'FAST' KARST
– AN INTRODUCTION TO TASMANIAN CAVE TOURISM IN THE YEARS 1840 - 1950

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KARST was one of Tasmania's first tourist attractions. The karst of the Mole Creek region was first reported in 1823, when Captain John Rollands noted some "circular pits or ponds"[1], in the area subsequently named "Circular Ponds". (Later known as Mayberry, this area is located along the Liena Road, just north of the Marakoopa Cave system.) Also referred to as "circular basins"[2], these pits are the features we know today as dolines; the "ponds" are in fact drowned dolines. The subterranean creeks, limestone caves and dolines of the Mole Creek region[3] in northern Tasmania were first examined in more detail by surveyors of the Van Diemen's Land Company in the mid to late 1820s while cutting a stock track from the Western Marshes (near Deloraine) to Emu Bay in north-western Tasmania. This route later evolved into the main road west of Deloraine. One of our first documented records of a tourist visit to caves in Tasmania relates to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur's visit to an unknown cave near Mayberry in January 1829[4]. More karst features were soon discovered in the surrounding district and by 1850 caves of the Mole Creek region were being marketed as a tourist attraction.

The physical barrier of Bass Strait, along with the island's small population, restricted its tourist numbers and slowed the development of its cave tourism industry. The power of the box office is such that, while the Mole Creek caves were discovered, almost simultaneously with the Jenolan Caves in New South Wales, the former lagged decades behind in terms of local and colonial governmental protection, infrastructure and lighting systems. Until about 1920, cave tourism in Tasmania was characterised by individual initiative and voluntary "booster" organisations, but ultimately it was the State government which shaped the present regime of "show" caves at Mole Creek, Gunns Plains and Hastings. In the post-World War II period, the formation in Hobart of the Tasmanian Caverneering Club signified a firmer recognition of the intrinsic value of karst and caves, rather than just their pecuniary value as a tourist attraction. Four phases in the development of Tasmanian cave tourism during the period 1840 – 1950 are apparent.

1: WESTWARD HO: THE PIONEERING PHASE FROM ABOUT 1840 TO 1870

In the years from about 1840 to 1870, an *ad hoc* form of tourism existed in the Mole Creek district. During the second half of that period it centred on an upwardly mobile ex-convict named Dan Pickett and his establishment: the Chudleigh Inn. (The town of Chudleigh takes its name from a town with tourist caves in the English county of Devon.) Pickett boasted that he had guided a succession of Tasmanian governors through the Wet Caves, beginning with Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin in about 1840, and also implied that he had attended the famous Eton school in England prior to emigrating here as a free settler! Such lies or "mis-truths" probably did no harm to the ex-burglar's reputation as raconteur and entertainer.[5]

Initially cave tourism was focused on one cave system: variously reported as the Western, Westward, Oakden, Chudleigh or Wet Caves. The two caves here are known today as Wet Cave and Honeycomb 1. The main entrances of both caves are only a few hundred metres apart, located at each end of a surface breach in a subterranean tributary of the actual Mole Creek. Wet Cave was the site where Tasmanian cave fauna was documented for the first time, when Lieutenant William Breton reported glow-worms during a visit to the cave in September 1842.[6] Twenty years later another set of "new" caves had been discovered further west on Sassafras Creek; subsequently known as "How's Sawmill Cave" (Sassafras Cave) and later as the "New Caves", these were also being visited by tourists in 1862.[7]

Aside from the Chudleigh Inn, and the guiding service offered by Pickett and/or on an impromptu basis by local farming families, there was no infrastructure for cave tourists. There were none of the safeguards for tourists or caves that generally apply today: no cave gates, no authorised guides or caretakers, no in-house electric lights, no ladders, no bridges, no cement paths or protective wire. One of the results of this was unchecked vandalism: removal of speleothems and the proliferation of speleograffiti signatures. Bark torches and sperm whale oil candles lit the way, and the answer to wading through cold, often knee-deep water was not thermal underwear, but a bottle of brandy. Glow-worm displays, playing the "organ pipe" flowstone ribbons, autographing the 'Registry Office', the thrill of the "sublime" and the excitement of journeying underground characterise reports of early visits to the Wet Caves.[8]

Apart from the few local residents, only the more wealthy "well-to-do" saw the caves at this time, the reason being that a trip from Launceston to the Wet Caves took several days by horse and dray. The working class could not afford such a trip and did not have the leisure time it required. The most famous visitor was English novelist Anthony Trollope, who in 1872 accompanied Governor Du Cane to the Wet Caves, with Dan Pickett as their guide.[9] Even prior to the publication of Trollope's travel book *Australia and New Zealand*, tourists' handbooks such as Thomas's *Guide for Excursionists to Tasmania* began to promote Tasmanian attractions on the mainland. Until 1885 there were no Bass Strait steamers, so crossing the Strait was a long, uncomfortable battle with winds and waves.[10]

In about 1861, limestone caves were also discovered at Flowery Gully on the western side of the Tamar River near latter-day Beaconsfield, probably as the result of a tramway being built nearby to exploit timber for the gold rush market in Melbourne.[11] Known variously as the Ilfracombe Caves, Winkleigh Caves or the West Tamar Caves, the caves at Flowery Gully appear to have received visitors only sporadically, the main reason for this possibly being that they were on private land. Similarly, there was no local entrepreneur like Pickett to promote these caves, and they were essentially in the middle of what became in the 1870s probably Tasmania's busiest mining district.

2: RAILWAY DAYS: FROM LAUNCESTON TO "FAIRYLAND"

In 1871 Tasmania's first railway line was opened between Launceston and Deloraine, which brought a small urban population within 18 kilometres of the Mole Creek caves. That distance was further reduced when in 1890 the Mole Creek Branch Railway ushered in the day trip, finally enabling Launceston's working class to see these caves. At this time, a cool, temperate climate was considered curative and invigorating, and the 'Englishness' of rural northern Tasmania, with its rolling hills and hawthorn hedge windbreaks – even blackberries – also appealed to British subjects in the Antipodes.[12]

In 1879 the Deloraine Council made the first efforts to protect the caves, the catalyst probably being the theft of a large formation called "The Cauliflower" from the "New Caves" (Sassafras Cave).[13] The "Old (Wet) Caves" were enclosed by a 100-acre (40.5-hectare) reserve, a 300-acre (121.5-hectare) reserve enclosed Sassafras Cave and a smaller less well known 37 acre reserve was created around "How's New Cave" (known today as Cyclops Cave)[14]. These first cave reserves in Tasmania were effectively municipal reserves: three areas of crown land leased to the Deloraine Council on the proviso that Council protect the caves, as well as providing and maintaining access roads to the caves. Subsequent to these reserves being declared, the Deloraine Council was petitioned by local graziers and timber getters in the 1880s to sub-lease the reserve lands and to assist the *Chudleigh Road Trust* to provide access roads. By 1909, that 300-acre reserve was already down to 100 acres, after locals pressured the Deloraine Council to let them cut timber on the land.[15] The *Crown Lands Acts* of this time were "toothless", guaranteeing little more than that reserved land would not be sold. That reservation of land was not a popular movement at this time is borne out by a glance at a map of today's Mole Creek Karst National Park, which shows a block of only two hectares covering the entrance to Sassafras Cave. Similarly, both Council and Tasmanian Lands Dept. never honoured the original intent of these cave reserves by creating legal access roads, so consequently the Sassafras Cave reserve is now an "island" – surrounded by private land – without a legal access road for visitors.

In the early 1880s Baldocks Cave was discovered near Sassafras Cave, and it was from here that the Tasmanian Cave Spider (*Hickmania troglodytes*) was documented for the first time in 1883.[16] For a few years during the late 1880s/ early 1890s, William Baldock became Tasmania's second example of individual cave entrepreneurship. In the 1890s, Tasmania had no government tourist authority, relying on voluntary organisations like the Northern Tasmanian Tourists' Association (NTTA) to promote the colony and its tourist attractions. Acting on the advice of visiting Jenolan Caves guru J.C. (Voss) Wiburd, the NTTA induced the Tasmanian government to buy Baldocks Cave and place it in the association's protective custody. Part of this protective regime was the 1902 appointment of David Howe as Tasmania's first "official" cave caretaker at Baldocks. [17]

When the Railways Department introduced the special excursion fare day trip in 1894, the two sets of tourist caves at Mole Creek: the "Old Caves" and "New Caves" were respectively marketed as the "Wet Caves" (today's Wet Cave and Honeycomb 1) and the "Dry Caves" (Baldocks Cave and Sassafras Cave), emphasising two contrasting cave experiences. Both sets of caves had caretakers (appointed by the Deloraine Council) who acted as cave guides, charging set fees to visiting tourists. The railway excursion fare included the cave entry fee. The typical description of the Mole Creek caves late in the 19th century and early in the 20th century was as a "fairyland", "fairy grotto"' or a "magical paradise", which reflected both contemporary fascination with the supernatural and the gradual replacement of candles by the more vivid magnesium ribbon and acetylene powered lamps.[18]

Limestone caves were discovered at Ida Bay, south of Dover in the late 1880s, but access initially required a boat trip and long walk. In around 1894, tourist caves were found at Gunns Plains, in the north-west and near Kelly Basin in western Tasmania in 1899.[19] All these discoveries were on Crown Land. Like those at Flowery Gully, the caves at Ida Bay and Kelly Basin were soon threatened by proposed limestone quarries, and development at Gunns Plains was hampered by its isolation.

3: "TASMANIAN WONDERLAND": THE HEYDAY OF PRIVATE CAVE TOURISM AT MOLE CREEK

The heyday of private cave tourism in the Mole Creek region early in the 20th century was characterised by the use of acetylene lighting, a technology which reigned for two decades. Local farmers became entrepreneurs exploiting the custom brought to the district by the Mole Creek Railway. The westward spread of settlement guaranteed new cave discoveries such as the Alexander Caves (Scotts Cave), King Solomons Cave and Marakoopa Cave, this being the only truly competitive period in the history of Tasmanian cave tourism.[20]

Scotts Cave at South Mole Creek was as famous for its hospitality as its limestone marvels, if the epiphanies contained in its visitors' books are any guide. The Scott family kept a boarding-house on their property and guided tourists not just to Scotts Cave, but to the Chudleigh Lakes on the Great Western Tiers, plus the Den and Alum Cliffs on the Mersey River.

King Solomons Cave near Liena, developed by the blustery entrepreneurship of EC James, is in some ways perhaps the ideal show cave, compact and colourful, guaranteeing the visitor almost instant gratification. In its early days it featured an underground cafe. Like Scotts and Baldocks, its original entrance demanded physical agility.

Marakoopa is a much bigger cave system than either Scotts or King Solomons, containing more spectacular formations and a glow-worm chamber for an entrance hall. Pious Baptists, the Byard family who developed the tourist cave at Mayberry sang hymns within the cave, which they lit cheaply but dimly with hand-held acetylene lamps. The ethereal resonance and shadows which resulted appealed to Hobart novelist Marie Bjelke Petersen, whose best-selling romance *The Captive*

Singer, set anonymously at Marakoopa Cave and the town of Mole Creek, advertised Tasmanian karst across the British Commonwealth.[21]

The advent of the private motorbike or car introduced motor touring to the caves. Skilled black-and-white photographers, including Steve Spurling, John Watt Beattie and HJ King, helped promote the tourist caves. It was during this period that stereotypic guided cave tourism, in which every formation had an official name and story, began to erode the sense of discovery that earlier cave visitors experienced.[22] Nevertheless, the word "wonderland" and the phrase "Tasmania's wonderland" or "Tasmanian Wonderland" gradually replaced "fairyland" as the typical cave metaphor; "wonderland" being a reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which had remained in print since its initial publication in 1868.[23]

4: EMMETT'S TEMPLE: THE CAVES IN GOVERNMENT HANDS BETWEEN THE WARS

In 1914 the Tasmanian Government Tourist and Information Bureau was established in recognition that the state needed a unified effort if it was to compete for the tourist pound (£) with the mainland states and New Zealand. In 1915, with the passing of the *Scenery Preservation Act*, Tasmania went from having ineffectual environmental legislation to having what has been called the most progressive of its kind in Australia.[24] This reflected a growing interest in conservation, although those who wanted to preserve nature found themselves having to side with tourism boosters like ET Emmett, director of the Government Tourist Bureau, in order to establish Tasmania's first national park, at Mount Field.[25]

Emmett was the dominant figure in Tasmanian cave tourism between the wars. He led the annual four or five-day Easter trip by rail to the Mole Creek district, which took in Baldocks, Scotts, Marakoopa and King Solomons Caves, plus other local features such as Westmorland Falls and the Alum Cliffs.[26]

The Government Tourist Bureau's attachment to the Railways Department signaled that the government wanted to protect its railways from the increasing competition provided by road transport. The Tasmanian Railway Department had been at the forefront in providing government assistance for organised tourism in Tasmania, but it was also a means of helping to repay the costs of laying the lines and purchasing rolling stock.

The railway excursions to tourist destinations were still very popular. Reflecting the growing interest in conservation of tourist assets, one of the very first public notices relating to the protection of caves in Tasmania (under the control of the Govt. Tourist Bureau) was issued as a "Railway Department Notice" in 1921, with a set of By-Laws coming into effect on June 1st that year.[27] The by-laws introduced a set of penalty fines stating that admission to the caves required being accompanied by a guide who had the authority to restrict entry by intoxicated persons or those with a physical disability. There were also provisions for protecting the fauna, "eggs" and flora of cave reserves along with penalties for defacing the cave formations and cave rock (with any writing or marking) and causing "injury" to any rock, stalactite or stalagmite.

For about a decade the Easter trip to the Mole Creek Caves was conducted by railway, but by the late 1920s Emmett found it more convenient to use hire cars, a shift away from the train which culminated in the Tourist Department becoming an independent body in 1934.[28] The slogan "Tasmanian Wonderland", formerly a description specifically used to promote the caves, was adopted by the Government Tourist Bureau as the logo for its Tasmanian tourism package.[29] The advent of regular air services and the establishment of mainland branch offices of the Tasmanian Government Tourist Bureau helped sell this package.[30]

Around this period, in late 1917 and early 1918, three dolomite caves were discovered by timber loggers near the end of their tramway in the forest about 10km west from the Hastings Mill, situated on a bay in the estuary of the Lune River, almost directly north from Wheelbarrow Bay (Ida Bay). The three caves: Newdegate Cave, The King George Cave (now King George V Cave) and Beattie Cave collectively became known as the Hastings Caves, though today this name is used synonymously for Newdegate Cave, the sole remaining most visited tourist cave in Tasmania. Newdegate Cave was the first to be discovered, shortly before Christmas in 1917, reported in newspapers in mid-February 1918.[31] About ten days after several newspapers published conflicting accounts of their discovery and size of the entrance – then, travelling by "motor" and "horse train" – the caves were inspected by ET Emmett in the company of wilderness photographer: JW Beattie.[32] Barely three weeks later, using the new Hastings Caves discovery as his "show-piece", Emmett provided an illustrated address on the *Caves of Tasmania* to the Annual General Meeting of the Royal Society of Tasmania.[33] The two other new caves at Hastings were discovered early in 1918 and all three caves featured in a subsequent lecture by JW Beattie to the Royal Society at their April 1918 meeting, illustrated with a series of 36 lantern slides[34]; some of these slide images were subsequently published in newspapers.

Although a 131 acre Hastings Caves Reserve was gazetted 14 months later on June 24th 1919, the government did little to physically protect the caves from damage by visitors. All three caves were reguarly visited by local people and their families, sometimes accompanied by self-appointed cave guides who encouraged their touring parties to sign their names at designated signature sites in cave chambers. Early in 1920, Emmett wrote to the Esperance Municipality Council requesting that all three caves be gated and later that same year, the Tasmanian Government agreed to a request from the Scenery Preservation Board that the caves at Hastings be vested in the control of the tourist section of the Railways Department. Despite the best intentions of the Government and the Esperance Council, the caves continued to be vandalised until control was temporarily vested in the hands of Council while Parliament debated the cost of constructing a road and formally developing the caves for tourism.

The Esperance Council established a series of graded walking tracks with excavated pathways to the caves and for a short time in the 1930s, all three caves were open to tourists. One of the enterprising guides appointed by the Council had an especially designed truck for excursionists with wooden bench seats installed with rope lashings in the boxed-in tray compartment behind the driver's cabin. The guides charged tourists an entry fee for public inspection of the caves and visitors books were placed at all three cave entrances in an effort to prevent further desecration of cave formations with signatures. Cave guides used a mix of lighting methods including kerosene lanterns, carbide lanterns (removed from bicycles) and hand operated dynamo powered electric torches.[35]

Despite the threat of limestone quarrying, the caves at

Ida Bay and those near Kelly Basin on Macquarie Harbour were also being promoted as tourist attractions in the first and second decades of the 20th century. Both sites were accessed along tramways: a timber logging tramway at Ida Bay, via "The Avenue" – a branch line from the Lune River Mill tramway – and near Kelly Basin on the west coast: the former North Lyell Railway from Gormanston to Pillinger, via the old mining towns of Crotty and Darwin. A 40 acre cave reserve at Ida Bay to protect the "Ida Bay Caves" (Mystery Creek Cave) was gazetted on July 3rd 1917, by notice from the Tasmanian Department of Mines under auspices of section 16 (2) of the *Mining Act 1905* to "preserve the caves situated thereon". The caves on the Bird River near Kelly Basin eventually lost their appeal as tourist destinations, following the decline in supporting infrastructure with the demise of the nearby towns several years after the collapse of the former North Lyell Mining Company.

By the time the *Scenery Preservation Act 1915* was passed and the Scenery Preservation Board was formed to administer the act, it was obvious that farming families could not raise the money to fully develop their own caves. As a result, the government bought King Solomons and Marakoopa Caves. So now five cave systems – Gunns Plains, Baldocks, King Solomons, Marakoopa and Hastings – were in government hands, leaving Scotts as the only privately-owned tourist cave. Flowery Gully was still privately owned, but limestone quarrying prevailed over tourism there, despite a short respite in 1933. At that time, a Launceston businessman, Bill Annear, installed a 32-horsepower electric light plant outside the caves, which were officially opened to the public by the Mayor of Launceston.[36] It is interesting to note that this electric lighting at Flowery Gully occurred around six years ahead of the electric illumination of present-day tourist caves: Marakoopa and Newdegate.

The Scenery Preservation Board was starved of funding until the mid 1930s.[37] It was actually local improvement associations, not the Scenery Preservation Board, which ran Gunns Plains and Hastings Caves during this time, and which ensured that in 1928 Gunns Plains was the first Tasmanian cave to receive the electric light.[38] The "old" Mole Creek caves were administered by the Railways Department through the Government Tourist Bureau. The little money available for their development was focused on King Solomons, which was electrified a few months after Gunns Plains.[39]

In the late 1930s the Ogilvie government spent heavily on tourism in the name of unemployment relief, which included the epic task of labourers with hand tools working all seasons in deplorable conditions over several years to form the 11km long stretch of road to open up the Hastings Caves.[40] Although a considerable section of this new caves road was formed through forest and swampland, much of it followed the route of the former timber tramline from the Hastings Mill, running roughly parallel to the course of Hot Springs Creek. By 1939, the present regime of four major tourist caves, each with electric light, King Solomons, Marakoopa, Gunns Plains, and Newdegate Cave at Hastings, was established. Even Flowery Gully had the electric light, some of which can be still seen today hanging "lifeless" from passage walls in the cave now only accessible from the one remaining quarry-face entrance. The two remaining tourist caves at Mole Creek which were not electrified, Baldocks and Scotts, fell by the wayside.

CONCLUSION

In September 1946 Dr Sam Carey founded the Tasmanian Caverneering Club (TCC), Australia's first speleological organisation, in Hobart. This signalled acceptance of the idea that karst had an intrinsic value aside from its pecuniary one. The club's investigation of existing "show" caves, at the request of the Scenery Preservation Board, prompted the opening of new tourist chambers including Binneys Chamber in Newdegate Cave,[41] named in honour of the TCC's patron, Governor Hugh Binney.

TCC were requested to investigate and survey a number of caves, preparing reports and detailed maps for the Scenery Preservation Board on nearly all the operating tourist caves, plus the closed sites including Baldocks, Scotts and Flowery Gully making recommendations on the viability of possible future tourist operations. In 1947, members of TCC were guided to a cave on the south side of Marble Hill at Ida Bay where they searched for the exit passage from Mystery Creek Cave in the hope of discovering yet another potential tourist destination; this "new" site became known as the Exit Cave. In subsequent years, TCC members became more and more focused on finding and exploring new caves with early attention paid particularly to the karst areas of Mole Creek, Junee-Florentine, Hastings, Gunns Plains, Loongana and Ida Bay. Caving as a recreation in Tasmania now developed independently of the tourist caves.

There was a rapid expansion of tourism in Tasmania in the immediate post-war period, probably due to many people having postponed their travel during the hostilities of World War II.[42] This trend did not last, though, with successive Tasmanian governments being more interested in luring secondary industry to the state with cheap hydro-electric power, rather than chasing tourists.[43] A small population and the physical isolation, still cost Tasmania the benefits that the mainland states gained from an increase in motor touring in the early 1950s.[44] Not until the roll-on, roll-off Bass Strait ferry *Princess of Tasmania* made its debut in 1959 was there a resurgence in tourism, but not even that service could give Tasmania parity with mainland "show" caves.[45] ■

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