

HASTINGS CAVES, TASMANIA

– PERHAPS A NEW ERA?

- Arthur Clarke

Introduction

Hastings Caves has several things going for it that make it unique in terms of show cave presentation in Australia. Firstly, *Newdegate Cave* is obviously the southernmost tourist cave operation in Australia; secondly, it is one of only two show-cave sites in dolomite in Australia; thirdly, it is the only tourist cave operation with an associated warm springs attraction and, lastly the caves were discovered by “accident” - when timber loggers were falling trees around Christmas time in 1917. Although once described as the most degraded tourist cave in Australia, the recent rehabilitation efforts combined with brief cave biology studies, together with the start of the “new” Hastings Caves Enterprise are positive signs that could improve the image of Hastings Caves as a tourist destination. Despite present shortcomings, it is possible that there may even be some more karst science introduced into Hastings cave management.

The Hastings Caves Enterprise – Govt. and private enterprise working together

A half-government, half-private Board of Management now directs the “new” Hastings Caves Enterprise. The Board comprises of two government officers representing business and management in Parks: Andrew Roberts and Mark Bryce and the private entrepreneurs: Ian and Sue Hall. Keith Vanderstaay is employed as the business manager by the Enterprise, to run the day-to-day affairs at Hastings Caves. Subject to success in site re-zoning and approvals from the Planning Appeals Tribunal and the Huon Council, the Halls propose to spend about \$1million to construct 3-4 star holiday accommodation cottages (with off street parking) along a new private road uphill behind the present Chalet and the Booking Office/Restaurant complex. In return for the investment and involvement of the private entrepreneurs, the Tasmanian Government gave a commitment toward putting in an equal or greater investment to re-develop the Hastings Caves complex, including construction of a Visitor Interpretation Centre. It is hoped that the State government will also fund the bitumen sealing of all the C635 Hastings Caves Road, presently only sealed a third of the way to the C636 Lune River/Leprena road junction.

The private entrepreneur component of the “Enterprise” will not derive any monetary gain or share of profits from the Hastings Caves operation: the cave tours, kiosk sales, souvenir and book sales or other proceeds from the new Visitor interpretation Centre. The success of the Enterprise for Ian & Sue Hall will come as profit from the accommodation cottages. The first 4-6 cottages will be completed by January 2001. The Halls will maintain the accommodation sites and cleaning etc., but will pay a service fee to Parks for staff to manage the accommodation bookings.

The Hastings Caves Enterprise was initially designed to operate in conjunction with an Advisory Panel composed of the karst geomorphologist for

Parks (Ian Houshold), community representatives, a representative of Parks staff at the caves and other persons (including speleologists) with specialist knowledge. This advisory panel was never established. However, there is – or there was – some karst expertise on the project team established for the re-development of the Hastings Caves complex.

The Hastings Caves development project team

The government funded component of the Hastings Caves development has a total budget of \$1.53 million – funded principally by the Commonwealth Government using monies from the first part sale of Telstra plus additional National Heritage Trust funds, along with a smaller component of monies from the Tasmanian (State) Government. The project team is composed of Head Office staff from the Parks division of the new Department of Primary Industry, Water & Environment (DPIWE), a number of private enterprise consultants, plus a sole representative from Hastings Caves: Keith Vanderstaay, the business manager for the Hastings Caves Enterprise.

The project team is headed by Sue Haines from the Planning and Policy Branch of the Parks & Wildlife Service (PWS) division of DPIWE; (Sue is also currently overseeing two other project developments: for Freycinet National Park and the Mount Field National Park). The project team also includes Andrew Roberts – the Manager of the Tourism, Recreation and Visitor Services Branch of PWS; Ingrid Albion from the Interpretation and Education Branch in PWS; and the Southern District Manager for PWS: Mark Bryce. In addition, the project team initially included Ian Houshold, the karst geomorphologist from the Earth Sciences section in the Nature Conservation Branch in the DPIWE division of Resource Management & Conservation (RMC) - see further detail of new Parks structures elsewhere in this ACKMA journal. There are four (or five) major (private) consultants on the Hastings Caves development project team: the landscape architect: Sue Small; two site architects – Alvio Brianese and Gary Forward; a management consultant: Roy Cordner; and the interpretation consultant: Fiona Brine.

Although the project team also includes Keith Vanderstaay representing the Hastings Caves site, along with a Parks representative of the southern district (Mark Bryce) and a person representing Parks interpretation (Ingrid Albion), there are no project representatives for karst, speleologists, cavers or the Parks staff at Hastings Caves.

The absence of karst input to the Hastings Caves development project

The original proposal for the Hastings development incorporated a number of karst related aspects that have now been “dropped” from the project, supposedly due to “budgeting blow-outs”. The project emphasis has been now placed on the new Visitor Interpretation Centre, the Thermal pool

surrounds and its picnic grounds, plus the existing walk beside *Hot Springs Creek* behind the pool. Perhaps as a consequence of over-spending on consultants – or perhaps over-enthusiasm in the first instance, combined with a re-appraisal of project priorities in the second instance – two major planned karst initiatives have been shelved, along with a proposal for water tracing to determine the source of warm spring waters at the Thermal Pool. The two major karst initiatives involved the re-location of the Hastings Caves car park toilets (or improvement to the septic treatment system) and the well-designed and considered surface karst walk, with gravel and duckboard walkways, incorporating elements of the past cultural history from the logging era, as well as a visit to *Beattie Cave*.

In his role as the Parks geomorphologist on the project team, Ian Houshold expressed his deep concern and bitter disappointment at the loss of these two karst initiatives. Ian became of the opinion that karst issues and the environmental or scientific issues associated with karst were not getting addressed and that his karst expertise was being ignored and sidelined. In addition to abandoning the proposed dye-tracing experiments, Ian expressed concern about the decision to not re-locate the car park toilets or improve the gravel filtering system for septic tank effluent. Considering there is a large doline within 10metres of the present car park toilets, these toilets were considered as being the prime candidate responsible for the nitrate contamination and coliform (bacterial) pollution of the Thermal Pool a few years ago. Ian was particularly upset by the abandonment of the surface karst walk – a presentation that would have helped to put Hastings on the international map in terms of cave and karst tourism. (The karst walk would present significant examples of dolomite karst processes in a natural rainforest setting including dolines, swallets, caves, exposed speleothems, travertine, tufa and sculptured surface karren forms.)

For Ian, the final straw that broke the camel's back came when he was advised that there would not be sufficient funds in the project to meet the cost for the proposed re-lighting of *Newdegate Cave*. (ACKMA Fellow Neil Kell – a cave lighting specialist – had already submitted a minimal impact re-lighting proposal that included power cable replacement and special lighting associated with new path work in the cave.) Ian Houshold subsequently withdrew from the Hastings Caves development project team, because he did not want to be associated with a “caves” or “karst” project that was not adhering to karst issues. Consequently, there is no longer any direct karst input to the Hastings Caves development project.

There is a concern that the current site development and interpretation without karst expertise or consultation with caves staff (who have a reasonable idea what is practical and achievable) will result in a poorly co-ordinated and un-linked approach between the presentation in *Newdegate Cave* and interpretations with the rest of the site. The major focus of the Hastings Caves development is now centred on the thermal pool area, the construction of the new Visitor Interpretation

Centre and the interpretation displays inside (and outside) the Centre.

New developments at the Hastings Thermal Pool site

In June this year severe windstorms lashed southern Tasmania, resulting in many tree falls. Hastings was one of several areas that suffered, with trees and branches coming down across access roads and walking tracks – with one landing in the thermal pool. A large blackwood tree in the picnic area was uprooted by the winds and crashed into the pool, damaging the picnic area lawns and pool surrounds. It also bent the steel fence barrier between the children's wading pool and the main swimming pool. The lawns suffered a “little” more damage while the offending windfall was removed.

As part of the current re-development, the damaged concrete apron pool surrounds have been removed, along with some of the old brick pavers. The Hastings Thermal Pool has been closed and drained for the duration of the works. The pool surrounds will be modified as part of a process aimed at taking away the present “dark look” around the pool, which is compounded by the present dark background of the rainforest understorey and tree ferns. The pool development proposal aims to re-present the pool site with “softer edges”, including a “soft rock” landscaping image replacing the flat concrete apron with a pebble finish concrete surround. In addition, some larger rounded river stones (from sites along the North Lune Road, including *Mesa Creek*) will be placed around the pool along with larger more irregularly shaped rock pieces from a nearby quarry – (the quarry site used for sourcing much of the base metal rock used for construction of the original Hastings Caves Road in the mid to late 1930's).

Staff at the Hastings Caves complex has an somewhat unusual seasonal concern regarding the pool side picnic area and visitors to the site. Firstly, it's a concern at this time of year, related to the late autumn and winter months, when the “currawongs” (or Black Jays) and the Black Cockatoos make their annual pilgrimage to the site, leaving the colder higher altitude mountain regions in the hinterland to the caves area. The currawongs are a particular concern. Although very popular with tourists, because they appear to be very tame, the birds will often perch quite close to dining visitors and literally remove the food from plates under their nose! Another similar problem relates to the growing presence of quolls, which are known to jump on to hot BBQ plates to steal visitors' meat or bread from picnic tables. And then along comes the ever-increasing problem of European wasps in summer time!

The new Hastings Caves Visitor Interpretation Centre

After several years of consideration and many months of public meetings and written submissions with discussions and dialogue between Parks, private enterprise consultants and concerned individuals – construction work has commenced. The new *Hastings Caves Visitor Interpretation Centre* is happening at last. Site clearing is completed; a dozen or so of the nearby tall trees

(eucalypts) have been felled; and foundations have been poured along with the basement slab for the storeroom. The building contractor (Fairbrothers) has erected a two metre high cyclone wire fence with barbed spike wire top around the work site, situated across the road - opposite the old Hastings Caves Chalet and present Hastings Enterprise booking office/ restaurant. On Monday 21 August 2000, the first PVC piping mould was positioned - the first of many moulds for the cylindrical reinforced concrete pillars or columns that will support the road level, concrete floor slab of the new Visitor Interpretation Centre.

The new visitor centre complex will incorporate all the features of the present Hastings Enterprise booking office/ restaurant, including a larger kiosk and restaurant, plus a more substantial interpretation display of various elements related to *Newdegate Cave* and the surrounding area. The centre is scheduled to be handed over to Hastings Caves staff in November 2000 and is expected to fully operational on 4 December 2000.

Interpretation at Hastings

Despite my suggestion to the project officer: Sue Haines, and the interpretation consultant - that the "interpretation" of Hastings Caves should be considered more as a "presentation" - the interpretation is in fact going ahead as an interpretation! A private consulting firm: Brine Communication Design (headed by a graphic artist: Fiona Brine) has been engaged to prepare the interpretation for consideration and approval by officers of the PWS and RMC divisions in DPIWE. In addition to site interpretations related to the history, cave fauna and cave ecosystems, Fiona proposes to create 3D photograph images and a photo mosaic composed of cave photographs.

Fiona Brine proposes to relate the interpretations around a number of creative and/or artistic impressions based on the joint concepts of *"Following the water"* and *"Above and below"*. Under the heading of *"Participation, Rejuvenation, Inspiration - following the path of the water, above and below (a Journey full of Encounters)"*, Fiona's current interpretation proposal covers 19 storyline themes utilising display elements related to key ideas of conservation management and the WHA, forests, flora and fauna, karst landscapes, geology and cultural heritage. These storylines are being underpinned by another thirteen interpretative elements related to ecosystems. (At present, a number of these storylines are factually incorrect; however, despite my offer of advice to correct the errors, the themes are being progressed in their present format for interpretative display.) Fiona has employed a number of creative writers, each to produce a 150-300 word interpretation of the "storylines" or themes to be presented as displays inside the new Interpretation Centre (and outside). It was initially understood that the creative writers engaged would be persons who had backgrounds in the particular disciplines of karst, fauna, ecosystems, history or the other disciplines they would be writing about.

The information being handed to the creative writers by Fiona Brine has been variously sourced: directly through Parks, by consultation with local

historians, the Parks geomorphologist (Ian Houshold) and a cave biologist/ speleologist/ historian (Arthur Clarke). However, none of the consulted expertise is being engaged (or employed) to prepare the interpretations. Some of these information sources are concerned that their hard won information gained from many months or years of research is now being poached for someone else's profit. There is also concern that some information may be reworked in ways that could lead to misunderstandings or inaccuracies. A number of other local experts including Parks cave staff at Hastings, attendees at the various public meetings, speleologists and others with academic knowledge in the Hastings karst have not been consulted or engaged in the "creative" interpretation process.

Aside from the apparent non-academic involvement in the process, there does appear to be more deliberate bias towards artistic values, rather than scientific values. Perhaps coincidentally, many of the employed creative writers are women and although this may not be such a bad move, giving a feminine perspective on the interpretation, it has been cynically suggested that the interpretation is being run by a *"sisterhood conspiracy"*. The cynicism is probably unwarranted, but it does make you wonder when two of the employed writers have contacted the original source "experts" requesting more information, stating that they have never been to Hastings Caves and asking for directions how to get there!

The interpretative themes of ecosystems and the related concepts of interdependence on karst systems and processes, the surface fauna and flora and cave life, together with cultural links are all integral to this interpretation at Hastings. However, in conveying these notions to visitors, it would appear that at present that disciplines other than the arts will be left out of the loop. Those visitors who may wish to key into or engage themselves with the environment in other ways, for example - scientifically - may leave the site feeling disenfranchised. (It is anticipated that Parks themselves will produce some information fact sheets independently to the interpretation process.) While the experiential visual experience gives new meaning to "interpretation" for Parks, there are an increasing number of tourists who travel the world to visit tourist sites simply to learn more information.

No doubt, part of the justification for the creative arts orientation in the interpretation is that it will present opportunities for local people (including business people, artists, writers and photographers) to respond with their own entrepreneurial activities, producing products that could be sold at the visitor centre. The present restaurant complex already sells bottled spring water taken from the limestone karst under the nearby Lune River plains. Other examples of potential items for sale could include local history books, postcards, craftwork, sculptured models of related themes and models of some items of the installation art produced in the site interpretation.

New handrail fences and proposed Re-Lighting of Newdegate Cave

Apart from on-going rehabilitation (though no funding is available this year), the major new development works scheduled for the cave were new handrails and fences, plus the re-lighting of the cave. It was hoped that both would occur in conjunction with each other in order to integrate the installation of cable conduit and track lighting along the bottom rail of new fences situated, plus possibly utilising the top rail as a conduit pipe for water used in cave cleaning or washing down of pathways. Nearly two years ago, Occupational Health & Safety regulations demanded that new handrails with cyclone wire netting had to be placed beside all stairways and exposed walkways in the cave. In June this year, Parks were advised that the monies earmarked for the new cave handrails and fences had to be spent before the end of the financial year, or else it would be unavailable.

Consequently, the new handrails and fences have been put in place – but without the wiring cables or track lighting. The handrail/fence units were prefabricated outside the cave and positioned in sections. However there were a number of contractor errors, including stairway sections cut to the wrong slope angle or wrong length and the positioning of the bottom rail: governed by the width of the plastic coated cyclone wire netting. Instead of cutting the netting to suit the specified positions of the handrails – (the bottom rail was supposed to be 150-200mm above the pathway to accommodate the new lighting system at a later date) - the bottom rail now sits on the edge of the pathway. On the plus side, the handrails are all stainless steel; there are added handrail sections (where there was no railing before); and the handrails and fences have been installed to national BCA (Building Code of Australia) standards.

Ian Houshold has secured additional funds from Parks to now permit the re-lighting of *Newdegate*

Cave. The track lighting will now utilise “Fairy Lights” and cabling inside “C” channel attached to raised trackside pavers. In May this year, Neil Kell appraised the re-lighting needs of the cave. Neil considered five major components aimed firstly at impact minimisation: cave zoning, positioning cables within the pedestrian walkways (installation with the bottom fence rail), ease of access to lights for maintenance by cave guides, elimination of *lampenflora* sites and utilising reduced energy/high efficiency systems; secondly related to safety of visitors and staff in normal and emergency conditions; thirdly to promote maximum performance for mobility and observation; fourthly to create the appropriate visual environment for appearance and atmosphere; and finally as an aid to the interpretation program, enabling flexibility for guides to adopt different approaches to cave presentation.

Adventure tours in King George V Cave

In addition to the previously advertised all day (6 hour) adventure caving tours in King George V Cave, the Hastings Caves Enterprise has introduced a shorter half-day (3 hour) tour at \$69.00 per adventurer. Although the Enterprise has not been actively marketing these adventure tours, there have already been two half-day adventure cave parties to date, each with two visitors per trip. Customers report good value for money. The Enterprise was hoping to use a poster size enlargement map of the original King George V Cave survey map as an educational tool to show potential adventure cave customers, but cavers have been unable to locate the original survey. Southern Tasmanian Caverneers (STC) have offered to do a high quality professional re-survey of the cave for \$500; the cost is estimated on the basis of taking ten person days to complete. The Enterprise is currently considering the STC offer.