

Editor's Note: The following article was sent to me by ACKMA member, Jane Baird. Jane was for many years the guide at Rawhiti Cave, which is located at Takaka/Golden Bay in the north-west of New Zealand's South Island. Jane guided tours daily (on demand) for eleven years from 26th December 1988—2000. The Baird family owned Rawhiti Cave from 1955 to 31st March 2000, when the family sold the cave and the 164 ha surrounding it (now named *Baird Reserve*, appropriately), to the New Zealand National Heritage Trust. Today the cave is managed by the NZ Department of Conservation (DOC). It remains essentially a wild cave, with some modest infrastructure for its use as an 'adventure cave', although DOC does not currently run tours there – it is an 'open access' cave. The article below is from booklet by Will Lawson, entitled *Across Marble Mountains by Motor Car to Cape Farewell, New Zealand*. It was published in 1920. As I think you will agree, it is an exhilarating cave description. Having been in Rawhiti on two occasions, I can only but agree with the thoughts of the author...



A view back to the entrance of Rawhiti Cave. Photo: Jane Baird.

RAWHITI CAVES

The Golden Bay district is well supplied in the matter of limestone caves. Some of these are the Kairuru Caves, near the top of 'Tar-kicker Hill.'

Then there are the caves at Motupipi, on the shores of Golden Bay; others at Rockville, beyond Collingwood and the Rawhiti cave close to Takaka, in a deep gully of the eastern hills.

There is a drive of about four miles from Takaka to the mouth of this ravine, where, at present, the tourist must leave the comfort of the car and tramp to the cave. Before long, however, the car road will continued up the gully, alongside a beautiful, clear creek that tumbles down amid bush and rocks, through sunshine and shadow. As it is, the walk is a pleasant one for a distance of nearly a mile. On

either hand the walls of the gully rise steep and towering.

The way at first is almost level and the visitor would be lulled to thoughts of an accessible cave, were it not for the fact that the guide carries over his shoulder a long coil of rope. The acetylene lamps in his hands are comforting items, but that coil of rope has a disturbing effect. And when, at length he stops and calls a halt, one has expectations of seeing preparations for a mountain climb.

But the halt really is a preliminary to a greater effort. The track leaves the creek side, where the waters chatter and the birds call, to rush up a hillside almost hidden by the bush. It is a stiff climb, but is soon over.

A tour group in Rawhiti Cave. Photo: Jane Baird.



To have reached the entrance of the caves brings a sense of relief and anticipation of pleasant and beautiful sights. No one could ever dream of the wonderful vision which meets the eye at the entrance to Rawhiti (the sunshine) cave, a vast arch—it is three chains across, to come down for a moment to mere figures—and its crown soars high above the trees which grow near at hand.

Where the fence is stretched, light-leaved saplings of lace-bark and other trees make a screen, and the sunlight shining upon them and through them, is reflected into the cavern, if so dull a word may be used to describe this immense, imposing and spacious place.

It is more like a great arch of a mighty cathedral. Not so vast as the Grand Arch at the Jenolan Caves in the New South Wales, but richer in treasures of limestone formation. From the roof long stalactites, grey and weathered by exposure, reach down and outwards in long, twisting shapes. For some reason and by some process of nature they have grown towards the sunlight, as branches of trees would do. Behind and below these hundreds of stalactites, the dark walls and gloomy depths of the cave are visible, while the drip, drip of water echoes musically.

Through a gate we pass and take a few paces forward! We are on the brink of the cavern and see something of its size and depth. Right above us is the array of grey stalactites. Now, they are less imposing, but behind them are hundreds of more delicately coloured ones and below these again, in the crevices and crannies are many strange and beautiful formations of crystallised limestone. And not only is there petrified stone. There are delicate tracteries, beautiful beyond words, made of ferns

and creepers and leaves and twigs, which in growing in this cool spot and have been gradually overcome by the slow, insidious dripping water and so changed from their living green to a snowy crystal whiteness, with all their natural shape unaltered.

A striking example of this is seen in the green moss. Large patches of living moss are seen in close touch with petrified portions of the same plant or growth. To stand on the top and look at the colouring of stalagmite, stalactite and all the strange bewildering shapes is to regard a kaleidoscope of colour, wherein the tints vary with the changing sunlight, filtering through the trembling green leaves. Pink and grey, white and brown, green and prussian blue—all these are to be seen.

And while the guide prepares and trims and lights his lamps—still with that suggestive rope round his shoulder—it is not out of place to speculate as to where, in the shadows at the bottom of the cavern, the opening leading to the treasures of Alladin may be.

To the right there is a darkness and depth which does not attract. We turn away from there, glancing a little nervously at that rope of the guide's. Then in the centre of the floor of the cave, is a rock-slide which seems to have come out of a small over-hung hole in the far side of the cave just above the floor. To the left there is a slightly deeper floor with obviously no thoroughfare offering. It looks like a case for the rope. This idea is emphasised by the guide, who, having lighted his lamp, moves towards the horrid depth. He picks up a stone.

'Listen! It will bounce four times.'
He throws the stone. He is quite right.

'Now we'll go down,' says the guide, and he turns cheerfully away towards the other end of the cave. After the horror of that deep note we would gladly leap down those lesser slopes leading towards the rock-slide. But such haste is not encouraged. We step upon what appears to be wet, slippery rocks and find them dry and steady, their transparent covering made brilliant by glittering mica specks which give them a Christmas tree effect.

The water dripping from the roof falls in many places upon circular rocks—surfaces that are absolutely as level as they could be made. Trial by a spirit level has proved this.

In every case the drip falls right in the centre of the sand rock, which is growing steadily in the way stalagmites grow, but with the flat surfaces instead of pointed ones. There is one other strange formation, too. Round, white stones lie in heaps. They look handy to be lifted. Alas! They are immovable.

Bunches of them resembling bunches of grapes invite. But they, too, are solid stone. Above the rock slide there is a huge hole, quite a respectable tunnel mouth awaiting. And into this tunnel we plunge, with the light of acetylene lamps to guide our steps and the rope still around the guide's shoulders.

'We are going down the Devil's Staircase, now,' he says. We agree, and prepare to descend into some nether depths which have grown upon our peering vision. A wire rope fixed to a peg, curves itself over the edge and is lost to sight.

The guide fixes the hemp rope to the same peg and goes scraping downwards, holding the rope by one hand and the lamp in the other. The devil who

made this staircase was evidently in a jovial mood, for there is nothing terrible about it, and it will soon be replaced by a humanly designed stairway. Below this declivity, the cave goes on and on, with even greater beauties than occur upstairs. And the last spectacle of all includes a quaint little white figure, perched in the centre of an opening near the roof of the cavern, like a sentinel of the underworld.

To retrace our steps up his majesty's stairway and along to the entrance is easy work; and then there comes the most wonderful of all the sights of this wonderful cave, a vision which well illustrates the meaning of the title 'Sunshine Cave.'

Along the dark tunnel we move till a gleam, it is more of a shadow than a gleam, of green light shows we are approaching the entrance. Presently we can see into the great entrance cavern or hall. It is filled with a soft, mysterious, green light, and across the arch and well inside it, four misty bars of faint colour are stretched, like cigar smoke in a still room.

So soft, so ethereal are those misty bars, and tinted very delicately, while the sunshine shimmers through the green leaves and the radiance reflects in a dozen tints and colours in roof and wall. And so we wander slowly upwards by another way, finding new treasures by the way.

At last we stand again above the yawning hole and wonder about it. It is so black, unreflecting in all the quivering radiance of the great grotto. But the sunshine is reassuring and the rope has no terror now. So we stand at the gate of Rawhiti (the sunshine) cave and look back at its mysteries. It is a place to be seen again and again, for the light is always changing and the green leaves never fade.



Jane Baird in Rawhiti Cave. Photo: Jane Baird.