

## LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK CAPRICORN CAVES, QUEENSLAND

Ann Augusteyn

Twenty five years ago the Augusteyn family took over the ownership of Capricorn Caves from the Olsens who had discovered the caves back in 1881. Over one hundred people attended the celebrations in the Cathedral Cave, Robert Augusteyn prepared an excellent audio visual overview of the past twenty five years followed by a sneak preview of the new LED lights being installed by John Augusteyn. The evening concluded with a buffet dinner in the function area, speeches, photographs and the usual cutting of the cake ceremony.



L-R: Robert, Ann, Helen (Helmsworth) and John Augusteyn

### IN ISLAND OR A BAT CAVE Tourist caves on the market

"HOLY Bat Cave, Batman, the bat caves are up for sale!" Australia's largest freehold tourist caves, 34km north of Rockhampton, which are home to five varieties of bats, including the rare ghost bat, are on the market for

Olsen's Capricorn Caverns are on a 33.4ha property which includes a four-bedroom house with kiosk and an ablutions block.

Olsen's Capricorn Caverns are the largest privately owned tourist caves in Australia and have been operated by descendants of the discoverer, John Olsen, for 103 years.

Real estate agent Mr Greg Prange, of Raine and Horne Rockhampton, said the Capricorn Caverns could handle more than 400 visitors an hour.

"Olsen's Capricorn Caverns present an opportunity for a purchaser to own the largest of only three privately owned tourist caves in Australia," Mr Prange said.

There was unlimited potential "for future development in an atmosphere and lifestyle that is certainly unique in Australia, if not the world", he said.

Mr Prange said there was a potential tourist influx of thousands from the Iwasaki resort at Yeppoon and there was potential for a corral park and camping area to be built on the site.



He said there were other cave systems on the property that were not open to the public.

The property is exempt from mining and the State Government has declared it an official fauna sanctuary.

The present owners are Rodney and Annette Olsen. Mrs Olsen said the limestone caves were renowned for their kaleidoscope colors and the spectacular effects created during the summer solstice.

The caves were geologically unique in Australia because they were created by rainwater, Mrs Olsen said. Other tourist caves were subterranean river caves.

— GLENN SCHLOSS.

### Looking back

The last twenty five years have been an amazing journey. The family was full of excitement but very naïve with regard to what lay ahead when we took over Olsen Capricorn Caverns, as they were then named, in 1988. The property needed tender loving care. The only infrastructure was a kiosk/tea room which doubled as a family home. All roads leading to the caves were gravel and every time it rained the entrance to the kiosk flooded.

Ken not only had the vision for the property but also the technical skills and muscle power to execute his dreams. His achievements included the construction of cabins, 12 room lodge, high ropes course, climbing wall as well as a wheelchair ramp into the caves. All of this underpins the current success and sustainability of Capricorn Caves. The diversification of product from "just cave tours" to outdoor recreation and education programs, school camps and weddings, environmental management, cave lighting projects and all the ongoing refurbishments sustains staff employment all the year round. Assistance has been given to Queensland Museum's palaeontology work in the caves with visionary plans for the future. As the past is revealed and the future planned, the two are inextricably linked, as we see with regard to cave lighting.

A tribute book was passed round for signing and this is now a much treasured memento of a special gathering of friends, family, staff and colleagues. The messages were overwhelming and a heartfelt thanks to all those

who contributed. In response to a request from the Editor the following is an extract from the tribute book:

*“Congratulations on 25 years! Your amazing efforts have really done wonders for the caves, especially their long term conservation, study and promotion of such endemic and fragile habitats. Providing such a unique experience for every single visitor and the fact that you have been so hands on with the place is a testament to your passion and care and love for it. Your support of our palaeontological research has been outstanding and so very inclusive that we all consider it a home away from home.”*

Fondest wishes, Scott Hocknull and the Queensland Museum palaeoteam.



*Scott Hucknull at a dig site in Capricorn Caves  
Photo: Steve Bourne*

### Stories from the past

With reference to Sasa Kennedy’s article “The Memory keepers” in the December ACKMA journal No. 92, we are in the process of capturing the stories from the Olsen era and there are many surprises. Kelvin Olsen, fourth generation of the Olsen family, is currently researching and recording his own experiences at Olsen Caves. His research has revealed that the Norwegian Johannes Olsen was in fact born in Sweden; he was not present when his sons discovered the entrance to the caves, which probably occurred in 1881 and not 1882 as all the tourist pamphlets state. Kelvin recalls many fascinating anecdotes from his past. I will conclude with one account from his unpublished Memories of Olsen’s Capricorn Caverns.

*“In the early 1950s only one system of caves was electrically lit. Power was provided by a small single cylinder petrol engine coupled to a 32v DC generator. There was no battery bank to provide emergency lighting in the event of engine failure. For several months as an 8 year old my job was to sit during tours and continually adjust the fuel needle valve to keep it running.*

*I got to know when the engine was about to quit and would urgently adjust the needle, where the tour group was when lights were switched on and off and stop the engine when the party left the caves. I would then go to the office await the next party when I would once again disappear through the scrub to start my generator monitoring duties. “*

What 8 year old today would sit for hours undertaking such a responsible job?

### Looking Forward:

Twenty years later the same Kelvin introduced a new lighting system into the caves using 32v tungsten lights. This system has served the caves well for 40 years but is now in urgent need of replacement. Fortunately a TIRF (Tourism Industry Regional Development Fund) grant was obtained in 2013 to relight the Visitor Experience. The new LED lights are brighter, cooler and the use of solar power should significantly reduce energy costs. John Augusteyn, with the assistance of caves staff, when they can be spared from guiding duties, together with technical advice from Dave Rowling, is working hard to place the lights and run cables to CBus™ boxes. History repeats itself! But for now, stay posted for the official opening of “Relighting the Visitor Experience at Capricorn Caves”.



*Family photo in the 1990s  
Photo: Ann Augusteyn*