

Jenolan Caves

Imperial Streamway to Discovery Aven

Three trips 2012

Keir Vaughan-Taylor
SUSS

THIS is a condensed account of a persistent investigation of an aven noticed in the roof of Jenolan's Imperial Streamway.

Those who participated in this noble attempt included Deborah Johnston, Andreas Klocker, Bill Lamb, Phil Maynard, Rod O'Brien, Aiden Lloyd, Scott Moores, Tom Short, Mel Stammell, Keir Vaughan-Taylor, Jack Wachsmann and special appreciation of the support from Ted for his in-house support and the Guiding Staff of Jenolan.

I've trogged the Imperial Streamway many times now. It's a classic trip. There are many avenues, grikes, side chambers and holes to explore.

The Imperial tourist cave has narrow winding steps that descend to the Imperial River. The cement arch bridge that crosses the streamway marks the beginning of Sump 1 upstream and another excellent dive downstream.

Going upstream a dive through Sump 1 is followed by a walk along streamway curling through a variety of changing river passage, chambers and hallways coming to a short second sump—Sump 2. Between Sump 1 and Sump 2 there is a hole in the roof; a large aven with all the hallmarks of a major inflow passage. The only way up would be with scaling poles. It's a long way to carry poles, bolts and brackets. Easy along the tourist cave paths but more difficult down through the barrel, through the tunnel squeeze down a ladder pitch dropping into Far Country, then into Bell Chamber, breathe, hold, duck-under and through Sump 2. If you have to go through Sump 2 with the poles you might as well go through Sump 1. It's only a little bit longer.

Diving with scaling pole equipment through Sump 1 avoids the need to carry poles and equipment a longer way through the caves, thereby reducing the time to transport gear and also protect the cave. Three two-metre-long poles were lashed



Phil Maynard on the climb

KEIR VAUGHAN-TAYLOR

together with climbing tape with a reverse cinch knot providing a tape handle running the length of the pole trio. With three pole clusters, the bag of brackets, nuts, bolts, spanners and the climbing equipment, we dived back and forth through Sump 1 adding each time to the not-so-ethereal colour of the water. The tourists' experience of the beautiful underground stream was compensated by whale-like air-venting from our buoyancy compensators supporting all that weight moving deep into the cave. We could see the flashes from the cameras just before we surfaced.

The first dive through the sump was uneventful, delivering half the poles and the heavy bag of bolts and brackets to start the climb. The second set of poles was left on a ledge to be picked up on the second trip through the sump. They slipped off the ledge into the water and were for a short while lost. Assembling the poles at the discovery avens we realised there was a trio of poles missing. I returned through Sump 1 and searched rift holes in the floor of the sump where they might have gone having slipped off the ledge above. After some time

I located the poles and delivered them to the climb site. Tom was keen to lead the climb and so he accompanied a small group that would join us by going round the long way. The group's brave-hearted would free-dive Sump 2 and join in any successes had at the top of the aven. This was ambitious, optimistically assuming an easy discovery. After all these years I should know discoveries are hard won.

With the gear ready to go there was no sign of our other group. I went upstream with my diving gear to make sure the climbing team free-dived Sump 2 without any problems. This seemed to take forever since the five-metre-long sump seemed to cause trepidation among some of our seasoned cavers. It's the cold that puts you off. With a little encouragement and a little anti-drowning advice the group were encouraged through, but it took hours and I eventually became very cold with all the sump travelling.

Meanwhile, back at our potential big discovery, there was a choice of aven holes to ascend. The scaling poles were assembled and placed in the lower aven which was followed some distance to the termination of the passage. A passage seen through a thin roof slot above could be seen but at this time there was to be no grand discovery. There was another hole but a little higher and that would require one more length of scaling pole.

TRIP 2

With the scaling poles bolted together and erected into the lead in the roof they displayed a worrisome curve reaching to their ambitious high point. We attached rigging tapes onto bolts on sections part way up and secured the other ends to natural anchors on ledges on the left and right sides. Tom ascended, the scaling poles supporting each side preventing a slip of the pole end away from the desired position in

the roof. We spent a long time getting this right so as to ensure the safety of our valued climber. The upper passage continued but presented a second scaling pole lead.

After making safe belay points in the upper chamber the scaling poles were raised from their lower position to the upper ledge and used a second time to get to another higher level.

Exploration and further climbs connected to a small but technical climb, at the top of which could be seen what looked like a canyon passage clearly delineated in the roof but a serpentine pressure tube and a large walk-along stream canyon.

We curtailed the climbs because we were already later than we had arranged with the guides. A rope was fixed at the furthest point of exploration and rigged for descent and as a means to prusik back in future without scaling poles.

After derigging we reversed the transport through the sump and the climb team returned upstream and out of the cave.

The two passages in the roof are in an area of the caves where there is no other known passage. The closest tourist cave is Chifley but the map shows the position of the avens to be far. We were still enthusiastic. Well, at least I was.

TRIP 3 26-27 OCTOBER 2012

This time, expecting to be climbing into the attic avens, I wore my caving suit over a dilapidated surfing suit, underneath generous layers of thermal clothing. Knee and elbow pads are an essential when go-



GREG RYAN

Keir Vaughan-Taylor waits in the cold

ing light. I would only be underwater for at most five minutes and hopefully a short time later climbing way up in the roof where the expected lead would take us. There was no second group to look after so much simpler logistics. Climbing gear and various equipment we did not want wet was packed in a waterproof drum and suitably loaded with lead to get a neutral buoyancy passing through Sump 1. We had tested the underwater performance of the drum at Manly Dam, depth testing to 10 metres off the dam wall. The drum emerged just a little bit squashed by the pressure but there was no leak.

Phil's brand new regulator leaked air profusely at the edge of the Imperial Bridge Sump. The cause was a minor problem that required tightening the high pressure hose. Usually we have a tool kit on hand but being in lightweight mode we had no tools

with us. Phil had to leave the cave and find a spanner back at the car.

Meanwhile, Greg and I swam back and forth through Sump 1 transporting all our paraphernalia and setting up the gear under the rope hanging from the climb.

In time Phil returned. He was first up the climb and was the only person who could safely go into the upper regions because when least expected, lumps of falling mud would rebound from above. The climb was a one-person job. Greg and I waited in the river watching Phil's light as it gradually moved higher and higher to become a small beacon in a sea of darkness. Phil would occasionally shout some piece of information but in the echoes it was impossible to hear what he said.

Hours passed with Greg and I standing with our necks bent back trying to catch glimpses of light way up there. There was a two-syllable shout from Phil, completely inaudible, but the tone carried the news that the tunnel had terminated.

It remained to remove the belay points, derig each belay point and abseil to ground. Returning to the streamway we could see Phil, completely covered with mud. I could tell that this was not the huge passage we had imagined. Oh well—it had been a brave effort.

This was one of several Jenolan projects running concurrently. While this trip had been lots of fun, cracking the Jenolan code would be more successful in the River Lethe and Barralong—soon to be summarised in a *Caves Australia* near you.

Cave Words: Aven

Stephen Bunton
STC

IN AUSTRALIA and England an *aven* is a shaft that rises vertically from a known cave passage.

This is an example of a word we have appropriated from another language, French, and changed the meaning to suit ourselves. The most famous example of this in Australia would be the Gunbarrel Aven in Wyanbene Cave, NSW—a prominent landmark in the epic trip to the far end of the cave. It was partly climbed in the late 1970s and photographed around that time, its final height being measured at 112 m, which left it only 6 m short of intersecting the surface.

In France, an *aven* is an entrance shaft, the best translation being an abyss.

It has been used as the name of the cave,

for example, Aven Jean-Nouveau which has a 163 m deep entrance shaft. There are several words for cave in French; *aven, grotte, puit, trou* but not *cave*: a *cave* is a wine cellar.

These are almost synonyms that are found in various regions as if part of the regional dialect.

In Australia we have pit, pitch, pot, pot-hole and shaft but these are not restricted to any particular area.

The term *aven* could also be applied to describe a shaft that can extend both upwards and down; one that the caver intersects part way down.

In this case, the most impressive *aven* in Australia would be the Black Supergiant in Niggly Cave, Tasmania.

The 191 m final pitch starts from the floor of a rock-filled chamber, which in reality is false floor, a collection of boulders and debris plugging the shaft. The ceiling at this point is another 30 m higher taking the whole shaft to well over 200 m in height. This would be an impressive landmark on a horizontal through trip from Growling Swallet towards June Cave!

Around the world there are quite a number of 200 m deep pitches, a handful that exceed 300 m and several that exceed 400 m.

The world's deepest is the 600+ m pitch in Vrtiglavica Vertigo, Slovenia. Imagine if this were discovered from the bottom; now that would be an *aven*!