

The Ideal Health and Holiday Resort: An Investigation into the Development of the Caves Area at Yallingup, Western Australia as a tourist destination

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The coastline of Western Australia is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating from around 6000 years ago. Previously the continent, part of the original Gondwana, included much of the land now under water and forming part of the Continental shelf. Long after the drowning of the coastline, it came to be occupied by plants, animals and eventually people.

The Archaeological evidence in limestone caves such as that at Devil's Lair, which lies in the same cave systems as the Yallingup and Mammoth Caves of Margaret River, indicates a long term aboriginal use of the South West area in particular and Australia in general¹. Evidence from the Orchestra Shell Cave, adjacent to the Yanchep group of caves, confirms this occupation. However, not all caves were occupied and used as shelter by the natives. In the 1840s, when pastoralist Edward Landor stopped to water his horse at Yanchep, his aboriginal companion refused to enter the area, fearing a "chinga", or spirit being, from the nearby caves. From this and other examples it is clear that caves could, and did, become part of local aboriginal mythology and belief systems².

European explorers too wove caves into their story of exploration. French sailors in the *Gros Venture* with explorer St Allouarn in 1772 speculated that the presence of an obvious cave in the midst of the limestone cliffs along the South West coast might be the product of man's activities³ but, following the settlement of the coast by British opportunists in 1829, little attention was paid to Western Australia's hidden landscapes until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Surveyor and explorer, Lt. George Grey, is reputed to have first discovered the caves at Yanchep, just to the north of Perth, although the first authenticated reference is by John Septimus Roe, Surveyor General, in 1841⁴. Roe led a team of explorers, including the then Governor, Hutt, and wrote up an account of his exploits for the Western Australian newspaper, the *Inquirer*. In the South, Fanny Bussell, a member of the pioneering Bussell family of South Western Australia, is believed to have been the first European to discover the Lake Cave at Yallingup, while looking for strayed cattle. Caves in the Augusta region had been previously discovered in 1848 by local settler Edward Hester⁵.

Despite these early discoveries, further exploration of both cave sites was delayed until closer to the turn of the century by the sheer necessities of life, proving climate, soils and crops, and creating towns and cities. Life in the South West was marginal at best, with many settlers leaving the southern Augusta area for wider, clearer land slightly further north. Around the settlements of Perth and Fremantle, settlers found the soil sandy and difficult to cultivate. So hard was the struggle that in the late 1840's, at a time when other colonies were eschewing convict labour, such labour was seen as the only solution, and in 1850 transportation of convicts to the Swan River colony became a reality. Transportation ceased in 1868, and the apparent stagnation of the colony would have continued had it not been for the growing market in beef and pastoral pursuits just to the north of Perth, and the sudden development of a timber export industry in the South West.

The jarrah and karri forests of the South West became one of the major resources of the Swan River Colony. Resistant to most forms of pest, and the dreaded marine teredo worm which bored through lesser timbers, Western Australian timbers were exported for use in ships, building and even as road material. The export of timber required the development of an extensive support system, including sawyers and loggers, timber mills and railways. Local hero and bushranger Moondyne Joe is reputed to have worked at a local mill. His legendary ability to escape from any confinement, predating Houdini's reputation, was apparently tested by pranksters who lowered him into one of the known caves in the Yallingup/ Margaret River area sometime in the 1880's⁶. It must be presumed he escaped without incident, to go on to other, better documented adventures.

Cave History Presentations

As well as providing necessary infrastructure, timber entrepreneurs such as MC Davies endeavoured to be seen as progressive and humanitarian employers, utilising the necessary rail to provide a transport and access system to provide workers with holidays by the sea, and annual picnics where timber workers and their families could enjoy a day by the sea to bathe and sunbake. As early as 1910, there was a boarding house, catering for the holiday trade at Flinders Bay, in the far South West.

Further north, around Yanchep, land leases were made available for grazing purposes, and cattle and horses were fed and watered on their journeys to and from the markets and shipping in Fremantle and the pastoral regions from which they came. Several pastoralists apparently commented on the hollow sounds made by their horses hooves as they passed over the extensive, and mostly hidden, cave system⁷. Major landowners and pastoralists such as Edward Hammersley, entrepreneur and father of Margaret Forrest, wife of Sir John Forrest, bought land and developed large holiday homes in the barren coastal area between Yanchep and Perth⁸. Horse riding, bathing and exploring were the summertime leisure activities of Western Australia's landed gentry.

Cave development and exploration became a possibility around the turn of the century. During 1900 Colonel Ernest Le Souef, who holidayed in the Margaret River area when taking a break from developing a Zoo at South Perth, surveyed several caves in the Yallingup/Margaret River area with his close friend and local inhabitant, Tim Connolly⁹. Yallingup Cave itself is believed to have been discovered and explored by Edward Dawson, who later became the guide to the Cave, a post he held for over 30 years. Two years later A.W. Milligan, a lawyer from Perth, visited friends at Yanchep and was shown the caves there by Harold White, who owned property in the vicinity. Milligan made a recommendation for preservation of the Yanchep Caves, and the letter was duly passed to a newly formed Caves Board.

The Caves Board had been created under the powers of the Parks and Reserves Act of 1895, which set aside land "for the purposes of controlling and managing parks and reserves". Control of these parks and reserves were to be vested in the various Boards established for the purpose. The first such Board, established with the Act, had responsibility for Kings Park only. The Zoological Gardens Board was created three years later, and the Caves Board in 1901. Boards created under the Act were to "improve or ornament such parks or reserves and do all such things as are calculated to adapt such parks and reserves to the purposes of public recreation, health and enjoyment". Under the Act the use of the land for quarries, dams, timber cutting, grazing and even Zoos was all approved, as was, apparently, the construction of guest houses and hotels.

Work commenced on a guest house at Yallingup, under the auspices of the Caves Board in 1902. The hotel was placed near the Caves Reserves, declared in 1901, and within walking distance of a good beach. It was provided with a cow, chickens, pigs and a vegetable garden so that guests would have fresh food at all times. The main house was built of wood, using timber cut from the Busselton area, and was constructed on-site by local builder Robert Donald. The bricks for the chimney were made on the site, using local clay, and were apparently so porous that they were only passed by the Public Works Inspector after it was agreed to cover them in cement render¹⁰.

A liquor licence was also suggested for the site, and met considerable opposition from a variety of sources. The biggest concern of all those against the licence was that the bar would attract men working in the various timber mills in the area.

Permit the sale of intoxicating liquor in this isolated place, and the Cave-House will be run chiefly for the sale of it; spirits will be offered to cyclists and other so-called 'sports' as an inducement for them to make it a place of call on Sundays with the result that the Caves House will degenerate into a place of debauchery¹¹.

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The rhetoric surrounding the establishment and construction of the Hotel concentrated on the healthy activities and environment which visitors could experience, "those who may be desirous of obtaining a quiet rest and beneficial change of air." It also stressed the family nature of such entertainment, and sought to place it beyond entertainment to an almost holy experience¹². In his strongly worded personal argument against the licence Caves Board member Mr May referred to "....the Caves Houses where fathers and husbands should be able to leave their wives and children in perfect peace and safety - as in a place of sanctity." Despite these arguments the licence was granted.

By the beginning of the Great War, Yallingup had become firmly entrenched as a major tourist and holiday destination. Visitors could purchase coupons entitling them to a train journey to Busselton, accommodation at Cave House, Yallingup and entry to at least one cave, Yallingup Cave, during their stay. They were met by local transport entrepreneurs such as the Bignells and conveyed by car or cart to Cave House, which by 1913 consisted of:

twenty two single bedrooms (which provide for eighty outside sleepers) three bathrooms, three slop-hopper rooms, two linen closets, nine WC's, over eleven hundred feet of verandah, one large smoking room, two drawing rooms, one dark room with water laid on (for photographers), two temporary store rooms, one large bar, one billiard room, one large kitchen, one servery, cellar for the kitchen, cellar for bar, cook's pantry, servants hall, boots room, and a creamery.

Servants quarters, a garage, farmlet, blacksmith's shop, petrol bowser and a laundry all combined to meet every visitors' needs and wishes. The coupons could be purchased through the newly formed State Tourist Bureau, which took over from the Caves Board in 1910, in line with the firmly held belief that the caves and tourism were synonymous. Indeed, a question was asked in Parliament as to why one of the contenders for the position of head of the Tourist Bureau, Mr Robertson, formerly of the Caves Board, had not been appointed.

The principal attraction and main reason for the development of Caves House were the caves. As early as 1903 they were being extolled in glowing terms by the Government Statistician, Malcolm Fraser¹³, and in 1912 State Librarian James Sykes Battye described them as "the crowning glory of Western Australia... which those fitted by experience to speak upon the subject have pronounced the equal if not the superior of any known to exist"¹⁴. By the 1920's and 30's the caves at both Yallingup and Yanchep were touted to international and local holiday makers as Western Australia's premier holiday destination. The image of the 'Suspended Table', from Yallingup's Lake Cave, formed part of the letterhead for two government departments, while other cave formations were pictured in pride of place on a wide range of tourism brochures.

Visitors to the Yallingup caves sought a sense of well-being and a connection to nature. The proximity to the sea meant visitors in the summer months could enjoy the cooling breezes and the healthful benefits of immersion in seawater. A holiday at Yallingup promised refreshment for mind and body, so much so that holiday makers who, in the years before the Great War, visited for only one or two days, "now bring their families and stay weeks"¹⁵.

During the first three decades of tourism at Yallingup, visiting the caves was the principal activity available to tourists. Holiday packages included at least one if not more caves in their itineraries. Access was by car, and for the first two decades, the importance of the scenery and the educational benefits to be derived from these excursions was paramount.. Early photographs show formally dressed Edwardian men and women in suits, long dresses and enormous hats, gathered at the side of a hole in the ground proposing to educate themselves about Western Australian geography and archaeology through access to the wonders below. They were guided in this experience by Edward Dawson, who seems to have been exclusively associated with the Yallingup Cave, and by Tim Connolly, who had responsibility for caves further afield. Between 1901 and 1910, thirteen caves were opened to the public, who accessed them through routes devised by the guides. As discoverers and guides there was obviously also a very personal sense of ownership to the caves, which probably created a more intimate experience for the visitor.

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Early exploration was carried out using lantern light, but a magnesium wire was soon found to provide a better, clearer light. The magnesium wire was, in turn, replaced by an electric generator and Delco lights, after the system used in the New South Wales Jenolan Caves. Within the caves visitors were shown a variety of limestone formations, many of which had been given descriptive names by their discoverers. In the Yallingup cave, accessed by a small tunnel and over 200 steps, there are several chambers, such as the "Theatre", the "Cauliflower Chamber" and the "Shawl Shop", named after the shawl formations, "which admittedly has no equal anywhere"¹⁶. The archaeological importance of the caves was emphasised in 1914 when Louis Glauert of the Western Australian Museum undertook an extensive examination of the fossil record found in the caves, and located a *Diprotodon* in Mammoth cave. Glauert's expedition may have put Margaret River on the fossil map, but the manager of Caves House was less than impressed by Glauert's expeditionary skills. Glauert had descended on the House with his wife, three children and a maid, plus "a large quantity of luggage." It was suggested that, "In future should any more palaeontologists wish to visit the Margaret it would be better for Guide Connolly to meet them with a wagon at Busselton"¹⁷.

By the 1930's, although the caves were still considered a central part of the Yallingup experience, it was less for educational purposes, than as part of a wide gamut of recreational activities. Photographs of the period show people wearing simple linen dresses, trousers and shirt (no tie) and even shorts. Swimming, hiking, tennis at Caves House, and even golf on the newly developed golf course vied with the caves as the recreational activity of choice.

With the Depression, facilities at Caves House, which had already become run down and overcrowded, continued to deteriorate. As early as 1922, complaints had been made about the facilities, a point which nearby Boarding Houses and hotels in Margaret River were quick to pick up on. Nevertheless, Caves House continued to operate as the premier tourist destination in Yallingup, until the fateful night of December 4, 1930.

Despite the proximity to the Christmas holidays, Caves House at that time was occupied only by one set of visitors, the aptly named Soothills, who were visiting during Mr Soothill's convalescence. During their first night in residence Mrs Soothill thought she smelt smoke, and on going out on to their balcony saw "flames everywhere"¹⁸. The fire alarm was rapidly raised and the fire brigade summoned from Busselton. Local car driver, Frank Bignell, who had so often taken passengers to Caves House and on excursions to the caves, was also a volunteer fire fighter. With five men on board, their fire fighting equipment, and three men hanging off the engine on either side, Frank drove the 28 miles through the dark in 20 minutes. Robert Donald, the builder of both the original and eventual replacement Caves House, is reputed to have said that they were inspired solely by thoughts of saving the Hotel Bar!

The State Hotels Department, which now managed Caves House developed plans for immediate repairs, which just as promptly lapsed. Minor repairs were carried out in 1931 and 1932, but state funding priorities meant that the House, and access to "the glories of our Caves heritage" were forced to limp along until 1937, when plans for a new Caves House were put in place. It was opened in 1938. When it once more returned to the public attention, after the Second World War, its isolation and bucolic charm saw it become one of the State's premier honeymoon locations, and caving became just one more activity on an evergrowing list.

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