

A Short History of the Yanchep Cave Area

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EARLY EXPLORATIONS

George Grey 1838

First white man on the scene was the explorer, Lieutenant George Grey, who was later to become Governor of New Zealand. He made two explorations in the colony, neither of which achieved a great deal; the first to a small portion of the Kimberley region, the second a trip down the coast from the vicinity of Geraldton to Perth. The latter was to end in tragic circumstances, involving the death of the party's youngest member as they struggled through waterless country to reach Perth.

Grey's visit to the Yanchep area took place following his first journey of exploration in the Kimberley region, in the course of a minor foray that he made in December 1838, in which he advanced up the coast north of Perth to as far as the Moore River. It was during his return to Perth that he was shown to a cave in the area, and was also told about the existence of other caves nearby. His party camped at a spot north of a lake called Man-bee-bee, which was the stretch of open water at the southern end of Lake Yanchep, today's Loch McNess. His journal for December 6th (Grey, 1839, pp.308 & 309) then reads as follows:

"December 6th. - This morning, we started at daybreak, and breakfasted at Man-bee-bee, and immediately after breakfast resumed our route. I left the party with two natives, and travelled up a swampy valley, running nearly in the same line as the chain of lakes we had followed in going. The natives insisted on it, that these lakes were all one and the same water; and when, to prove to the contrary, I pointed to a hill running across the valley, they took me to a spot in it, called Yun-de-lup, where there was a limestone cave, on entering which I saw, about ten feet below the level of the bottom of the valley, a stream of water running strong from S. to N. in a channel worn through the limestone. There are several other remarkable caves about here, one of which was called the Doorda Mya, or the Dog's house. Probably, therefore, the drainage of this part of the country is affected by the chain of lakes, which must afterwards fall into the river I saw to the northward. We slept at Now-oor-goop."

This is the sole reference to cave visitation on the part of Grey. Man-bee-bee was the earliest spelling of the aboriginal name for today's Loch McNess. This links it to the Yanchep area in general, but not specifically to any caves inside today's Yanchep National Park. The cave he was shown has been identified. After many attempts to match it with a cave inside the Park, it was eventually found to match a cave known as the Doogarch Cave (YN428), which is situated a few kilometres south of the National Park (Bastian, 1995). In retrospect this became obvious, as Grey's account shows he was travelling back towards Perth, and had evidently covered some miles from the lake at Yanchep before the above incident took place.

Septimus Roe 1841

John Septimus Roe, who was Surveyor General to the Swan River Colony, may be considered the first cave explorer as such in Western Australia (and this includes the aboriginal inhabitants, as the local people had a great fear of caves and would not attempt to enter any dark place: Doogarch Cave is an exception, as it faces north and allows much light into its main chamber). Whereas Grey's brief encounter with a cave was incidental to his trip, Roe set out in October 1841 with the specific goal of locating and exploring the other caves that Grey had been told about, but had not seen.

The primary objective was the cave which the local aborigines called "Doorda Mya", meaning the "Dog's house", because it was home to many of the wild dogs of the district. These were dingoes, but the local (Nyungah) name for them was "doorda" (or "dwerta", as used in more modern spellings). This proved to be a little to the east of the lake "Man-bee-bee", (or "Mambibby" as Roe preferred to spell it). Roe also recorded the name "Yancheep" for the swampy tract stretching northwards from the open water. In time the latter became the established name for the lake as

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well as the district, although the other (with the spelling Mambibby) was not lost, as one of the caves today has this name.

Roe set out from Perth on 13th October 1841 with a small party, consisting of two soldiers and two aboriginal guides, to locate and explore the caves. Having made their camp at the southern end of the lake Mambibby, they were led to a hilly area approximately three-quarters of a mile eastward from that spot, in which they saw two small but rugged glens, to the larger of which he gave the name "Maidin Glen" (today's Boomerang Gorge). On the subsequent day they explored six caves. Roe wrote up a detailed account of his trip (Roe, 1841), which has facilitated the identification of most of these caves.

One of these, over which Roe was most enthused as to its decorations, has been positively identified with a cave in Boomerang Gorge (YN7), having many points of identity with his detailed description (Bastian, 1994). The largest of his caves is probably today's Cabaret Cave. Roe blazed a diamond upon an adjacent tree to mark the entrance. Unfortunately work on that cave in the 1930's to turn it into a Ballroom seems to have led to the removal of the tree, and also altered its internal topography drastically, involving the removal of much speleothem material, as well as filling in the original tortuous route - which included the crossing of a strongly-flowing stream - by which Roe accessed the cave's main chamber. The changes are so considerable that it can no longer be positively confirmed that this was the cave explored by him, however it is the "best fit".

As for "Maidin", this appears to be more correctly the name applied to the actual cave locality, as distinct from the nearby lake, and since this is the earliest name applied to the caves specifically, I have used it here as a matter of priority, even if it never comes back into use. A slightly later spelling put it as "Maiden" (Webb, 1847). (The story of the name changes does not end here, as Lake Yanchep was changed to Loch McNess in the 1930's, to honour a benefactor in the development of the Park.)

Roe's description of the trip had some major ambiguities, notably in the fact that only one of the two glens (Boomerang Gorge) was described. When a few months later George Webb made his own privately-organised expedition, he was apparently as confused by Roe's descriptions as the present author was 150 years later! Although he claimed to have found and explored the largest of Roe's caves, he did not mention encountering a stream, and his description actually matches more closely that of YN7.

TURN OF THE CENTURY

A major phase of exploration commenced in 1903. Information about this era is mainly to be found in newspaper articles held on microfilm in the Battye Library of Western Australian history, some also on Lands Department files held in the State archives.

The exploration was prompted by the recent discoveries in the Margaret River area, which were by then already being developed for tourism. A Perth man, Mr Milligan, knowing the existence of caves to the near-north of Perth, pushed the idea that perhaps these too had excellent tourist possibilities, which had merely been overlooked. One large cave (which appears to have been one of those seen by Roe, which later became the Silver Stocking or Cabaret Cave) was already fairly widely known. The first party to follow this suggestion up was put together by a newspaper of the time: "The Morning Herald". Consisting of four persons: a reporter L.Ramaciotti, photographer C.P.Conigrave, and two local men R.Cockman and H.Kent, this group went up to Yanchep in mid-February of that year, and after numerous frustrating explorations of small caves (of which there are an abundance at Yanchep!) that did not lead to anything of significance, they finally discovered and named Yonderup Cave (Ramaciotti, 1903). Highlight of this was the finding of a detached human skull in the farthest chamber of the cave, which was later identified as the skull of a white man.

Discovery of the skull deserves special mention because of what happened some thirty years later. Following its discovery a constable (Constable Cahill) was sent to the cave to search for more bones. With an aboriginal aide he dug the floor of the chamber for two days, but could find nothing. The only conclusion the police could come to was that the skull had fallen down the solution pipe (now blocked with a large rock) that is in the ceiling of the chamber, but that other bones from the

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rest of the skeleton had not worked their way down. It was also positively identified as the skull of a white man. The final newspaper article does not go into details on this point, but since the finders had also readily observed it be a white man's skull, they possibly noticed gaps in the teeth or obvious fillings.

About the same time, a local farmer Mr J. A. (Jack) Grant, discovered a large cave a little farther north, which was subsequently named Yanchep Cave. Another local identity, Henry White, then was stimulated to begin his own cave searching, and the following month found Crystal Cave, which he at first called the "Crystal White Cave". Less than a month later he found another cave, which he named the "Clustered Coliflower Cave" (today's Cauliflower Cave), after its main decorative attraction. Both these discoveries were reported by him in letters to the Lands Department - however, he did not quote precise dates. Following upon these, a parcel of land was set aside as a Caves Reserve, and Henry White was appointed the first (Honorary) custodian of the Reserve. No actual tourist development took place however until the 1930's.

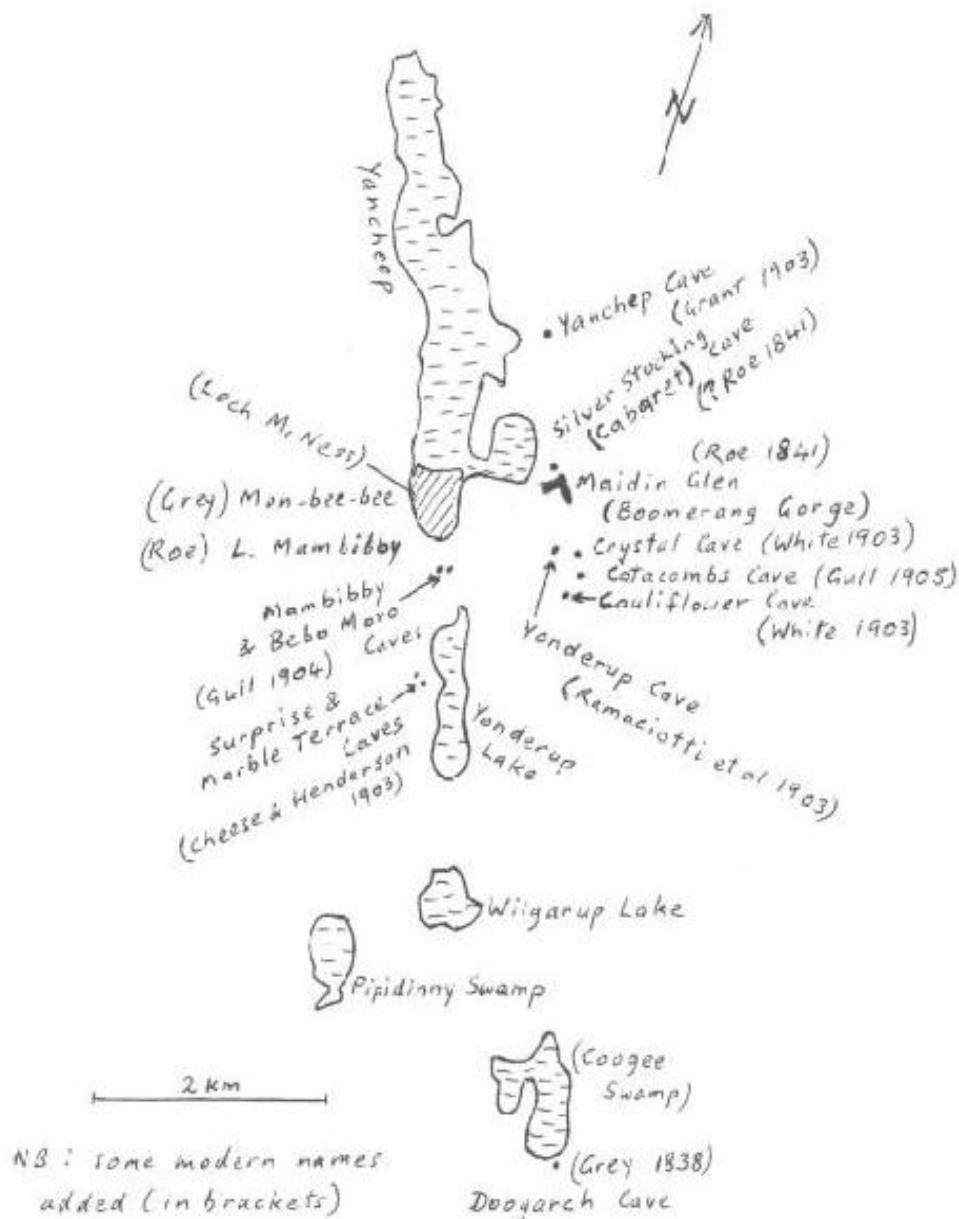


Figure 1 - Main events and dates at Yanchep 1838-1905

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Henry White commenced a "Visitor's Book", which is today held in the Gloucester Lodge Museum at Yanchep, and this is a major source for information in the years immediately following. Two persons, Phillip Cheese and Edgar Henderson, explored Yanchep over the Easter period of 1903, finding numerous caves, including Surprise and Marble Terrace Cave, which are situated south of the Park centre. Two of their finds have never since been relocated, despite numerous attempts by the author. In March the following year they returned, discovering a large chamber near Crystal Cave, which they named Gilgar Cave, and another small but well decorated cave southwest of Surprise Cave, which they named the Amber Crystal Cave.

A Perth man Mr H.E.B. Gull, explored over Christmas/January 1904, finding two caves in close proximity, which he named Mambibby Cave and Bebo Moro Cave. He then returned the following summer, discovering an exceptionally beautiful decorated cave which he named the Catacombs. Both these were written up in detailed articles appearing in "The West Australian" newspaper (Gull, 1904, 1905). (Unfortunately when Wanneroo Road was extended past Yanchep in the 1960's the location of this cave had been forgotten, and the road was put right past the cave, which then came to be known as Road Cave; it also suffered considerable vandalism through its proximity to the road.)

THE RSV (REVISED STANDARD VERSION) OF YANCHEP

The Yanchep reserve came under the jurisdiction of the State Gardens Board. In the early 1930's this body, headed by Louis Shapcott, was given the task of developing the area for tourism. This included not only developing the caves, but also the building of several accommodation buildings. Top-rate accommodation was provided for in the Yanchep Inn, with Gloucester Lodge catering for middle-levels, and McNess Hostel being the equivalent of 'backpackers' lodgings. The main source of funding came from a gift made by a wealthy businessman, Charles McNess, and men who were out of work due to the Depression were employed on the development. The result of this development is testimony to the "Art Deco" era; with caves being "tizzied up" with pillars, walls and wishing wells, and where deemed necessary, the removal of whatever decorations stood in the way of a "nice" pathway through a cave. What was in the early 1900's considered to be the premier decoration in Crystal Cave, a shawl group known as "The Butterfly", seems to have disappeared about this time, evidently because it was in the way chosen for the pathway.

Shapcott - apart from having some very high-level contacts in the government of the time - had the "gift of the gab", and very quickly decided that in order to "sell" Yanchep, its story had to be made a great deal more colourful. He decided that the discovery of the main tourist caves had to be much older than a mere 30 years in the past (Shapcott, 1933). These caves were therefore "discovered" by George Grey, and this became the standard statement made by cave guides.

The original steep entrance fissure that Henry White had used to access Crystal Cave was greatly enlarged to change it into a set of easy steps, then the story was changed to that of Grey and his men swinging down by a rope through a hole in the ceiling of the cave in 1838. (I recall as a youngster looking up at that narrow hole and wondering how grown men had ever managed to fit through it!) The 1903 letter written by Henry White does not indicate that the first means of access was through the hole in the ceiling of the entrance chamber, as had been the guides' story for so long. Nor do any of the writings in the "Visitors Book" kept by him suggest that visitors to the cave had to endure the hardship of squirming down through a tight hole on a rope. (Ken Gibbs, whose father was the Reserve Caretaker in the late 1920's, has confirmed that the original access was via a ladder that Henry White had made, where the present entrance is situated.)

Yonderup Cave had an even bigger furphy woven into it, and for the background to this we have to note the skull that was found back in 1903. Development work proceeded with the objective of bringing parties in through one entrance and out by another route. To achieve this they located a small cave in a ravine nearby which seemed to come close to Yonderup Cave, and commenced to tunnel a connection. However funds seem to have run out, because the tunnel (still to be seen) terminates at a blank wall.

The tunnel was supposed to connect with the final chamber at the west end of Yonderup cave, however the series of tumbledown chambers going in that direction from the entrance had virtually nothing of interest in them. A great deal of tunnelling had already been done, but now it was going nowhere in particular, so in order to utilise it Shapcott hit on the idea of putting a large number of

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bones into the west end chamber (the one that had the skull in it originally), and then made up a 'cock-and-bull' story about aboriginal men throwing their womenfolk down the solution pipe that opens in the ceiling of the chamber.

I remember the story - the bones were all females, there were sixteen of them, each skull had a hole in it, the women had been unfaithful, they had been punished by firstly being hit over the head and then thrown down, etc. Other discerning persons since then had observed that the main skeleton on display was actually a composite, that had been wired together. Where the bones came from we will never know, although I suspect they may have been in the museum, and that Shapcott who a great deal of "clout" simply demanded them, probably over the phone. The fiction he put together in a publication entitled "The Story of Yanchep" takes some beating, and shows the utter contempt with which aboriginals were held at the time! A full assessment of all the relevant material has been made, drawing very strong inference that the whole business was a hoax (Bastian, 2001).

Other work undertaken was the joining of Mambibby and Bebo Moro Caves, after which the latter name was dropped. Comparison with the description of the original discovery of Bebo Moro Cave, reveals that an immense amount of decoration was wiped out during the work (Bastian, 1993). Mambibby was wired for tourist visits, but the 1930's wiring was not good enough to stop current leakage as the cave is very moist, and the tours never got going. Cauliflower was likewise developed, but without electric light, and some tours are believed to have taken place. A big tunnel project was commenced in Loch Overflow Cave, with the objective of linking it onto Mambibby Cave, but stopped far short of its goal.

One unique piece of work was the conversion of Silver Stocking Cave (named from a curiously-shaped speleothem, which can still be seen) into a ballroom, with the name change to Cabaret Cave. This is a fairly astonishing cave in its own right, if only for its "Art Deco" work of arched pillars and concreted floors, and perhaps for once we may forgive the intrusion of man into nature, as anyone who visits it usually find themselves standing open-mouthed for a time.

POST WW-II

A major hiatus occurred in the management of Yanchep during WWII, when the Park was taken over for military purposes. As a consequence knowledge of the caves was set back considerably; for example Catacombs Cave was simply forgotten about. It was not until the formation of WASG in 1958 that sporadic attempts began to discover and/or rediscover caves in the area. Although a few old caves came to light, eg. Minnies Grotto in the north of the Park, it was not until the early 1980's that significant additions began to be made to the cave list. At that time numerous caves were located in an area north of the Park centre.

The author commenced a systematic documentation of the Yanchep caves in 1988, which was prompted by a conviction that there were many more caves than those appearing in the Karst Index. Over three hundred caves have been added to the list, as well as a large number outside the Park, which still come under the YN listing. During the course of the project many caves which revealed evidence of previous entry came to light, including old graffiti, spent torch batteries, etc. Catacombs Cave was positively identified, and found to be a cave which since the 1960's had been called "Road Cave" from its proximity to Wanneroo Road (Bastian, 1992). Melaleuca Cave was found to be not the cave shown on maps; the correct Melaleuca Cave was established by having the caver who originally named it come out and show it to the author.

Besides this numerous actual discoveries were made, many through enlarging small breathing holes. These include some rather special decorated caves such as YN151 (Serendip Cave) and YN438 - named Jackhammer Cave because the author was lent an electric jackhammer to open out the solution pipe - with extension leads run through the bush from a power point in the workshops! In the northern part of the Park YN256 (Orpheus Cave) was discovered after a bushfire in 1991. The most recent activity has involved considerable extensions to Mambibby Cave and Loch Overflow Cave, prompted by a hearsay that connection had been made between these two caves back in the 1930's. Connection was finally established in May 2002, however no sign of previous explorations have ever come to light, and the story appears to be yet another furphy of that era.

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APPENDIX

Excerpt from "The Story of Yanchep" by L E Shapcott. 1933.

"The Yonderup cave is . . . remarkable for its masses of piled rock and gloomy recesses, and its evident antiquity; while, buried away in the remote recesses of one long reach is a chamber suggestive of a heathen temple, with a crocodile's gaping jaws in one corner; in another, a yawning inferno from which spirits might emerge; and round about are piles of formation suggestive of the anatomy of animals butchered for votive offerings. At the extreme end of another corridor leading from the entrance is the aboriginal burying ground, from which five or six skeletons have been taken to enable a path past to be cleared, while the principle mound, doubtless containing scores of other skeletons, remains intact alongside. Truly, he who runs may read. Above the conical pyramid containing the ashes of the warriors and their women of bygone ages may be seen cut through the solid rock as though diamond-drilled - although doubtless fashioned by water - the cylindrical shaft down which the dead and dying were projected when their usefulness to their fellow natives had ceased. The aboriginal did not inhabit these recesses. If a member died or was so near death that his recovery was impossible, the body was thrown down the shaft. The survivors, unlike their American brothers and weak in their belief of happy hunting grounds, first removed his weapons for their own use in the future, threw him down a little food in the shape of the bodies of marsupials indigenous to the country, and went on their way to continue the battle of existence. In due time the hole was covered, either by design or by bush fires and falling rock, only to give up its secrets to the present-day visitor to Yanchep. From local knowledge it is clear that this burial ground could not have been used within the last seventy years. One skull found there is a most perfect example of an aboriginal, probably a woman of about forty years of age. Another complete skeleton appears to be that of a man at least ninety years of age. This historic link connects us with Yanchep before the white man roamed the mainland, when the savage held undisputed sway." !!!