ABSTRACT

Caves of the Western Australian mid-west: a brief history of human interaction

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The caves of the Western Australian mid-west have been visited by humans almost (geologically speaking) since their formation. Since the arrival of Aboriginal people in the area, humans have been interacting with these caves in a variety of ways. Shipwreck survivors, stock drovers, early settlers and even politicians have explored their gloomy depths. From the grim discovery of a dead body to a prominent Western Australian minister (later to become Premier) getting embarrassingly 'stuck', these caves have seen their fair share of man's endeavour to penetrate their underground delights.

Ann-Marie is a member of the Western Australian Speleological Group and has been caving in the Western Australian mid-west since the early 1990s. She is currently the Karst Area Coordinator for several of the areas located within its boundaries. A passionate amateur historian to boot, Ann-Marie has scoured the local daily rags of yore to dish up the (cave) dirt on several of its former subterranean guests.

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I don't know about you, but when I tell people I am a caver, I'm usually met with intrigue or horror (depending on people's level of claustrophobia). One thing I always get asked though, is 'What is it that cavers actually do?' Well ... we explore, we survey and produce maps, we study bugs, bats, bones and what I like to call 'bygone barbecues' (more appropriately known as archeological hearth sites). And we simply enjoy the natural beauty of caves. We've been doing this for the past 60 odd years, however, that is a mere blip on the timeline of human interaction with the caves of the mid-west of Western Australia. In fact, unlike most caves in the world, the caves in this area are in the unique position of having had humans interacting with them almost from their inception.

Amangu people

The caves in this region started their development less than 400 thousand years ago, which places them in their geological infancy when Aboriginal people started making their way

down into the area about 40 thousand years ago. Dr Carly Monks from the University of Western Australia recently excavated Aboriginal archeological sites in Yellabidde and Weelawadji Caves near Eneabba. She found evidence of human interaction from as far back as 25 thousand years ago when the coastline was approximately 40 kilometres west of its current position. This was just before the peak of the last glacial episode, when the climate was much cooler and drier. The evidence suggested sporadic use of the cave until approximately 7 thousand years ago, when the coastline reached its current position. From then on there was a considerable increase in human activity in the caves. Yellabidde Cave revealed a rich deposit of stone artefacts, ochre, charcoal, mammal bones, fish and shellfish remains, and emu eggshells. The Amangu people, like most Aboriginal tribes, did not venture far into the caves as they believed spirits inhabited them. Instead, they sheltered in cave entrances where they established short term camps — sleeping, cooking and going about their day to day business of survival and cultural activities.

Grey's expedition

We'll now fast forward to an event which saw the the beginning of a change in how humans interacted with the caves. It all started with a British exploration expedition going horribly wrong. In 1839, 27 year old army officer Lieutenant George Grey was to lead a Royal Geographical Society expedition to explore the land between Shark Bay and Perth, studying Aboriginal culture, flora and fauna and the general geography of the land in between. He and his party of 12 men hitched a ride with the American whaler, *Russel*, to Bernier Island, just north of Shark Bay. They had with them three whaleboats to convey them on their travels. A grand adventure awaited our little team as they embarked upon their long-awaited expedition. It wasn't long, however, before their dreams of adventure were dashed. Quite literally, with their whaleboats smashed beyond repair on reef and in heavy seas with the loss of most of their stores and equipment.

With no choice but to walk the 300 odd miles back to Perth over unknown land, Grey certainly had his work cut out trying to keep morale up. To make matters worse, they started their journey at the end of a long, dry summer which meant waterholes were at their lowest levels. Near the Greenough River, Grey made the difficult decision to split the party; with the stronger members forging on to seek help and the weaker contingent making their way along the coast. Grey's party skirted the limestone ridge and therefore unwittingly most of the water sources. They eventually arrived in the Swan River Colony somewhat worse for wear but alive nonetheless.

In the meantime, Mr Walker, who was in charge of the slower coastal group following the limestone ridge, had a most timely find. He wrote: 'Went into the interior about midday and found a native well six miles inland, also a large cave in the rocks'. The native well was Yewadabby Spring and the cave, also containing water, Brown Bone cave. Coincidently, Grey's party came within 2 miles of both well and cave. They saw a flock of cockatoos flying west and rightly presumed them to be flying towards water. As the men were in an extremely poor state by that stage, Grey decided not to risk deviating from their course. They struggled on for some time before eventually finding water and were very lucky indeed to have survived the ordeal. Only one of the twelve man in the original party perished en route, with the rest of the group making it safely back to Perth. And the era of European interactions with the caves had begun.

Old Stock Route

Our next wave of visitors to the caves began with the advent of what is now known as the Old Stock Route between Perth and Geraldton. When Grey returned to the colony after his ordeal, he was full of praise for what he deemed 'prime pastoral land' between the Hutt and Greenough rivers. After much to-ing and fro-ing amongst the powers that be, and multiple exploratory parties, the Champion Bay district was finally opened up for settlement in January 1851. This meant that thousands of sheep and cattle were required to stock the

newly developed areas. And they had to be driven along a carefully chosen route. Assistant Surveyors Augustus and Henry Gregory went ahead of the first droving party to select the best line through the rugged landscape. One of the jewels in the Stock Route's crown was the discovery of the Stockyard Gully Cave system. Here, drovers could find fresh water and drive their livestock into the narrow gully that led to the mouth of Stockyard Tunnel. With towering limestone cliffs on either side and a forbidding, dark entrance to the cave at the far end, stock were effectively penned in on three sides. The only opening to this natural corral was where the drovers camped with their fires blazing.

Caves were often used by drovers and other travellers along the stock route as a source of clean, cool water on their long and often dusty trips. However, this source of sustenance wasn't always reliable, as one poor soul found out the hard way. In June of 1886, Mr H. Bowers ventured into Stockyard Cave to quench his thirst from the little stream which wound its way through the vast cavern. As he scrambled down into the cave, something out of the ordinary caught his eye. Peering into the gloom, he spied something glistening. Curiosity got the better of him and he picked his way over the giant boulders to investigate. Imagine his surprise at finding a silver watch and chain, with a gold ring fastened by a knot in the chain! Very odd indeed. He poked around some more and found a pair of boots, carefully placed under a rock from whence water slowly dripped. Our Mr Bowers was completely perplexed. How did these items come to be in this dark, lonely place? He moved deeper into the gloom towards what he perceived to be a log of wood. To his horror, this was no log, but the dead body of a human being!

Our Mr Bowers, not being of a particularly strong constitution, stayed not to investigate further and fled immediately the scene in a 'highly agitated state of mind'. He did have the presence of mind, however, to snatch the deceased's clutch of jewellery on his way out. Mr Bowers then rode hard to Dongara and reported the incident to the officer in charge of the police stationed there. Constable Troy immediately 'procured a conveyance' and furnished it with a jarrah coffin for the deceased. Together with Mr Bowers, the men returned to the cavern with the intent of burying the remains of the unfortunate man. The deceased was thought to be Mr James Cook who had travelled north some time ago and was returning to Guildford on horseback via the coast road. It had been reported that the man had been dead approximately two months and had neither money nor rations, leading Constable Troy to rule that he died from 'starvation and want of water'. Finding no suspicious circumstances, the two men then buried Mr Cook in a lonely grave near the cave in which he perished.

Phosphate mining

In 1908, the caves were starting to be visited for an entirely different reason altogether. At the turn of the century, a quick-acting 'artificial' fertiliser was beginning to be imported into Western Australia to help in the enhancement of growing crops. By 1907, this 'superphosphate' was gaining in popularity and the Western Australian Government engaged Hungarian-born geologist Stephen Goczel to search for a more local supply. Goczel directed his investigations towards the coastal limestone ridge between Perth and Dongara, exploring the caves in which lay significant reserves of phosphatic material built up largely from centuries of bat guano deposits. The caves of the Nambung region impressed him most, both with their phosphatic deposits and also the sheer beauty of their crystal formations. He established a camp close to the caves and continued his investigations. Goczel sent samples of phosphatic material down to the Government Analytical Laboratory in Perth which came back with promising results. Goczel's subsequent report to the Department of Agriculture also estimated there were at least 10 thousand tons which could be readily shipped from Cervantes, a short distance away.

The then Minister for Lands and Agriculture, later to be known as 'Sir' James Mitchell was an enthusiastic supporter of this project. In October 1908, he set off with his Under-Secretary and a small contingent of press to investigate Goczel's finds. Their first port of call was at the Minyulo Homestead of our Mr Bowers of Stockyard Gully fame. Goczel had supplied Mr

Bowers with a couple of pounds of the phosphate which Bowers mixed with four gallons of water and applied to 30 square feet of his rye crop. The comparison between the test patch and the remainder of the crop was significantly impressive to the minister and his little party that they left Minyulo brimming with enthusiasm. When the group arrived at the first cave, they found a substantial amount of work had been carried out in order to 'open up' the cave for the mining venture. A 30 foot shaft had been sunk into the largest chamber in preparation for guano-filled bags to be lifted out for shipping to Fremantle. The ministerial party were shown many more deposit sites in several caves the following day, which saw them scrambling through tunnels and squeezing through narrow passages to see the 'pay-dirt'. Somehow, I doubt today's politicians would be so keen to partake in such activities.

After the 'business side' of the expedition was over, the touring party were then taken to a newly discovered cave nearby. One of the accompanying reporters wrote of their little side adventure: 'To reach the chambers the party were required to clamber down a short shaft and to then crawl in serpent-fashion some 20 feet or so. An upright position without risk of collision with hanging stalactites became possible some 20 feet further on, and then chamber after chamber of gorgeous splendour was revealed. From the roof were suspended domes and myriads of long, varicoloured stalactites. The marble-like flooring was everywhere studded with huge stalagmites, which in some cases also met the suspended stalactites. In the centre of a shining ledge there had been a breaking away of the upper crust, which left an opening of oblong shape. Underneath there glittered crystals of all colours, the whole giving a replica of a well-laden jewel casket with the lid removed. So soon as he had returned to the surface Mr Mitchell gave instructions for this particular cave to be sealed up, for beholds that in days to come it must prove "One of the Greatest Tourists' Attractions in the Southern Hemisphere".' That cave, now known as Pretty Cave, was never opened up to tourism, however, and remains gated with restricted access only to experienced cavers. As an aside, our Sir James, being of somewhat 'stout' constitution, actually found himself wedged getting into the cave and had to be assisted through by members of the party. Oh, to have been a fly on that cave wall!

Goczel's team bagged and extracted 20 tons of guano from the caves and sent it down to Fremantle to be tested on Government farms and by a handful of private individuals. With ever-increasing interest in this new product, the Department of Agriculture decided it would enter the commercial market itself and sell Nambung guano to settlers 'at cost sufficient to cover the cost of obtaining and handling'. Unfortunately, the venture was doomed to failure within a year. High quality superphosphate was starting to be produced in Perth which stripped the demand for the comparatively poorer guano phosphate. In 1910 the Nambung project ceased operation and all equipment associated with it was sold off.

Fred Weston

One of the first people to more fully explore the caves of the Nambung region was a British immigrant by the name of Fred Weston. Fred had read about the 1656 shipwreck of the Dutch trading ship *Vergulde Draeck*, or *Gilt Dragon*, off the coast near Wedge Point, in a 1934 edition of the British journal *The Wild World: The Magazine for Men* — a periodical more associated with wild imaginings than actual truth. The article suggested there could be a vast fortune hidden in the land beyond where the ship was wrecked. Fred was struck with 'gold (or actually silver) fever'. He applied for a position of head stockman with the Australia New Zealand Pastoral Company and found himself in a plum position to start his investigations. Fred had fixed in his mind that the treasure was spirited away in some cave in the Nambung vicinity and took every opportunity to fully explore any hole he could find. By all accounts he was most secretive about his knowledge of the caves, however it did him little good. Fred's venture for undreamed-of riches was never realised, for the *Gilt Dragon*'s treasure never made it to shore. It went down with the ship and lay there until discovered in 1963.

Recreational caving

Locals had been visiting the caves on more of a recreational basis since the area was opened for settlement and this increased further with the advent of motorised transport. Property owners took visitors to their far-flung homesteads on journeys to the caves, which was considered high adventure indeed. In March of 1936, A local young lady who went by the delightful pen name of 'Sunny Skies' used her enthusiastic prowess with the pen to enlighten us of the experience. She entitled her little expose 'A Visit to Wonderland: A Modern "Alice" Goes Exploring', and begins with, 'Do you like cave exploring? Personally I think it too thrilling for words so I must write and tell you of our recent trip to those situated near here.' Our young lady then goes on to describe a 'treacherous track' that they 'bumped along' for ten miles before reaching the first cave on the day's agenda.

She writes: 'We left the car and walked a few yards forward. Here we descried a cavity some ten feet deep and a few yards across. Into this "hole" we stumbled, one after the other. Then, without any previous warning whatsoever we literally fell into an Aladdin's Cave. Before us yawned a vast cavern mouth — deep and gloomy at its furthest end, whilst towering rugged walls on either side rose to a vast dome above. At the entrance, the roof was shaded a delicate pink contrasting so vividly with the unrelieved blackness of the interior. To describe the myriad sensations that the rapid transit from the hot glaring world outside into that cool translucent splendour of this stupendous cavern would be quite impossible. The vastness was awe-inspiring, and as we slowly traversed the decline to the cave floor, we were silently awed by the mystic splendour of this subterranean world. We lingered as long as time permitted, walking round and round this vast silent tomb, reluctant to leave its tranquillity for the sun dazzled world above.'

Whilst for many by this stage, the caves were being visited more for the novelty value they provided than sheer survival, the caves were still being used for this purpose during the depression years of the 20s and 30s. The Aboriginal elders who assisted and consulted in Carly Monk's Aboriginal hearth excavation told how their uncles had continued the tradition of using the caves for shelter during harsh weather, camping in the cave entrances. Although living a semi-assimilated life as casual stockmen, these men had maintained a connection with the land and continued to hunt and live in the bush before they and most of their fellow tribespeople were gathered up and sent off to the Mogumber Mission.

War years

As the 1930s drew to a close, a new breed of visitor to our caves was on the horizon. With World War II taking a disastrous turn to threaten Australian shores, and especially after the sinking of HMAS *Sydney* further up the coast, a number of radar stations were hastily established to provide the area with an early warning radar network in case of invasion by the enemy. In 1942, a coast watch station was built at North Head in Jurien. The station was manned by RAAF trained technicians and guarded by the Australian Army. During patrols of the area, soldiers regularly stumbled upon caves and of course had to explore them! One particular cave, 'Thousand Man Cave' was allegedly so named after an officer investigated its vast interior and remarked that 'The Japs could hide a thousand men in here!' Personally, I think that was rather an ambitious estimate and wouldn't want to be amongst the thousand stuffed into every nook and cranny of that cave. Still the exciting lure of cave exploring enticed many of the station's personnel which can be evidenced in the recording of military service numbers on cave walls and formations in several of the caves in the area.

Protection for the caves

Although some form of management of the caves in the Western Australian mid-west had been mooted as early as 1939 by the then State Gardens Board, it wasn't until 1968 that Nambung National Park was finally vested into the National Parks Board of WA. Alf Passfield was the first ranger of the park and whilst the management of the Pinnacles was

his main priority in those early days, he was keen to learn as much as he could about the caves in the area. By this stage, many of the more well known and visited caves had been heavily damaged by accident as well as by more wanton forms of vandalism, and pressure was put on park managers by head office to gate those most at risk. Drovers Cave in Jurien had been gated with a grill which allowed the cave's colony of bats to continue to exit and reenter the cave. Unfortunately, locals regularly broke into the cave by either breaking the lock, cutting bars out of the grille or simply blowing holes in the cave roof with gelignite! Passfield frustratingly found he was spending much of his time repairing the damage in order to try protect the cave so decided to completely seal the cave entrance with a more substantial gate. Despite the cavers warning Passfield that such action would decimate the cave's bat colony, Passfield went ahead and had a 75 kg steel plate door made up at the Moora Engineering Works. At the same time, all natural entrances to the cave were concreted up. Sadly, the cavers' predictions came to fruition and there no longer are bats in Drovers Cave. Even more sad is that this cave continues to be broken into and damaged on a regular basis today.

In the early days, it was common practice to inscribe one's name onto the cave wall or cave formation as our young friend 'Sunny Skies' recorded in 1936: 'Before leaving, my husband scratched the name and age of our year-old son, who will have the distinction of being the youngest baby to penetrate this cave.' That signature joined the myriad of ones dating back to the days of the old stock route and later were joined by many more. It has always been a contentious issue within the caving community when it comes to removing old signatures from cave walls and formations. Some argue it should remain as historical value, whilst others see it more as 'graffiti' in the broader sense and seek to have it removed. This also brings up the big question, of course, of when is something deemed of historical value and when does it fall into the other end of the spectrum as senseless vandalism. The actions of the individuals, both in the distant and not so distant past are the same, however, we rarely attach great value to notations of the 'Shaz and Baz 4 eva' variety. Still, in the mid 1980s, the Western Australian Speleological Group applied for a permit from the National Park rangers to remove a vast quantity of the 'graffiti' in Drovers Cave. Arguably, the most offensive to the senses was a more recent application with red house paint on the cave wall which resulted in a layer of limestone having to be removed. But still, many signatures of a more historic nature were lost in the endeavour.

Members of the Western Australian Speleological Group have worked closely with National Parks managers in the Western Australian mid-west over the past 60 years, providing support, assistance and advice on the precious subterranean environments they oversee. The future for these caves is unknown; however, with sensible management plans and greater understanding of the fragility and importance of the cave networks in this area, they will be preserved for generations to come.