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The Grand Arch  
Abercrombie Caves  
N.S.W.

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CONTENTS

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Number Thirty Nine - March 1968

EDITORIAL

Conservation of the Texas Caves on the Queensland - New South Wales Border. 1

HISTORY OF ABERCROMBIE CAVES

A Review of Historical Literature of the Caves and Natural Arch  
at Abercrombie Caves, New South Wales. . . . Stephen Morris. 2

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Editorial.

THIS EDITORIAL WILL BE THE LAST TO BE PREPARED BY MYSELF, HAVING AT LAST DECIDED TO ALLOW SOMEONE ELSE ATTEMPT TO PRODUCE THE ASF NEWSLETTER. I WISH THEM LUCK - THEY WILL NEED IT.

THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY CONTINUES TO MOUNT ITS CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE CAVES IN THE TEXAS AREA ON THE QUEENSLAND - NEW SOUTH WALES BORDER. THE AREA CONTAINS THE CAVE SYSTEMS OF VIATOR AND GLEN LYON. BOTH CAVE SYSTEMS ARE THREATENED BY THE PIKE CREEK DAM IRRIGATION SCHEME. U.Q.S.S. HAS POINTED OUT IN SEVERAL BULLETINS (CIRCULATED THROUGHOUT AUSTRALIAN SOCIETIES, STATE GOVERNMENT MEMBERS AND OTHER INTERESTED BODIES) THAT SEVERAL ALTERNATIVES ARE AVAILABLE WHICH WOULD NOT ENDANGER THE TEXAS CAVE SYSTEMS. THESE ARE AN ALTERNATE DAM SITE ON THE MOLE RIVER AND THE USE OF AVAILABLE UNDERGROUND WATER.

FROM AN ECONOMIC POINT OF VIEW, IT APPEARS THAT NEITHER OF THE DAM SITES WOULD PROVE TO BE AT ALL ECONOMIC ALTHOUGH THE PIKE CK. DAM IS THE BETTER CHOICE. AN ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE, THE USE OF UNDERGROUND WATER AT AN ESTIMATED COST OF 3% OF THE COST OF THE PIKE CREEK DAM, HAS BEEN PRESENTED TO THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT BY THE SOCIETY. WHILE THIS METHOD WAS INVESTIGATED AND REJECTED IN 1961, U.Q.S.S. POINT OUT THAT IMPROVED METHODS OF EXTRACTION MAKE THE PROPOSITION FEASIBLE.

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN THE CONTROL OF INSECT PESTS IS THE PROTECTED SPECIES OF BAT, MINIOPTERUS SCHREIBERSII. THESE BATS USE THE TEXAS CAVES THROUGHOUT MOST OF THE YEAR. DISTURBANCE OF THESE BATS BY THE REMOVAL OF THEIR NATURAL HABITAT COULD LEAD TO INCREASED DEPREDAATION OF CROPS BY NIGHT FLYING SPECIES OF INSECTS.

THE FACT THAT THESE CAVES ARE THE ONLY CAVES LIKELY TO SHOW ANY POTENTIAL AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION IN THE AREA IS SIGNIFICANT. THIS AREA OF QUEENSLAND AND N.S.W. RECIEVES VERY LITTLE REVENUE FROM TOURISTS. THE PRESENCE OF POTENTIAL TOURIST CAVES WOULD UNDOUBTABLY BE ATTRACTIVE TO LOCAL TOURIST BODIES.

CONSERVATION IS ALWAYS A DIFFICULT PARTNER TO MARRY TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. IT IS SOMETIMES INEVITABLE THAT SOMETHING RARE IN NATURE MUST BE SACRIFICED FOR THE ECONOMIC BENEFIT OF THE COMMUNITY. THIS MUST BE, AND IS ACCEPTED BY CONSERVATION BODIES IN GENERAL. HOWEVER, WHEN IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO REMOVE THE UNREPLACEABLE THEN A STRONG CASE EXISTS FOR THE CONSERVATIONIST.

IT DOES IN THIS CASE. A REVIEW OF THE SITUATION BY THE BORDER RIVERS COMMISSION IS CALLED FOR. ALL SOCIETIES WITHIN THE FEDERATION, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN N.S.W. SHOULD SUPPORT THE U.Q.S.S. IN THE FIGHT TO SAVE TEXAS CAVES.

Ian D. Wood

## HISTORY OF ABERCROMBIE CAVES, N.S.W.

by Stephen Morris  
N.S.W. Department of Tourism

### LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

The Abercrombie Caves are situated on the main highway between Bathurst and Goulburn, eight miles south of the old gold fields at Trunkey Creek. The Grand Arch is regarded as one of the largest and finest limestone archways in the world, far surpassing the archways of Jenolan. It is nearly 700 feet long, 100-200 feet wide and in places over 100 feet high. The entrance of daylight at either end of the archway provides a soft light which accentuates the beauty of the arch. The caves themselves are small but beautifully decorated.

### GEOLOGICAL FORMATION

In middle tertiary times, ancient water courses drained the surface of the country in the Abercrombie area. Streams of lava from now extinct volcanoes subsequently flowed into the old valleys burying these water courses. This occurred during either Miocene times (which extended between 11 and 25 million years ago) or Pliocene times (between 1 and 11 million years ago.). During the subsequent 2 million years to the present day (that is during Pleistocene and Recent times) continued denudation eroded fresh channels through the lava forming the present day features of the area.

The present bed of Grove Creek (which runs through the main archway) lies in one of these old channels, although its depth today is several hundred feet below the old Pliocene channel, which gives some idea of the enormous length of time taken by drainage water to cut through the old Pliocene channel and pierce the bed of limestone in which the caves have been formed.

### FIRST DISCOVERY

Like Jenolan, the first white visitors to the Abercrombie Caves appear to have been bushrangers.

In 1830, a considerable number of convicts employed on pastoral holdings in the Bathurst district deserted, armed themselves with stolen guns and became bushrangers. They became known as the "Ribbon Boys" because of the head-dress adopted by their leader.

In order to disperse them a Corps of Volunteer Cavalry was formed at Bathurst and an exciting encounter took place on the limestone cliffs of the Abercrombie Caves. However it was not until the volunteers were reinforced by police and a detachment of the 39th. Regiment that the "Ribbon Boys" were captured after a fierce gun battle in which several lives were lost.

They eventually surrendered on Bushrangers Bald Hill about two miles west of the caves. Ten of them were subsequently hanged in Bathurst near the present site of All Saints Cathedral.

The encounter with the Bushrangers attracted public attention to the cavern which became known as "The Bridge" to many of the stockmen and settlers in the neighbourhood. Its beautiful white marble provided many souvenirs for the specimen hunter. Pieces were carted away and used to adorn the borders of gardens of old western homesteads along the Campbell River. Some of the dripstone was even brought to Sydney where sculptors fashioned several busts that were used to adorn some of the city's public buildings.

### OFFICIAL DISCOVERY

The caves or actually the arch was officially discovered in 1842 by the then Surveyor General, Mr. Davidson, while he was engaged in a survey of Grove Creek, which flows through the cavern on its way to join the Abercrombie River. This official discovery was not made public until 1844.

In 1834 the caves were visited by surveyor W. H. Wells who gives an account of his trip in "A Geographical Dictionary or Gazetteer of the Australian Colonies". He has been credited with discovering the Kohinoor, Pulpit, Long Tunnel, Cathedral and Hall of Terpiscore Caves. Mr. Wells reported finding many bats and large numbers of wombat holes in the caves.

A few days after the official discovery of the caves was made public in 1844, W. C. Wentworth paid them a visit and later in the same year Governor Fitzroy and his staff also made a visit. During this period the caves were known as either "The Bridge" or "The Grove Creek Caves" and it was not until the late 1860's that they became known as the Abercrombie Caves.

In the early 1850's the caves were used as the hiding place of Ben Hall, Jonnie O'Meally, Frank Gardiner and other members of the Hall gang. The bush-rangers lived in one of the six caves while robbing gold coaches from Tuena in the days when the town was really booming. (Population, 1964, 225). One of Ben Hall's revolvers still lies in a small museum at one end of the Grand Arch. After the gold rush a number of miners for a time lived in the caves relying on water and fish from Grove Creek. It was these miners who built the wooden dance floor on stilts that still stands today in the western hall of the Grand Arch.

By 1870 the caves had been visited by many "pleasure parties" who invariably collected samples and left their signatures on the walls of the caves. It was not until 1889 that steps were taken to protect the caves. In this year it was learned that certain residents of the town of Trunkey (about eight miles from the caves) intended to blow up what is believed to be the oldest bees' nest in Australia (reputed to be over 100 years old) situated in the face of a cliff at one end of the Arch. The vandals had started to drive a tunnel into the limestone under where the bees were working with the idea of robbing the nest and taking the honey. In July, 1889 another group of residents from Trunkey led by Mr. T. A. Smith (Mining Warden and Police Magistrate for the district) visited the caves and took possession of them on behalf of the Department of Mines. Following these actions a temporary keeper was appointed on a small salary to protect the caves as far as possible. In the years 1889-90, 248 people were recorded as visiting the caves, this being the first year in which a record was kept.

In the ten years between 1889 and 1899 two more caves were discovered - Cave No. 1 was discovered by the keeper Mr. S. Grosvener in 1894 and the Grove Cave was discovered by Jeremiah Wilson in 1897. During this period a number of hand-rails were erected in the caves and the Department of Public Works improved the road to the Caves which was previously in a dangerous state.

#### PRESERVATION DECLARED

On the 16th. September, 1899, the preservation of the caves was officially declared, and in this year the Grove Cave and upper Gallery in the Grand Arch opened to visitors.

From 1900 to 1950 the number of visitors to the caves continued to grow steadily and many improvements made, including the opening of King Solomon's Temple to the public and the construction of pathways, retaining walls and stairways.

#### MODERN HISTORY

In 1950, the flooding of Grove Creek caused severe damage to the Caves and nearly all the installations were washed away. The torrent of water rushing through the Arch is reported to have reached 20 feet up the walls and because of the damage caused by this flood the caves were closed to the public for two years so that repairs could be made. Not only were all the installations restored but during these two years four additional suspension bridges were constructed over Grove Creek by the Caretaker, Mr. Coops, almost singlehandedly - a remarkable achievement for one man.

On the 6th. April, 1952 the Caves were officially reopened by the Chief Secretary, the Honourable C. R. Evatt, M.L.A. This date marked an important point in the history of Abercrombie for at the official reopening the caves were, for the first time, electrically lit in place of the old magnesium flares.

Since 1952 improvements in visitor facilities have continued and today, although Abercrombie may not be the best known of the limestone cave systems in New South Wales they are still one of the most beautiful.

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## NOTES.

Of the above references only the following contain any relevant information about the history of Abercrombie Caves.

## Reference B3.

"The Grove Creek or, as they are popularly termed, the Abercrombie Caves are about 45 miles to the west of Bathurst. They are situated on the Grove Creek, about four miles above the confluence of that stream with the Abercrombie River, about seven miles from Mulgunnie, which was formerly a cattle station belonging to Mr. Askill but which is now the residence of Thomas Smith Esq. J.P.

The cave contains the memorials (signatures) of many visitors. Mr. Davidson enjoys the reputation of having discovered it, but this must mean that he explored it and brought it to the public notice for local accounts say that it was known long before to stockmen and settlers in the neighbourhood. Since Mr. Davison's visit and more especially in late years it has been the resort of pleasure parties who come on horseback in the summer season, carrying with them provisions, blankets, tents and everything else required to make them comfortable during a few days of sojourn."

## Reference B6.

"Like Jenolan, the first white visitors to the Abercrombie Caves appear to have been bushrangers who naturally made their camps in country not easily accessible,

In 1830 a considerable number of convicts employed on pastoral holdings in the Bathurst district deserted, armed themselves with stolen guns, etc. and commenced a career of bushranging. They were known as the "Ribbon Boys" from the headress adopted by their leader.

With a view to their dispersion a corps of volunteer cavalry was formed at Bathurst. An exciting encounter took place on the limestone cliffs of the Abercrombie Caves but it was not until the volunteers were reinforced by police and a detachment of the 39th. Regiment. that the desperadoes were captured after a sharp conflict in which several lives were lost.

They surrendered on Bushranger Bald Hill about two miles west of the caves. Ten of them were subsequently hanged in Bathurst near the present site of All Saints Cathedral.

The curiosities of the caves had evidently attracted notice for very shortly after these events specimens of dripstones were carted away some of which are still to be seen in the borders of a garden on the Campbells River.

The existence of the caves was officially made known about 1844 by the Surveyor General Mr. Davidson and were visited a few days afterwards by W.C. Wentworth and then by Governor Fitzroy."

## Reference B8.

"1892; 510 visitors; large increase on previous years. A number of iron staircases have been provided and guard rails erected at some of the more dangerous places along the creek which flows through the main cave.

The caves are situated about one mile east of the main road between Trunkey and Tuena and about ten miles from the latter place. The number of visitors yearly is greater than either Jenolan or Wombeyan. During the past 12 months the caves have been revisited by a bushranger who has done his time."

## Reference B9

"We can only arrive at the geological age of these caves from a consideration of the formation of the physical features of the surrounding country. The general geological features of this area consist of Silurian shales, sandstones,

conglomerates and limestones with occasional intrusive masses of greenstone trap; covering these rocks are patches of Pliocene tertiary rounded quartz rubble drift, overlain by basalt. These patches of drift are the remnants of the beds of those ancient water courses which in the Pliocene times drained the surface of this country. Streams of lava from volcanoes now extinct flowed into the old valleys, burying the water channels; subsequently long continued denudation eroded fresh channels through these rocks, deepening the valleys and this gradually formed the present features.

Now the bed of Grove Creek is several hundred feet below the level of the old Pliocene channel, so that we may form some idea of the enormous time that must have elapsed since the Pliocene channel was cut through, for the valley to have been eroded several hundred feet deeper and this before the drainage water began to pierce the bed of limestone in which the caves are. There can therefore be no doubt that these caves were formed subsequently to the Pliocene period and towards the end of the Pleistocene period."

#### Reference 12B

"This magnificent tunnel or archway was discovered by Mr. Davidson a short time back and it is surprising that so little notice has been taken of the work of nature. Although it was known to some of the stockmen that there was such a place as "the bridge" somewhere in the neighbourhood. I could not hear of anyone with the exception of Mr. Davidson who had ever explored it or could even point out its exact situation.

Close to the entrance at the north end is the mouth of a passage making clearly a right angle with the main archway in an easterly direction. This for about 100 feet is broad and lofty after which it gradually contracts until at the distance of 70 or 80 feet or more it is terminated in a low archway about two feet high. The most impressive feature of this passageway are two massive stalagmites resembling a pulpit and a tomb. I should think that the roof of this cavern must be near the outer surface of the rock for upon going up a steep ascent on the right I saw roots of grass hanging down from fissures in the rock. There were the remains of a fire which Mr. Davidson had made he being unprovided with some means of obtaining a better light.

After quitting the passage we continued our search and not many yards further down the main archway on the same side of it we found a second passageway, but not of very large dimensions and about the centre of the tunnel, on the opposite side another long passage of 500 or 600 feet in length, which also gradually contracted and terminated in a narrow arch opened into another cavern, lofty but not large, in which the roots of grass were also visible.

Parallel to this is another long passage separated from it by a stone partition, through two low apertures in which it is approached. These caverns had escaped the notice of Mr. Davidson and in all probability had never before been visited by any human beings; the bats were very numerous and appeared to be much annoyed at our intrusion.

In one of the upper galleries on the eastern side of the ground archway there is what we took to be the mouth of another passage. This however we were unable to explore.

Wombats must be very numerous for we saw their holes in every direction."

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