

WOMBEGAN KARST CONSERVATION RESERVE TURNS 150

David Smith

Manager Wombeyan Karst and Caves Reserve, New South Wales



Part of the crowd at the opening address.

Photo: David Smith

Not a bad innings, even by world standards. On February 2, 1865 Wombeyan Caves was gazetted as a reserve for the protection of limestone caves. This was quite remarkable given the relative remoteness of these caves and the lengths one had to go to reach them from civilisation. At the time Wombeyan Caves had a short history as a tourist attraction with a fellow named Charles Nicolas Chalker leading cave inspections to some of the new discoveries known to exist. Charles, and later his half-brother Thomas were instrumental in exploring and developing several of the show caves on public display today.

From the sketchy and somewhat questionable written history that exists today, we are led to believe that the first European exploration of the caves occurred in the 1820s and that several trips were made over the following decades. By the time Charles Chalker was officially appointed 'keeper of the caves' in 1868, around 300 visitors were making the journey each year, often travelling for days. It was appropriate then that measures were put in place to preserve these wonderful caves and features for future generations to experience.

Over the following 150 years a host of managers, researchers in many disciplines, speleologists and enthusiasts have contributed the wealth of information on the Wombeyan Karst, a feat certainly worth celebrating. So from March 13-15 2015 the staff of Wombeyan Caves in conjunction with the Office of Environment and Heritage Customer Experience Division delivered a public event to commemorate this milestone.

With a limited budget and a grant from the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative, the event was promoted as "The Blind Valley Festival", a term derived from the geological entity that now forms the exit of Fig Tree Cave and Victoria Arch where the Wombeyan creek disappears underground. The focus of the celebrations was conservation of the natural environment and, to that end, experiencing what we all have been striving to protect for a century and a half. Official proceedings began with an opening address from key note speaker and NPWS Deputy Chief Executive, Michael Wright, a brief history and blurb on the significance of the event from the writer and Welcome to Country by Sharyn Halls representing the local Gundungurra people. A replica of a plaque commemorating 150 years of conservation was delivered on horseback, a throwback to the days of the early mail runs.

Naturally there were several cave tours on offer and also a special candle light inspection of Coronation Cave – a spectacular but unlit section of the Wollondilly Cave. This extension had been partially developed for tourism in the early part of the 20th century, before electric lights were introduced, but later abandoned. The special ambience and breathtaking beauty of this passageway were not lost on the visitors who took the rare opportunity to inspect Coronation Cave.

Numerous local exhibitors showed off their wares and community organisations provided sustenance for the 300 or so that were in attendance. There were demonstrations from wildlife handlers, toolmakers, speleo sport activities and of course researchers from UNSW and Newcastle University displaying current and



Fun and games!
Photo: David Smith



Caves guide and local historian Ken Fleming.
Photo: David Smith

recent advances in our understanding of karst. A bagpipe procession led the crowd into the arch where the Cavernous Choir from the local conservatorium of music made good use of the natural acoustics. The event went on into the early evening with local musicians entertaining those that stayed on, and proceedings were capped off with the screening of Stephen Babka's latest production "Cave" a wonderfully descriptive narrative on Wombeyan and its history.

Probably the crowning glory of the celebrations was the re-opening of the old powerhouse as a museum of natural and cultural history. What had once contained the generators for illumination of the caves and buildings prior to connection with the grid, this old building had been demoted to a storage shed and free lodgings for rats and silverfish. But underneath the decades of mounting documents and steel offcuts were some exciting relics from the past including appliances and fittings from another time, bones and old cave exhibits collected from the quarry leases and photos and artworks long since forgotten. Several weeks were spent transforming this building into an interpretative display that NPWS can be proud of. Local historian and longest serving guide, Ken Fleming (who many visitors met in 1960), donated many of his own historical items to the event and was on hand (in period costume, see photo) to explain all things "Wombeyan" to those interested. With time (and funding) the intention is to further develop the powerhouse into an interpretation centre as outlined as a priority in the Plan of Management.

Community feedback on the event was very positive and there was almost unanimous support for an annual public festival at the caves, an idea certainly worth investigating.....