

Cave History Presentations

Augusta's Jewel Cave from a Caving Perspective

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The many inaccurate articles written about early history of the Jewel cave will add to difficulties future researchers of history will face in determining fact from fiction. It is not intended here to detail a history of the caves exploration, save to say, a factual account of the caves exploration can be found as the feature article in the June 1958 edition of 'Walkabout' magazine.

In caving terms, the Jewel Cave has to be classed as a major discovery. As caves go, it has had an unusually quick rise to prominence from its first known entrance in early 1957, to a fully operational tourist cave in December 1959. To compress time even further, the first exploration beyond its entrance pitch did not take place until February 1958.

The three explorers were an unconnected group, unknown to each other previously; comprising of a local 'man of all trades' working as a hairdresser, cave guide, to professional fishing; a young geology student with a keen interest in caves; and an unemployed wandering caving nobody from the East, with membership of an isolated caving club that had been shunned by the ASF. None of the three had any contact with ASF codes or practices written or unwritten.

Exploration was not difficult or haphazard, progress in a number of areas was confined to single file pathways, which remained that way for a number of years. Careful study of the cave floor, and time out to examine the myriads of formations slowed exploration. It was immediately obvious to the explorers that this cave needed care and protection, and that lake levels had been both higher and lower in past years.

For local political reasons, the explorers did not immediately reveal the find. When the find was announced, with State news in short supply the WA Newspapers Ltd. gave the cave the full treatment. News of the cave spread overseas. A tourist in England was surprised to see a photograph of one of the explorers in a London newspaper. A casual comment by an explorer to the media that 'this cave is in the class of Jenolan', intensified interest. At the time of publicity, only the three explorers had been in the cave; the level of public interest was surprising.

The explorers failed to name the cave, resulting in it being referred to as 'The New Cave', right up to near the entry of the first tourists. This caused confusion with other cave discoveries in the same area.

The result of all the publicity was swift action by the Augusta Margaret River Tourist Bureau. Their first action was to immediately take control of the cave, claiming the entrance came just within the boundary of the small Moondyne Cave Reserve, which was under the Bureau's control. A solid grill with a locked opening was installed over the entrance, and entry to the cave restricted.

There was no need of other than a few bearings to determine the cave extended beyond the boundary of the reserve. The Bureau considered it important that the reserve be extended to cover the cave's known and possible unknown extent. They took steps to bring this about. The cave being virtually hemmed in on three sides by low land, sand hills and Moondyne Cave, the reserve when eventually enlarged, mainly extended in the remaining direction. By chance, the increased reserve included the entrance to Easter Cave.

The Bureau president was considered by the locals as a 'blow in'. However, he had many contacts in state government of both persuasions, and with the help of continuing publicity, was able to gain government action.

The first visit of officials from Perth to see what all the interest was about, turned out to be a fizzer. They declined to enter the cave by the means available. Further the explorer with the means of gaining entry was not always in the district, and indicated a return to the east. The rare cable ladders stayed with him as they were in demand elsewhere.

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To overcome these problems the Bureau engaged two of the explorers to find and prepare an alternative entry to the cave, that did not require the use of cable ladders. This long forgotten second entrance to the cave was completed in six days, and consisted of a ground level lock-up trap door, two fixed bush ladders and a fixed rope hand line used as an aid in negotiating a low height slope into the entrance cavern. Progress down and up this slope caused angst with some people. It now has a concrete plug to seal it off. As originally developed it had to be dug out. A number of people who entered the cave by this entrance have thought it to be the original entrance.

The Bureau was not in a position to fund any development of the cave for tourism. With no chance of funding from the local shire, a deputation from the Bureau, an explorer, and led by the local member of state parliament approached the Minister for Lands to seek aid from the state government. With the cave in a safe opposition electorate and a state election in the wind, the deputation left the meeting feeling dubious about any assistance.

The Minister immediately formed a committee of three to conduct a feasibility study of the cave for tourist purposes. Together with available explorers, the committee visited the cave to come to grips with the many intangibles that needed to be taken into account to enable tourist access to the caves features, and the all-important total cost involved. The committee relied on the explorers for much more than just finding the way around the cave. It was soon agreed that initially tours should be confined to the Entrance, Organ Pipe, Camel and Jewel Casket caverns and that the superb reflections in the Organ Pipe cavern lake should be shown off as one of the prime features of the cave.

The major discussion was the selection of a site for the tourist access tunnel. The least expensive method was enlarging the original entrance to accommodate lighthouse type spiral stairs, an option favoured by some members of the Bureau. All agreed it too risky to interfere with the entrance cavern roof in view of its large size.

Another option was to drive a tunnel into the far end of the No1 lead. This would have had the advantage of keeping the later built infrastructures away from above the cave. This was discarded as it would require walkways over the lake, detracting from one of the main features, the reflections.

It was decided that a tunnel be driven into a near surface cavern at one end of the entrance cavern, and to gain roof height on a slope into the said cavern. With many 'ifs' and 'buts' an all up cost was determined to cover the entire project involving a housed generating plant, tunnel, walkways, steps, viewing platforms, handrails, lighting and enlarging some access-limiting restrictions within the cave.

This completed the brief of the committee and for the next six months all went their various ways, the explorers keeping in touch with each other by mail. The Bureau was keen for the project to proceed and their president hoped the explorers would agree to become the principle contractors. Without funding they could do nothing except contact the minister and his department, and with the aid of the local explorer, taking anyone of influence through the cave. The WA Newspapers Ltd. maintained pressure on the government to develop the cave, going as far as an editorial in 'The West Australian' on the subject. Finally the government made a grant of two thirds of the cost of the project on condition the Bureau raise the remaining one third before any work could commence. In this the Bureau successfully raised a loan from the Rural and Industries bank with nine locals signing up as guarantors.

After lengthy discussions by phone and mail, two of the explorers agreed to develop the new cave, and operate the unlit Moondyne tourist cave on a reduced basis during the construction period. The third explorer wisely decided to continue with his studies.

Meetings were held with the re-formed committee in Perth, prior to work commencing in late December 1958, the start of the holiday season. The committee which now included the Bureau's president, could not visit the site until early February, a situation which left the contractors to themselves during this period.

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Starting from ground level, a sloping trench, wide enough to allow entry of a landrover, was dug and at a length of fifty two feet and a depth of twenty four feet a good face was encountered to start tunnelling. Attention turned to inside the cave pending the arrival of drilling equipment.

Fortunately long timbers for platforms, stairs and raised walkways could be taken, with some difficulty, into the cave via the temporary entrance.

Augusta is a popular holiday venue for people working on the land. Men accustomed to hard physical work often became bored while holidaying, and welcomed the chance to assist in the construction of walkways, platforms and steps. In due course a number of walkways and viewing sites were completed within the entrance cavern. It was not long before word of these activities did the rounds, resulting in the Bureau placing a ban on anyone entering the cave, other than the explorers. The Bureau's concerns related to public liability which they viewed very much like we now experience today.

Cave access restrictions caused ill feeling between the contractors and visiting cavers with heated encounters. Many cavers of the day felt they had a right to enter any cave they wished. Being on site, the contractors became the first line of contact.

Some of the loan guarantors kept a close eye on progress reports as they could ill afford the bank to call up the guarantee if anything went amiss. One Bureau board member thought the tunnel was heading in the wrong direction; his concerns raised additional fears amongst the more anxious guarantors.

The government committee and contractors formed an excellent working relationship. The tunnel went through some unstable ground, which caused a drain on monies earmarked for lighting.

Three hundred and sixty seven days from commencement of work, the cave opened for tourism on Boxing Day of 1959. December in Augusta was the build- up to the 'three month wonder period' of tourism which many depended on for their survival. With thoughts on other things, the opening caught the Bureau short, as no surface items for ticket sale etc. were in place. The contractors came up with an old battered caravan to serve this purpose. Over the next six weeks the contractors turned guides, shepherded twelve thousand, six hundred visitors through the cave. Any worries guarantors had about the Bureau meeting the loan soon evaporated.

The cave was officially opened by the W.A. State Premier in May 1960.

Unfortunately television and documentary film crews played havoc with cave wiring over the first two years of the caves operation.

FOOTNOTE

This paper has been taken from a detailed account of the Jewel Cave exploration and development in preparation for the Western Australian Government Archives.