

THE SHAFT

Location :

Approximately 3km West of Allendale East and 2km South West of Mount Gambier P.O., on the property known as "Cave View".

Reference number - Cave Exploration Group of S.A. Cave Number L158

CDAA Category:

The cave is rated by the CDAA as Sinkhole, but certain conditions apply.

These include;

- No Nitrox in diving mix.
- Decompression mixes must be attached to a shot line.
- Proof of 5 twin tank dives are required.

History:

Unlike all of the other large waterfilled caverns of the area, the Shaft has only a relatively short history. This is due to its small entrance which was not discovered, indeed, did not exist until about 1938. At this time the surrounding land was owned by the late Mr. C. Griffin who lived a half mile (0.8km) West of Allendale. On that fateful day, the late Mr. Don Kerr, Mrs. Ashby's father, was ploughing in a flat featureless paddock when one of the horses stumbled for no apparent reason. Upon investigating, Mr. Kerr found to his amazement that the horse had punched a 12 inch (0.3m) diameter hole into the soft topsoil to reveal a cavern below. With the help of two neighbours, he dropped a line into the sparkling clear water which could be seen below. It must have been astonishing for them to find that although the water surface was 18 feet (5.5m) below, the bottom of the cavern was not felt until 150 feet (45m) of line had been played out. This meant that the depth of water was 132 feet (40m), certainly surprising considering the small size of the entrance. Quite probably they were expecting only a few metres of water depth like many of the small shallow split-caves found in the area which only just penetrate the water table.

After raising the weighted line to above the water surface, they swung it in a pendulum motion until it hit the roof, finding it to be a big chamber. The weight when removed was found to be coated in white lime similar to plaster used to top-coat house walls.

In 1953, the property was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Ashby from the Griffin family and the cave remained virtually unchanged until around 1965, when the old house was demolished and the rubble disposed of into the cave. Some of this material can still be seen today amongst the limestone rocks cleared from

paddocks and dropped into the entrance hole to make up the introduced rockpile.

It was around this time in the mid 1960's when local divers were beginning to explore many of the caves and sinkholes of this region and The Shaft was first dived. This occurred when members of the Mount Gambier Spear Fishing and Skin Diving Club were on their way to Ewens Ponds and dropped in to look at the hole they had recently heard of. By this time the surface entrance would have enlarged itself through erosion of the top-soil to much as it is today, a 1 metre diameter vertical tube which opens into a chamber with water directly below.

The only diver with scuba equipment on site was "Jock" Huxtable who had only 700 psi (4700KPA) of air in his tank. He was lowered into the cave by a rope held by many of the dozen or so people present and then dived to a depth of 70 feet (21m) and returned to report that the cave continued.

Undoubtedly, it wasn't long before other local divers visited The Shaft which they named this new hole because of the brilliant shaft of light which was produced by the small roof entrance and which penetrated the clear water to great depths. Many hundreds of dives occurred and the cave's reputation for transparent water and depth began to spread.

On the 28th of May, 1973 a group of eight New South Wales divers entered The Shaft to undertake a dive to greater than 60m depth where they intended to take photographs of themselves. Only four surfaced following the dive. Media reaction to this tragedy (equaled only by a similar accident in America several years earlier) was to say the least, irresponsible. All sorts of false accusations and emotional rather than factual statements were made. The event was also drawn out because even three months later, at the Coroners Inquest none of the bodies had yet been found. Even so, the Coroner found that all four had drowned due to their lack of experience in this type of diving and general lack of heedance of recognised safety standards. It was not until over 10 months later that all the bodies were finally recovered.

As a result of this accident many of the landowners chose to close their holes to divers. Subsequently the CDAA was formed in September 1973 as a 'self-regulatory body' of cave divers and in a relatively short period of time, most sinkholes were once gain made available to them.

During the late 1970's the bore to the North of the entrance was sunk but unfortunately it missed the edge of the main chamber by quite some distance. It eventually pierced the roof at a depth of 46m, only 4m from the cave's known extremity.