

REFLECTIONS on the LIFE of ANDREW DAVID SKINNER: 8 JANUARY 1953-15 MAY 2011

Arthur Clarke



First child of Roy and Emily (Pem) Skinner, Andrew was born in Armadale (Melbourne) on the 8th of January 1953. Andrew came to Tasmania in 1954, when his father Roy was appointed Assistant Manager at the recently rebuilt Coles Bay Chateau (now Freycinet Lodge). Later that same year, Roy took up the position as Assistant Guide at Hastings Caves, using the Hastings Cave Chalet as residence.

From boyhood, Andrew assisted his father Roy maintaining a full meteorological station reporting temperature, humidity, rainfall and wind speeds. One of Andrew's earliest recollections of life at Hastings Caves, was the early morning ritual of doing the weather readings then spending up to two hours every day cleaning up the rubbish from the previous day.

Andrew relates that as a youngster, his learn-to-swim paddle-board used in the original thermal pool was made especially for him by family friend Olegas Truchanas, the well known Lithuanian-born Tasmanian conservationist and nature photographer. Olegas subsequently taught Andrew to swim properly and as Ros recalls, Andrew gained a reputation as a local swimming champion, proudly boasting that he could easily swim three lengths of Hastings pool, underwater with one breath!

Andrew inherited, or absorbed by osmosis, his father Roy's interest in caves and became a very keen caver. Andrew recollects early visits to *Mystery Creek Cave* with his father in 1960, when the Ida Bay Railway was still operating and together with caving club members they rode the empty limestone wagons into the old Blaneys Quarry on the northern side of Marble Hill. He recollects over-nighting with his father and other cavers in a dilapidated paling board quarry workers hut beside the Blaneys Quarry limestone railway terminus.

At one stage, Andrew was a member of four caving groups, joining the first, TCC (Tasmanian Caverneering Club) as a child member in 1962, at the age of nine and a junior member at age 13. Later during his teenage years, he became a member of SCS (Southern Caving Society), then at age 20 joined NC (Northern Caverneers) and from 1974 was a member of the Launceston Speleo Club. He remained a member of these groups till 1976 when he and wife Ros took up their post on Maria Island. In the early 1970s, Andrew had an association with a fifth caving group: the Claremont Caving Club, based in the northern suburbs of Hobart.

Together with his father, about 1965-1966, Andrew assisted TCC cavers in planning the route and constructing the second major access track to Exit Cave.

Lovingly referred to as the “Brooker Highway” (then later “the flat track”), it ran some seven miles from the old Catamaran Road along the *D’Entrecasteaux River* Plains to *Exit Cave*. Andrew’s first trip to *Exit Cave*, on the southern side of Marble Hill, was at the age of 13, in 1966; the cave was then only known up to the talus section, generally referred as “*The Rockfall*”.

Andrew lived with his family at the Chalet till 1968, until the larger dedicated restaurant with improved facilities and kitchen was built together with adjoining Cave Superintendent’s accommodation. At age 15, Andrew established a small museum of cave related exhibits in a corner of the dining room; it lasted from 1968 to 1970. His museum contained a mixture of geological items including fossils, rock samples, a few speleothems (but not many), old photographs, early newspaper cuttings about Hastings, pieces of old caving equipment, old cave lighting fixtures, a carbide-fuelled acetylene coach lantern and other items of interest borrowed from members of the outlying Hastings, Lune River and Southport community. There was also a small collection of philatelic items: postage stamps that featured caves, cave tourism or karst features. The museum also included some cave interpretation and historical information, some of which was used c. 1976 by Roy and Andrew to produce a booklet: *Hastings Caves State Reserve Tasmania – A Visitor’s Guide*.

Andrew went to University of Tasmania in Hobart in 1971, where he was majoring in Zoology, Geology and Geography. For those next two years, he lived in Parliament Street (Sandy Bay) sharing a house with other cavers including Kevin Kiernan. Andrew’s studies in Geography were the inspiration for Kevin to commence his own Uni studies and he still has Andrew’s First Year Geography lecture notes! Known as “Parliament House” their house hosted the monthly meetings of the Tasmanian Caverneering Club. While at Parliament Street, there was the one and only meeting of the Exit Cave Society attended by Roy Skinner, Jim Casey and Michael Hodgman, mustering support and finance for the development of *Exit Cave*.

Aside from caving, Andrew was a keen bushwalker. He became involved with the old *Lake Pedder* and took on the role of Secretary for the Lake Pedder Action Committee. In late 1972, Andrew and Ros made a trip to Precipitous Bluff (see photo), as a reconnaissance for the subsequent 1973 expedition by members of the Southern Caving Society. Andrew joined the United Tasmania Group – precursor to the Greens, to try to make a difference.

He transferred to the Mt. Nelson campus of the TCAE (Tasmanian College of Advanced Education) in 1973, enrolling in the final year of a landscape architecture diploma course. Inspired by his own exploration and other cavers’ adventures in *Exit Cave*, plus the international Churchill Fellowship studies of tourist cave developments undertaken by his father, for his final year major project, Andrew formulated a plan to show how *Exit Cave* could be developed as a major world class

tourist attraction. In that same year, Andrew conducted about 20 exploration trips into *Exit Cave*, producing an extremely detailed survey from the cave entrance to *The Rockfall*.

Despite being poor tertiary students with no car, Andrew was so passionate about caving that when he and Rosalind Bell married in 1973, he insisted that part of their honeymoon was spent caving. After completing his tertiary education, Andrew moved to Launceston and worked in town planning. It was an exciting time in the State of Tasmania. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) had just been formed and later in 1974, Andrew gained a position as an investigations officer in the NPWS resources section, where he worked with Greg Middleton and others. This put Andrew in a position to influence the creation or enlargement of some parks and reserves. He was justifiably proud that he was able to influence extensions to the South West National Park, increase the area of Southport Lagoon State Reserve, enlarge the South Bruny Island National Park to include *Partridge Island* and supported the public submissions to have the Ida Bay State Reserve declared.

In 1975, Andrew was instrumental in setting up the Maydena Branch of TCC, which included Max Jeffries, Laurie Moody, Phil Voss, John Parker, Ann and Steve Annan among others. The first trip of the new club found *Beginners Luck Cave* (later re-named as *Tiata Kominya*), with its multiple entrances, wombat burrows, megafauna remains and evidence of Tasmanian Aboriginal occupation. Also that same year (1975), Andrew assisted his father and other local cavers in organising the second Australian cave management conference in Hobart.

According to Ros, when Andrew joined Parks he had really only wanted one job, the Ranger on Maria Island, even though it entailed less pay, isolation, sometimes dangerous hair raising boat rides, wild aeroplane landings, a house full of wildlife to evict, no power on occasions, and monotonous green paint on everything – inside and out. Andrew’s devotion allowed him to make a significant contribution to the preservation of Maria Island’s important cultural heritage in a meaningful and respectful way. Later, on reflection, Andrew said that their years spent on *Maria Island* were the happiest in his life – fishing, magical walks, and endless barbecues, plus a superb environment and work that gave great job satisfaction.

Late in 1978, Andrew had a promotion to Ranger-In-Charge at Hastings Caves. Andrew arrived there around Christmas 1978 with Ros, young Ailsa and their six month old infant daughter Annie. *Newdegate Cave* had just been rewired so Andrew’s focus was initially to upgrading the thermal pool area. In *Newdegate Cave*, Andrew re-positioned most of the cave lights, especially those that were aiming towards peoples’ faces. One of his first major achievements in *Newdegate Cave* was the final removal of the last lot of wooden bridges and stairs in the upper regions of *The Cathedral*, including the *Cathedral Stage* and the approach to *Titanias Palace*.

As Cave Superintendent from 1978-1984, he fought, cajoled and even embarrassed parliamentary ministers to get what was necessary for the Cave Reserve. A new water supply, sewage system and amenities that won awards were the result. He expanded the range of responsibilities for the Ranger-in-Charge to include surrounding reserves, scrounging paint, materials and labour to improve the Ida Bay Railway train depot, using his own tractor to mark tracks out to the George III shipwreck monument and the *Southport Lagoon*.

As head ranger at Hastings, Andrew also took it on his own initiative to alter the existing interpretation given for cave tours. He dismissed the former tradition of cave fantasy with named cave formations as “garbage”, introducing more appropriate description of the speleothem features in terms of their geomorphic origin. Cave guides were retrained, to ensure they delivered a more appropriate cave science related interpretation, so the cave could be presented as a natural scientific feature. On arrival at the entrance to *Newdegate Cave*, illustrated descriptions of karst processes now greeted patrons, together with a survey profile of the cave they were visiting. An alternate walking track to *Newdegate Cave* via *Fossil Creek Swallet* and a suspension bridge over *Hot Springs Creek* gave Tasmania its first karst interpretation walk.

In 1981-1982, Roy Skinner commenced planning of a new access route to *Exit Cave* from the saddle between Marble Hill and Lune Sugarloaf, behind Benders Quarry. Together with Hobart-based cavers Andrew assisted his father in the preparation and formation of this new more direct (walking) access track to *Exit Cave*. Formed as a level and contoured pathway across the surface karst at Ida Bay, it was constructed with the aid of various local cavers (particularly SCS members) and NPWS rangers. Subsequently known as the Skinner Track it is still today the only regularly used route for *Exit Cave* visitors. On occasional weekends, in between rostered duties at Hastings Caves, Andrew assisted his father running the Adventure Cave tours in *Exit Cave*.

Andrew planned a restoration project in *Newdegate Cave* to remove jettisoned waste, particularly the inorganic rubbish such as broken glass and discarded light globes. However, after spending funds to revamp the cave lighting, NPWS was reluctant to fund any restoration work.

Andrew later assisted Tony Culberg in running school based caving at *Exit Cave*, in the Junee-Florentine and at Mole Creek. Andrew made valuable contributions to the first set of guidelines for school based caving, being a member of the caving sub-committee of the Education Department's Committee on Outdoor Educational Experiences (COOEE).

After leaving his position at Hastings Caves, Andrew bought land in Southport and later on in 1986 at the Hastings Caves Road site running a small farm where he, Ros and the three children raised cattle, living in a house beside the old Hastings Mill bakery. Andrew ran a rural contracting business, doing all kinds of odd jobs in the district running their small farm in between. He will



be remembered for the role of caretaker at the former National Fitness Council Esperance camp site at the mouth of the *Esperance River* east of Strathblane.

In his spare time Andrew spent three years as a Volunteer Ambulance Officer. He was treasurer for the local coast care group and was a driving force in the establishment of the new Southport Community Management Centre, of which he spent several years as chairperson. Andrew had ceased active caving by 1990, and applied himself to working with the Dover Fire Brigade and then later running the more local Southport Volunteer Fire Brigade, as well as taking an active interest in local politics.

Andrew was very humble and always felt that he should do more. When in 2001, in the year of the volunteer, it was announced that he was the Huon Valley Council Citizen of the year he was so shocked and honoured that he was left speechless. Andrew had words for every occasion but at this time, he was quite without words.

On a fine and sunny Saturday morning on 21st May 2011, the cortege into the Dover Lawn Cemetery was made up of members of the local Dover and Southport Volunteer Fire Brigades. Kookaburras in nearby trees cackled with perfect timing, as Ros cracked some jokes about Andrew while reading the eulogy. As his coffin was lowered into a grave, brigade members held his Collingwood Football Club flag above! Carn the Pies!

Andrew Skinner was held in high esteem within the Far South community. This was largest gathering at a funeral I have ever seen in Dover.