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## WELLINGTON - OR MANY SCOUTS MAKE LIGHT WORK

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BY DENIS STOJANOVIC AND JACK WACHSMANN

**Participants:** (in order of appearance) Keir Vaughan-Taylor, Greg Ryan, Katrina Badiola, Denis Stojanovic, Jack Wachsmann, Phil Maynard, Ian Cooper, and assorted venturer scouts from Baulkham Hills

**29-31 July 2011**

Whispers of cave diving at Wellington floated clumsily in the winter fog, which Kat and Denis had cleverly avoided by running away to the Northern Territory. Keir sought minions to carry the dive gear. The whispers became suddenly redundant when Wellington appeared boldly on the trip list described adroitly by Phil as “warmer than Jenolan”. What better way to farewell the uni break than a quick 6-hour spin up to Wellington? From what we were told of the caves it seemed there would be ample opportunity for après-caving. For Kat and Jack this would be the last gasp of study-free air for another semester. For Denis this would be only the beginning of the long dark teatime of the soul before leaving in September for his year on exchange in Edinburgh and many new and wonderful tartan horizons.

Unfortunately for various reasons the diving component of the trip was called off and we minions were spared . . . or were we? With plenty of other worthwhile projects and a plan of management meeting on the Friday for the bigwigs, the trip went ahead as planned. By all accounts the meeting was rather heated and saw Keir get rather irate (a very rare occurrence indeed) with the mayor and very forcibly express his views on the proposed sale of Wellington Caves. As a result the guides graciously offered us the use two most luxurious cabins/rooms and we were saved from the indignity of camping. The guides also very kindly provided us with a wonderful barbeque lunch on the Sunday afternoon.

### *Lime Kiln / McCavity*

The first underground jaunt of the trip was into the creatively named Lime Kiln Cave. Our job here was to prepare the rather small cave (the dry area at least) for a party of scouts we were later to guide through. A caving ladder was set up for the entrance pitch, mostly to give the scouts the opportunity to use a ladder as the climb is not particularly hard. Several tapes were also set up through the cave and we even brought in an extension ladder! Lime Kiln is actually quite a significant system with the larger proportion being submerged and known as McCavity cave. Despite the rather small and aptly named entrance to the dive site, the birth canal, it is a popular cave diving site. Diving at Wellington was pioneered by Keir and Greg and beyond the birth canal the cave opens up into very large chambers. Though not yet qualified to cave dive, Kat, Denis and Jack were not content to be left high and dry. A trip to the seaside was in order and donning wetsuits we headed for Bondi Beach, a large chamber with a steep sandy slope to the water's edge at the dry extreme of the cave. After walking past a group of very confused venturers on the surface we quickly arrived at Bondi.



Despite the obvious sandy bank that gives the chamber its name we resisted the temptation to run straight in and worked our way around to the side of the chamber to an alternative entry point in order to not disturb the rare cave biota living in the sands. We had a pleasant swim in the chamber in water that was a pleasant 19°C (a whole 4°C warmer than the ocean in Sydney were we had been diving the previous week).

## *The Anticline Project*

Engineering and subterranean nautical nonsense.

As all good holiday parks should, this one had a pool but strolling about the well-manicured lawns of the caravan park one spots the quintessential green pool fencing heads straight for it with bursting intent for a swim. Upon reaching the fence however one is not met with the questionable waters of a family holiday park but with what seems to be, by contrast to expectations, the descent to the underworld complete with concrete steps and the sign "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here"<sup>1</sup>. During the development of the caravan park this large depression was filled with tonnes of debris and rubbish while all around the karst was levelled. This being a speleological travesty, Keir et al. came to the rescue. For the unabridged tale of Keir the Brave see SUSS Bull 44(3). The ultimate goal is to restore the cave to a state suitable for tourists to descend to lake and marvel at the magnificent fold of rock which gives the cave its name.



There is legend of a vessel once moored on the subterranean shores of Anticline cave and, lacking any photographic evidence of such a thing, Keir thought it would be best to attempt to recreate this in order to test the theory. Finding a convenient kayak perched on the roof of Keir's car we sought to evoke the ghost of the lost ship Anticline. A pair of scouts embarked on the maiden voyage (God bless her and all who cave in her) on the crystal clear waters, promptly making that description inaccurate. It was not long before Kat and Phil assumed their guises as Lady of the Lake and the creature from the black lagoon respectively. Inevitably the time came for Jack and Denis to brave the ocean blue (by this stage a *very* inaccurate description) and not without some concern that Katfish was still lurking in

the murk. It was to great surprise that Jack and Denis were overturned within 30 seconds of casting off. Wet, cold and a little snotty, the seafarers dragged themselves and the kayak from the depths and prepared for further underground adventures.

### *Mitchell's Cave* Say again, over.

The scouts were eager to practise their rope skills so Mitchell's cave was used as a vertical playground for those not employed (or enslaved) in the excavation of Anticline or the tripod shaft. This was no up down in and out job however. We had a quest: to find and retrieve a handheld radio dropped down the adjacent excavation shaft. After some delicate rigging work on Kat's part and the first pitch swiftly despatched by all we were faced with a squeeze. Like Alice down the rabbit hole the Pippa, a particularly enthusiastic scout, shot through with reckless disregard for comfortable caving principles leaving the crotchety, cracked codgers of SUSS, all in their early 20s, arguing about who would go next. When the elderly eventually made their way through, the final pitch brought us to some water-filled passage and above it the connection to the excavation shaft complete with dilapidated ladder. Lo and behold, beyond all expectations the prophesied Uniden handheld was found wallowing on muddy shore with batteries widely strewn. It was retrieved with little hope of resuscitation but we were later informed that it was brought back to life not without ubiquitous suggestions of placing it in rice to draw out the moisture. I contend that couscous would have performed equally if not to a higher and more pleasurable standard. When the time came to exit the cave I was struck with profound nostalgia when the scouts pulled out their prusik loops ready to ascend the ropes with lightning efficiency. Being far more time and energy inefficient than mechanical ascenders, the use of prusik loops is a skill that is often left by the wayside. Although oft mocked it is a skill that is vital to keep up and can prove to be invaluable in an emergency.

### *Excavation pit*

This project remained mostly a mystery for the trendier SUSSlings as we were promptly banished to the mines

<sup>1</sup>The latter may have been an invention of the author's imagination.

of Anticline. Kat however took the opportunity to rig a hauling system for the progression of her trip supervisor qualification. Countless ancient treasures and artefacts from a primitive civilization, like vintage cans of Fanta and Passiona, were hauled from its depths among sample of geological interest.

Keir and Phil were the pioneers of this project over the weekend with Phil spending a lot of time on rope as he dug away at the unstable floor of rubbish. The cave has a radio connection to Mitchell cave and based on past reports we are hoping that some more bone deposits may be found.

### *Cathedral*

A prospective venue

The bright young things, abiding by their scout-minding duties, had missed out on the exclusive tour through Cathedral Cave the night before while in Mitchell's Cave. Luckily, Ian Cooper, admirable fellow, offered to take us through after the original plan to run through Gaden Cave was foiled by the gate being left invitingly wide open and easily accessible which meant that to us the cave was closed (it being occupied by a tour at the time). Originally sceptical as to the impressiveness of Cathedral Cave, we were soon made to see the light and the errors of our ways as we were brought before the Altar. The Altar is a magnificent collection of boulders, flowstone and stalagmites which is cemented together by shimmering calcite. Unfortunately the formation throughout the rest of the room consists of packed dirt thoughtfully provided by previous generations to provide a level floor for concerts and the like. Although disappointed by the past destruction of formations we young cavers could not help but notice the suitability of the room for a black tie dinner ...

### *The Phosphate Mine*

And they call it a mine ... a mine!

Finally after a hard weekend caving it was time at last for the eagerly awaited Vaughan-Taylor magical mystery tour of the phosphate mine. The mine operated from 1914 to 1918 and was an attempt to source phosphate for explosives and fertilizers closer to home, with most of the supply coming from Nauru at the time. However the quantity and quality of the phosphate meant that the mine was never able to be economically viable. The mine lay abandoned and doomed to a slow and painful death for almost 80 years until the mighty Keir et al. campaigned for it to be reconstructed and made safe for tourists. The distinct advantage of having one of the initial surveyors and pioneers of the area quickly became apparent as Keir dazzled us with factbites and anecdotes galore. We were also able to explore some of the off route side passages and shortcut through the mine, with intrepid explorers Kat, Denis and Jack bridging and chimneying up onto the wooden roof on one passage. Our very entertaining and informative tour managed to uncover bones, golf balls<sup>2</sup> and of most interest to Jack the engineer ... TRAINS!!!

### *History, fossils and palaeontological significance*



As any avid reader of the SUSS Bull will know (44-3, 45-3, 35-3), Wellington is a critical palaeontological site for Australian megafauna. It is also the home of a 1:1 scale Diprotodon. It is a long established tradition (apparently) for the president or his/her representative to ride the Diprotodon. Legend has it that only the true SUSS President, being pure of heart, soul and mind, can tame the fibreglass beast. As a result Kat found it very difficult to get on.

Visitors to Wellington may also find themselves berated by the lively avian population and a caged chorus of cockatoos. Relentless volleys of "Hello! Hello, Cocky!" ring out from the large aviary housing a variety of cockatoos and parrots. If one dares to stroll down the avenue that passes through the cage and engage in a tête-à-tête with the residents one may be surprised to be rewarded with a

rather creepy "Thank you" from those birds of larger vocabulary. My attempts to instruct the birds in introductory French and German were met with hostile obstinacy.

<sup>2</sup>Bones which may or may not have been previously known.