



Rimstone News

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Rimstone Cooperative Ltd.
Rimstone Cooperative Ltd.
A Community Advancement Society

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Shades of Death Cave – How? Why?

Whilst many (limestone) caves are located on private property, very few have been developed as tourist show caves. There are many good reasons but probably lack of interest ranks high, as few farmers have or would be prepared to undertake a full feasibility study. Shades of Death Cave at Murrindal, Victoria (only 15kms from the famous Buchan Caves) has been developed over many years as a show cave.²

This Rimstone Co-op special edition newsletter describes the history and development of the cave over the years, and provides a glimpse of the future with the new owners – Rimstone Co-operative Limited.

As the editor of this newsletter, I have received a number of papers, photos and contributions from various sources, and would like to express sincere thanks for these (even if some of the supplied detail is not in complete agreement). Several of these contributions are referenced within, and listed with sincere acknowledgements on the last page.

Rob Brain (editor)

About the M-3 cave (briefly)

The cave was known to early settlers, reputedly discovered by Ernest Henham in 1900, and was first entered in about 1905 by Frank Moon. It was developed into a show cave in the late-1960s onwards and opened during school holidays. Visits were attractive to visitors in small intimate groups with the passionate owners but the cave was never a real commercial operation.⁵

The cave has many valuable attributes, prolific decoration, but also extends to a wet muddy downstream section and it has beautiful upper level galleries beyond the developed main chamber. It has been very well protected by the owners who have respected the values and protected the undeveloped parts of the cave from vandalism, unrestricted tracking and damage to formation.⁵

The cave is a very beautiful and challenging cave beyond the developed pathways. It has some further exploration potential and the lower levels can be wet and muddy. Its original vertical shaft entrance has Single Rope Technique (SRT) training possibilities that are being considered by the Co-operative. It is a good cave for educational purposes. This cave could be important scientifically as it is one of the “older” caves in the Buchan area.

Apart from the developed portion of the cave, the rest has been little trafficked and it has been very well looked after.⁷

Photos: Examples of beautiful limestone formations in M-3 (Daryl Carr, Brett Wakeman).



Shades of Death – Open Day details

Date: Saturday November 2nd, 2019

Time: 10am to 5pm

Opening: 11am (the formalities)

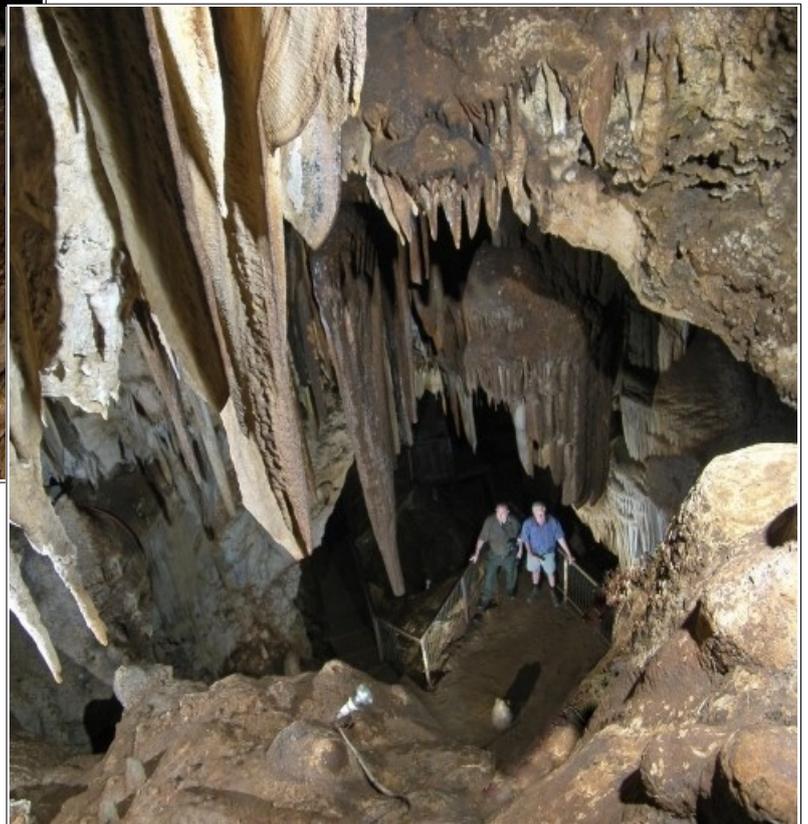
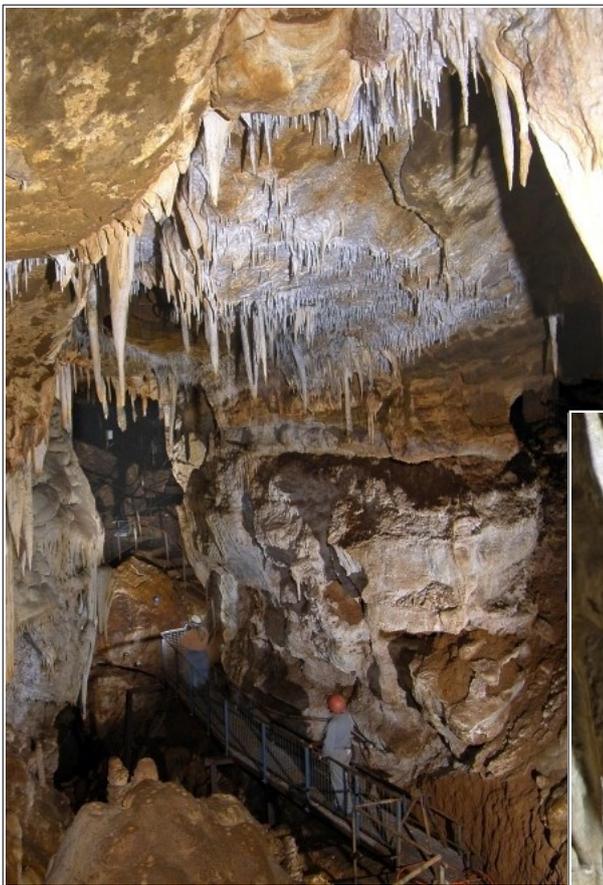
Where: At *Shades of Death Cave*,
Buchan-Gelantipy Road, Murrindal
(15 km north of Buchan)

What: Tours of cave and this souvenir
Rimstone Newsletter with detailed
history of the cave.
BBQ at Homeleigh in the evening.

Please make sure to RSVP for catering, and book accommodation asap.



M-3 Cave — Spacious and very decorative



Top left: Showing extensive calcite flowstone and stalactite formation.
Bottom right: Cave spaciousness with early custodians Geoff Rebbechi and Graham Shaw.
Top right: Graham Shaw admiring the cave's beauty.
Photos: Daryl Carr

About Rimstone Co-operative^{5,6}

Rimstone Co-operative Limited is a Community Advancement Society established in 1974 and has for 45 years provided opportunity for speleological activities in the Buchan area.

Rimstone Co-op has done this through the provision of accommodation facilities at "Homeleigh" in Buchan. It has also provided scholarships to students to assist with speleological study.

The Rimstone Co-operative was originally formed in 1974 to purchase the former Homeleigh guesthouse (built c.1885) at Buchan as a base for caving and speleological pursuits and its membership is largely, although not entirely, made up of cavers and speleologists.



Homeleigh in the mid-1970s.



Homeleigh c.2015 (Rob Brain)

The co-operative first ventured into ownership of cave and karst with its purchase in 2012 of the 42 hectare Scrubby Creek Cave property which contains a number of wild caves including the 'Scrubby Creek' active stream cave (M-49).

In acquiring the M-3 Shades-of-Death Cave property the Co-operative will similarly protect the cave and its values but as the cave is more accessible and less dangerous, provision for recreation access is very possible.

As well as recreational access for recognised groups, there will be the capacity to conduct interpretation and education tours of the cave itself and its context in the landscape of this part of East Gippsland through Open Days for the local community.

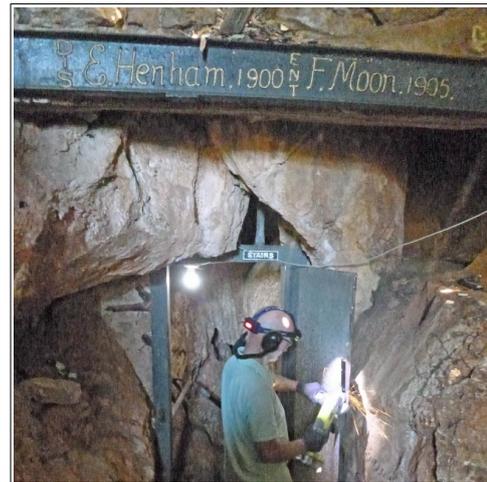
M-3 – Early History⁶

Local farmer Ernest (Ernie) Henham reportedly discovered the cave's small shaft entrance on a hillside above the Murrindal River in 1900.

According to one 'local legend', the name 'Shades of Death' was due to Ernie's initial reaction on seeing mist rising from the entrance shaft on a frosty morning and thinking it to be a ghost. Other explanations have been advanced from time to time.

[Apparently, when seeing the mist rising from the ground, he tentatively approached, and found it to be warm moist air from the cave. Dropping stones in the hole he realised that if he had fallen in he would have been killed, thus he thought of death. In those days ghosts were mostly called Phantoms or Shades as we all leave our shade behind when we die.^{2]}

In about 1905, Frank Moon, who was by then employed by the Lands Department to find and explore caves at Buchan in the context of potential tourism development, is reputed to have made the first known entry into the cave using a rope ladder.



Maintenance work on the entrance door with the original steel beam overhead inscribed with key dates.

Legend has it that the cave then also became known locally as the 'Murrindal Moon Cave', but the alternative name 'Shades of Death' later gained ascendancy.

A typical 1990s cave tour²

At one stage when tours were operating they were typically run between 11am and 4pm on demand to avoid waiting. As a result tour groups were of a manageable and satisfactory size.

At the bottom of the first staircase, the guide explained the origin of the name [see more details within]. The actual explanation given has been known to vary dependent on the mood of the

guide, the size of the group and the nature of the people within the group.

The tour is then continued to the bottom of the second staircase to the "Helictite Garden" (named by the illustrious Kent Henderson). The various formations found within the caves are described at this point. From here to the balcony where the visitors view "The Vault" (Kent again) before descending to the third level to view magnificent flow stone and the "Termite Turrets" (Kent again).

The group is led down into "The Hall of the Mountain Kings" (you guessed it, Kent strikes again). The tour is led across the recently constructed "Warren Kennedy Bridge" and shown the pathway to the future planned extensions. Formation in this area is truly magnificent and it is often quite difficult to start the group moving again.

If there are children in the group, the guide tells some stories at "Monster Corner" (not named after Kent) before allowing the members of the tour to return to the surface at their own pace. Tour duration normally varies from half to three quarters of an hour.

Shades – The First Descent

Transcript of interview with Frank Moon⁸

[Editor: In recent research there has been some question raised about some aspects of the early cave history, including the first descent. The following transcript is included herewith as supplied.]

Shades of Death cave was first discovered by Mr. Ernest Henham in 1900 and the first descent was by Mr Frank Moon c.1905.

How did you discover the Shades of Death cave at Murrindal, how did you go about that?

Yes Mr. Henham was the first man to notify me about the Shades of Death, and ah! I thought it would be very difficult to get down on a single rope. So, my boss then the Mr. J.M. Reed of the surveyor general's department, he actually was the surveyor general at the time, and was in charge of all the caves at Buchan and the work to take place on them, not a committee of management in those days.

Anyway, they sent me up a beautiful [rope] ladder in two by twenty-five-foot lengths. I could join them in the center, all beautiful rungs in them you know, and Mr. Henham told me about this Shades of Death cave. So, when I got his letter, I said 'ok, I will go down'.

So Mr. Henham and one or two of his little boys, which are old men now, really, they came with me and we put a big bar across and tied the rope to it and let the ladder down.

I went down, and I got down quite all right, and it was a fairly large cavity as I remember now, and I got down onto porphyry gravel. I never done any exploring in that cave but I certainly think that it should extend and probably would connect with the Murrindal cave or the creek that comes out underneath the Murrindal cave into the river. I have followed that underground stream up to where it wasn't possible to follow it any further without aqualungs. If they have followed it any further since I could not say.

How did it come to be call Shades of Death, do you know?

Well I really don't know why, but Mr. Henham thought it was a place, a very deathly looking place, the Shades of Death, so he gave it that name. I have heard all sort of rumours about that but I think that's right

Did you have any further exploration there?

No, I never went down it again, but went down numerous other caves.

Original interview by Geoffery Rebbechi & Jack McMahon. Ernest Henham's two young sons are believed to be Richard (Dick) and William (Bill) Henham.

M-3 Cave –Timeline

Following is a basic timeline of key events over the years.

1900 – M-3 discovered by Ernest Henham.

c.1905 – First descent believed to be by Frank Moon.

1960s – The "front end" was developed into a privately run show cave.

January 1984 – Cave reopened for public tours.

1989/90 – Record visitor numbers 5436pa.

1990s – Regular tours ceased.

2017 – Purchase of the 0.4 hectare property by Rimstone Co-operative Limited.

November 2019 – Official Open Day welcoming the local community to the upgraded cave.

More History⁶

In the early 1960's VCESⁱ members Graham Shaw and Geoff Rebbechi in conjunction with Jack McMahon, an Orbost mechanic, obtained a lease from the private landowner with the aim of developing the well decorated first part of the cave for tourism.

A new entrance was excavated and blasted downhill from the open (and mostly vertical) shaft and enclosed with a roof over to form a vestibule space where visitors could gather and be briefed before entering the cave.

(i) Victorian Cave Exploration Society

As the first section of the cave beneath the original entrance shaft is predominantly vertical, three sets of welded steel stairs were fabricated and duly installed along with sections of concrete pathway. A basic electric lighting system was also installed, powered by a small engine driving a 2.8 kW, 230 V direct-current generator.

Guided tours were conducted on weekends and public and school holidays by the leaseholders during the 1960s whilst improvements were progressively made to the infrastructure.



Daryl Carr painting the M-3 cave railings (2019)

Unfortunately, when the lease period expired at the end of the decade the then landowner declined to renew it. The cave was then closed with some of the more moveable parts of the development infrastructure removed.

Subsequently some of the original group members leased the nearby Murrindal and Lilly Pilly caves from the government to conduct similar 'on demand' public tours. This arrangement ended in 1982.

With by then a new landowner of the property containing the M-3 cave, a land subdivision was negotiated by Dennis and Carol Rebbechi to enable the purchase of a 5-acre (2 ha) allotment fronting the Buchan-Gelantipy Road and including the M-3 cave entrance and its previous surface developments.

A long-term lease was then granted for a partnership – later a private company – comprising Graham Shaw, Geoff, Dennis and Carol Rebbechi and Warren Kennedy to resume operation of Shades of Death cave.

Using their own labour and resources this partnership installed new sections of concrete pathway, hand-railing and other underground improvements including an electronically

controlled 240 V AC lighting system devised by Warren Kennedy. They successfully reopened the cave for public tours in January 1984.

As previously, guided tours were managed by one or other of the partners, typically taking place on weekends and public holidays on an 'on demand' basis. Given the location some 15 km north of Buchan, visitor numbers and takings were modest, but those who did partake of the relaxed style tours routinely enjoyed the experience.

In its first year after reopening 1000 people toured the cave and in 1989/90 a record of some 5436 visitors was attained, although around half this annual number was more typical. As such, operating Shades of Death cave for tourism was always 'a labour of love' rather than a commercial proposition.

An attempt made in 1991 by the then private company to gain further shareholders who would also be actively involved in the running of the cave was unsuccessful³.

The 0.4 hectare subdivision was sold to Geoff Rebbechi in 2004, thereby keeping ownership of the cave property 'in the family'. On this basis, Geoff Rebbechi, together with Graham and Mary Shaw, continued to administer the cave using the long leased local one-room Murrindal school house as their on-site base.

In subsequent years occasional caving visits to the extensive inner reaches of the cave beyond the developed section were permitted and survey parties led by local cavers John and Kim Van Dyk culminated in a plan map of the known cave in 2006.

The acquisition

In 2016 Geoff Rebbechi offered Rimstone Co-operative Limited the option to purchase the 0.4 hectare subdivision containing the Shades of Death cave entrance.

After careful consideration and due diligence, the co-operative proceeded with the purchase in mid 2017, assisted by a loan from the Australian Speleological Federation (ASF).⁶

Rimstone Co-op's plans⁶

Rimstone Co-operative has plans to rehabilitate the developed section of the cave and run occasional open days.

On the public open days the cave lighting would be 'on' and local Buchan district residents in particular encouraged to visit the cave for 'a gold coin donation', similar to a past practice by Parks Victoria for the nearby (unlit) Murrindal and Lilly Pilly Caves.

At other times members of the co-operative and their guests will be able to independently inspect the developed part although probably limited to using their own light sources.

For the extensive 'wild' part of the cave beyond the developed section, recreational caving activity along with speleological projects including further



Brian cleaning the formation

exploration and surveying work will be permitted by prior arrangement and subject to participants adhering to the ASF's Minimal Impact Caving Code and any other prescribed constraints.

The existing 2006 map of the cave by John Van Dyk was the result of successive surveying trips coordinated by Kim and John Van Dyk between 1992 and 2006. This map is limited to a plan view, and at a minimum further work is needed to add cross sections and elevation views. A digital 3-D survey project could also be undertaken in the future.



Showing off the new roofing over the cave entrance foyer (Daryl Carr)

Recent physical work undertaken on-site to date includes tidying up of the immediate surface area and structures, trimming of vegetation and removal of accumulated rubbish. Underground work has included replacement of corroded stair treads, cleaning down and rustproofing treatment and painting of some handrail sections, as well as removal of detritus and redundant items in the developed part of the cave.

It is known that some damage to speleothems,

including muddying, has occurred over many years in some parts of the extensive wild sections of the cave and it is intended that, where practicable, careful cleaning will be undertaken. Also, in some sensitive areas, track marking is anticipated to limit further damage to floor sections and speleothems.

It is planned to identify a number of management zones such as areas to be rehabilitated, track marked, no go zones, etc. Some have already been marked up on a copy of the cave map.

At present, access into much of the wild part of the cave is constrained by tight squeezes and whilst some may be marginally enlarged by approved means, these physical challenges tend to reduce through caver traffic.



Roy derusting the gate

Proposals to conduct digs, enlarge squeezes or otherwise physically modify the cave will be subject to ratification by the co-operative's board of directors.

Another proposed initiative is to re-establish the vertical entry via a gate on the original entrance shaft whereby members could practice their vertical techniques in 'a real cave environment'.

Developing 'best practice' cave and karst management for Shades of Death Cave is the avowed aim of the Rimstone Co-operative directors, spearheaded by current director and ACKMA⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ member Nicholas White who has led the process to purchase the M-3 cave property. A draft management strategy has been written and will be progressively refined.

Footnote (Ed): VSAⁱⁱⁱ had a cleaning trip in 2014 to remove mud from the chamber where the

(ii) ACKMA — Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association, Inc.

(iii) Victorian Speleological Society

rootsicles formation is found and track marking tape installed to limit further muddying of the beautiful formations found in this part of the cave. Cleaning took place with tooth brushes and garden spray bottles filled with water collected from the Dukes resurgence.

Also, some of the works conducted in recent months include a new roof over the cave portico entrance (photo above).

Upgrade to lighting system⁶

At the time of the Co-operative's acquisition of the cave, fixed AC engine-generator sets that were installed in the 1980s and 90s to power the then new lighting for the developed part of the cave had been replaced by a small single-phase engine-generator set.

The 1980s-90s custom built electronic switching control for the cave lighting that has

long since succumbed to the cave environment has been bypassed and will eventually be removed. Given that it is now not intended to run any regular public tours, an elaborate switching scheme is no longer warranted. In the medium term at least, it is proposed to retain the 240 volt lighting circuits powered from the single-phase engine-generator. However, some of the 150 W and 75 W PAR type flood lights will likely be replaced with more efficient LED equivalents.

The existing in-cave wiring is typically exposed given the limited scope to bury it and the undesirability of chasing flow stone surfaces. For the most part this will remain but opportunities will be taken to tidy it up where practicable.

In the longer term, a solar cell (PV) based low-voltage LED lamp replacement of the present electric lighting is a possibility.



Caving party returning from a venture into the undeveloped far reaches of the cave (Daryl Carr)

Some action at one of many working bees



Above: A hard-earned lunch break enjoyed by the volunteer members.

Left: One of several runs to the tip to dispose of equipment that has passed its use by date.

Photos: Daryl Carr

References

Sincere thanks to all those who have contributed to the content of this special edition of the Rimstone Co-op newsletter.

1. Rebbechi, D. (2004). *Shades of Death Cave – Murrindal, Victoria – Sold*, Journal of the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association. No. 55.
2. Rebbechi, D. (1993). *Australia's Smallest Private Tourist Cave*, Proceedings of the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Conference, Rockhampton, Australia.
3. Rebbechi, D. (1991). *Murrindal Caves – Proposal for the Sale of Shares on Behalf of Existing Shareholders*, unpublished limited issue prospectus.
4. Henderson, K. (1985). *The Buchan Experience – A Guide to the Buchan and Murrindal Caves East Gippsland, Victoria*, Kent Henderson.
5. White, N. (2017). *Australian Speleological Federation Inc. Karst Conservation Fund, Proposal for project*.
6. Pierce, M. (2018). *New Challenges for Rimstone Co-operative in Managing Shades of Death Cave*.
7. White, N. (2016). *M-3 Shades-of-Death Cave, Murrindal*.
8. Carr, D. (2019). *Transcript of an interview of Frank Moon's "Shades of Death" cave first descent*.

Booking accommodation at Homeleigh

Rimstone Co-op members and caving affiliated groups via a member representative can utilise the Homeleigh accommodation. To make a booking request, please make sure to use the proper email address so that your request is received promptly. Then our on-duty accommodation officer can reply promptly. (Else your request might get lost.)

Homeleigh Booking Officer

More information... Rimstone website

Our slowly growing collection of M-3 cave and work party information and photos are being added to a recently new page on our website. You can see it here:

www.rimstone.org.au/m3-cave.html

 See more, and larger, [M-3 Cave photos on Facebook](#). To navigate to these on Facebook, go to Facebook and search for Rimstone Co-operative Limited, then click on the link to view **Photos > Albums > Shades of...**

Rimstone Co-op directors

Nigel Cooke, Gary Coleman, Darryl Pierce, Nicholas White, Neil Wilson.