

HUNTING SIGNATURES

by Darryl McDowell

Go caving with a member of The Rover Speleological Society (RSS) and you will probably find yourself looking not at cave decorations, but at graffiti!

[Why is this so? Have the members of RSS finally succumbed to cave madness or were they always like this? It all started a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away Oops, sorry, wrong story]

It all started a number of years ago as a project of historical interest to identify people who visited Jenolan Caves - either local residents or early colonists and government officials who had the time and resources to organise expeditions to caves. The project has expanded to include possible links to other cave areas with anecdotal evidence of signatures of the same people in different cave areas.

RSS accepted the invitation of Ernst Holland to become involved in this project at Jenolan in 1994. The scope of the project includes surveying all the caves, with the exception of the tourist caves, at Jenolan for historically significant signatures and associated dates. The project was planned to take 10 years. Rob Whyte of UNSWSS is documenting the tourist cave signatures.

The identification of the early cavers is to be determined with the assistance of JCHAPS - The Jenolan Caves Historical And Preservation Society. The base reference document we are using is "The Caves of Jenolan 2: The Northern Limestone" edited by Bruce Welch 1976 (SUSS).

OK, so that's the credits done - now lets get into the interesting part of the story: methodology - now don't anyone get too excited! The methodology is quite simple - go caving, look for signatures, rejoice when you find some! - simple!

Obviously when we find a historically important signature the information needs to be recorded.

But first, what constitutes a "historically significant" signature? After some preliminary surveys, we decided that signatures or graffiti that date prior to 1965 are historically significant.

So, this begs the question - Are people born before 1965 historically significant or just old? Of course the other side of the coin is that maybe people born after 1965 are not significant! Now that I have insulted everyone in the room, let's move on.

The information to be collected has three parts.

- Firstly, the cave location is updated on the field photocopy of the location map where there is an error or some confusion.
- Next, the signature location, within the cave, is marked on the cave map and numbered for reference.
- Finally, the details of the signature are recorded onto a project sheet similar to those shown.

These details include the cave name and number as per the book. Both are included for ease of reference. Some people know caves by name, others by number.

The location reference number as marked on the cave map is recorded. The height above the floor is marked and the surface that the signature is on is recorded - for example: wall, shawl, stalagmite.

This results in the marked map and information sheet being needed to locate the signature at a later time. This provides an effective method to revisit signatures whilst affording some level of security.

The material and method used to create the signature are next recorded. Common materials and methods are charcoal, pencil, carbide soot, and scratched into the surface. This is extremely useful in ascertaining the most likely date that a signature was created especially when an abbreviated date is used. For example, a signature may include a date of 7/3/54 which could refer to either 1854 or 1954.

[And you thought the Y2K bug was a problem!]

The material and method used also assist in the authentication of dated signatures.

One of the problems in hunting signatures is being able to read what is actually written when a signature is faded or damaged, which often happens to charcoal and pencil graffiti. This can include looking from various angles and lighting from various directions and with different lights. All this is done with as many pairs of eyes as possible looking to decipher the subject signature.

Next item recorded is the surveyors interpretation, or best guess, as to what is written. This will be used for subsequent spreadsheet entry.

A copy of the exact details of the signature is made including gaps and all marks. This is a sketch of the signature and we particularly look for style of writing in order to date signatures and authenticate dated signatures.

Lastly, the trip details and those surveying are recorded. This is to assist with later clarifications of the data if needed.

So that's the methodology. But what have learned so far?

The project is definitely a long term one as correlation of the data using a spreadsheet is yet to be done. The physical surveying is a long process especially as it is being done on a voluntary basis. There are however a number of interesting facts that we have discovered so far which we would like to share with you.

A fascinating effect of this project on the behaviour of members of the society is that when we are exploring caves we are likely to observe signatures far more readily than you would otherwise expect - you might say we have become graffiti aware.

One example of this was a visit to Glass Cave at Jenolan which was an exploratory, or recreational visit. The trip very quickly turned into a signature gathering one when a whole wall of signatures was discovered. So absorbed were the party members that they showed little interest in assisting one member who was having difficulty in descending from a climb he had undertaken.

There are various reasons for placing signatures. Some are just to record the fact of visitation by the person. These signatures are often in places where they become covered or damaged as little thought is put into the location.

Some signatures record discovery such as those of Wyburd and Wilson. Such signatures are in a prominent location but usually well placed to avoid damage.

Then there are signatures from people such as the infamous G.Taylor who generally climbed to the highest point of the highest aven, and then precariously balanced whilst placing his signature to record his achievement.

Sometimes copycatting occurs at locations where one person includes their address and then subsequent signatures also include their address.

One amusing example of a signature at Jenolan is of a honeymooning couple who placed their initials - she at first incorrectly, having to cross out and change her last initial which had only recently changed!

Signatures in protected areas within the caves are incredibly well preserved to the point that the small chips from the lead of a pencil are still present on such signatures.

Sometimes signatures reveal just how accessible some caves were in years past, before we learned the importance of preserving them and limiting access.

Some of the interesting signatures and background that we have discovered include the beginning of Brett Whiteley's artistic career at 9 years of age at Jenolan. This particular piece of graffiti also includes his parents' signatures.

In Carey's Cave at Wee Jasper, the signatures have been correlated to local residents using the school records. Interestingly, some of the signatures here are being covered over by new calcite growth.

The signatures found in Swallow Cave at Cudgong appear to belong to local families, on initial investigation.

At Wellington, miners of phosphate during the war left their mark along with overseas visitors who were collecting samples.

The famous Wyburd, Edwards and Wyburd signatures that appear in numerous caves at Jenolan can also be found at Tuglow Caves.

So where are we going from here? Other than the continuation of collection of data from the field, the information will be correlated into a database allowing it to be sorted and compared by location, date, person and initials. This will enable further authentication and identification. We will then be looking for any other interesting or revealing information to assist with the identification of the early visitors to the caves.

The project has the capacity to extend to all cave areas with the possibility of revealing many interesting facts about early cave exploration.

So next time you see a signature in a cave - record the details and send it to us at RSS ---- Happy Hunting!!