. He was elected a Fellow of ACKMA in 1993 and the ultimate accolade – a Life Member – in 2001. He has attended eleven ACKMA Conferences since 1983.

When he rang to tell me he was retiring, he insisted no fuss be made. He didn’t want a retirement dinner (there will be one, if a venue can be found that’s big enough!). Sorry Mick, a fuss it is to be – you deserve no less. Happily, although he is soon to be retired, I know Mick well – he may be retired from Wombeyan, but his interest in caves and karst will continue unabated forever – we can expect to see him at Conferences and other ACKMA functions well into the future. I am reminded of my old school motto – *Sic Itur Ad Astra* (reach for the stars). Mick is one of those few who have actually got there – his legacy is incalculable.

Finally, let us not forget Annette, the backbone of Mick’s achievements – a lovelier lady (in every way) you could not meet. May the retirement of both of you be long and joyous.

Professor Elery Hamilton-Smith said:

Many people are unaware that the Wombeyan Caves were both discovered and reserved prior to Jenolan. The initial caves manager was Charles Chalker and was succeeded by Thomas Michael Chalker in 1885. After many years of other managers, Michael Chalker came to the throne in 1981.

Mike has always tackled life with dignity, integrity and a great sense of fun and humor. His consistent approach to improving the tour experience at Wombeyan has earned him the reputation as one of the most competent and creative Australian cave managers.

But in particular, he has created a remarkable feeling of welcome at Wombeyan. Whenever people arrive, they are always welcomed by Mick or one of his team. I have often met and talked with visitors who have called in simply to enjoy the camp ground and its wonderful birds. Even the birds seem to enjoy life at Wombeyan – call in sometime when the wild berries are fermenting and enjoy the performance of drunken gang-gangs!

Mike, you will be missed by thousands. With best wishes for a totally fulfilling retirement.

Steve Bourne said:

When Kent asked me to write a few words about Mick, I tried to think back to when I first met him. I think it was soon after I began working at Naracoorte when I called into Wombeyan Caves unannounced and after I introduced myself to whoever was selling tickets (possibly Annette), was directed to find Mick in Wollondilly Cave. Mick of course was his usual congenial self and spent the rest of the afternoon showing me around his patch. I think the reception I received that day was typical of Mick, always happy to take time out to share his beloved caves with another interested person.

I have many fond memories since then, like the 2001 ACKMA conference he convened at Wombeyan. A small group was given permission to visit Olympian Cavern, one of Wombeyan most special chambers. I asked Mick about the feasibility of taking my camera equipment, given that I had about 10kg of gear in a backpack. He said 'No problem, just a small slope to walk up'. The 'small slope' was a short-ish, but near vertical climb up slippery rocks made much more difficult with a backpack. When our group returned and I suggested that the description of the climb was far from adequate, Mick said 'I guess it is a bit steep

isn't it'. I still think he found it pretty funny that I wrestled all this equipment into this cave (for very poor results too, the chamber is so huge!). Mind you, it was the same conference he convinced me to lead a gorge run in very cold conditions...!

Mick has always been a thinker – always seeking ways to do things better. One night at Yarrangobilly, he, George Bradford and I were musing over how the Cave Guides Workshop (Gabfest) might be reinvigorated with improved attendances. Mick suggested a holding the workshop at the same time as the ACKMA AGM. This was subsequently done most successfully in Tasmania in 2004 and although has not been carried forward is an example of how he always looks at the big picture.

Another example of his clear thinking occurred at the 2007 Buchan conference. As disgruntled ACKMA delegates departed the one and only hotel at a ridiculously early hour (ie *before* midnight), Mick proceeded to explain to the hotel owner the error in his ways in not staying open. This man was not taking advantage of a one in a lifetime windfall of an ACKMA conference delivered to his doorstep and Mick thought he would point out this extremely obvious error, after all he and others had a lot of money in their pockets they were willing to hand over in exchange for more beer. Perhaps the delivery was wrong on this occasion, as the offer was not taken up!! He was thinking of the team again though.

There are a thousand such stories of Michael Chalker; the genial host, great cave manager, family man and a friend to all he has met. Thank you for your contribution on so many levels, enjoy retirement but please keep sharing your wisdom and friendship to all in caveland.

JEWEL CAVE AGAIN IN THE HEADLINES

– Jasmine Meagher*

Over fifty invited guests were privileged to attend the 50th anniversary of Jewel Cave (Margaret River, Western Australia) on 12 February 2008 and celebrate one of the most exciting cave explorations in Australia. Covered by extensive media coverage including WIN TV, the West Australian and ABC Radio, the event was a spectacular celebration.

Guests were joined by original cave explorers, Lloyd Robinson and Lex Bastian, who first explored the cave half a century ago. They were initially taken into Jewel Cave whereby they viewed a dramatic re-enactment of the 1958 entry and a captivating visual presentation containing historical photographs of the cave and the events that followed Mr Robinson's and Mr Bastian's entry.

After official proceedings a number of these guests participated in a tour led by Mr Robinson and Mr Bastian who took participants on their own journey of discovery. Upon their return to the surface a cake-cutting ceremony accompanied a progress

report on the Jewel Cave Preservation and Redevelopment project. Guests were also privileged to mingle at the event with other key identities involved in Jewel Cave's history including Tony Tapper and Cliff Spackman's family, members from the party that rediscovered and entered Jewel Cave in 1957.

It was on 12 February 1958 that the two intrepid explorers first descended a twelve metre deep narrow solution pipe to explore what at the time was only known of as a wind-hole. What they encountered led to a media and public interest frenzy. They had unwittingly entered what is now known as Jewel Cave.

Located on the cave riddled Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge, Jewel Cave was one of the last caves to be discovered in the region. From the early 1900s there was limited knowledge of the 'Wind Hole'. It's whereabouts, however, were lost overtime until the 3 January 1957, when Tony Tapper, Mr and Mrs

Jack Burrows, Cliff Spackman and Harley Webster rediscovered the hole by chance and decided to investigate.

The group lowered Spackman down the tight solution pipe into the cave. Suspended in mid air, Spackman shone his torch across incredible crystalline formations in a chamber 30 metres high and over 35 metres wide. Once he was hauled back up to the surface, the group agreed extensive preparations were required in order to explore the cave.



Early boating in Jewel Cave. Photo: Lloyd Robinson

Before the group managed to return, Lex Bastian and Lloyd Robinson found the cave after following directions from a well known local called Bill Ellis. The pair explored approximately 2kms of the cave, descending 42 metres. They were astounded by the diversity and extent of the formations in the cave. The now famous red shawl formations in the cave greatly impressed Bastian who commented how they were 'so fine as to resonate with (their) voices.' A few weeks later, the extraordinary discovery made headlines in the Daily News and West Australian newspaper's and generated enormous interest in the Augusta Margaret River Region.

Jewel Cave is a phreatic cave or a water table cave which has been formed by the action of water, as it flows slowly through the limestone. Hence some sections of the cave were waist deep in water and were navigated by boat. However, by 1988 the water table had dropped by more than a metre and today the lake and its famous reflections have all but disappeared.

Despite the disappearance of the water, the spectacular and unique crystalline formations of the cave make it a photographer's dream. Jewel Cave has a mapped distance of approximately 2km of which 700m can be currently accessed by joining a guided tour.

Opened to the public in 1959, only 23 months after the first exploration, Jewel Cave had 7,000 visitors alone in the first month.

Jewel Cave was vested in the care of the Augusta Margaret River Tourism Association (AMRTA) in 1961 with the aim of protection and preservation of

caves and flora. The AMRTA is about to embark on an exciting \$3.1 million preservation and redevelopment project which will include environmentally compatible infrastructure based upon protection preservation strategies of the underlying cave system. Such strategies will include a more eco-sensitive site located above stable ground, environmentally conscious toilets, a naturally aesthetic entry and the revegetation of the existing car park.

The redevelopment will occur over a five year period to be funded by the AMRTA together with government grants. To date the project has received \$500,000 from *Lotterywest*, with another \$247,000 granted from *Envirofund*, the South West Development Commission and the Shire of Augusta Margaret River. It is expected that further grants will be secured through the Regional Partnership Scheme operated by the *Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government*.

AMRTA Attractions Manager, Jayme Hatcher, has welcomed the redevelopment as an integral part of the future of Jewel Cave.

To redevelop the Jewel Cave site as an ecologically sustainable tourist attraction and it's valuable natural ecosystem will not only be of benefit to the local community, but also to visitors to the region, and the relevant scientific community. '



The original entrance. Photo: Lloyd Robinson

AMRTA Chief Executive Officer, Francine Burton, also sees great potential for the newly developed Jewel Cave and its role as a significant part of the tourism marketing of the region.

'The redeveloped Jewel Cave will bring a balance of conservation of the natural environment, cultural and scenic values while providing tourism and recreation in a manner compatible with the conservation of one of Australia's most beautiful caves.'

Mr Bastian praised the way the cave had been managed stating that the beauty he had written about 50 years ago was still evident today.

* PR/Communications Coordinator, *Caveworks*