

# The Buchan Story

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## Abstract

The Buchan caves were first recognised and described by Stewart Ryrie in 1840. They were given little attention until the Stirling expedition of 1889 and the subsequent efforts of J.H. Harvey and others to ensure that the caves were protected and made available to tourists. Hotelier J.H. Wyatt and others conducted tours on a more-or-less casual basis for some years, citing Jenolan as an example of what should be done. This was taken up by geologist A.E. Kitson. Frank Moon arrived home after working on the Western Australian goldfields and commenced exploration of the caves. Kitson then arranged for him to be employed and in due course he discovered “Jenolan’s Rival” – the Fairy Cave.

Frederick Wilson, former and long experienced manager of Jenolan Caves was then appointed to undertake the development of Buchan Caves for tourism access and to manage the caves reserve. At that time the normal tour route was by way of a train to Sale, a boat trip on the Gippsland Lakes, and a coach journey to Buchan. The responsible oversight was placed in the hands of a Committee of Management for many years but today Buchan Caves Reserve is managed by Parks Victoria.

Although somewhat hidden away, Buchan was recognised and investigated by a remarkable diversity of people, each of whom played their own part in the very complex history. This paper will simply introduce many of these people, and briefly outline their role at Buchan.

## Discovery

Buchan received its first whitefellas in 1838, when Edward Bayliss and his associates, fleeing from the drought on the Monaro, arrived at Buchan. Bayliss then returned with the intention of taking up land at Buchan, but he was beaten by John Rhodes Wilkinson who took up that land on the day prior to his arrival. Bayliss then retreated and established Gelantipy station. Neither stayed for very long nor left much of a mark. There is little really known about their brief tenure (Adams, 1981).

Stewart Ryrie was commissioned by the government to undertake a review and survey of the Monaro region. Although his manuscript report (Ryrie, 1840, cited in transcript Gippsland Heritage Journal, 9:11-17) has survived, it is somewhat disappointing in its lack of details. He does describe the forest at Murrindal as being “full of caves” and describes one which he entered on 7 April 1840 (Ryrie, 1840, cited in transcript Gippsland Heritage Journal, 9:11-17). Peter Ackroyd carried out a painstaking analysis of Ryrie’s story and draws the somewhat tentative conclusion that the cave entered was most likely M22, The Garage (Ackroyd, 2006).

It must be assumed that later settlers were aware of the presence of the caves, but there is little evidence of them entering caves and the potential interest of the caves remained more or less unrecognized.

## The Grove Reminiscences

In 1867, C.H. Grove was appointed as overseer of Buchan Station, at that time owned by John Alexander Rose, and remained in that position until 1873. Grove was an intelligent and inquiring man, and left behind a one hundred page manuscript of his reminiscences. This has proved to be of considerable value to historians, as the only detailed account of everyday life at that time. He was later elected to the new Tambo Shire Council in 1882. His reminiscences include the story of an unusual cave incident. Sheep belonging to the Riddle family of Gillinal Station were destroyed on order from the Agriculture and Stock Inspector as the flock was infected with scab. Although Riddle had expected compensation to be paid, this did not eventuate, and

“ . . . This so preyed upon the mind of Riddle that he went at least partially demented, and had an idea that everyone who came near him desired to do him personal injury. From this time forward, he used to live principally in a cave some short distance from the homestead, and only coming home after dark, during stress of weather or when he required a fresh supply of food or clothes.” (Grove, c1873: 19-20)

## Beginnings of Cave Tourism

Not surprisingly, the caves were well known to John MacLeod, manager of Buchan Station from 1845, who also held a range of public offices. Doubtless many other early residents were familiar with them, and probably many shared in leading parties of visitors to them.

The first explicit references to Cave Tourism appeared in R.S. Broome’s Tourist Guide. In his first edition (1882) there was only a brief reference to the ‘famous Buchan Caves’ being accessible by coach from Bruthen. One can still see the site of the coaching stop near Boggy Creek at some distance to the West of the current Buchan road crossing. A similarly brief reference to guided tours of the caves can be found in Pickersgill (1885: 106).

In Broome’s third edition (1886), he refers to the Pyramids and the underground course of the Murindal (sic) River, then to “ . . . Wilson’s Cave, situated in a pretty nook, is entered by a small opening which gradually leads to a spacious chamber vying in size with the interior of the exhibition building, with side passages and anterooms of considerable magnitude. Provided with candles and kerosene torches, we follow our leader . . . our guide here teased out a quantity of stringy bark and saturating it with kerosene, applied a match, and in a twinkling of a second we were looking at thousands of stalactites and stalagmites . . .” (Broome, 1886).

He also mentions Spring Creek Cave and that “The Murindal (sic) also possesses features of interest but time prevented us from visiting other caves that have been recently discovered.” (Broome, 1886). Finally, he noted

“Two well appointed hotels standing on either side of the river.” (Broome, 1886).

Another account (*Tambo and Orbost Times*, 19 Nov 1887) describes a visit to Spring Creek Cave, guided by T. O’Rourke and using only candles for illumination. The same writer also visited the Murrindale (sic) Lead Mines, which were entered through a natural cave and which had also broken into a further cave. This was followed by visits to two other nearby caves and to both ends of the underground course of the Murrindal River.

It is clear that at least some of the caves were known to local residents and used for their own recreation. For example, on Easter Monday 1891,

“ . . . a picnic to Wilson’s Caves took place and almost every local inhabitant put in an appearance. The caves were lit up and a number of songs rendered in the underground regions. Refreshments galore were provided and a thoroughly appreciated outing was the result.” (*Tambo and Orbost Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1891)

Similarly, a party of singers from Bruthen visited the town to present a charity concert and were entertained at a picnic in Wilson’s Caves. (*Tambo and Orbost Times*, 23 Feb. 1895)

Joseph Wyatt was one of many miners of Cornish stock who settled in Buchan and other parts of East Gippsland. He managed mines at both Murrindal and Buchan and then became the licensee of the Cricket Club Hotel and in this capacity played a major role in Cave Tourism. In due course he became secretary of the Buchan Progress and Tourism Association.

### **The First Scientific Investigation**

As a result of the growing interest in visiting the caves, James Stirling, a geologist from the Victorian Mines Department was asked to inspect the caves. He was accompanied by J.H. Harvey of the Public Works Department. Although one can only speculate as to why Harvey was chosen, factors which may have led to his presence include the fact that he was a senior engineer and so could represent his Department’s interests; his expertise as a noted (amateur) photographer and his enthusiastic interest in caves. They were supported by two assistants from Stirling’s own staff and by Mr Kellie who was the telephone operator from Buchan.

They explored and mapped Dukes Cave, O’Rourke’s Cave (now B-2, Moons Cave), Spring Creek Cave, Wilsons Cave, Dixons Caves, and Moons Cave (M-13, also known as Murrindale Cave). Harvey provided four photographs of Wilsons and Dixons Caves which appeared in Stirling’s published report (Stirling, 1889).

Like all cave investigations of the period, there was a preliminary attempt to find and identify fossils in the cave floors. This appears to have been based upon the well-known discoveries by Rankine at Wellington, N.S.W., and the ensuing investigations and descriptions by Sir Thomas Mitchell and Richard Owen. The results at Buchan were disappointing, although again Harvey took a fine photograph of an attempted excavation.

Harvey also continued his interest in caves, visit-

ing Jenolan soon after the Buchan investigation and on other occasions. He endeavored to arrange for Jeremiah Wilson to visit Buchan, but the Victorian Government was not willing to pay the cost of travel. However, Harvey continued to argue for action to develop Buchan as a cave tourism destination.

### **A.E. Kitson and Protection of the Caves**

A further scientific examination of the caves was carried out by A.E. (later Sir Albert) Kitson in 1900 and again in 1907. In his relatively detailed report, he recommended a series of land reservations to provide for protection of the caves (Kitson, 1907). A report from the director of the geological survey (Dunn, 1905) summarised Kitson’s work and supported his proposals for reservations. A series of regulations designed to protect the caves was enacted in 1901 (*Government Gazette*, 26 July 1901: 2891), but these were too late and not implemented because of the absence of any on-site management.

Following his first visit, he engaged Joseph Wyatt as a contractor to provide for gating and lighting of Spring Creek, Dicksons Caves and Wilson Cave. He also discussed with Wyatt the possibility of accepting a position as overseer of the caves but this did not eventuate. (Bailey, 2007, Hansford, 2008: 49-51).

Other important caves were discovered and/or recognised during this period. Thomas Slocombe had gated the major cave on his property at the Basin and protected it from damage from the mid 1880s. Kitson commended this action and supported Slocombe’s work.

### **The Advent of Frank Moon**

Frank Moon was born at Buchan and developed a remarkable prowess and reputation as a horseman, swimmer and runner. However, he found little opportunity for employment and so sought his fortune as a prospector and miner. This culminated in working at Kalgoorlie, where he took up cycling, the major means of transport in the Goldfields region, and won the annual race. The cash award enabled him to return home to Buchan (Hansford, 2008).

In 1906, while seeking some other outlet for his restlessness, he turned his curiosity to the caves. He commenced by exploring what was then known as O’Rourke’s Cave, clearly unaware at that time of Stirling’s work. He thus claimed discovery of the cave and it was re-named in his honor.

“Another large cave has been found within half-a-mile of our Post Office. It was discovered by Mr Frank Moon and is over 700 yards long. A stream over five feet in depth runs through the cave. The water contains fish but they are quite white in appearance. The stalactites and stalagmites are quite perfect and every care will be taken to prevent wanton destruction of the cave’s beauties.” (*Bruthen & Tambo Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1906).

John Flynn (later famous as Flynn of the Inland) was at that time a theological student and missionary. He was sent to Buchan and became a close friend and often companion of Moon, assisting him in his exploration. He was also a keen and able photographer and developed an impressive array of photographs of the Buchan area and its caves. (McPheat, 1963; Coates, 2006).

Frank was then engaged by Kitson as field assistant and in February 1907 was appointed as Crown Lands Bailiff with the responsibility of being 'Caretaker and Tourist's Guide at Buchan Caves'. This proved to be a major turning point for both Frank and the caves. A key early event was the discovery and entry to Fairy Cave. In announcing his discovery, Frank wrote "*I feel convinced now that I have Jenolan's rival!*" (Hansford, 2008).

It was soon recognised that the new cave needed appropriate infrastructure to provide protection against damage. Frederick J. Wilson, formerly at Jenolan, was appointed as manager with the responsibility of designing and developing stairways, paths and lighting. Frank initially resented this appointment and so there was some conflict between the two men, but in the longer run, they developed a mutual respect for each other.

Frank Moon was a highly intelligent, kindly and gentle person. He was passionate about each of his interests – caves and horses in particular. He was exuberant in expressing his interests and convictions. Sometimes, his exuberance overcame his sense of reality and he told great stories of his caves. One of the family once said to me, "Pop never let the truth stand in the way of a good story!" The great example came at the time of his retirement when two Melbourne journalists arrived at Buchan to interview him and write a feature story of his caving experiences. Frank saw the opportunity for a prank and retold a story from the great French cave explorer Norbert Casteret.

His enthusiasm really put Buchan on the tourism map. He was born to be a promoter. He also devoted a lot of attention to working out how to treat various visitors. I recall him telling me that he had never read very much until he was responsible for telling the story of the caves to visitors. He realized that in the early days it was generally only the educated people who were interested in visiting Buchan and could afford to do so. He started reading so that he could talk with visitors on equal terms, and then became almost as devoted to books as he was to caves (Hansford, 2008: 19-20)

Fred Wilson was in some ways very different. He was almost painfully shy and reticent. He was a task-focused man who worked very hard and with great skill. He also had a great sense of the beautiful; his development of the caves at Buchan (and before that at Jenolan) demonstrates his remarkable sensitivity. One of the nice indications of this is that he had no choice but to remove a number of stalagmites in order to build the pathway through Royal Cave. He re-located a number of these in the pool known as the Font of the Gods so that they joined with three already standing in the pool to become the Twelve Apostles.

He also showed a remarkable commitment to conservation not only in his own work but in bringing up his children. His daughter told me he taught them that they should never kill any animal, even pests or other threatening animals like snakes or spiders. His belief which he transmitted to them was that all animals had their place on earth just as much as people did. He was a man of great integrity but because of his reticence and modesty, often did not get credit for his great accomplishments.

In 1908, journalist Frank Whitcombe produced a

*Guide to the Buchan Caves and Gippsland Lakes*. Many commentators and reviewers consider it to be one of the finest guidebooks published in Australia. Even to day, one can identify with the experiences of the tour as described by Whitcombe.

### The Photographers

Caves often attract photographers, and Buchan succeeded in capturing the interest of some of Australia's most interesting photographers. They helped to ensure a more adequate history than would otherwise have been available and they played a great role in supporting Frank's promotion of the caves.

*J.H. Harvey* was a perfectionist and as an amateur won an immense number of awards for his work. He virtually always used wet plates. Don Pitkethly of Kodak explained to me that this meant he could take a photograph, develop it on site and if he was not satisfied with it, he could simply clean it off the plate, re-coat the plate with fresh emulsion and re-take the view until he was satisfied. This could readily be interpreted as a conservative approach to methodology, but The National Library has a stereograph taken by Harvey at Jenolan with the inscription in Harvey's handwriting 'These images were taken on the first roll of the new celluloid film imported to Australia.' So, we really have to recognise that even this innovation was only part of Harvey's constant search for perfection. (Davies & Stanbury 1985: 94-95)

*Norman J. Caire* was a professional equivalent of Harvey with the same search for perfection (see Pitkethley & Pitkethley, 1988). He was commissioned by Whitcombe (1908) to provide quality photographs for his guidebook. At Lakes Entrance, he met Howard Bulmer as a young man just beginning his career as a photographer and Caire recruited him to help in the task and shared the credit with him (Kerr, 1992: 125-126; Squires et al., 1990: 10).

*Howard Decimus Bulmer* commenced a life-time commitment to and passion for Gippsland photography. He took photographs during Moon's first exploration of Fairy Cave and returned to Buchan regularly (Squires et al., 1990: 6-8).

At the same time, he had rivals of considerable note. *James H.A. MacDougall* came to manage the South Buchan Post office and established Walden Studios. He pursued this practice both in Gippsland and then at Margaret River in Western Australia. But he then moved on and developed a life devoted to being an Australia-wide wandering missionary and insurance agent. Families who insured their home and farm with him were presented with a large photograph of their home and property. These are now a source of fascination for rural historians. (Squires et al., 1990: 52-53).

Finally, *George Rose* established the Rose Stereographic Company. Of course, caves were great opportunities for stereographic pictures, but Rose photographed everything and probably produced more stereographs, lantern slides and postcards than anyone else. (Blum, 2008).

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Elery Hamilton-Smith and Stan Flavel at the conference. Photo: D. Carr