

Ernie Holland and the Cave Divers at Jenolan

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In the 1970's, cave diving took off in Australia on a national scale. Sinkholes in Mount Gambier were being explored and mapped and the vast underwater caves of the Nullarbor were being discovered. Some of us from the Cave Divers Association of Australia (CDAA) then turned our attention to the challenging cave diving in the highlands of Eastern Australia.

We contacted Ernie Holland at Jenolan to ask if the underground river could be re-explored after Ben Nurse and Denis Burke of SSS had made their initial discoveries 20 years before in the early 1950's. We were not optimistic that the Jenolan management would be receptive to our proposal after the series of cave diving deaths in Mount Gambier, but Ernie was excited and very supportive. I think he must have already been aware of our increasing skills and achievements in underwater caves elsewhere. We made several trips across to Jenolan from South Australia and combined with Sydney cave divers Ron Allum and Al Grundy over several years. Each dive revealed more of the hidden Imperial River and the sumps etc on the Lucas Cave side of the Arch. Ernie was always keen to hear of our finds and insisted that we write them up in the log in the Guides Office which we did, and they are on record there.

Ernie thrived on the exciting stories we began to bring back from our diving. There was great excitement when I found a smoker's pipe sitting on a rock in a dry chamber after Sump 6 in Imperial Cave and brought it out. It was instantly recognised by Senior Guide John Culley as his own pipe from a previous dry cave exploration decades earlier from an upper level down into a chamber which

had a small pool in a side tunnel ... where I popped up with dive gear from the other side, decades later. Ernie and John and all the guides were really chuffed to learn of this connection as it validated their long-held story of the earlier Guides exploration, the Lost Chamber, and the pipe.

On another occasion in the first Imperial River sinking in the tourist area of the cave, we dug our hands in the mud and gravel and came up with fingers dripping with pennies, thruppences, shillings etc thrown into the pool by generations of visitors! Ernie and the tourists watching on loved the great publicity shots! There was more excitement when our first RDF point beyond several Imperial sumps was located directly beneath Cave Guide John Callaghan's carrot patch halfway up the hillside behind his house! Ernie's outgoing character delighted in such stories.

As cave divers, we have always been grateful for the full-hearted support that Ernie gave us as without that, or with a more cautious management at the time (perhaps less speleo-oriented), none of this would have happened perhaps for some decades more - or maybe not at all with modern management risk aversion for some types of outdoor activities in public reserves and Parks. Ernie was keen that the divers' discoveries be woven into the Guides' stories as part of the rich exploration history of the Jenolan Cave system.

Ernie, it was privilege knowing, working, and laughing with you and you have the fond and grateful memories of the cave divers for all that you did for us!



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