

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF SURVEYING THE BULLITA CAVE SYSTEM

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## ABSTRACT

*There have been snippets of geological and other information concerning Australia's longest cave published in various editions of the ASF's journal Australian Caver, minor presentations made at overseas and ASF conferences over the years and a substantial trip report in CEGSA News (Volume 49 Number 11). Recently there has been an article published in The Australian newspaper as well as numerous postings on the Ozcavers email group. Further reading on the Bullita Cave System is listed at the end of the paper.*

*The aim of this presentation is to provide a brief history of the results of the annual surveying of the Bullita Cave System and smaller adjacent caves during the numerous expeditions since exploration commenced 15 years ago. As a result of the initial work by PWC Rangers Keith Claymore and Keith Oliver followed by the Operation Raleigh Expedition of Smith and Storm from the United Kingdom in 1990 to the Top End Speleological Society (TESS) surveying and subsequent work by Australian cavers coordinated by TESS and Canberra Speleological Society (CSS), the Bullita Cave System is now just over 100 km in length.*

## INTRODUCTION

In Pre-European times the Victoria River Region was home to seven Aboriginal language groups: Ngarinyman, Ngaliwurru, Bilineara, Malngin, Nungali, Karangpurra and Wardaman. There were frequent and often violent disputes regarding tribal boundaries. It is the Ngarinyman that lived predominantly in the region of the caves.

European discoveries began in 1839 when Captain J. Wickham and John Stokes discovered, named and explored the Victoria River. Following favorable reports by Wickham and Stokes, Augustus Gregory (Figure 1) led the 'North Australian Exploring Expedition' in 1856-57 and followed the Victoria River to its source and recommended that the area be opened to pastoralists. In 1879 Alexander Forest traversed the Wickham River and at the beginning of the last century the Duracks had taken up grazing licences in the area.

In 1968 Arthur Clarke, while employed with the Bureau of Mineral Resources, worked in the area with geologist Sweet and an English geologist, John Mendum, who was there with his wife Mary. They explored quite a few caves and entrances in the course of their geological mapping of the area (Clarke, pers. comm.).

The area around Bullita had been used for cattle grazing until it was purchased by what is now the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission for inclusion in the Gregory National Park.

In the 1980s NT Parks and Wildlife Commission (PWC) staff, Keith Claymore and Keith Oliver, conducted a survey of the karst and found several entrances.

On 17th July 1984 the concept of The Gregory National Park was approved and the park was declared on 14th August 1990 making it the largest park in the PWC estate. Kakadu is larger but Federally administered.

There is now a new Bill before the NT parliament, the *Parks and Reserves (Framework for the Future) Bill 2003*. Basically,



*Figure 1: Augustus Charles Gregory (1819–1905).  
(National Library of Australia).*

if this bill is passed, it will return NT parks to the indigenous landowners who will lease back the parks to the NT Government on a 99-year lease. This act will provide "a framework

for negotiations between the Territory and the traditional Aboriginal owners of certain parks and reserves for the establishment, maintenance and management of a comprehensive system of parks and reserves" (Office of the Chief Minister, 2003). This applies to Gregory National Park.

## HISTORY OF EXPLORATION AND SURVEYING

The map at the end of the article (Figure 2) should be looked at to assist in locating some of the sites mentioned below.

### 1987

Two members of TESS made a brief trip to Limestone Gorge but no entrances were tagged or explored.

### JULY 1990

Operation Raleigh Expedition of Smith and Storm (Storm & Smith, 1991) from the UK surveyed the following caves north of Limestone creek:

Tic Tac Cave with a length of 500 m, Lost Cave with a length of 1600 m

Birthday Cave with a length of 1700 m

Dingo Cave with a length of 1600 m

Later in this Expedition, two caves were surveyed that were adjacent to the East Baines River in the South of the region:

Jalaman Wangar Jarin Cave with a surveyed length of 1340 m and Claymore Cave with 6200 m of surveyed passage.

### 1991

A TESS trip located some caves south of Limestone Gorge (BAA 22, 23).

CSS initially mapped BAA 10-11 (Two Fishes, to a length of 4600 m).

### 1992

After an examination of aerial photographs, Guy Bannink and Karen MaGraith located BAA36, BAA37 and with Peter Bannink explored a major rift further south where the entrances to BAA34 and BAA35 are now located and tagged (Bannink, pers. comm.).

CSS members surveyed an area to the south of the southern block tagged BAA29 - 3900 m. CSS also surveyed the small area south of Limestone Creek, BAA37.

### 1993

TESS began exploring and surveying BAA35 in the central area of the karst with Tasmanian cavers Stuart Nicholas and Chris Davies.

A CSS expedition discovered "Berks Backyard" to the north of BAA35 and mapped their historic 11 km in one trip. It was named "Berks Backyard" as it was within reasonable walking distance from the campsite and because no one had found it previously and the ferns and trees gave it an aura of being in a garden (Brush, 1994).

### 1994

TESS was shown a cave by some members of the RAAF who were camped at Limestone Gorge, that was later referred to as "Raafies Cave", BAA50.

TESS and CSS overlapped their expeditions and together located and surveyed BAA51 entrance at the beginning of the "Neighbours Block", a cave system that was later connected to

BAA50. BAA36 and BAA37 were joined and TESS connected BAA35 to "Berks Backyard".

### 1995

The three-person trip of Don Glasco, John Dunkley and Veronica Schumann surveyed 10 kms and joined "Berks Backyard" and "The Frontyard" proving an underground connection between two major karst blocks. Glasco commenced using the mapping procedures we still use today. (See the article on surveying problems in these proceedings). The passage length was increased to 29 km, making it Australia's longest cave.

### 1996

According to Bruce Swain and John Dunkley, CSS and TESS discussed splitting the exploration area. CSS would continue mapping and coordinating "Berks" and the karst south of Limestone Gorge and TESS would continue coordinating and mapping the area north of Limestone Gorge.

CSS resurveyed BAA35 and began work in the karst of the "Neighbours Block", probably resurveying the BAA50-51 area that TESS had surveyed and increased the passage length to 42 km.

In late March 1996 Arthur Clarke and Mick Williams, undertook an appraisal of the biodiversity of invertebrate species and species types from caves in warm temperate and tropical Australia (Clarke, pers. comm.).

They collected a range of species from caves north and south of Limestone Gorge.

### 1997

BAA36 and 37 were joined to the "Neighbours Block" and an area called "SWB" to the NW of "Berks Backyard" was added. An isolated cave called "Skeleton Key" was found and surveyed. Work continued in "The Frontyard". The total continuous surveyed length of passages was now 54 km.

### 1998

In that year, BAA 97, "SWB", was joined to BAA35 "Berks Backyard" and surveying commenced in BAA34 taking the length of the cave system to 60 km.

### 1999

BAA 34 was extended and a new but isolated area "SOGS" (Silly Old Goats) named in honour of the silly old fellows Nicholas White and Lloyd Robinson who continually walked over the area. Lloyd and Nicholas also found a resurgence from the SOGS system but that was not surveyed until 2003 because it was impossible to enter. The length of the system was now 65 km.

### 2000

Work continued in BAA 34 and to incorporate short days in between long walks, "fill-in" work in the "Neighbours Block" occurred bringing the cave length to 76.5 km.

### 2001

The year of the "Space Odyssey" and many days work joined "SOGS" to BAA34. We relocated an entrance discovered by Michael Coopes and Bruce Swain in 1999. It was named "Mikes Cave" in honour of Michael Coopes after his death in an accident in Switzerland. We found a new entrance in what is called NW SOGS and a drain at the bottom of what

is a multi-level (5 level) area that headed in the direction of the resurgence. More “fill-in” in the “Neighbours Block” extended the cave length to 80.5 km.

## 2002

A great deal of work in BAA34 and NW SOGS around “The Drain” took the total length to 85.8 km

## 2003

The survey teams joined three previously isolated caves, Skeleton Key, Mikes, The Drain and then the Efflux of SOGS, into the Main Bullita Cave system. During the last few years, members of the expeditions assisted Bruce Swain, from TESS, with a survey on the north side of Limestone creek. The distance now was very close to 93 km (Sefton, 2004).

## 2004

Exploration to the NW of Mikes Cave and following up leads left in the Hermitage Grange area that had been surveyed in 1993. Another 1.2 km in the SOGS region was surveyed. A new isolated cave south of SOGS, “Wadija Cave”, was surveyed to a length of 1.3 kms.

An important milestone in the Bullita Cave System was reached at 4.45pm on 15th July 2004 (the last day of the 2004 expedition), when Station “04100km” was constructed to celebrate the 100.03 kms of surveyed length.

## THE FUTURE

A great deal of exploration and surveying will still have to be completed if cavers continue to follow the requirements of the NT Parks and Wildlife Commission Permits and traditional landowners’ wishes.

Please see the letter that is attached as Appendix 1 that was published on the ‘Ozcavers’ forum in response to several enquiries regarding the Bullita Cave system in July 2004.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Oliver, Keith	Perry, Justin
Anderson Mark	Playford, Luke
Carter, Dane	Schmidt, Cate
Connor, Nathan	Scoot, Barry
Fisher, Garry	Sharpe, Cameron
Hartwig, Andrew	Washburne, Sam
Jones, Sarah	Williams, John
Nicholson, Steve	Woodward, Mark
Michael ?	

We need to acknowledge the achievements of a dedicated group of cavers from various expeditions who helped in achieving the successes over the years. *Our apologies to anyone that may have been inadvertently left off the lists below.* The surveyors are:

### Explorers/Surveyors from TESS:

Bannink, Guy	Jacups, Susan
Bannink, Peter	Finke, Craig
MaGraith, Karen	Connolly, Scott
Swain, Bruce	

### Expedition members:

Abbott, Doug	Madris, Melissa
Anderson, Carol	Martini, Jacques
Anderson, Neil	Nicholas, Stuart
Bradley, Chris	Nosworthy, Andrew
Bradley, Lisa	Papp, Eve
Brush, John	Poulter, Norman
Campbell, Jim	Poulter, Robert
Campbell, Nikki	Poulton, Fran
Carmichael, David	Randall, Bru
Cashburn, Jean	Redpath, Carol
Coggan, Marjorie	Redpath, John
Davies, Chris	Robinson, Dorothy (camp)
Dunkley, Jeanette	Robinson, Lloyd
Dunkley, John	Schomer, Barbara
Dunn, Bob	Schumann, Veronica
Elton, Judy	Sefton, Mark
Epsen, Tim	Taylor, John
Fitton, Coral	Veness, Tony
Fullager, Fred	Wall, Andrew;
Glasco, Don	Wellington, Bob
Goede, Albert	Wellington, Pru
Hite, Norm	White, Nicholas
Hunter, Debbie	White, Sue
Ingeme, Yvonne	Woodcock, Gary
Jambrecina, Mim	
Kershaw, Bob	

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## APPENDIX 1

### LETTER FROM BULLITA EXPEDITION MEMBERS TO AUSTRALIAN CAVERS

(as sent to Ozcavers in July 2004)

We are sending this item in response to several postings recently, following unsolicited publicity in *The Australian* newspaper about Australia's longest cave in the Northern Territory. These 'Ozcavers' postings were quite inaccurate, but our brief here is not to take issue with the authors, but to acquaint you with the background.

First, we are rather surprised at claims by a few cavers that there is something secretive about this project. It has in fact received much more publicity than successive expeditions to remote parts of northern Queensland and Western Australia, for example, but as in those places, there are sound reasons for exercising caution when the mass media become involved. *The Australian* also carried a report and photograph back in 1997, so there is really nothing new reported.

The mass media may think otherwise, but there is nothing secretive about our project within the caving community. Over the last decade, progress reports have been presented to at least 3 ASF and other conferences, with some 7 or 8 publications (including cave maps) in at least 4 or 5 different journals, proceedings and club newsletters. For the record, the most recent were in *Australian Caver* 160 in December last year, and a lengthy article in *CEGSA News* in February 2004.

This has been a genuinely national project, but it is not controlled or organised by ASF. Initially organised by CSS & TESS, the project has for a decade been open to members of other clubs prepared to accept the expedition conditions, although there is a practical limit of 12 to 15 people for logisti-

cal reasons. More than 60 individual cavers from at least 11 different ASF member clubs in every state and territory except Queensland have assisted with the exploration and surveying over a period of more than 13 years. To our knowledge, all offered their services of their own volition - they were not approached to do so.

However, participants are bound by the conditions of access set down both in the Permit and in writing by the land managers, which include not publicising the work we do, nor publishing any of the results without their prior permission. Management has several reasons for this including risk management in a remote area with limited resources, sensitivities of Aboriginal communities and, until very recently, the absence of a Management Plan.

### Aboriginal communities

Next, we feel that cavers generally need to be more aware of the sensitivity of Aboriginal communities to people wishing to enter their lands. At the ASF Conference in Bathurst in 2001 a guest speaker from the local Aboriginal community stressed these sensitivities strongly in his address.

Most cavers live in southern Australia and are accustomed to liaising with managers and private landowners in places where Aboriginal rights have long been extinguished either by the land tenure system or by effluxion of time. We sense that they may not appreciate that it is different in the North. Throughout northern Australia, and particularly in the Northern Territory (where over half of the land is Aboriginal), traditional landowners (i.e. local Aboriginal communities) have sensitivities, powers and rights on both public and Aboriginal land (including statutory rights) that they generally do not enjoy in other states. Most Australians are aware, for example, that entry to Aboriginal land generally is on a permit basis, and that commercial photography of icons such as Uluru is at the discretion of the traditional landowners, who also dissuade visitors from climbing the Rock.

Clearly, land management authorities must abide by statutory requirements in this regard, and in turn so must we.

### ASF Code of Ethics

In considering how to let fellow cavers know what has been happening, we have meticulously followed both the conditions of access, and the ASF Code of Ethics, which includes the following clauses:

"2.1 Landowners, tourist guides and any person representing a management authority will be treated with courtesy and respect.

"4.4 Consideration should be given before publishing an article disclosing a cave's location, as to its intended audience, the wishes of the landowner and/or management authority, and the subsequent effect on the cave."

The managing authority for the area in question is the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory. Like other public authorities, the Parks Service allows entry to caves only under permit.

Furthermore, as elsewhere in Australia, there is also an expectation that visiting cavers will contact and cooperate with the member club that is documenting the area for the Australian Karst Index, which in this case is Top End Speleological Society.

### Whose right to know?

There is always going to be debate between those seeking an unfettered right to know and those wishing to manage

their land in accordance with their statutory rights. In general, cavers have accepted that land owners have final say in who is allowed on their land, under what conditions, and what is said about it either among the caving community or to the public at large. Even in NSW, for example, books on caves have omitted maps and location information on wild caves, even though that reduced their effectiveness as sources of information, because managers and/or landowners requested it.

Cavers and other visitors simply must accept the fact that in the North, the rules are different, and have more consideration for those of us trying to negotiate access. Conditions of entry for activities like caving are just not as open or as straightforward as you are accustomed to in southern Australia. They may have been in the past, but they aren't now. For example, several significant caves and karst areas in the Kimberley and in north-west Queensland were explored by cavers in the 1970s and '80s. They are now closed off. In 2003, access to one major area was denied to cavers after arrival, even though the managing authority was previously willing. If these areas are ever to become accessible again, speleologists must accept these facts of life, and demonstrate a track record of respect for the wishes of owners. Although we have issued warnings in previous years, still neither *The*

*Australian* newspaper, nor the recent postings to 'OzCavers' appear to recognise reality.

Ours has been the most successful focused program of exploration and surveying ever undertaken in Australia, and the outcome is world class.

It is only natural that some of you will feel you have missed out on something big. But, as we said, more than 60 cavers have already taken part. It's not a closed club. We will seek permission to present another progress report at the ASF Conference in January 2005, and members should then feel free to ask more from our group. In turn, we ask that even if you disagree, you accept the wishes of the managing authority relating to publicity, be patient, and not vent your frustration on us.

***It's not secrecy, it's respect for the rights of others.***

*John Dunkley*

*Bob Kershaw*

*Bruce Swain*

*Mark Sefton*

*Nicholas White*

*Susan White*

*Debbie Hunter*

*John & Carol Redpath*

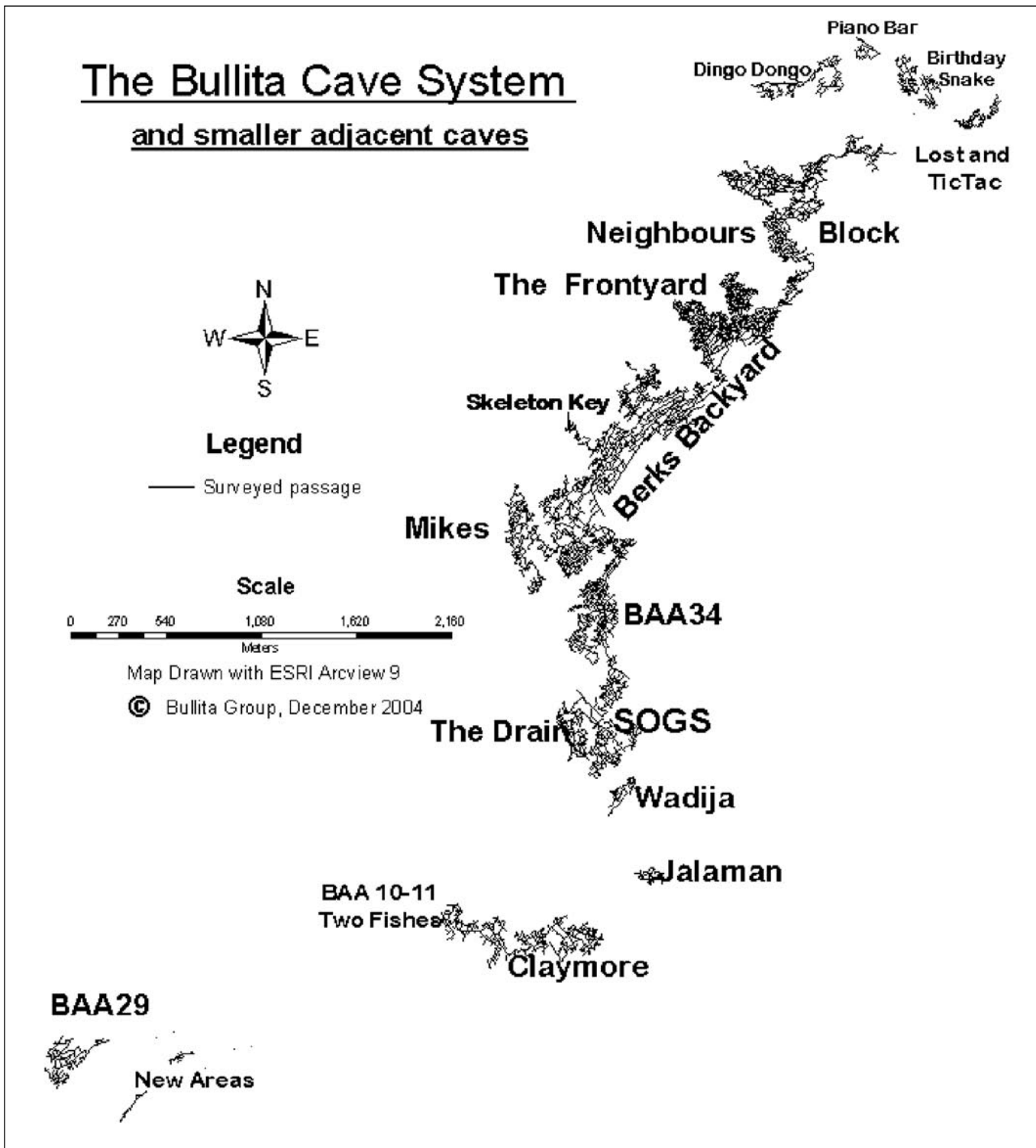


Figure 2: The Bullita Cave System.