

# NEWS FROM THE SLEEPY BUROUGH OF JENOLAN CAVES

– Dan Cove

A group of teenagers engaged in a 'Breaking the Boundaries Tour'.



Do you sometimes get the feeling that everything seems to happen at once? This feeling can actually be the source of satisfaction or of utter panic, depending on what is actually taking place. Is it that so many interesting projects and productive initiatives are underway that you are not quite sure which one to focus on? Or, is it that there is simply such an avalanche of work driven by changing circumstances that you feel overwhelmed by the sheer weight of events? It could be said that Jenolan at the moment is rather a combination of the two.

There is change in the air, with the future structural arrangement of the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust to be largely determined by the outcome of the current E.O.I process concerning Jenolan Caves House. However, this change is still set against a background of continuing energy and innovation in the way in which Jenolan is going about the business of finding ever new ways to develop and present its caves (and indeed, other services) to the wider world. The atmosphere is charged, but there is a great deal of positive energy to the charge.

This will be but a brief overview of what has been happening over the past months at Jenolan, principally in terms of current cave re-development and new tour designs and interpretive activities.

## CAVE DEVELOPMENT

The overall objective at Jenolan over the past decade has been the progressive upgrade of the lighting systems in all nine show-caves, and the replacement of all handrails with stainless steel. Given the extent of the system, this was a daunting proposition. However, with a significant infusion of funds from the NSW Government we were able to replace the handrails and netting cage areas in all the most visited caves with stainless steel from 2004-2006. The lighting has been a more protracted process, in part through economic necessity and in part through a desire

to improve on each previous project and to create diversity amongst the tours through lighting design.

The Orient Cave was the last major show-cave to be relit, with the majority of work undertaken in 2008. This was an exciting project in terms of the availability of technology, as it was the first time that LEDs were available as a genuine alternative to conventional lighting. This allowed a massive overall reduction in power requirement, and the entire cave to run off a system of small multiple battery banks giving unprecedented reliability and redundancy.

The environmental advantage to the extraordinarily delicate Orient Cave is clear, with overall heat output now minimal. The LEDs themselves far exceeded original expectations, not the least as we continually came up with additions that had never been a part of the original plan. David Head of Weidmuller rose magnificently to every fresh challenge thrown at him, coming up with such sensational new products as the 'ramping pillow' (we had neglected to mention the small detail that we required all LEDs to ramp up over 4-8 seconds). The Orient was officially re-launched in August 2009 by the Hon. Carmel Tebbutt, Deputy Premier of NSW.



New LED lights in Orient Cave.

The Orient project was a great success; however we had been unable to complete the lighting of the Ribbon Cave under the original government funding. This exquisite extension to the cave had to wait until early this year when the Trust was able to self-fund the relighting. Once again we used only Weidmuller LEDs. The nature of the cave lent itself to the subtle use of light, and the miniaturisation that had been achieved during the Orient project was again of great advantage.

The Ribbon was relit relatively quickly, with the advantage that we were able to suspend all tours through the cave for the duration of the project. Given that the tour has a maximum group size of 8 and consists of a single 60m passageway, there was no advantage to lighting sequences or to any approach to the lighting other than to merely light

in order to accent the natural delicacy and fragility of the crystal. The result is that one of the most beautiful single sections of cave at Jenolan now has lighting that is unobtrusive, with almost all fixtures and cabling concealed, and that is highlighted as never before.



Characters at the Historical Festival.

The next major project will be the relighting of the River Cave. Jenolan was fortunate enough to be successful in receiving a \$100,000 AusIndustry Federal Government grant towards the project, with the Trust providing the remaining funds. Major works on the River Cave are scheduled to commence in late May, and the project will be completed by March 2011. The plan envisages an approach to the lighting that accentuates the heritage aspects of the cave.

The River has always had a slightly more adventurous feel to it than other show-caves, and it evokes a sense of awe in relation to the early days of exploration amongst visitors. Lighting the cave in a way that utilises the most cutting edge technology, yet that keeps the overall feel consistent with the essential heritage values of the tour, will present yet another set of challenges to the team. Naturally, a full report on this project will be forthcoming in due course.

The River will also be a significant project as, once completed, it will allow the entire Jenolan Southern show-cave system to be connected through a single network. This has been a long time in the planning. It was 2002/2003 when a 600m optical fibre was run in a single length from the middle of the Lucas Cave to the Guides Office. This was done in the hope that technology would one day allow us to remotely access and control

operations within the cave. Thankfully, this is indeed now eminently possible, and both lighting as well as environmental monitoring stations will now be able to interface with the optical fibre link to the Guides Office and, from there, direct to the Internet if required. With slight trepidation we ran the first tests on the optical fibre in early May. To our great delight, all is working perfectly.

## TOUR DEVELOPMENT

The finest technology in the world will not, on its own, produce a cave tour experience that is capable of delivering the quality of experience that is necessary in today's environment. It seems to be the case that we all have to work ever harder, and deliver a product that is always evolving simply to maintain a consistent visitation level. However, the challenge of continual improvement has forced us to think differently about caves and cave tours, with one of the most obvious areas of thought regarding the differences in our visitors. Recently this has been most clearly evidence in the designing of tours and activities for younger visitors.

It may seem self-evident to make the observation that children are not like adults and, equally, that teenagers are not like either young children or adults. However, conventional tours had always made it difficult to present an approach that acknowledged the differing needs of different age groups. We have attempted to address this by designing both tours (and activities) for children and for teenagers. The former is an area in which we had dabbled previously. But all earlier efforts have now been drawn together into what are known as the 'Discovery Series' tours which now comprise four activities; 'Bones and Stones', 'Bats, Bugs and Beasties', 'Junior Guides' and 'Young Explorers'. All four of these are very different, but all focus on aspects of caves that most captivate the younger visitors and all four are far more engaging and interactive than standard tours.



'The Shrine' in Ribbon Cave with new LED lights.

In looking at the teenage market, we introduce over the recent summer school holidays, the 'Boundaries Series' tours. Two activities have been developed as a part of this; 'Pushing the Boundaries' and 'Breaking the Boundaries'. Both have an adventure component, with the 'Breaking the Boundaries' involving serious adventure caving. Importantly, parents and younger siblings are not allowed on either activity (a concept that seems to go down unsurprisingly well with



parents). The focus is again on interaction, but further on empowerment of the teens – placing them in a leadership role and developing reliance on their own decisions and those of their new teammates.

Both the 'Discovery Series' and 'Boundaries Series' have quickly become staples of the holiday programme, with the Easter holiday period showing the potential of these programs with a massive increase in both interest and uptake on tours. On the back of these successes, we are looking to expand and experiment with further new tours for younger visitors and the family market, and over Easter trialled new concept tours that focus on Cave Fantasy and the place of caves in mythology.

We have also been improving the Nettle Cave self-guided tour experience. The Nettle is not available as a standalone product, but is packaged as a 'value-add' addition included with a guided tour. The use of digital audio guides allows great scope for provision of layers of information, and this is now available in 8 languages with a further three having been added late 2009 (Korean, Japanese and Russian).

A further significant addition was a dedicated 'Children's Tour'. The original script was completely rewritten and rerecorded (using children). It is one of the great strengths of the audio guide product that it can be continually refined and added to. A further three languages are to be added later this year. Two of these will most likely be Italian and Arabic. The third is currently in the translation stage, and will hopefully be recorded and completed by mid-June. More on this later, but suffice to say that it will be a cave tour experience that is truly unique.

At time of writing we have also just commenced a fortnight long festival period, 'Phantoms of the Underworld'. This is essentially a festival celebrating Jenolan's cultural history, bringing together all the historical tours that have been developed over recent years featuring guides in character as figures from Jenolan's past. The festival also focuses on the history of Jenolan Caves House. This focus is timely, as the House has also been the focus of major upgrading over recent years. A new roof and exterior painting is now being followed up with interior painting, new carpeting and furnishings and, most significantly, a refurbishment of the kitchen. The House has regained a great deal of its former grandeur throughout this process, and we are all eager to see the final results of the ongoing refurbishment.

## THE FUTURE

As is widely known, major news at Jenolan currently is the commencement of a process intended to seek expressions of interest from the Private Sector to take on the hospitality operations at Jenolan through a lease on Jenolan Caves House. The philosophy is that the private sector has resources to improve and grow the commercial viability of the hospitality operations that are beyond the ability of the Government to match. This process is currently in the first stage, with calls for initial expressions of interest having

been called and all such submissions to be received by May 20th.

Operation of the Caves will continue to be the responsibility of Government, although the final structural arrangement as to where the current Trust model will fit within Government has not been finalised. The eventual partnership arrangement between a potential operator and the Trust has also not been fully determined. It is expected that the final model will be established in the second stage of the process, involving negotiations between the Trust, Government and any possible operators.

As is only natural, the process is creating a certain amount of uncertainty amongst staff at Jenolan. Impending organisational change of any sort is bound to create a climate of concern, and the recent experience of private sector engagement at Jenolan is still fresh in the minds of many staff. However, a great deal of thought and preparation has gone into the current process, including a meticulous level of detail in management planning and environmental safeguarding. Equally, the lessons of the past have been well studied, and all are keen to avoid making any decisions that would lead to a reversal of the current trend of improvement in the facilities, service and reputation of Caves House.

At time of writing, it is not possible to anticipate what the level of interest from the private sector will be, or to speculate on how the process will proceed through the second stage. An update on how the E.O.I process is progressing will certainly be provided for the next Journal.



Historical materials in preparation for the 'Phantoms of the Underworld' festival.

## CONCLUSION

So, all in all, life at Jenolan is not without interest at the moment. However, I think that it is important to emphasise that, despite the spectre of organisational change, there is still a distinct energy present. The caves themselves are looking better than at any time previously in my own experience, and I am delighted that we are continuing to find ever new ways in which to engage the public and promote not only Jenolan, but the world of caves generally. It will be a challenge, but an intriguing one, to see where this current spirit of energy and innovation will lead us as Jenolan continues to look ahead to the great 'undiscovered country' of the future.

