

CENTENARIES AT JENOLAN

- Rob Whyte

1998 has been an important year for Jenolan, if for no other reason that it marked two significant centenaries. To ensure no one forgot these centenaries the Jenolan Caves Historical and Preservation Society (JCHPS) staged a number of events on Saturday November 14th.

The first centenary was that of the current entrance to the northside show caves. The very first entrance that was used was the natural entrance at the top of the hill, near the Carlotta (No.2) car park. It was by descending a significant pitch within the Elder Cave that the Imperial Cave was initially entered. Historians have debated who it was who made the discovery and the exact date it was made but for the sake of simplicity the most frequently stated account will be cited here and so credit given to Jeremiah Wilson on February 16th 1879.

Initially the means by which the Imperial Cave was inspected was by entering the Elder Cave and descending the shaft by which it was found, now known as Ridley's Shortcut after a gentleman who happened to fall down this hole. Wilson claims to have resolved to find an easier access route and within two years had found a way in by way of the Grand Arch. However, other accounts suggest that the route may have been found on the same trip that discovered the cave. Some widening of passages took place and a couple of ladders placed in the Grand Arch to gain access to the entrance. This entrance can be viewed inside the Grand Arch high to the northern side. It is now frequently referred to as the Kings Tableland.

It was not until 1898 that a simpler route was created by tunneling a short distance through the wall of the Grand Arch. This allowed a ramp to be built leading up from the floor of the Arch providing much easier access to the cave. This work has meant that today the Imperial Cave is one of the easiest to negotiate at Jenolan requiring visitors to climb less than a hundred steps (if the side trip to the river is omitted). Cost at the time to provide this access was £45 10s 10d.

Given that the first entrance from the Arch was natural whereas the current man-made, it is worth noting how this is managed at Jenolan. A gate is placed at both entrances. The gate at the first entrance is a grill structure allowing free flow of air and easily passed through by bats. In contrast the other gate is predominantly a solid structure which restricts the air flow.

The other centenary probably can lay claim to having a much greater impact upon guests and that is the opening of Caves House. Bear in mind that what is being celebrated is the centenary of the opening of the main section of the current Caves House owned by the State Government. The original Caves House was built by Jeremiah Wilson and was built piecemeal from 1880 onwards. This is significant in that prior to its construction Jeremiah

would accompany guests to the Caves when they visited but did not stay there for any great length of time. When permanent accommodation was provided it meant that greater opportunity was provided to him to explore and within a short period of time the Imperial, Chifley (Left Imperial) and Jubilee caves were found as well as a number of other caves.

Back in the late 1800's Jeremiah Wilson was compelled under the terms of his agreement with the Government, to provide tours free of charge. He was permitted though to exploit other options in order to subsidize his activities. He did this through charging for candles and magnesium, renting coveralls to protect guests clothes (guests didn't go exploring in their Sunday best as some tell). His main source of income though was Caves House. It was not infrequent that letters appeared in the press complaining of Jeremiah's monopoly and the prices he charged. The complaints even made their way into the Parliament.

In 1895 disaster struck in the form of fire. An excerpt from the 1895 NSW Dept of Mines reports gives an indication of the impact: *"In March last, as previously reported, the whole of the old accommodation house, including the first and second class dining rooms, sitting room, billiard room and table, twelve bed-rooms, kitchen, pantry &c, the property of Mr. J. Wilson, keeper, were completely destroyed by fire. Visitors were somewhat inconvenienced thereby, but not to such an extent as might have been expected. Quarters in the new building, usually reserved for visitors alone, had to be set apart for Mr. Wilson's family and servants. Fortunately, there is another place of accommodation (Wallace's) within easy distance, which was taken advantage of by a number of visitors, and, consequently, it has been well patronised since the fire. I may mention that Mr. Wilson and family suffered to a large extent, owing to the loss of all their personal effects. The buildings, but not the contents, were insured. It has been decided to resume the remaining buildings, and erect a new dining room, kitchen, &c, and let the whole by tender on a ten years lease".*

There is much speculation whether the fire was purely by accident or whether it was part of a conspiracy to force Jeremiah to relinquish his lease. Irrespective, it could not be denied that the State Government was not disappointed with the outcome. As it worked out Harry Smith was the successful tenderer and it was through this association that a popular misconception developed. Harry Smith was well known for holding the leases for many of the refreshment kiosks found on railway stations. Advertisements run by Harry Smith pointed out where all his properties were and now included Caves House. Consequently many people interpreted this as meaning the State Railways were now responsible for managing the caves.

Jeremiah still had a few more years left to work at Jenolan and during this period he found accommodation at Wallace's guesthouse, now also acquired by the State Government. In this year, Caves House is not the only structure whose centenary is celebrated, this honour also being shared by the Post Office and Telegraph Station, the caretaker's cottage (also referred to as the *Engineer's Cottage* behind Caves House), and The Nest (home of Robert Bailey, co-discoverer of a number of southside show caves). All in all 1898 was a significant year for construction works at Jenolan. Work was also underway developing the

Jubilee Cave, providing easier access from the Grand Arch to the Lucas Cave and development of the gardens.

Through the course of the celebrations in 1998 the public have been given a chance to come to a better understanding of Jenolan's past. Tours of Caves House and displays of photographs showing the Caves House in days gone by have hopefully made an impact upon visitors and conveyed the important message that Jenolan is a lot more than just caves but has a fascinating history set in an impressive and beautiful valley.