

BACK to JENOLAN CAVES, NEW SOUTH WALES

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Over the first weekend in November 2016, finally, I got back to Jenolan Caves! It is a few years since I was last there, far too long; but in the interim I received not infrequent 'reports' from various sources as to how it was travelling - both positive and negative...

For this visit I organised a large group from Melbourne who flew to Sydney early on the Saturday morning, and flew out again the next evening...zapping up to Jenolan in between to enjoy a Masonic Lodge meeting in The Cathedral in the Lucas Cave followed by a sumptuous banquet in Caves House on the Saturday night. All excellent stuff!

Locally, the arrangements were handled by ACKMA stalwart Dave Rowling who, aside from being Jenolan's long term Chief Electrician, is also currently the Master of the Masonic Lodge in the nearby town of Oberon; and of course, my very old friend ACKMA Fellow Barry Richard, who is also a doyen of the Oberon Lodge.



Brown stainless steel hand rail in the River Cave

It was great to catch up with many 'old stagers' in the Guides Office, such as Ted Matthews, Scott Melton and Anne Musser, and meet new ones as well! Of course, the weekend included cave tours. My group did the obligatory Saturday 2.30 pm Lucas Cave tour, led by young guide Stephen Kennedy.

I have to say that reports had reached by ears that the quality of cave guiding at Jenolan had sunk badly in more recent years, so my expectations were not high. Well, I was pleasantly surprised. Stephen was excellent - his cave and karst knowledge, interpretation and manner were all top draw. And he received more than a few 'curly' questions too, which he answered to my complete satisfaction. I am happy to report that stalactites do not (necessarily!) grow one centimetre every hundred years! But, of course, I figured that he may be an exception to the rule, given that his mother is former Jenolan Guide (and a former member of the ACKMA Committee), Sasa Kennedy, who I regarded as one of the best cave interpreters ever to have graced an Australian cave. So one would imagine that Stephen would have received a few pointers...

However, the positive reports continued to flow. Parts of my group toured Imperial and the Temple of Baal, and their feedback on the quality of the guiding was great. Well, the



Severe rusting on the brown stainless steel in River Cave

Imperial Tour was led by long-standing guide and ACKMA Member Scott Melton, so I would have expected nothing less in his case. On the Sunday morning I went with some of our party through Chifley Cave, led by young (full time) guide, Belinda Lotherington - and she was excellent as well; full of enthusiasm and with great cave knowledge. So, my 'fears' about 'falling standards' in guiding at Jenolan were most happily proved incorrect.

However, not all at Jenolan is a bed of roses. Dave Rowling took me to look at the still-ongoing work in Jubilee Cave, which has been closed to the public for nearly two years already, for refurbishment. Virtually every handrail in the Jenolan show caves has been replaced with stainless steel of various gauges, and I have long held the general view that that is the way to go. Pretty much the 'last cab off the rank', Jubilee has now been largely redone in stainless, except for a section at the end of its left passage. Apparently, the existing grant money has run out, so when the cave will be finished is very unclear. Additionally, it remains to be re-lit.

There is, however, already an issue in Jubilee, as well as in Imperial Cave (through which one passes to get to it). I refer to the use of ubiquitous chicken wire. While I agree that chicken wire is needed in some sections of some caves to protect otherwise vulnerable speleothems; historically it was very much overdone. I recall the little Jersey Cave at Jenolan (which hasn't been a show cave for about 100 years!) whose passages



*The Pincushion
- an incredible feature in Jubilee Cave*

are 100% chook wire! Fortunately, the urge to encase everything has gone.

The new stainless steel chicken wire, of a larger gauge used in the Imperial and Jubilee is quite effective and infinitely better than its iron-leaching predecessors. However, the placement of it, in more than a few cases, leaves much to be desired. It would seem very obvious to me that the contractors did not have detailed placement instructions.

In Jubilee there are several sections where the chicken wire is demonstrably on the wrong side of the track; blithely protecting a largely blank wall, while the other side, filled with relatively close and vulnerable speleothems, is unprotected. I would highly recommend an audit of chicken wire placement, with a careful placement plan to ensue as a result.

The Pool of Cerberus Cave also has an uncertain future. A few years back its lighting was deemed to be so archaic that the lot was pulled out. Again, when and if the money will emerge to do its relighting is anyone's guess. Thus, it would appear that Jubilee and Cerberus, in my view two of the most iconic caves at Jenolan, are off-line well into the future.

During my 'look around' I was also taken into River Cave, where there is a very major issue. With the exception of this cave, all of Jenolan's show caves have been given 'normal' stainless steel, which has performed perfectly in the wet cave environment, as expected. In River Cave, however, brown stainless steel has been used - which I had not seen before (nor do I wish to see again...).

River was one of the last of the show caves to be updated with stainless. The reason for its purchase and use, apparently, is because normal stainless steel handrails are very light reflective and are not overly conducive to tourist's photography! Yes, well... Don't shine lights on the handrails... Anyway, the brown stainless steel is not reflective - so problem solved! Yay!! Or so you would think?

The trouble is, as has now been discovered (unlike normal stainless), the brown stainless steel rusts! Oh dear! And River



*Part of my group from Melbourne
(plus the 'odd' one from Sydney!)*

Cave, possibly the wettest at Jenolan, has it from head to tail. Apparently there is no manufacturer's warranty either. Oh dear (again). So, the only options are to allow an ever increasing leaching of rust (not an option!) or replace the brown stainless with the proper stuff. Not cheap...the River Cave tour is 400 metres!

Overall, it was wonderful to get back to Jenolan; and great to catch up with many old friends, and to find the guiding to be good shape - even if there are some serious ongoing infrastructure issues which must be dealt with. Let us hope the money, and will, to solve them arrives sooner rather than later.