

Working in the 'lab'.



## TOMMY GRAHAM'S CAVE VISITOR BOOK

– Peter Buzzacott\*

Tommy Graham's Cave lies not far from the Cocklebiddy Roadhouse on the Nullarbor in south-eastern Western Australia. The entrance lies partially hidden by trees near the top of a doline. Occasionally, I hear reports that Tommy Graham's Cave has collapsed, usually from people who have walked passed the actual entrance and gone down to the bottom of the doline (which is a dead-end). 'Tommy's', as it is affectionately known, is administered by the Esperance District Office of the Department for Environment and Conservation (DEC). Visitor permits are required and it is an interesting little cave, with low-ish passages heading ever down at a steep angle until a subterranean lake is reached. Cave divers use carpet to protect the narrower sections when passing tanks from person to person, the gear is assembled at the water's edge and only then is the full scale of the cave revealed.

There are large flooded passages, an enormous cathedral-sized chamber, and the water is so clear that tiny divers can see each other from opposite sides. There is a dry chamber with a high carbon-dioxide level and, for the fit and hardy, divers can

climb over this underground 'hill' of boulders, all the while breathing from their scuba regulators, to dive the second sump on the other side. The water is 23 degrees, which is five degrees warmer than nearby Cocklebiddy Cave, and this heats the air in the dry section.



The ph reading.

In July 2008 I visited Tommy Graham's Cave and inside the entrance found the Visitor Logbook immersed in water inside its protective plastic container. The lid was broken and at some stage water had entered the cave and filled the container. Nullarbor dust had also made its way inside and covered the sodden visitor book. It looked beyond salvage and was left *in situ* within the container.



The Visitor's Book. Above – before. Below – After.



Upon returning to Bunbury I contacted Klaus, the DEC regional manager based in Esperance, and the CDAA directorate based in Melbourne, to propose we replace the original book with a new waterproof visitor book, and conserve what remained of the existing book. Conservators at the WA Maritime Museum gave some conservation advice, though paper is notoriously fragile, and a tentative treatment plan was formulated. Both DEC and the CDAA approved the plan, I bought a waterproof notebook at the local dive centre and returned to the cave in September 2009 to make the exchange. Reports by CDAA members suggested the visitor book had been submerged since before mid-2007 and, probably, dried out and re-soaked periodically

since. The entire container was sealed in a plastic bag and returned to my home in Bunbury, bubble-wrap packed in a box.

Firstly, the ph was tested using an 'electrolysis' meter which read roughly 7.0, and this was confirmed using a chemical freshwater aquarium Ph kit called Alive-O. I laid out all the materials in the shade on my veranda, at noon when the sun was high, and filled large clear plastic tubs with water. The container and all in it were photographed using a Nikon Coolpix 5-megapixel digital camera set on 'fine' quality and 'macro', with no flash. In the rinsing tubs the Nullarbor dust was gently brushed away, all underwater. It appeared that a plastic waterproof notebook page was on top, followed by the green Army notebook, and then a mass of paper 'pulp'.

The plastic page was easily cleaned and revealed a 14 July 2007 visit record. The rest was not so well preserved. Four ball-point pens (BIC) were found in the mud. These were removed and cleaned.

The green notebook was carefully and gently flushed of external red dust and then rinsed three times as the water clouded, then placed in the main tank. The cover read:

RSM  
Department of Defense  
Field Message and Notebook – Army'

Underneath was a soggy wad of muddy papers and business cards. A mask and snorkel was donned and, with my face underwater in the tub, the surface dirt lightly brushed off. The book was gently opened only at obvious partings between pages. Most of the pages were stuck together around the edges and the paper was extremely fragile. Where the book was opened photographs were taken and then a rectangle of glad-wrap was placed between the pages to prevent them from bonding during the drying process. Using a magnifying glass as needed, anything legible was transcribed onto dry notepad.

Mostly, there were the names of visitors, dates, and comments moaning about how hard it was to get the dive gear back up and out of the cave. This was no surprise because, having made more than a couple of Tommy's dive trips, I can attest that it is indeed strenuous. The last entry is dated 18 September, 2006 so it must be assumed that sometime between then and 14 July 2007 the lid cracked (possibly in the heat of summer), then it rained and the container filled with water.

Once photographed the book was closed with a sheet of glad-wrap between each opened page, then lifted from the water onto a plastic tray to dry in my warm, dark shed.

Next, the old pile of mush... On the top was a dark hard cover with a sticker on the inside. The first page after the cover was a blank double-sheet page folded in half. This paper was much stronger and more integral than in the notebook – more like baking paper. Once photographed each page was

lifted from the container using a stainless steel spatula and placed on sheets of glad-wrap, then placed on sheets of newspaper in my shed.

Ten double sheets in all, then underneath, a business card which read:

'... dive try not  
to think about  
the climb out.  
Remember one foot  
After the other  
Will get you there  
04/8/99'

Opening the folded pages the first reads:

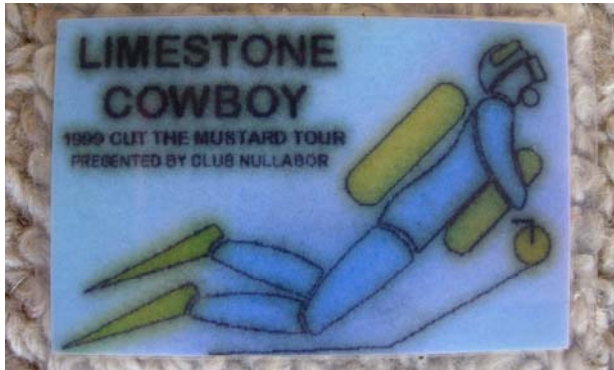
8.10.92 – 10.10.92  
Gary Barclay  
Rockpile to 2nd sump looks  
Like hard work. 2 dives in 1st

Next, in August 1999 John O'Brien says 'The climb sucks a bit' and his buddy John Coombe says the 'Pain was worth the gain'. A group known as CCV list their party and then, in January 2001 someone with the initials TG writes:

'What pain? Bunch of wussies.

The last six double pages were blank so I turned to the remaining pile of mush, and found a laminated card that read:

Limestone Cowboy  
1999 Cut the mustard tour  
Presented by Club Nullabor [sic]



Then a selection of business cards, the first one from:

Cochran Technology – Diving into the 21st Century  
Stephen G. Sturgeon  
General Manager  
Cochran Australia Pty Ltd  
Rockingham, WA.

This is a fitting find as Western Australian Steve Sturgeon was, at one time, the National Director of the CDAA. The other cards are from WA, SA, Vic and NSW.



The remaining pile appeared to be compliment slips from SG Printers and the pile was very fragile indeed. All the cards and clumps of paper were placed on Glad-Wrap and dried. The pens and plastic container were washed clean of dirt, dried, the whole lot re-packed as it was found (albeit with the Glad-Wrap still between the sheets for long-term preservation) and will be delivered to the Esperance DEC office the next time I am passing through. It appears too delicate to post in the regular mail.

A more detailed record of the conservation process was written-up and put onto a CD-Rom with the photographs, and copies were sent to the DEC office in Esperance, the CDAA history officer, and to the library of the Western Australian Speleology Group. My next visit to dive Tommy Grahams cave is planned for March. Though the new visitor book has only been in place for six months I'll photograph any entries, a practice I intend to follow at least annually in case one-day this new book is lost or damaged.

The lesson here is that we may have lost some of our recorded history but we now have in place a more durable visitor book and a plan for ongoing back-up. I heartily recommend anyone with a visitor book digitally record every page and store that record separately, in case of fire or flood, and update their back-up annually. Data CDs and DVDs are known to only last five years or so, but if you copy last year's back-up and add the latest year's back-up together, and burn a new disk, you should always have four years of 'good' disks and never lose more than one year of visitor records. Ideally, make two copies and send one to someone independent, as I am.

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