

A view over the top of Melville Caves from the nearby lookout.



CAVES YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD OF...

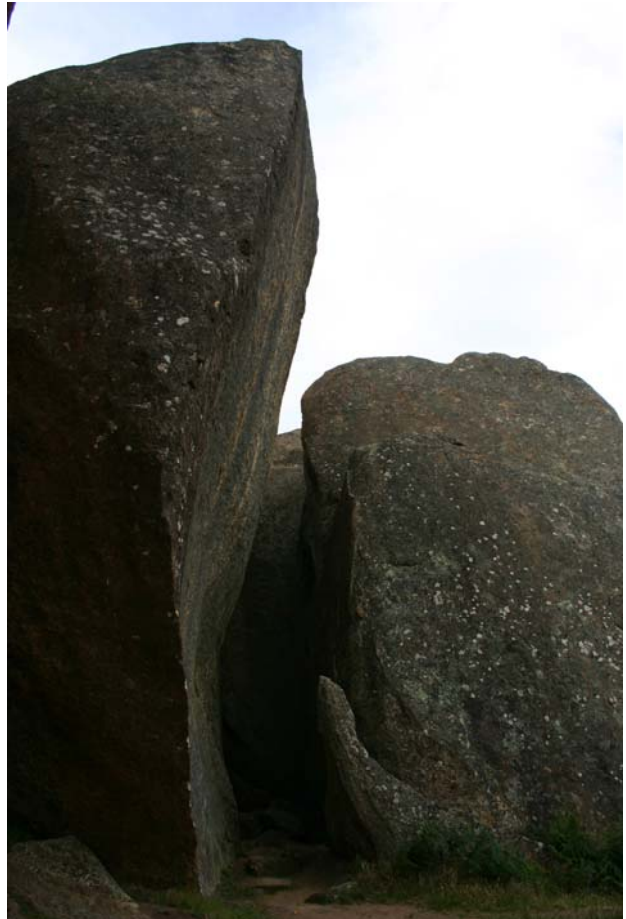
– Kent Henderson

All ACKMA members have heard of, and most probably visited, Buchan Caves and Princess Margaret Rose Cave – the show caves of Victoria. They are probably also aware of that there are over twenty other significant karst areas in Victoria including Bat Ridges, Drik Drik, Glenelg River, Gippsland, Murrindal, Mitta Mitta, and Warrnambool. They are possibly also aware of caves in volcanic areas of the State – at Byaduk, Mt Eccles, and Mt Hamilton.



Interpretation Booth at the main Melville Caves camping area.

I recently visited some Victorian caves that are not in any of the above areas. They are not in karst, they are not in basalt, and they are not even in sandstone. Interesting, eh? The caves I speak of are in granite. Pull the other leg, surely!



A view of the granite boulders over the cave.

Have you ever heard of the Melville Caves? No? Let me help. Melville Caves are a collection of huge granite boulders sitting on the top of a massive granite tor in the Kooyoora State Park. It is the spaces between these huge boulders which form the 'caves'.

The cavities are, in fact, a series of large fissures which have formed in the weathered granite. They are located 205 km north-west of Melbourne via the Calder Highway and 21 km west of Inglewood, in central northern Victoria.

Prior to European settlement, the area was inhabited by the Jaara Aboriginal people. There is evidence they used the rock formations of the area for shelter including, it is believed, Melville Caves.

Scarred trees around the park's rock shelves indicate the removal of material from the trees by the Jaara for use as shields and bowls. The recovery of an array of spearheads, chisels and quartz flakes provides further evidence of their former presence.

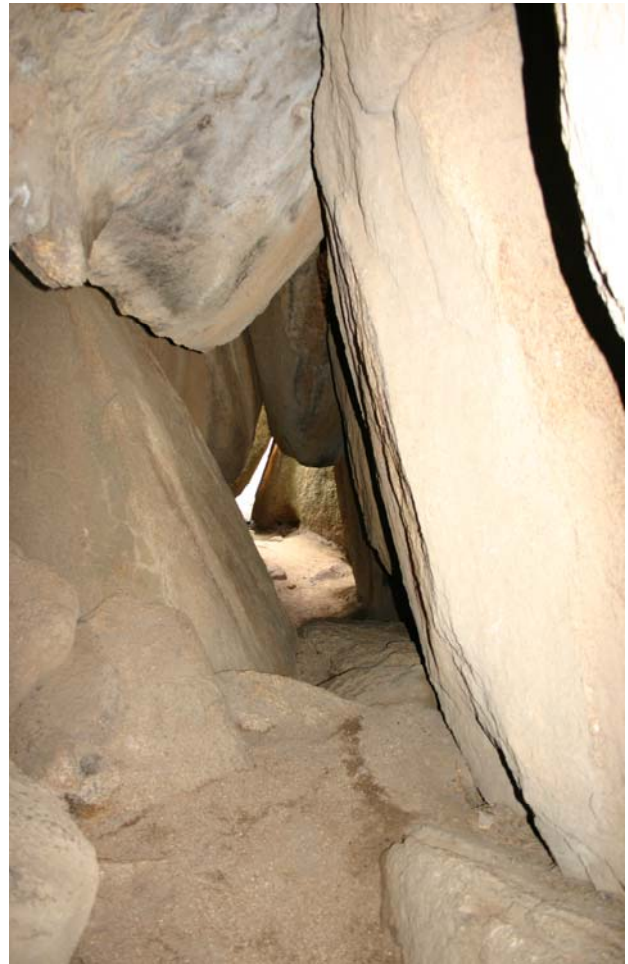
The first known Europeans in the area were the party of Thomas Mitchell during his *Australia Felix* expedition of 1836. European settlement of the district began in the 1840s.



A view inside the cave.

Gold was discovered north of Melville Caves, near Wedderburn, in 1852. Prospectors flooded into the area causing the large pastoral estates to be broken up into smaller holdings. During this period, the bushranger *Captain Melville* (nee Frank McCallum) is thought to have used the caves as a camp and a vantage point owing to their elevation which facilitates excellent views down over the flat plains to the south – along which, conveniently if you are a bushranger, gold-bearing coaches traveled.

He conducted raids at numerous points throughout western and south-western Victoria and once made off with five billycans full of gold dust which were never recovered. They are thought to be buried at Mt Arapiles west of Horsham. *Melville*, after whom the caves were subsequently named, was caught on Christmas Eve 1852, and was found dead in his cell in 1857.



A view through Melville Cave to daylight.

From 1852 to 1883 the region yielded 369 nuggets weighing over 1.5 kg. The bulk was found between 1854 and 1857, including the *Blanche Barkly* nugget at Kingower, weighing 49.5 kg. Two other nuggets weighing over 30 kg were found at Rheola, to the immediate south of the Caves.

Gold mining occurred within the bounds of what is now Kooyoora State Park and relics of the associated settlement are to be found in its eastern section.



A view of an entrance to the cave.

Interpretation sign near the cave entrance.



The *White Swan Quartz Mine* operated in what is now Kooyoor State Park during World War II, producing industrial and ornamental quartz. The Melville Caves were listed as a geological monument in 1980. In January of that year a 240 gram nugget was found and that started another minor gold rush which turned up a 2.4 kg nugget. The World Orienteering Championships were held in the area in 1985 and the Park was declared in that year.

The Melville Caves area is quite well developed. A sealed road leads to the cave car park, past two separate camping grounds. There are toilets,

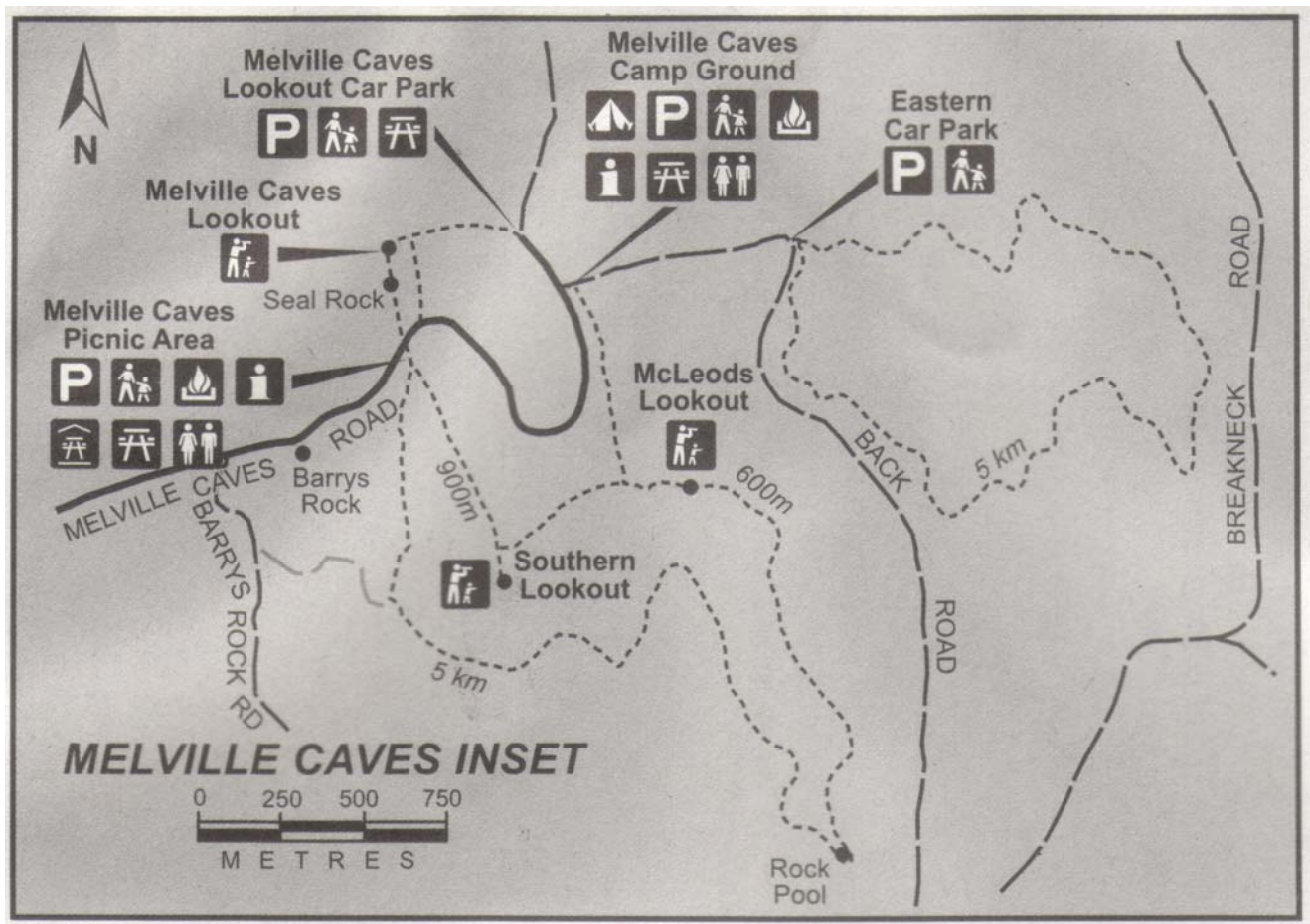
information boards, picnic tables, etc. A 400 metre walking track leads from the caves car park to a lookout and a bit further on to the caves.

The lookout gives one an outstanding panorama of the area, and a great view over the top of the caves to the right – which are in fact substantial fissures that have appeared when the weathered granite atop the tor split to create cave-like openings.

The main cave is a walk-through fissure, maybe 100 metres long. Diffused daylight, either from the entrance at either end, or small skylights through the granite, penetrates much of the cave. There is a duck under towards the middle, but otherwise the traverse is very easy.

Management at Melville is more than satisfactory. All the pathways to the caves area are well made, and there is a good interpretation sign at the start of the immediate caves area. I was a bit surprised (but happily so) that, given access is totally unregulated, there was no graffiti at all in or about the caves – or the park generally (that I saw). Impressive.

Certainly, if you are in the area, you could usefully spend a pleasant few hours at Melville Caves, as I did.



A schematic of the Melville Caves – from a *Parks Victoria* handout.