

L to R: Professor Elery Hamilton-Smith, Deborah Carden and Hon. Jay Weatherill, South Australian Minister for Environment and Conservation, at the Alexandra Cave centennial celebrations.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF MEMORIES A Celebration at Naracoorte National Park

– Deborah Carden

The anniversary of a significant chapter in the history of Naracoorte Caves National Park was celebrated on 5 April 2009. Alexandra Cave, part of the Naracoorte Caves World Heritage Area, was officially opened for guided tours in May 1909, after its discovery a year earlier. This signalled the start of the Naracoorte Caves' transformation into an internationally-known tourist destination.

The cave had been discovered by William Reddan in 1908, who named it after Princess Alexandra, the daughter of Queen Victoria (patriotic namings were popular in those times). With the assistance of his daughter Agnes and others Reddan immediately started developing the cave with the intention of opening it to the public.

The cave's discovery was of interest to the South Australian Tourist Bureau whose charter was to publicise the attractions of the State, together with the organisation of tours. The Bureau gradually expanded its functions and that included managing 'National pleasure resorts', one of which was the Naracoorte Caves.

While Blanche Cave was the first in the Naracoorte network to be discovered, with evidence that it was used for parties as early as the 1860s, Alexandra was the first to be developed into a tourist attraction.

Alexandra Cave features a series of three highly decorated chambers, including fragile straws, helictites and many other speleothems and is one of the National Park's treasures.

Barb Lobban, Naracoorte Guide (aka Agnes Reddan) – far left, Jen MacLean, Naracoorte Guide (rear centre) and Alison Rowe of Friends of Naracoorte Caves (rear right), with local school children, at the Alexandra Cave Centenary



12 May 1909

The official opening on 12 May 1909 by the Governor at the time, Admiral Sir Day Hart Bosanquet, was a lavish affair that drew a crowd of 2000 people. Press reports of the time described it as a 'remarkably grand ceremony, no doubt the most grand ever performed at such an event'.

5 April 2009

The centennial celebrations were a less lavish affair than that of 100 years ago, with a crowd numbering about 300. Official guests were met by a guard of honour comprising local school children, members of 'Friends of Naracoorte Caves' group and most of the cave guides, dressed in period costume.

Adding character to the occasion was the grand gateway under which the official party passed as they entered the ceremony area. The gateway was a replica of the one built for the 1909 celebration and was the work of guide Barb Lobban helped by her husband Scott and screen printer friend Nigel. The children were waving traditional paper flags and these, along with the gateway and the costumes gave much relevance to the occasion.

Hon. Jay Weatherill, South Australian Minister for Environment and Conservation, was the guest of honour at the ceremony. He was accompanied by his wife and two small daughters. Others in the official party included Peter Alexander, Regional Conservator and Steve Bourne, Deputy Regional Conservator with the Department for Environment and Heritage which administers the Park; local Mayor Ken Grundy and the Chief Executive of the Naracoorte-Lucindale District Council – along with ACKMA dignitaries Professor Elery Hamilton-Smith, Dr Grant Gartrell and Andy Spate.

Peter Alexander acted as Master of Ceremonies for the Official Ceremony. The Mayor welcomed everyone warmly and Minister Weatherill spoke prior to unveiling a plaque. This was followed by the

launch of 'Trapped in Time', a new interpretive DVD that tells the story of the discovery of the megafauna fossil deposits in Victoria Fossil Cave. After the DVD launch, Minister Weatherill and Mr Grundy planted two commemorative trees, assisted by youngsters Sasha and Chelsea Wills, who had also helped during the ceremony with unveiling of the plaque and the DVD launch.

In his speech, Mr Weatherill commented: 'About 85 years before it became part of a World Heritage Area, South Australians were recognising Alexandra Cave's importance by flocking here for a chance to see it for themselves. Since then, guided tours of Alexandra Cave have been a must-see for tourists, generating important economic benefits for the Limestone Coast community. The cave is an outstanding example of geological, ecological and biological evolution. For more than 500,000 years the cave has been preserving a rich fossil record of ancient fauna and the major stages of the Earth's evolutionary history.'

He also noted that as well as being a delightful show cave Alexandra is an integral part of the education hub at Naracoorte where primary, secondary and tertiary students learn about cave conservation and science. About 20,000 visitors a year enjoy tours through Alexandra Cave each year.

Once the ceremony was over the Official Party was led into Alexandra by Steve Bourne (who, as previous manager, was considered to have enough expertise to lead the group!). However, once inside the cave they were met by William Reddan and his daughter Agnes (Park staff Andrew Hansford and Barb Lobban in period costume).

After lunch the official guests went escorted by Steve into Victoria Fossil Cave for the inaugural screening of *Trapped in Time*. The screening took place alongside the main interpretive fossil deposit – a perfect setting and the best way to end a very nice day.



The official Party, including several ACKMA 'suspects', Naracoorte Caves staff, and Friends of Naracoorte Caves members, at the plaque commemorating the event.