

AN ACKMA AFTERNOON in Mount Gambier

- Kent Henderson

The new Aquifer Tours Visitor's Centre



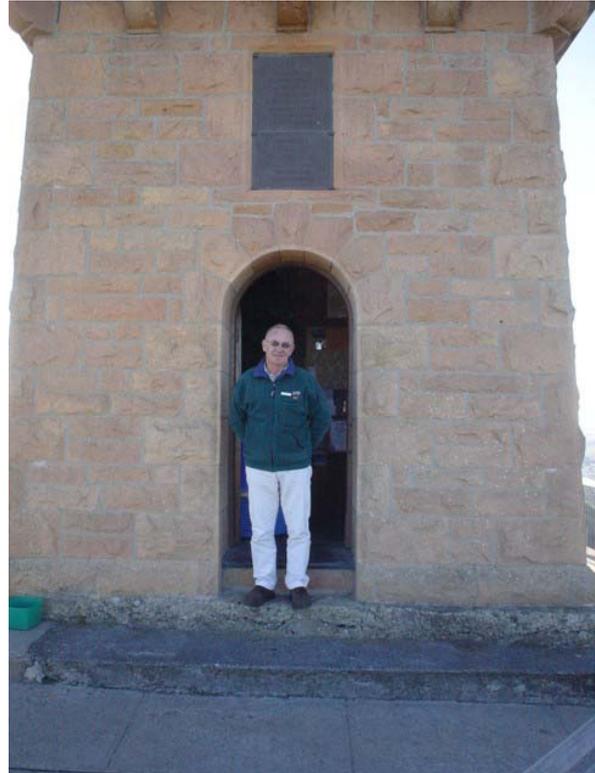
In early May I spent some time in the Upper South East of South Australia on business, but I did manage to get down for an afternoon in Mount Gambier. I particularly wanted to catch up with long-time ACKMA member Gary Turner of Aquifer Tours.

Gary started his tours in December 1991, which he runs to the historic Blue Lake pumping station in Mt. Gambier, which as well as its function as the city water supply, is also a something of a museum in itself. Delegates to the 13th ACKMA Conference at Mt. Gambier in 1999 toured this facility, as those attending will readily recall.



Mt. Gambier's Centenary Tower

The famous Mt. Gambier Blue Lake is both a volcanic and a karst feature, and is fed by the surrounding karst aquifer. Every November it changes colour from grey to vivid blue, and reverses back to grey by winter. This is explained by the light scattering calcite suspended in the water, which changes with seasonal concentrations. The lake stores about 35,000 megalitres, and about 4,000 is extracted annually as drinking water.



Bob Peters at the Centenary Tower entrance.

The lake water level has fluctuated considerably since records began in the mid 1880s because of the interplay between land use changes (which affect recharge), rainfall variation, and groundwater abstraction. The Lake water level is essentially that of the aquifer water table and the lake is thus a window into the aquifer. The quality of water in the lake is good, with low salinity and bacteriological levels, despite pollution of the water table aquifer immediately to the north, through farming.

Drilling in the area has shown that the bottom of the lake is close to the top of the confined aquifer. Groundwater recharge to the lake is thought to occur from the basal part of the Gambier Limestone aquifer which is essentially un-contaminated. The aquifer may also receive leakages of uncontaminated groundwater from the underlying Dilwyn Formation aquifer thus explaining the low pollution levels detected in the lake water.

L to R: Trish Turner, Kent Henderson and Gary Turner outside the new Aquifer Tours Visitor Centre



After 18 months in construction (attended by many delays), a new Visitor Centre was opened on the lake rim for Aquifer Tours. It was officially opened on 28 May 2004 by the Mayor of Mt. Gambier. It cost \$365,000 and was jointly funded by the local Council, State and Federal Governments, South Australian Water, and Aquifer Tours. The Centre is vested in the Council, but Aquifer Tours has a long lease. I was impressed! The new Visitor's Centre is very functional, pleasing to the eye, and has excellent interpretation – as well as the obligatory coffee shop, etc. Gary tells me visitation to May 2005 has already exceeded the entire visitation for 2004. Not surprisingly he is more than happy with that, and his wife Trish has now come on board full time. Excellent!



At Princess Margaret Rose Cave:
L to R: Dean Fox, Jody-Lee Robins and Kent Henderson.

While at the Visitor's Centre, Gary happened to mention to me that Viv and Bob Peters, the former lessees of Princess Margaret Rose Cave (which is just over the border in Victoria about 20 minutes drive from Mt. Gambier), had very recently taken over management of Mt. Gambier's Centenary Tower. In my many visits to this area in the past I'd never heard of the Centenary Tower, but Gary promptly pointed me in the right direction – and being a Sunday afternoon, it was likely to be open, I was told.

Centenary Tower sits on the crest of Mount Gambier (i.e: the mountain itself) overlooking the city. It was built in 1900 as a watch tower, and it is still used for summer fire spotting to this day. It is also an historic tourist attraction. So, up the mountain I climbed from the car park. And a climb it was – a one in four incline, and that is steep!! When I finally got to the top, there was Bob Peters! It was great to catch up. Viv was not there, but happened to phone while I was present, so it was great to catch with her as well. By the way, the tower is a something of a 'karst feature', being constructed of pink dolomite, and Bob always points out the many imbedded fossils (as he would!).

Upon descending Mount Gambier, I thought I might as well go the whole bit, so I promptly drove off to Princess Margaret Rose Cave (PMR) – hoping to encounter Viv and Bob's successors as lessees, namely Jim Hanel and his sister Joy, whom I was yet to meet. I was out of luck, sadly – they had gone for the day. Instead I met Dean Fox and his partner Jody-Lee Robins, who these days are the resident caretakers at PMR (the Hanel's live in nearby Nelson). They are a most pleasant younger couple, and they usually do the last two PMR tours of the day – which is how they wound up with me. I was not overly keen (having been in PMR almost as often as I've had hot dinners), but Dean insisted I went on his tour. It was well done, too! Oh well, perhaps I'll get to meet Jim and Joy next time!

Below: Cross section of the Blue Lake, Mt. Gambier .

