

A FURTHER LOOK AT HASTINGS

- Kent Henderson & Arthur Clarke

L to R: Arthur Clarke, Dave Hawkins & Kent Henderson at Newdegate Cave, Hastings



In mid October 2002, Kent Henderson was in southern Tasmania again – for a week on business – during which time he stayed with ACKMA’s newest Fellow Arthur Clarke and his partner Robyn Claire in Hobart. At the start of his stay, Kent spent a night with Arthur and Robyn at their “other” residence in Francistown (near Dover). During this short stopover, Arthur and Kent drove south to the nearby *Hastings Caves* hoping to have a chat with the Hastings Enterprise Manager: Keith Vanderstaay. Keith was delayed in arriving, so in the interim Arthur and Kent latched on to a scheduled tour of *Newdegate Cave*, led by information officer: Dave Hawkins. It was great to catch up with Dave again. Kent had not previously had the pleasure of being on one of Dave’s tours, and a pleasure it most certainly was. Dave’s interpretation was tremendous – as good as you would hear anywhere – including a detailed, but easy to understand, description of karst geomorphology and how speleothems develop – using straw stalactites, stalagmites and columns at the top of the spiral staircase to showcase the processes.



New lighting in Newdegate Cave

He gave the right amount of educative information in what was a most interesting, enriching and thoroughly enjoyable visitor experience – clearly evident from the positive reactions of the tourists in the party.

Kent’s last visit to Hastings Caves was earlier this year when Neil Kell was finishing off the re-lighting of *Newdegate Cave*, after which Kent waxed lyrical upon the results (see “*Editorial Ramblings*” ACKMA Journal #47, p. 24). Having now seen the lighting yet again, we considered that these previous comments were, if anything, not effusive enough! Again, we would encourage anyone to go and see *Newdegate Cave*; it is world class, and more! Dave Hawkins was also impressed with the new lighting, which he says gives much more flexibility to cave tours. Cave guides generally use one of three main pre-programmed lighting schedules for small tour parties, larger groups or cave concerts.

After the tour, Arthur and Kent returned to the new *Hastings Caves Visitor Centre* to catch up with Keith Vanderstaay. While Kent had passed the new centre several times, he had not previously been inside the structure before. It is located diagonally opposite the Caves House Chalet (the former “*Caretakers Cottage*”), across the road from the old site with restaurant and adjoining offices (now demolished), and is close to the thermal pool. In fact, entry to the pool area and the fern glade walks to see platypus and the warm springs near *Hot Springs Creek* is now only gained via the new Centre, where visitors purchase tickets for cave tours and pool entry. It is a modern two storey, A-framed building, but if anything perhaps a bit smaller than one would have hoped. There was a reason for that, to which we will come shortly. In addition to offices and other staff facilities, the centre features a cafeteria-style dining area, a range of obligatory souvenirs, postcards and books but a relatively small karst interpretation area. Although adequate, the interpretation did not excite us – our immediate impression was that it could have been done much better, even in the restricted space it occupied. In our view, the presentation inside the centre is fairly static and could be more innovative, perhaps in the manner of the revolving glass casing information panels outside the restaurant.

It was great to catch up with Keith again. We quizzed him (as we would!) about present and future plans for the Hastings area. Adventure caving is now an added part of the operation with tours available through *King George V Cave* – a former tourist cave in the 1930’s (see ACKMA Journal #35, page 35). Adventure tours are run on demand, with a minimum of two starters on weekdays and four on weekends and holidays. These tours have proved extremely popular, so the Hastings enterprise is now expanding its operation to include an adventure caving option in the nearby (World Heritage Area) *Ida Bay karst*.

*A view of the Interpretation Area inside
the Hastings Visitors Centre*



From late November this year, they expect to be running adventure tours in *Mystery Creek Cave*; discovered in the late 1880's, this cave is renowned worldwide for its fabulous glowworm displays. With approval from Parks and Wildlife, some preliminary track work and clearing has been undertaken to improve access to the cave entrance and minimise the risk of injury to tourists clambering under and over slippery logs and rocks.

Back at Hastings, staff have their "fingers crossed" in anticipation that the long awaited *Hastings Karst Walk* will soon be coming to fruition. Earlier this year, a submission was placed with the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) to provide funding for the karst walk proposal.

Currently under government consideration, there is hope that their submission will be amongst the successful funding proposals scheduled to be announced in November this year, so good news may soon be forthcoming. Unfortunately, funding for the sealing of the unsealed 8kms of the *Hastings Caves Road* has not yet eventuated, but Keith is hopeful that this is not too far away from materialising. (Roy Skinner reports that various Tasmanian governments have been "promising" to seal the Caves Road for nearly forty years.)

The unsealed road surface has been blamed for acting as a deterrent to visitors, particularly during the winter months, and also in the past when some hire car companies penalised customers for using rental cars on unmade roads. Keith advised that he will definitely be attending our Chillagoe/ Undara Conference in May 2003, which is great news!

After leaving Hastings, we called into the *Driftwood Holiday Cottages* at Dover to allow Kent to meet ACKMA members Ian and Sue Hall. Five years ago – following on from their success in running an accommodation complex for tourists in Dover – the Halls entered into a corporate partnership arrangement with the Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) section of the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry, Water and Environment (DPIWE) to jointly operate and manage the Hastings Caves

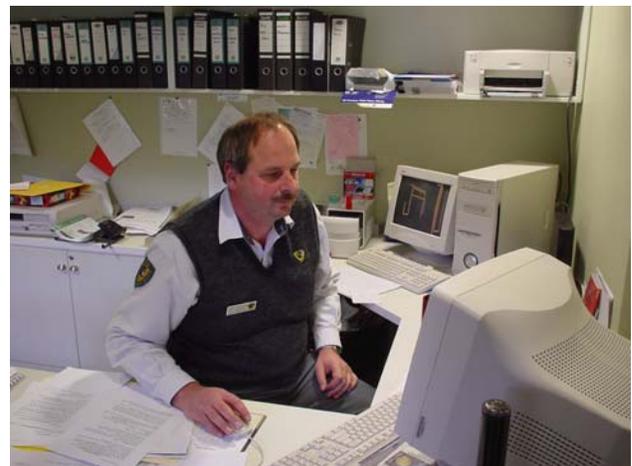
complex and Thermal Pool. Referred to as the *Hastings Enterprise*, the Halls are supposedly in a joint 50:50 arrangement with PWS. The enterprise board is composed of five people: Ian and Sue Hall, two interpretation officers from PWS head office in Hobart, plus Keith Vanderstaay employed as their business manager.

The other cave guiding and visitor centre restaurant staff at Hastings – all now referred to as information officers – are still retained as employees of PWS, but under direction of the enterprise. Although the Halls have not yet injected any funds into the operation, Ian and Sue have spent a considerable amount of time and effort in developing the promotional brochure and the initial marketing plan for the enterprise, which is marketed as *The Hastings Experience*.

Although the enterprise promotes the "*Natural Sensations*" of the site as the *Hastings Caves and Thermal Springs*, the actual "Hastings Experience" is simply just the entry ticket: an attractive souvenir postcard featuring images of the Hastings rainforest, tourists in the cave and beside an open fire in a poolside picnic shelter.

Providing excellent value for money, the Hastings Experience ticket includes one scheduled cave tour and all day access to the thermal pool and associated picnic facilities, the fern glade walks for platypus viewing and walks to several warm spring sites. The ticket also includes a "Warning" notice advising parents to supervise their children at the thermal pool. Due to on-going costs with site improvements over recent years (including hygienic pre-treatment of pool water and the sewage treatment ponds), a subsequent rationalisation in services has meant that the thermal pool area is no longer supervised by enterprise staff.

The Hastings Enterprise generates a little over \$250,000 a year in entry fees, but up till now most of this income has been used to support the operation of the Visitor Centre and the Thermal Pool, with very little funding going back into *Newdegate Cave* itself or its maintenance.



Keith Vanderstaay in his office at Hastings Caves

L to R: Kent Henderson, Keith Vanderstaay, & Arthur Clarke outside the Hasting's Visitor Centre



However, following another recent rationalisation involving a change in staff duties, the amount of cleaning, preventative maintenance and rehabilitation in the cave has increased and is about to increase even more so, quite dramatically in fact... giving more value for dollars despite the limited operational budget.

When Ian and Sue Hall entered into the arrangement with PWS, it was proposed that there would be an equal injection of funds into the new enterprise: the Halls would construct and operate a dozen purpose-built four star accommodation cottages and the Tasmanian Government would construct the new visitor centre, originally budgeted at \$750,000.

Despite being supposedly run as joint enterprise, the Halls were given very little opportunity for input into the planning or control of the process, with the “pants” being worn by the Government.

Following successful lobbying for additional NHT funding, the enterprise budget was extended to \$1.59 million, but the end result produced a visitor interpretation centre that was barely two-thirds of the size originally proposed in the planning presentations given to the general public.

Similarly, although there was still an allocation of funding for the re-lighting of *Newdegate Cave* (with financial assistance from the Enterprise’s operational budget), there was not enough left in the kitty for the proposed surface karst walk. (In the public mind, these shortcomings were perceived to have resulted from a blowout of funds due to Tasmanian Government’s engagement of the various landscape, architectural and site interpretation consultants.)

An immediate effect of this downsizing of the Visitor Centre was the reduced area for interpretation (of the karst and surrounding landscape, the cave and its fauna), compared to that originally envisaged in presentations to the public.

However, if the visitor centre had been larger as originally planned, the building code would have

required it to be classified in another construction category entailing even more added expense to install extra features such as self-opening doors and fire sprinkler systems, etc.

Management and staff are generally happy with the size of the centre, because it is big enough to cope with the peak visitor loads and for most of the year it is not too large or too costly to run, clean and maintain and it fits in well with the thermal pool, picnic facilities and nearby cave.

Some of the recent development funding was also used to re-model the Thermal Pool site by “softening the edges” to produce a more natural setting. This modification of the pool site roughly coincided with another natural event: the falling of a large blackwood tree that crashed into the pool and surrounds during a windstorm; it is still evidenced by the bent railing around the children’s wading pool.

Apart from re-surfacing the pool surround, the softening touches included placement of large rock boulders in the lawn areas and a cobblestone drain outlet for the pool, where it empties into *Hot Springs Creek*.

More recently, without reference to the Halls or the *Enterprise*, some additional heavy duty picnic tables with fixed bench seats have been installed at various sites around the pool and surrounding lawns. Although not detracting from the natural setting, these new tables are probably over-engineered for the site.

Despite these shortcomings, the Halls are still keen to construct the accommodation cottages and planning approval has been accepted for the first six cottages, but although they intend to build the cottages, they are reluctant to go ahead on a leasehold land arrangement, unless satisfactory title issues are resolved.



Ian Hall (left) explains the plans for accommodation cottages at Hastings to Kent Henderson.

