
BREAKTHROUGH IN BARRALONG

JENOLAN CAVES, 10TH – 12TH JUNE, 2006

BY PHIL MAYNARD

Participants: Keir Vaughan-Taylor, Michael Collins, Jason Cockayne, Paul Boler, Rod O'Brien, Jack O'Brien, Phil Maynard, Jenny Whitby, Gary Whitby, Darren Dowler, Caroline Dowler, Steve Roy, Paul Lewis



Jason exits the downstream Barralong dive

photo Paul Boler

Saturday: This was the first diving trip to Jenolan in quite a long time, so a large group of divers and helpers turned up. Barralong was the main priority for the weekend, because of all the going underwater leads at Jenolan, it's got the potential for the biggest breakthroughs and has dry cave to keep the helpers happy. It was a cold, wet saturday and a good day to be underground, so we got going pretty early.

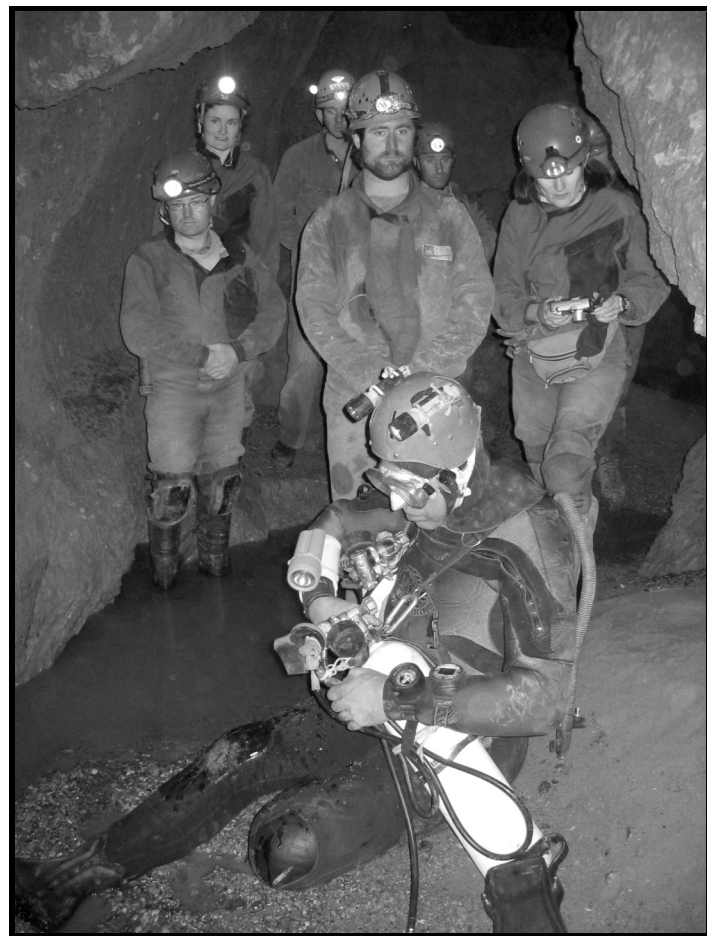
Barralong is a big extension of the southern show caves at Jenolan. It's a mix of phreatic tubes and collapse chambers, and the second half is famously decorated. The passage runs almost straight south from the show caves into the great unknown. Right at the end, the creek appears out of a lake and runs north past the main passage through some tight rifts into another sump. The upstream dive holds the promise of breaking into the entire southern catchment of Jenolan – at least 2 km of limestone with no stream cave known and no surface creek. Downstream, the course of the creek is unknown for about four hundred metres before it appears underneath the show caves. The creek flows right through the tourist sections of River and Pool of Cerberus before it appears on the surface as a spring beside Blue Lake.

Carrying dive gear though Barralong is difficult. There's a tight section through some rockpile, followed by a short up pitch (we hauled the gear with a rope), followed by some extremely delicate decoration. Over the years, the divers have got better at doing the gear haul and avoiding damage to the caves, so we only took a couple of hours to put the divers at the end of the cave. Paul and Keir dived upstream from the lake, taking some sacks with them. The dive currently ends at a dig at the bottom of a slope. They were hoping to use the sacks to haul mud completely away from the dig so that it would not roll back down the slope.

While they were gone, the rest of us did some more survey of the dry passages near the end of the cave. There's far more here than is shown on the original map, so we're slowly compiling data for a new map, to include all the side passages and the dive. We connected up an unexpected loop and found more to survey on the next dive carry trip with idle carriers.



*Paul in upstream Barralong dive
photo Rod O'Brien*



*Keir kits up
photo Gary Whitby*

Keir and Paul returned with news that the dig looked a little more optimistic than before. They'd had to look at it without the sacks, though – the sacks hadn't made it through the first squeeze. Somewhere under the lake, there's some sacks waiting to be found again..... We left as much gear as we could for the next day and hauled the rest out, finding the weather truly cold wet and miserable on the surface when we emerged after dark.

Sunday: Rod went for a walk with Jack, and Steve and Paul went to Cliefden, so a slightly smaller group returned to Barralong. Jenny, Gary, Paul, Darren and Caroline concentrated on photography while the rest of us got Michael and Jason into the downstream end of the Barralong creek. The last time this was dived (See SUSS Bull 43(3)), there were three short sumps passed and then Keir spent his time digging out a fourth sump. He thought at the time that he'd cleared the sump out, mostly by removing big boulders, but the sump visibility was zero by then so he left it.

This time, Michael and Jason got through the sump with ease. It was short and shallow, and they found themselves in walk-through stream passage! The passage ran due north and the stream eventually disappeared under a rockpile. They climbed their way into the rockpile and found several climbing leads at the top, as well as a hole through which they could see the stream flowing about four metres below them. Without a tape or ladder, they weren't game to climb down to it, so next time there's a going lead at stream level as well as the possibility of climbing to higher level chambers.

Michael and Jason returned after two hours (only because that was the time limit we'd set; I think they'd like to have kept exploring) looking very pleased with themselves. We hauled the gear out into a clear and cold night and returned to the hut to celebrate.

Monday: Steve and Paul returned from Cliefden and helped us carry gear through to Twin Bridges in the show caves. The divers in the downstream end of Twin Bridges were Jason, Paul and me. About half way between Twin Bridges and Pool of Cerberus there's a side passage which is shown as a question mark on the 2003 map. Keir had been in there and surfaced in a chamber, as well as seeing some tight underwater passage that continued. This chamber is not shown on any map of Jenolan and we didn't know of any reports of a chamber in that part of the system. Jason and I were planning to get out of the water and climb around in the chamber to look for leads, while Paul was going to push the tight underwater passage beyond.

A fairly pleasant and open 10 minutes of diving saw us surface in the chamber. While Jason and I were splashing around trying to take off fins and other odds and ends, we suddenly heard a call! Michael had found us by the noise we were making. He stuck his head into a muddy tube off the Pool of Cerberus and found a way through to the chamber we'd surfaced in. There were plenty of footprints and kneepoints in the mud, so the chamber has been seen before, but not reported or mapped. That's surprising, because it's a pretty impressive chamber, rising 15 m out of the water with one wall entirely covered in flowstone.

Meanwhile Paul got through some desperately tight diving and got to the point where he could stick his hand, but not much else, out into air. He couldn't see what was going on, so was a little surprised when Keir shook his hand. He'd surfaced in the Pool of Cerberus chamber, in the little side creek that's shown on the map. Keir dug him out.

Jason and I got our gear back on and had a go at diving downstream to Pool of Cerberus through the squeeze in the main creek, but it's silted up since the survey and is impassable. We turned around and went back to Twin Bridges, surfacing in time to entertain a tour party.



Helictites in Barralong
photo Gary Whitby