

# Graffiti Removal from Main Cave at Timor (NSW)

7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Report by Garry K. Smith

Newcastle and Hunter Valley Speleological Society (NHVSS)

*As published in 'Caves Australia', No. 209, pp 11-12, September 2019, An official publication of the Australian Speleological Federation Inc.*



Graffiti vandalism in Main Cave, Timor before cleaning down began. Photo by Garry K. Smith

One of our members had alerted me that a large amount of spray paint graffiti (vandalism) had appeared on the walls of Main Cave, Timor, during 2018.

This led me to thinking what could be done to remove it. As trip leader for the upcoming Timor and Crawney Pass caves trip, scheduled over the June long weekend, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity.

In the week before the trip, I emailed participants the usual information on the trip objectives, but also included a request that everyone bring along a wire brush to be used for the removal of graffiti. I am sure some participants were quite puzzled by this request.

In all we had 18 participants who took part in all or part of the planned activities during the long weekend; however, our numbers had dwindled to seven to go caving by Monday, the last day of the weekend.

NHVSS members are very lucky to have access to a well-equipped privately owned, multi bedroom hut (previously a shearers accommodation) as a base when caving at Timor. This makes our caving trips to the area, quite comfortable. After a good nights sleep we set out at 8.30 am to head for Main Cave located on the ridge in the NW corner of Caves Reserve.



Our members really appreciate a close relationship with all the property owners around Timor, so we were able to utilise 4X4 drive tracks to get our vehicles to the top of the ridge on private property. This meant we only had a one hundred and fifty metre walk along the ridge to the cave. The private property access, negates a half hour climb up a very steep walking track on the reserve, which is the only access route available to the general public.



**Marcia, Brian and Trish clean off graffiti in Main Cave, Timor. Photo by Garry K. Smith**

Upon entering the cave our group was immediately confronted with the horrendous amount of spray paint graffiti on large sections of wall. The areas were assessed to identify any historic signatures which may be impacted if we cleaned them all down. I can hear the thinkers questioning, 'At what point in time does a signature change from being graffiti to a historic signature'. There are many arguments to be considered here and there are numerous published in-depth articles about this subject. A good example is the paper by Reed and Bourne (2018) under the subheading "The value of historical writing in caves". Hence I am not going to tackle this subject in this short article.

To document our clean-up, we decided to photograph each area of graffiti vandalism, prior to and after removal.

Luckily the majority of the walls now covered in graffiti, were those which had been vandalised about 30 years earlier and had previously been cleaned down at the time using the same method which we were about to employ.

Back then I was a member of NHVSS and also heavily involved with Scouting as a Venturer Leader and a Regional Caving



**Ellie & Connor Brown & Rod Smith cleaning off graffiti. Photo Garry K. Smith**



Instructor, so the Scouts on one of my caving courses were involved in the earlier clean down of graffiti.

Upon close inspection the majority of the cave walls were found to be still coated in a layer of soft calcite (not moonmilk) and the graffiti on the whole could be removed by vigorously rubbing them down with the wire brushes. So provided there was still enough soft calcite on the walls, I expected that the same process would be viable once again without sustaining any noticeable damage to the cave walls. Wire brushes were used on a small test area and proved to be very successful.

Our band of enthusiastic wire brush-wielding graffiti removers then set to work. Even the young children in our group embraced the project with enthusiasm and achieved some outstanding results in areas within their reach.

Overall the clean-up took about two hours and achieved almost total removal of all the 2018 graffiti. The shame is that the caves on the reserve at Timor are freely open to the public to wander into at any time and as such can be targeted in the future by graffiti vandals. In contrast to the vandalised caves on the reserve there are caves off the reserve on private property which are in pristine condition.

There is no way that we can restore the caves on the reserve to their former glory, prior to the souvenir hunters who broke off countless speleothems and carved names in walls, from the turn of the century onwards. However, the property owners around Timor recognise the importance of the caves on their property and are rigorously protecting what is beneath their land.

Thankfully the historic signature of Fred Ward 1865 – alias ‘Captain Thunderbolt’ a notorious outlaw has not been damaged in Main Cave. Our fingers are crossed his signature survives into the future.

**Participants;** Brian Reeves, Marcia Kaye, Trish Morrow, Rod Smith, Ellie Brown, Connor Brown and Garry K. Smith.

### Further Reading

Reed E. and Bourne S., (2018). ‘New evidence confirms Thomas Hannay as the first photographer of Naracoorte Caves and emphasises the importance of historical writing in caves’. *Helictite*, 44: 45-58.



Marcia Kaye and Trish Morrow — before cleaning. Photo by Garry K. Smith



Cleaning down almost completed. Photo by Garry K. Smith