

Cave History Presentations

Abridged Oral History Interview with Mr Peter Smith

Busselton Historical Society Oral History Group

The Busselton Historical Society has recently re-commenced its oral history interview programme. On being notified of the Cave History Seminar at UnderWAY, they decided as one of their first projects to interview Mr Peter Smith, a former cave guide at Yallingup. The interview was conducted by Delys Forrest, who kindly provided a copy of the tape for playing at the conference.

My name is Delys Forrest, and I'm interviewing Peter Smith on the Ngilgi Caves at Yallingup. I'd now like to introduce Peter Smith, to give his account of what he remembers and knows of the caves.

Thank you. I'm Peter Smith from Dunsborough, and I was involved for 9 years from 1970 as a guide in Ngilgi's Cave at Yallingup. Now it was first discovered... the hole was first discovered by Amelia Curtis and a friend who were riding through to the beach in clear country in 1891, but it wasn't until 1900 that the cave was entered. And in those days they had to improvise with rope ladders and lanterns, blackboy tops which give a good light, and slowly they found more than one cavern to investigate. However, Caves House had to be built first before we could have visitors, and so until Caves House was built preparations were made for the entry of the cave. Uh...

DF: Tell me about what Mr Keenan did in 1960.

Oh, in 1960... Mr Keenan was the contractor to replace the steps leading into the cave. Quite a job he had, and I would like to read Ray Keenan's account of how he did it.

Firstly work in the Yallingup Cave – it would have been 1959–60. The framework supporting the steps had to be completely renewed, so 8 x 8 inch sawn timber... sawn jarrah... was chosen as it was easier to work on the square, flat surfaces all round. If I remember right the timbers were 18 ft long and were straight off the saw. They were dumped in the car park, which in those days was not far from the cave; braces and girts had to be fitted in the scanty space in the cave. Every bolt-hole in both girts and braces had to be bored in all timbers, including the 8 x 8 uprights, so you'll understand that there wasn't much room for error.

A fresh concrete pad had to be poured at the bottom of the hole for the pylons to rest on, and a metal strut set in the concrete to bolt the pylons to. I devised a method of getting the concrete down the hole by making a kibble, such as are used in the mines, from 12-gallon oil drums, a robust handle from half-inch mild steel being necessary. When on the farm we used to use an old Dreadnought tree-puller, and although it was rather prehistoric, I could see the possibility of using it for a winch to lower the kibble full of concrete. Once emptied, the kibble could be raised to the surface with the tree-puller in top gear. I had a wire rope that would easily reach to the bottom of the hole from where we anchored the tree-puller to a tree above the cave. The rope was taken through a block tied to the roof of the cubby-house that somebody had very conveniently built over the entrance to the cave. This enabled us to drop the kibble perpendicularly down the hole. We set the foundations out and boxed them in and the system worked like a bought one.

Charles Ellis, who was on the tree-puller, had a brainwave about getting the loaded kibble down the hole quicker than by winding it down on the handle. He obtained a piece of 4 x 2 which he stuck into the shaft. He took the strain on the lever of the tree-puller, then releasing the pull, let the kibble down... blind down the hole, exerting what pressure was necessary to control the descent of the loaded kibble. Now likewise, timbers were lowered by using the gears on the tree-puller. We could easily manoeuvre the timbers into the required position. I congratulated myself that all the holes I had to bore in the timbers, they fitted exactly, with only one being a quarter-hole out. Further along the cave we had to renew some timbers under a walkway. This was tricky as the timbers had to be manoeuvred around a corner, but

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for this persistence prevailed, and the job was completed to everyone's satisfaction. Incidentally, all the holes had to be hand-bored by brace and bit.

Now I was associated with the cave for 9 years, and that is a short time in 100 years of cave viewing. So I'll tell you what I know of those few years. Now Joy, my wife, happened to be the manageress of the committee, and she wanted extra guides as the population increased and extra tours per day came on. I assisted the first two years intermittently, until guides retired. After two years, full-time.

Fridays were closed before I started. They were guided tours in those days, and there were coloured lights in the cave also in those days, but they were changed after I became a guide. We didn't get much in the line of wages – we were paid peanuts compared with today – but we did our job. Eventually guides were stationed along the routes instead of taking groups along; they had their guide sheet with them, and numbered at various stages along the pathway. The best Easter I can remember was Saturday, Easter Saturday, 800-odd came through, and on the Sunday 1070 people came through, so you could see there were just lines of people everywhere.

Many changes took place about that time. We had walkie-talkies.... it didn't work above ground so telephones were installed and they were quite successful. And different lighting and rewiring of the cave took place. The whole of the old wiring had to be taken out in pieces – handfuls –because some of the passages are pretty narrow. Anyway the contractor, Turle, was quite successful in taking all that out and rewiring the whole cave with white lights, if I remember rightly. Now when I began there were only toilets on the area near the parking area, and there was much vandalism from the hippies in those days. I saw tearooms constructed during my 9 years, and that entailed having water tanks... rainwater tanks built, otherwise we may not have had enough water from Caves House.

Inside the caves there was also vandalism. Now when a boy I recall the Angel Wings as we entered the main cavern. They were beautiful stalactites. It is said a member of a school group got under the wire netting protecting them and grabbed a wing and it broke off, and it is said he lost a finger in that event. Another formation nearby was treated likewise by a schoolteacher who had to take several steps from the path to vandalise a large piece hanging by a small piece of formation.

DF: Did that have a name, Peter, that piece?

No, it did not, as far as I know. It was just a large stalactite hanging from a small neck. Now an overseas diplomatic tour smashed a good shawl within easy reach. This happened about when I started, but it was not known who smashed it because they were in a long line being guided. The guide was ahead, of course. There were once two tree roots in the main cavern, but over the time each died and fell, but new ones are showing at present.

Now, when a boy, everyone had to walk up to the caves, a kilometre or so. It was known as Lovers' Walk. There was a barrel to catch water off a small roof over the entrance, which was lower than the present entry by about a metre.

Various covers and gates were used. The largest roof was built in 1975. It was called a 'hyperbolic paraboloid', which looked impressive. Recent years it was removed to the nearby museum as it was considered obstructive to cave ventilation. The greatest change we noticed was the slow cessation of water drips throughout, until now it is virtually a dry cave.

Now torches came in when electricity was supplied to the cave in the early days, and before that they used magnesium flares and lanterns and the tops of blackboys, which gives a good light. Torches were carried always as there were blackouts, and that made removing a tour from the lower end of the cave a tedious job. It took anything up to a half-hour to get the people out. Now a set of emergency lights are used on the floor of the walkways.

Now my legs told me to retire eventually, and I wasn't sorry to cease. Now there's one or two places in the cave which is called a crawl, where you have to crawl, and Harney's Pinch which was a very tight passageway until it was blown back in the 1960s. It's a little bit better now. Further on in the main cavern you've got the Jewel Casket and the Arab's Tent; they are the major ones to be seen.

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Now in conclusion I'd like to tell you a little story about Golgotha Cave at Forest Grove. Now in the early days of settlement a skeleton was found in that cave with a musket lying beside it. It was believed the skeleton would have laid there for about 30 years before white settlement. Now the musket was taken and sent back to Amsterdam where it was traced and that would be marked in the early... or in the 1600s, thereabouts. So that is the story of Golgotha. It is a large cavern which can be now entered, I understand, and it's just one of the many caves to be found in this area.

The New Caves of South Mole Creek, in Northern Tasmania

Arthur Clarke

ABSTRACT

The limestone and caves near Mole Creek have been known since the late 1820's when surveyors with the Van Diemens Land Company began their "westward" exploration. The first reports of cave exploration in the Mole Creek karst area date back to 1829 when caves were "discovered" in the Chudleigh area. The earliest descriptions of the "Chudleigh Caves": two neighbouring systems: Honeycomb Caverns and Wet Cave systems are recorded from 1833 and most of the cave descriptions in subsequent publications till 1878 relate to these two caves near Chudleigh. These "Chudleigh Caves" were known by several names during the course of their history. Some 40-50 years after being discovered by early settlers, the Chudleigh Caves became referred to as the "Old Caves" following the discovery of some new (initially unnamed) caves at South Mole Creek in the mid to late 1870's. This "new" area was described as being quite near to the Chudleigh district, but in actual fact the two cave areas were some distant apart and were thus considered separately as the "new caves" and the "old caves". In 1883, Higgins and Petterd described the Tasmanian Cave Spider (*Hickmania troglodytes*) from one of these unmanned "new" caves at South Mole Creek. In 1888, in his treatise on the Geology of Tasmania, R.M. Johnston describes the cave site with the recently described spider as one of the "New Caves in the Chudleigh neighbourhood" on the land of Mr Pickett. Although its location and name (if any) was a mystery, the cave was also known as a site recommended for further study because it contained a rich deposit of mammalian remains. In 1921, Baldocks Cave is identified as one of two caves in the Mole Creek district that was studied intensely, due to the presence of a rich deposit of mammalian remains. Literature sources and records from the Lands and Titles Office in Hobart indicate that the "New Caves" of the Chudleigh district were principally found in the Sassafras Creek area during the 1870's and 1880's, including Baldocks Cave that was opened for tourism privately, around 1890. Other caves known from this area - and believed to have been discovered during this time - are Sassafras, Glowworm and Cyclops Caves.