

A KARST ODESSY

- Kent Henderson

A few days after Christmas last year, I packed my chattels and drove north to New South Wales for a few weeks karst rest and relaxation leave. My first port of call was Wombeyan Caves, to infringe on the hospitality of Mick and Annette Chalker. They knew I was coming, which made the fact that were there on my arrival even more surprising! Levity aside, I am most grateful to them for looking after me so well, yet again.

In the subsequent few days, I checked out the now finished refurbishment of the Junction Cave, which I had been looking forward to seeing. Unfortunately, Mick chose the only Saturday in 1997 for the "Official Opening" (see ACKMA Journal 29, p24) that I couldn't get out of Melbourne, and this was first opportunity to see the finished job in person. And wonderful it is! The new lighting and raised tracking, particularly in the final chamber, is outstanding. I also viewed the phenomenal new lighting in Fig Tree Cave, which to this point is halfway through – the balance (the Creek Section) being due for completion this year. I spent quite some time photographing underground – always pleasant. Got some more good shots too!

One fine (hot!) morning, Mick bundled me into his Hilux, and "dragged" me off on a full day trip to Abercrombie and Borenore. Andy Lawrence, till recently the Manager of Abercrombie Caves, had just been promoted to the position of *Visitor Services Manager* at Jenolan, and Mick had been appointed the new Abercrombie manager, in addition to his managership of Wombeyan. So he has to zap over there every so often. The Grand Arch was as incredible as ever, but I was particularly interested to have a look through the now refurbished and re-opened Cathedral Cave (yet another "Official Opening" I missed, last year... sigh...). Great stuff it is, of course!

After leaving Abercrombie, we drove onto Borenore Caves, near Orange, which last year was passed over to the management of the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust. And the new Manager of Borenore? You guessed it – Mick Chalker!! One has visions of Mick being manager of most of Australia's karst, the way it's going! Upon arrival, we were met by Ernie Holland and thereafter spent several hours trying to keep up with him as he tromped the karst. I had visited Borenore, briefly, some years ago, but this was my first extended look. I was previously unaware just what an large karst area it is, and how cavernous. We checked out several entrances in our sojourn, but just a fraction of those tagged. The biggest management problem currently is feral flora, particularly blackberries, with a spraying program urgently needed. It was rather late that night when we finally got back to Wombeyan – considerably later than expected after somebody lost his car keys (which were

finally found), but I will not embarrass the person concerned by mentioning his name.

The next day, back at Wombeyan, after checking Mick still had his keys, I spent most of the day on photography, followed by a "quiet" New Year's Eve with Mick and Annette. On New Year's Day I embarked for Jenolan to encroach, this time, on the hospitality of Barry and Robyn Richard at their Jenolan Cabins. Ain't they good! If you know of anyone heading for Jenolan, this is the place to stay. The view over the Blue Mountains from the cabins is magnificent! Aside from his Cabins, Barry these days is a casual guide at Jenolan. After a brief "hello" to Robyn at the Cabins, I headed down the hill to the caves, and subsequently followed Barry guiding a Chifley Cave tour. 10 out of 10 of course, Barry! After much chatting with guides, Andy Lawrence (just on duty in new role), etc, it was back to Barry & Robyn's for a quiet night.

The next day, Barry had "off", so in the afternoon we went down the hill (again!), whereupon he guided me through the delights of Nettle and Arch Caves. They are both quite voluminous, with dark and daylight areas. The view down the *Devil's Coachhouse* from Nettle Cave is tremendous, and it must possess just about the best collection of craybacks anywhere. Both are old tourist caves, high up in the Grand Arch precinct, have not been shown for very many years. There has been talk of refurbishing them as a self-guided cave, but as this a "political hot potato" I will say not too much more at the moment, except to observe that the Nettle & Arch Caves (which interlink) are, in my view, ideal for the purpose. One question surrounds the rare Sooty Owl which inhabits Nettle & Arch, particularly in terms of habitat disturbance. While not wishing to canvass the issues here in any detail, Professor-designate Dave Gillieson subsequently suggested to me that, thinking laterally, a great idea would be to put infrared cameras on the owl roosts, *al la* the Bat Cave at Naracoorte. This would be an invaluable research tool, and clearly a great additional attraction for Jenolan, enabling tourists to see in real time an animal virtually no one has ever seen. He is of the view this could be readily achieved with excellent environmental sensitivity, and that any self-guided refurbishment of the cave could be accomplished by routing the tracking well away from the owl roosts.

That evening, Barry and I yet again descended to the caves, this time to tag along on "Gemma's Jenolan Caves Adventure". A theatrical company, Wik Wak Productions, in conjunction with the Caves Reserve Trust, was running specialist adventure tours through Chifley Cave throughout January. So, we met Gemma the Jenolan Gypsy, Crystal the Cave Fairy, and

Yippee the Bunyip, amongst others. This particular tour was combined with a Ghost Tour led by guide Ian Addison. Children old and young had a great tour. It was well done, indeed!

Bidding Barry and Robyn adieu the next morning (Saturday), I headed back to Wombeyan to join Mick et al on a trip into Olympian Cavern. This amazing wild cave, arguably “the best” at Wombeyan, hadn’t been visited for a couple years, and Mick wished to do a management check. Olympian is entered up the creek through the Junction tourist Cave, and is about a five hour round trip. It lies between Junction Cave and Fig Tree Cave, effectively being part of the one system. I call it the “crown jewels”, an allusion both to its quality, and how well Mick protects it! I was last in this cave with Mick over ten years ago, and felt very honoured to visit it a second, and as far as I am concerned, a final time. The main chamber is massive, with huge shawls, and some of the biggest oolites you’ll ever see! Andy Spate had also come up for the event, but unfortunately some leg problems prevented him from completing the whole trip. Happily, he was waiting for us outside Junction Cave when we eventually emerged, not too worse for wear!

The next day, it was off to Canberra to latch onto Professor (almost) Dave Gillieson, pack the camping gear, and head south to the Cooleman karst. On route we called into the Queanbeyan National Parks & Wildlife Service Office for a chat with Andy Spate, and met his “new” *karst offsider*, Michelle Cooper. Then to Cooleman! This amazing karst area, extensively researched and documented by the late Joe Jennings, is unspeakably incredible. It was my first visit, and quite unforgettable. Over the next two days, Dave guided me over the area – through magnificent karst gorges, over massive karst plains, and down several wild caves. Rather than dilate on Cooleman here, I will undoubtedly

inflict a separate article upon you in a subsequent Journal.

And so onto Caves House at Yarrangobilly for a few days and nights of delights! I had the pleasure of meeting “new” caves manager Jo Ingarfield – a very impressive and dedicated person, and additionally, Michelle Cooper came down to join us. We started by tripping through North Glory tourist Cave, and the next day donned the gear for some serious underground stuff. Dave, Jo, Michelle and I got to two wild caves – Coppermine, a very interesting, and well decorated, stream outflow cave, and Trickett’s Cave, which is quite voluminous and features an extremely large entrance. Both caves are infrequently visited, being well up the Yarrangobilly Gorge, and a goodly trip to get to, as well. I got my exercise for the year, let me tell you!

The next day the plan was to visit both East Deep Creek Cave, and Eagle’s Nest Cave – neither of which I had visited before – but sadly, very inclement weather set in. In the morning, we instead visited Castle Cave and Harrie Wood Cave. These former tourist caves, which I had visited several times before, are always worth a look. They are used over the January period each year for Adventure Tours. Unfortunately, the weather remained appalling, so we decided against what would have been an *evil descent* to East Deep Creek and Eagle’s Nest in the afternoon, hoping that the morrow would bring better weather. It didn’t. Thus it was that Dave and I headed back to Canberra earlier than planned, and me back to Melbourne. Despite this disappointment there is always next time, although with Dave moving to Cairns, next time for him might be a long time. Still, it was a great trip. Many thanks to Mick & Annette Chalker, Barry & Robyn Richard, Ernie Holland and Dave Gillieson for putting up with me at various times!