

New Challenges for Rimstone Co-operative in Managing Shades of Death Cave

Miles Pierce

Victorian Speleological Association Inc.

Email: milwen@ozemail.com.au

Abstract

In mid-2017, Rimstone Co-operative Ltd. gained ownership of Shades of Death cave (3M-3) at Murrindal in Victoria's East Gippsland. The 'front end' of this cave was developed into a privately run show cave from the early 1960s with regular tours ceasing in the 1990s. The Rimstone Co-operative was originally formed in 1974 to purchase the former Homeleigh guesthouse at Buchan as a base for caving and speleological pursuits and its membership is largely, although not entirely, made up of cavers and speleologists. The co-operative first ventured into ownership of cave and karst with its purchase in 2012 of the 42 ha Scrubby Creek property which contains a number of wild caves including the 'Scrubby Creek' active stream cave (3M-49). Now, as owners of Shades of Death cave, the co-operative faces a range of new cave and karst management challenges.

Introduction

Shades of Death Cave – number 3M-3 in the ASF Australian Karst Index – is formed in Devonian age Buchan Caves Limestone at Murrindal, approximately 10 km (15 km by road) north of the township of Buchan. Along with some other nearby caves, it appears to have drained water running off the higher Snowy River Volcanics to the west into the Murrindal River. Perennial underground water flow is now at a lower level, resurging from M-4 cave entrance on the riverbank. Any active water flow in the extensive fossil passages of M-3 cave is now limited to times of prolonged wet weather when it evidently then acts as a side tributary to M-4 cave. Speleological research indicates that M-3 cave is amongst the earliest caves to be formed in the Buchan region.

History of Exploration and Development

Local farmer Ernie Henham reportedly discovered the small shaft entrance on a hillside above the Murrindal River in 1900. According to one 'local legend', the name 'Shades of Death' was due Ernie's initial reaction on seeing mist rising from the entrance shaft on a frosty morning and thinking it to be a ghost. Other explanations have been advanced from time to time. In 1905, Frank Moon, who was by then employed by the Lands Department to find and

explore caves at Buchan in the context of potential tourism development, made the first known entry into the cave in 1905 using a rope ladder. The cave then also became known locally as the Murrindal Moon Cave, but the alternative name 'Shades of Death' later gained ascendancy. The first systematic investigation and exploration of the cave was made by members of the Victorian Caves Exploration Society – a predecessor of the Victorian Speleological Association Inc. – starting in the late 1950s. The VCES assigned the number (3) M-3 to the cave at that time.

In the early 1960's VCES members Graham Shaw and Geoff Rebbechi in conjunction with Jack McMahan, an Orbost mechanic, obtained a lease from the private landowner with the aim of developing the well decorated first part of the cave for tourism. A new entrance was excavated and blasted downhill from the open shaft and enclosed with a roof over to form a vestibule space where visitors could gather and be briefed before entering the cave. As the first section of the cave beneath the original entrance shaft is predominantly vertical, three sets of welded steel stairs were fabricated and duly installed along with sections of concrete pathway. A basic electric lighting system was also installed, powered by a single-cylinder Rosebery engine driving a 2.8 kW, 230 V direct-current generator.

Guided tours were conducted on weekends, public and school holidays by the leaseholders during the 1960s whilst improvements were progressively made to the infrastructure. Unfortunately, when the lease period expired at the end of the decade the then landowner declined to renew it. The cave was then closed with some of the more moveable parts of the development infrastructure removed. Subsequently some of the original group members leased the nearby Murrindal and Lilly Pilly caves from the government to conduct similar 'on demand' public tours. This arrangement ended in 1982.

With by then a new landowner of the property containing the M-3 cave, a land subdivision was negotiated by Dennis and Carol Rebbechi to enable the purchase of a 5-acre (2 ha) allotment fronting the Buchan – Gelantipy Road and including the M-3 cave

entrance and its previous surface developments. A long-term lease was then granted for a partnership – later a private company - comprising Graham Shaw, Geoff, Dennis and Carol Rebbechi and Warren Kennedy to resume operation of Shades of Death cave. Using their own labour and resources this partnership installed new sections of concrete pathway, hand-railing and other underground improvements including an electronically controlled 240 V AC lighting system devised by Warren Kennedy. They successfully reopened the cave for public tours in January 1984.

As previously, guided tours managed by one or other of the partners typically took place on weekends and public holidays on an ‘on demand’ basis. Given the location some 15 km north of Buchan, visitor numbers and takings were modest, but those who did partake of the relaxed style tours routinely enjoyed the experience. In its first year after reopening 1000 people toured the cave and in 1989/90 a record of some 5436 visitors was attained, although around half this annual number was more typical. As such, operating Shades of Death cave for tourism was always ‘a labour of love’ rather than a commercial proposition. An attempt made in 1991 by the then private company to gain further shareholders who would also be actively involved in the running of the cave was unsuccessful (Rebbechi, 1991).

Dennis Rebbechi, a former ACKMA Treasurer, reported in 2004 in an article in the ACKMA Journal (Rebbechi, 2004), that regular tourist operation of the cave had terminated in 1994 with by then only three of the original partners available for guiding and administration, rapidly rising public liability insurance premiums and ongoing problems with maintenance of the lighting system following the death of Warren Kennedy in 1991. With Dennis and Carol having relocated to Queensland in 1993 they subsequently sought unsuccessfully to sell the 2 ha property on which they had previously built a house. The presence of the former show cave on the property, rather than an asset, seemingly discouraged some potential purchasers. In 2002 Dennis successfully negotiated with the local council a ‘special circumstances’ further subdivision of the land to create a separate 0.4 ha allotment containing the cave entrance and the related surface improvements. The remaining part of the original subdivision, including the house, was subsequently sold to the surrounding landowner.

The 0.4 ha subdivision was sold to Geoff Rebbechi in 2004, thereby keeping ownership of the cave property ‘in the family’. On this basis, Geoff Rebbechi together with Graham and Mary Shaw, continued to

administer the cave using the long leased local one-room Murrindal schoolhouse as their on-site base. In subsequent years occasional caving visits to the extensive inner reaches of the cave beyond the developed section were permitted and survey parties led by local cavers John and Kym Van Dyk culminated in a plan map of the known cave in 2006.

Acquisition of Shades of Death Cave by Rimstone Co-operative Limited

In 2016 Geoff Rebbechi offered Rimstone Co-operative Limited the option to purchase the 0.4 ha subdivision containing the Shades of Death cave entrance. After careful consideration and due diligence, the co-operative proceeded with the purchase in mid-2017, assisted by a loan from the Australian Speleological Federation. The ASF considered that the Co-operative’s action in acquiring and intention to responsibly manage M-3 cave was consistent with the core business of the Federation. The three-year loan has to be repaid in three equal annual instalments and whilst funds by way of early donations more than cover the first instalment obligation, further contributions are actively sought. See: http://www.rimstone.org.au/files/M3-Appeal_April2017_interactive.pdf.

Rimstone Co-operative’s Management Plans and Challenges

Rimstone Co-operative plans to rehabilitate the developed section of the cave and run occasional public open days where the cave lighting would be ‘on’ and local Buchan district residents in particular encouraged to visit the cave for ‘a gold coin donation’, similar to a past practice by Parks Victoria for the nearby (unlit) Murrindal and Lilly Pilly Caves. At other times members of the co-operative and their guests will be able to independently inspect the developed part although probably limited to using their own light sources. Insurance has been taken out to protect the directors and co-operative members in relation to these activities.

For the extensive ‘wild’ part of the cave beyond the developed section, recreational caving activity along with speleological projects including further exploration and surveying will be permitted by prior arrangement and subject to participants adhering the ASF’s Minimal Impact Caving Code and any other prescribed constraints. The existing Van Dyk M-3 Cave map is limited to a plan view and at a minimum further work is needed to add cross sections and elevation views. To this end, some degree of resurveying may be initiated. A digital 3-D survey project could also be undertaken in the future.

To assist with progressing the above intentions, the co-operative's directors appointed VSA's Daryl Carr as its manager and coordinator of works and activities above and below ground. Physical work undertaken on-site to date includes tidying up of the immediate surface area and structures, trimming of vegetation and removal of accumulated rubbish. Underground work has included replacement of corroded stair treads, cleaning down and rustproofing treatment and painting of some handrail sections, and removal of detritus and redundant items in the developed part of the cave.

Work is also in hand to repair the 6.5 kVA single-phase generator set that was last used to power the cave lighting. The former electronic switching control for the cave lighting that has long since succumbed to the cave environment will remain bypassed and eventually removed. Given that it is not intended to run any regular public tours, an elaborate switching scheme is no longer warranted. In the medium term at least, it is proposed to retain the 240 volt lighting circuits powered from the generator, however, some of the 150 W and 75 W PAR type flood lights will likely be replaced with more efficient LED equivalents. The existing in-cave wiring is typically exposed given the limited scope to bury it and the undesirability of chasing flow stone surfaces. For the most part this will remain but opportunities will be taken to tidy it up where practicable. In the longer term, a solar cell (PV) based low-voltage LED lamp replacement of the present electric lighting is a possibility.

It is known that some damage to speleothems, including muddying, has occurred in parts of the extensive wild sections and it is intended that, where practicable, careful cleaning will be undertaken. Also, in some sensitive areas, track marking is anticipated to limit further damage to floor sections and speleothems. It is planned to identify a number of management zones such as areas to be rehabilitated, track marked, no go zones, etc. Some have already

Sources used by the author

Rebbechi, D. (2004). *Shades of Death Cave – Murrindal, Victoria – Sold*, Journal of the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association. No. 55.

Rebbechi, D. (1993). *Australia's Smallest Private Tourist Cave*, Proceedings of the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Conference, Rockhampton, Australia.

Rebbechi, D. (1991). *Murrindal Caves – Proposal for the Sale of Shares on Behalf of Existing Shareholders*, unpublished limited issue prospectus.

Henderson, K. (1985). *The Buchan Experience – A Guide to the Buchan and Murrindal Caves East Gippsland, Victoria*, Kent Henderson.

been marked up on a copy of the cave map. At present, access into much of the wild part of the cave is constrained by tight squeezes and whilst some may be marginally enlarged by approved means, these physical challenges tend to reduce through caver traffic. Proposals to conduct digs, enlarge squeezes or otherwise physically modify the cave will be subject to ratification by the co-operative's board of directors.

Another proposed initiative is to re-establish the vertical entry via a gate on the original entrance shaft whereby members could practice their vertical techniques in 'a real cave environment'.

Developing 'best practice' cave and karst management for Shades of Death Cave is the avowed aim of the Rimstone Co-operative directors, spearheaded by current director and ACKMA member Nicholas White who has led the process to purchase the M-3 cave property. A draft management strategy has been written and will be progressively refined.

Conclusion

In the past Shades of Death Cave was run as a small private show cave operation and was one of few such enterprises in the country. It is now owned by a co-operative comprised largely of cavers who are faced with the challenge of responsibly managing it. This includes retention and limited improvement of the show cave section for occasional public visits and controlling recreational caving access into the inner reaches to minimise further damage and where practicable redress historic damage. Another initiative will be to encourage further speleological investigations in the cave and its relationship to the surface and other nearby caves.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges assistance in preparing this paper from Nicholas White, Daryl Carr, Dennis Rebbechi and other Rimstone Co-operative members who have provided information.