





Holey Ground

THE LIMESTONE COAST IS CHARACTERISED BY A LABYRINTH OF CAVES AND SINKHOLES CREATED BY WATER SEEPING THROUGH LAYERS OF FOSSIL RICH LIMESTONE. MT GAMBIER'S UMPHERSTON SINKHOLE IS ONE OF THE REGION'S MOST SPECTACULAR UNDERGROUND WONDERS – THANKS LARGELY TO TWO VISIONS MORE THAN A CENTURY APART.

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WHEN SCOTTISH IMMIGRANT JAMES Umpherston purchased land surrounding a vast sinkhole in 1868, he built a grand Victorian residence complete with a conservatory and orchard. Mt Gambier's newspaper, *The Border Watch*, promptly declared it “one of the most beautiful properties in the colony”, and was just as impressed when bold plans were unveiled to create a magical sunken garden.

James Umpherston wanted to transform the gaping hole in the landscape into “a pleasant resort in the heart of summer”, which would be ideal for picnics and concerts. A footpath was cut from the highest point to the sinkhole floor, and a wooden staircase was erected. The slopes were terraced, walkways were bordered with ferns, shrubs and trees, and a rowboat was floated on the crystal waters of a small lake.

The Border Watch of October 16, 1886, described the end result as “well worth the trouble and expense”, and went on:

Sailing under the great overhanging cliffs – the water in places of unknown depth – gives one an uncanny sort of feeling not unmixed with enjoyment. A new feature has been added to the water in the shape of a small island, on which has been erected a Robinson Crusoe-looking hut. This is not inaptly named ‘The Island of Departed Spirits’ – the visitor will understand only when he sees it.

Sadly, following Umpherston's death in 1900, subsequent owners lacked that same sense of imagination. In 1949, the land was bought by the Woods and Forests Department (now Primary Industries SA), which demolished his historic home to make way for the further development of the Mt Gambier State Saw Mill. All that remained of Umpherston's vision were an olive grove and





Two defiant palm trees are all that remain of Umpherston's original plantings. Today, hydrangeas, agapanthus and acanthus have proven the most possum proof and offer a stunning display on the original terraces.



several tall pines which had once lined the driveway. That same vast hole which had greeted his arrival to the district a century earlier soon became little more than a rubbish dump, albeit with two defiant palm trees.

But this influential pioneer had left an important legacy which would help form the fabric of this thriving community – the idea that giving or sharing something creates both self satisfaction and a strong sense of achievement.

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It was the Woods and Forests Department Social Club which initiated the clean up of the sinkhole in 1971, following strong calls from community service groups and members of the public. The mill's regional administration officer, Ken Norton, led the campaign to reclaim an important piece of local history. "The club members were confronted by a terrible mess. Undaunted, men, women, boys and girls would come on Saturdays, Sundays and evenings and began the huge task," he recalls.

The project became a popular hobby for families, and as the sinkhole was gradually cleared the people were surprised to find the original terraces were still intact. It took several years of working bees to remove all of the rubbish and construct picnic shelters and pathways. Along the terraces, the team of volunteers planted rose bushes,





Park benches rise from the ashes

Several carved wooden benches in an area around Umpherston Sinkhole are a memorial – not to a person of note but to some ingenious salvage work after the devastating Ash Wednesday bushfires that swept through parts of South Australia and Victoria in February 1983. The trees from which these benches were carved came from local pine plantations and were among thousands that had been scorched to death.

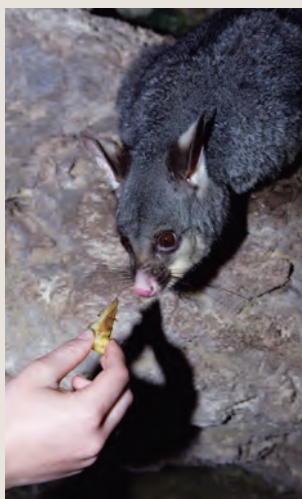
Many of those burnt trees had been snapped off at ground level by 100km/h winds – and they needed to be salvaged quickly by the Woods and Forests Department in Mt Gambier after the fires subsided. The best method of storing the damaged timber to prevent fungal decay was to put them under water. The problem was where, and how?

Lake Bonney provided the solution; it was nearby and accessible, large and shallow. But an access road needed to be constructed to the lake and continued along its eastern shore, with entry points to the water. A mini township of buildings, including workshops and storage sheds, was also required.

More than 500,000m³ of burnt timber had to be immersed, at a depth that would enable easy retrieval. An estimated water surface area of about 200ha was required, and because the lake's shoreline totalled almost 60km, logs had to be contained in particular locations. Special barriers of log bundles, each weighing up to 10 tonnes, were positioned along a 4km front, about 400m from shore.

Fortunately, the water level in the lake was at its end of summer low point. Logs were dumped on the shore and then moved into the underwater corral by front end loaders, to a depth of about 1.5m. All went according to plan, and the timber was preserved.

The logs used for the sinkhole benches were taken from Lake Bonney in 1987, having spent four years under water. According to the men who carved them with chainsaws, the timber was rock hard, ensuring that these unusual memorials to one of South Australia's worst natural disasters will remain in their beautiful surroundings for a very long time.



Oh Possum!

Brush tailed possums have played a prominent role in making Umpherston Sinkhole one of Mt Gambier's premier tourist attractions. Families take their children and visitors to feed them after dark, and some of the "friendlier" animals even make daytime appearances. Ken Norton was greeted daily by the possums while he was the

sinkhole's caretaker. "As soon as they heard me open the padlock on the work shed, they would come out of hiding and look for a feed," he says. "They're great scavengers and eat biscuits, fruit, bread, grass – just about anything." In the early days of the sinkhole's restoration, plants such as roses were also on the menu ... but they were too tasty to last. "Every plant you see in Umpherston Sinkhole today has been determined by the possums – quite simply, those species that have survived and flourished are ones that the possums don't like eating," Ken says. And although this avid gardener has helped to create a botanical masterpiece, he still believes the possums are the sinkhole's top drawcard. "The lights go on at night and it's a free attraction, and such a unique opportunity for families ... and the look of delight on a young child when it sees a possum with a baby on its back – or has one climb onto its own shoulder – makes an absolutely perfect picture," he says. "They can actually get right up close to them, feed them and even pat them ... it's an iconic Australian experience regardless of whether you are a local or an international visitor."

which thrived until they bloomed and were subsequently stripped bare by possums. They then tried various ornamental grasses, which met the same fate. Through further experimentation, it was found that hydrangeas, agapanthus, hibiscus, oyster plants (*Acanthus mollis*) and lilies were less palatable, and both plants and animals have become a lasting tourist attraction.

By 1978, the volunteers' efforts were rewarded with a Kesab Tidy Towns award. It was to be the first in a long series of accolades, culminating in the sinkhole's inclusion on the Register of State Heritage Places in 1995. Also around this time, the City of Mt Gambier took on the responsibility of maintaining the sinkhole during a ceremonial transfer acknowledging more than two decades of voluntary effort which showed no sign of waning.

After retiring from the mill in 1989, Ken Norton spent more than 40 hours a week in a voluntary capacity maintaining the sinkhole and its surrounds. In 2004, he officially hung up his gardening gloves during a civic ceremony recognising his long service, and his efforts were further rewarded with an Order of Australia medal in 2006.

Today, a council paid gardener continues Ken's work, but the story is far from over, with hopes now hinged on the preservation of a second sinkhole close by, which local historians believe once served as a watering hole for James Umpherston's stock. So far, the mill's current owner, Carter Holt Harvey, has ruled out its restoration, claiming that it would compromise vehicle access within company grounds. Ken Norton is again leading the push to overcome the seemingly impossible.

"So far, it hasn't progressed any further, but I'm certain that the people of Mt Gambier will never let it be filled in and I'm convinced that in due time it will be given back to them," he says. And no one should underestimate the determination of a country community.





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