

**A FAMILY AFFAIR**  
**AN INTERVIEW with NICK POWE**  
**DIRECTOR of KENTS CAVERN, UNITED KINGDOM**

Nick Powe



*Nick Powe, Director of Kents Cavern*

**How did your family get involved with Kents Cavern?**

My great grandfather, Francis Powe, originally rented the caves from Lord Haldon – he used them as a workshop to make beach furniture, boats and bathing huts, he also made use of the quarry and woodlands nearby to support his business, supplying building materials locally. A thriving Victorian and Edwardian holiday resort provided him with plenty of business at Ansteys Cove and Meadfoot beach, and in 1903 he was able to buy the caves from Lord Haldon!

Francis already had a strong family connection to the cave. His father in law (my great great grandfather) was foreman to William Pengelly during the Great Excavation of Kents Cavern between 1865 and 1880. At the end of this pioneering work, which established scientific proof for the antiquity of humankind, Francis saw a business opportunity.

Francis and his son (my grandfather), Leslie, transformed the underground caverns from an archaeological site into what we see today, installing paths, electric lighting and visitor facilities. They formed a business partnership which later became Kents Cavern Limited and is the company that manages and protects the cave.

At 86, Leslie (my grandfather) handed over the reins of Kents Cavern to my father, John, who returned from France in 1986, following a successful career in the Cognac business, to take over running of the caves. He arrived at the time when the demise of British seaside resorts was about to begin and he saw visitor numbers plummet from 150,000 in the late 80s to 70,000 by 2000.

Whilst we have seen little change in this figure in the past 14 years, we've moved with the times and we've



*Francis Powe*  
*Photo: Supplied by Nick Powe*



*Guided cave tour in Kents Cavern circa 1930s  
Photo: Supplied by Nick Powe*



*Ticket kiosk pre 1939  
Photo: Supplied by Nick Powe*

introduced more activities and events to deliver better returns.

#### **What makes Kents Cavern different?**

Kents Cavern is by far Britain's most important cave site, and unusually it is privately owned. We are most frequently asked "when was it discovered?" to which we answer ..."it wasn't!". The caves have been used for hundreds and thousands of years for shelter, and remarkably it is the only place in the world where three separate species of humans have used the same site, virtually continuously, for over 500,000 years.

The caves were first explored in 1825 by Father John McEnery (a Roman Catholic priest to the Cary family at Torre Abbey). He unearthed extinct animal bones lying alongside stone tools shaped by ancient humans, and these finds inspired William Pengelly to lead the Great Excavation, which over a 15 year period revealed a treasure trove of prehistoric remains.

Today, Kents Cavern has the highest level of state protection in Britain as a scheduled ancient monument and it also has a high nature conservation value. The cave achieved international recognition in November 2011 when a human jawbone was dated at over 41,000 years old, making it the oldest human fossil in North Western Europe.

I now have to balance our commercial operations within some very strict statutory frameworks, managing the business under the onerous shadow of being accountable to Natural England as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, to English Heritage and to the Secretary of State within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

#### **What major challenges is it facing?**

Our main challenge is to attract new visitors! In a resort which attracts such a high percentage of repeat visitors (many of whom could virtually be regarded as residents), we need to respond to the "been there, done that" factor. Attracting new visitors and keeping the offer fresh and vibrant so that there is always something new for repeat visitors.

We also need to work hard to eliminate weather dependency, which is more challenging. A significant proportion of our business is unaffected by the weather, so you won't hear me blaming the weather for poor performance, if I did that I might as well give up!

We work hard to achieve sufficient cash surpluses for us to invest in the long term sustainability of the business and to keep the attraction interesting.

Our main market, Cultural Heritage, is non-commercial (education, research and conservation work). Therefore, we undertake this work on the back of our commercial activities. We are competing with a number of large visitor attractions and museums who fulfil these objectives under a "not-for-profit" business model; unlike us, these attractions can access public funds and obtain tax breaks to deliver these benefits for the public benefit, in some cases providing a free visitor experience. It means an interesting and challenging environment but we manage fairly well!

#### **What are its aims for 2014?**

We're projecting growth in 2014, both with our existing markets and with the introduction of new innovative products aimed at locals and visitors.

We'll be enhancing our popular underground theatrical productions and art events, we'll also be improving the



*A view of the guided tour route  
Photo: Nick Powe*

restaurant and introducing new exhibitions. I'm particularly excited about the forthcoming "Europe past and present" exhibition, which will be funded through our network of top Neanderthal and Ice Age sites in Europe.

In marketing terms, we will continue to expand our online presence both across all social media platforms and e-commerce activity, a route which raises our profile and secures business. With so much of our work online, we have just introduced free WiFi in the visitor centre, which will enable and encourage visitors to engage, share pictures and give feedback instantly.

I believe Kents Cavern and its prehistoric heritage has much more to offer and we have the potential to deliver huge economic benefit to the region – my key aim in 2014 is to make this happen! My first step was to set up the 'Kents Cavern Foundation', a conservation, research and education charity. Through a board of trustees, the foundation is working on a number of European and national funding bids to develop our prehistoric and geological educational offer, facilitate on-going research into the caves and the worldwide Kents Cavern collection.

I truly believe this type of model will enable us to access significant investment to deliver my objectives and make a real difference to the visitor economy of Torbay.

#### **How did you come to join the company?**

I took over Kents Cavern in 2000, a little earlier than I was expecting, while it was something I wanted to do, it was also something I had to do. My father, John, was taken ill and died in November 2000, and my brother Tony (co-owner of the business) who lives in New York, was not in a position to run Kents Cavern, so with this backdrop, I stepped in.

It was a "baptism of fire" for me – I knew very little about the Stone Age and geology and even less about the tourism industry of Torbay. Now 14 years later, I have an entirely new and interesting career, and thankfully, a great knowledge of the Stone Age, geology and tourism: brilliantly, not just a local knowledge, but a national and international one.

#### **What was the company like then?**

I needed to take a step back and make some real changes – quickly. Visitor numbers were at an all-time



*Exhibition area in Kents Cavern  
Photo: Nick Powe*

low and our overhead structure at an all-time high – the business was facing a crisis and needed to change its ways of working.

We had not reviewed or substantially invested in the business since the 1950s, now was the time to change the experience for our visitors. Customer expectations were changing, our visitors were becoming more discerning and we were facing stronger competition from new attractions across the South West, many with a better offer than ours.

I arrived at the right time to give Kents Cavern an injection of energy and passion, and I've worked hard to make our offer the best it can be.

#### **What is your background?**

I'm a French speaking Chartered Accountant – my background is in consolidating European management accounts, preparing long term strategic financial plans, and costing up new petfood product launches across a European supply chain. A great career choice, for so many reasons – not only great foundation for making Kents Cavern as productive as it can be, but also, and most importantly, that's how I met my wife Sheena. Sheena, as well as being a fantastic mother to our 4 children, is also a very competent accountant, and together we make a formidable team!

So, I walked into Kents Cavern on my first day at work without the experience and background you expect anyone running a visitor attraction to have, suffice to say the day to day workload and the salary package at Kents Cavern was entirely different from that of my days at Nestlé.

Regardless, it's the best move I ever made. With Sheena's and my skills, we have been able to cut out many professional service charges and run a complex visitor attraction business with minimal back office support staff. This goes a long way to explaining how we have managed to survive the recent economic recession in a very competitive market.

#### **What has been the company's greatest achievement under your management?**

That's easy – the new restaurant and visitor centre in 2004 was the single best thing we decided to commit to. Whilst the caves are our cornerstone (forgive the pun), these developments mean we are now so much more than 'just a cave' or a wet weather attraction for tourists. We're now a hospitality and entertainment venue, offering facilities all year round to locals and visitors alike.

We're still paying back the money we borrowed (in excess of £500,000) for these improvements, and this does impact on our ability to commit to any meaningful step-change investments as I don't want to commit the business to more borrowings.

I am well aware, however, that running a visitor attraction demands constant investment and improvements. I've seen some outstanding investment in new museums and visitor centres across the country recently – so I know I need to find the right business model to secure the necessary game changing investment to improve the presentation of our fantastic prehistoric story.

#### **What major challenges have you faced?**

Kents Cavern was dismissed by many institutional bodies as being a purely commercial operation; we were perceived as being uninterested in conservation, research and education. This shocked me considerably and I have worked hard to change this perception of Kents Cavern amongst the academic and scientific community. This has been a demanding task and one of my biggest challenges!

Thankfully, in the last 10 years, I have raised the profile of the caves and we now have regular scientific interest and research taking place in the caves. This provides another interesting aspect for our visitors, delving deeper into the prehistoric story inside the caves.

I am also very proud of the success we've had with 'cultural activities' – our Shakespeare Underground week in November sells out to local secondary schools and the general public and the audience is always asking for more!

#### **How would you describe your management style?**

I am creative and dynamic and always encourage a pragmatic approach in all we do.



*Early human jaw bone*  
 Photo: Dr Chris Procter



*Ursus deninger Cave Bear skull*  
 Photo: Dr Chris Procter

I'm passionate about delivering excellence in all areas of our operation, particularly in the customer experience, and I encourage this throughout the organisation.

My experience outside of the tourism industry and with international organisations means that I can draw on many examples of best practice, and I am constantly learning and implementing what I learn at Kents Cavern. I encourage my team to do the same and this has seen excellent results and continuous improvements!

#### **How do you keep enthused and keep things fresh?**

Every day is different and every day I discover another amazing fact about Kents Cavern, which inspires and enthuses me! Just recently, I read about Sir William Petre, from Torbryan, secretary of state to Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, at the new Torre Abbey exhibition. Amazingly, the oldest inscription in Kents Cavern is dated 1571 and is by William Petre – it must be the same person! That's the sort of stuff that excites me.

For myself and my family, Kents Cavern is a way of life – we live and breathe it 24/7, even a family holiday would not be complete without a visit to a cave or to new visitor attractions searching for new ideas and inspiration!

The most important factor – we cannot relocate the business, so it's not just about me and Kents Cavern, it's about the whole bay, its visitor economy and the importance of the economy of the English Riviera rather than just its profile as a holiday destination.

#### **What awards have you (or the company) won?**

We're lucky to have won loads of awards – all of them proudly displayed in our café – and too many to list here.

The most prestigious was when Kents Cavern was awarded best attraction in South West England in 2008, a real achievement for our business! Then we received National success when our hospitality manager, Claire Preece (with a little help from our social media genius and mascot Cavog the Caveman) was awarded

VisitEngland National Tourism Superstar award and I believe we are the only attraction in Torbay that has ever been awarded an Excellence in England Gold award.

Awards are great – they really give us a boost, and it's even better when it's not just about the physical place, but also about the team who works there too – they are what make Kents Cavern what it is today and I am enormously proud of them (and in case Cavog is reading this, I also have to mention his award for Innovation in Marketing at the English Riviera and South Devon Tourism Awards in 2012!)

#### **What other organisations are you involved with?**

I'm chair of the board of Trustees of the Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust, and have actively worked with the Trust over the last 3 years to bring about a culture change to use its commercial assets more effectively to enhance the delivery of its charitable objectives.

In 2004, I helped create a Global Geopark in Torbay – and this is a particular favourite! So if you're in Torbay you're in UNESCO's English Riviera Global Geopark – how fantastic is that? Many people think the Geopark in Paignton is the Geopark but it's only part of the Geopark.

The Geopark designation is in place to bring about economic and social benefits to Torbay and, with the limited resources available, I think we're doing a pretty good job putting the English Riviera's natural environment firmly on the world destinations' map with stunning geology and coastal features. Just now, we're working on a bid to host the 2016 Global Geopark conference in Torquay.

I am proud to be so actively involved in two organisations which are so vital to Torbay's international tourism appeal.

Internationally I am a director of the International Show Cave Association and actively involved in Ice Age Europe, a network of top Neanderthal sites in Europe.