

It's all so exciting. An outback town formed millions of years ago with fossilised coral reef and mega fauna, cave systems to match the best, relics of earlier industrial years in abundance, friendly locals with a pub to match and birdlife to stun twitchers. Then there's Ruddy Gore and the mysteries it still has to give up. But then talk to any of the local cavers and a lifetime could be spent searching out what could be around the next corner...

On the road out west from Cairns (in Australia's far north Queensland) and for most of a two and a half hour trip, along the section known locally as the 'Wheelbarrow Way', one can get an almost complete feeling of isolation from civilization, with the exception of small townships breaking the drive for the brief seconds it takes to pass through. In between there is the usual sense of the vastness this continent nearly always conjures up but always terminating in remarkable places with inspiring antiquity. Chillagoe is such a place.

Fast forwarding to about 30,000 years ago while the fossils were still well and truly asleep, the Aboriginal peoples started settling here probably finding the area's cave systems as ideal protection from the elements and in such a hot climate, an all important asset – a permanent water source. It also looks like they thought it a good place to start an art gallery.

Caves

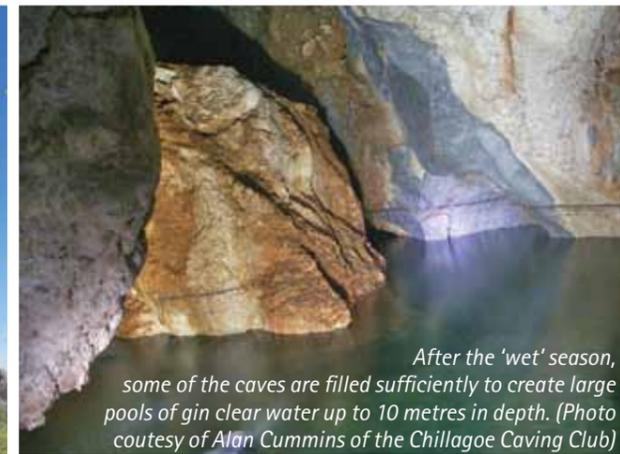
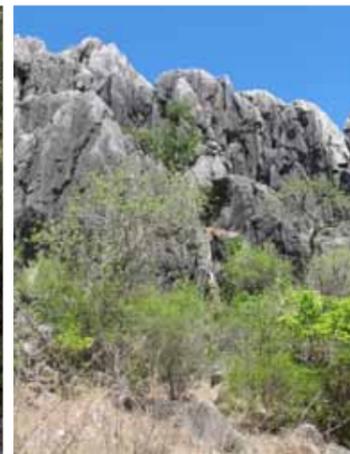
The cave systems are fantastic. Although all cave systems worldwide have their own individual benchmarks of excellence, those found at the Chillagoe-Mungana Caves National Park offer inexpensive guided tours but for the 'true blue' troglodytes, joining the Chillagoe Caving Club offers access to a lifetime of almost limitless opportunities to 'go where no man (or woman!) has gone before'.

It's only with these intrepid few that access can be made to cave systems that are/or become flooded and can offer cave diving experiences – albeit shallow ones!

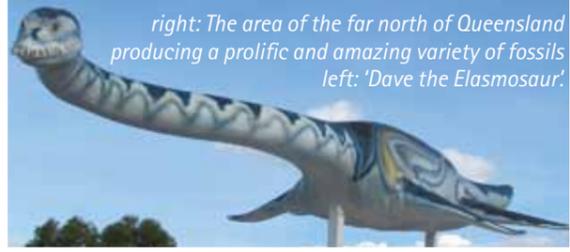
It is from this geologically unchallenged area that massive amounts of mineral deposits were discovered and exploited.



above l-r: Chillagoe creek providing a permanent water source to this arid part of the country. Weather forecasting as accurate as it gets – also a good forecaster of the local humour. Typical hilly countryside suspected of hiding more cave systems. Chillagoe's famous balancing rock



After the 'wet' season, some of the caves are filled sufficiently to create large pools of gin clear water up to 10 metres in depth. (Photo courtesy of Alan Cummins of the Chillagoe Caving Club)



right: The area of the far north of Queensland producing a prolific and amazing variety of fossils left: 'Dave the Elasmosaur'.



left: The must join club to go find all the real adventure spots here!

right: Ah! The grandeur and mystery of caves where stalactites and stalagmites grow at the lightning fast rate of three centimetres a century.

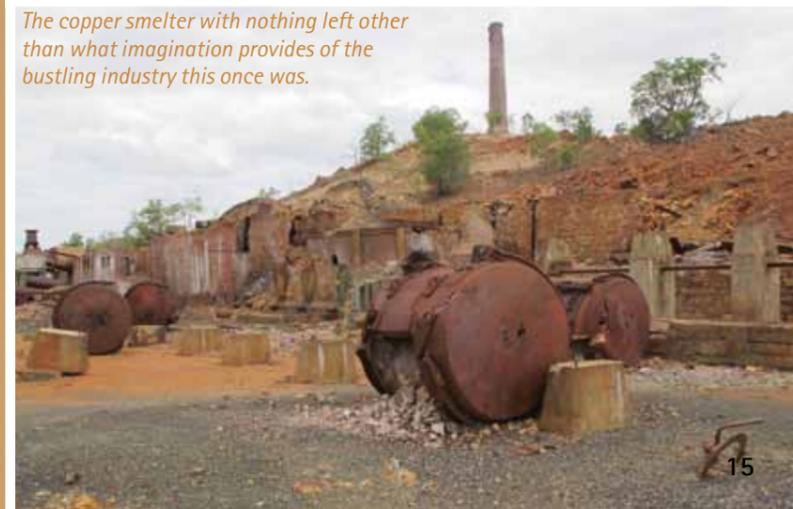


The copper smelter with nothing left other than what imagination provides of the bustling industry this once was.

As a result of this, and according to the local museum's archives, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, this now small township used to boast a population of about 10,000 supporting a thriving mining industry. This is often signalled by the all too obvious view of the remaining chimney-stacks at the copper mining smelter less than a kilometre from the town's centre.

Copper

A short way from this and passing the old cemetery is a rough 4-wheel drive track leading off to one of the open cast mines that used to feed the basic ore to the smelter. And then we reach....



CHILLAGOE

by Keith Cardwell www.fnqdiver.com

Fossils, Caves, Copper and its 'Ruddy Gore'



Ruddy Gore!

When I first stumbled across this water hole just over 10 years ago I was wandering around taking holiday snaps and watching out for snakes and potholes. It was only after going back to town that I found out about its history. Now flooded and unused for decades, this open-cast mining site, full of clear blue water and unknown depth, promised a diving adventure to which I was determined to return. Several months later and with fellow intrepid adventurer Spence, we tackled the hill of tailings and rubble wearing our twin sets and sling tanks; 30 degrees and already wet through before hitting the water.

Planning for 50 metres and hoping to find all sorts of rare tackle and souvenirs, we bottomed out at 30m and found nothing. We looked at each other glumly and knew that if we told this story we'd be looked at as a sad pair of twats. Even so, we persisted and went around the entire contour of the site and found something we just weren't prepared for – a horizontal mine shaft burrowing into the hillside. Armed only with torches and no caving gear we came up saying 'next time!'

And that came three years later. This time tackled up but expecting a short penetration, we were able to get in a clear 60 metres before reaching a



This time tackled up but expecting a short penetration, we were able to get in a clear 60 metres before reaching a connecting vertical shaft that appeared to go down forever.



above: Mark (my standby buddy) and the two intrepid cavers, Sam and Joel preparing to plop in.

right: Cross-sectional drawings of the Ruddy Gore mine by E. Broadhurst.

below left: Joel side-mounting it.

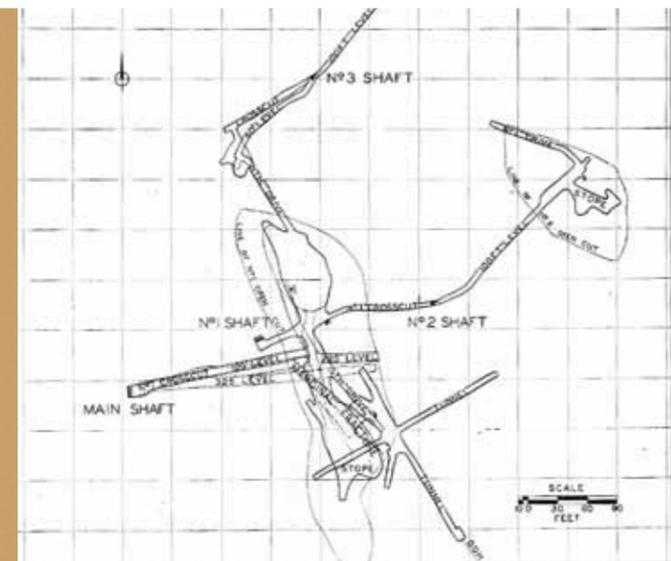


FIG. 1. Composite Plan of Ruddy Gore Mine.

connecting vertical shaft that appeared to go down forever. This is where we had to call it a day. We hadn't done enough homework. Like that first exploratory dive, we now needed to dig up more information and plan a more comprehensive expedition. As it turned out, Sam, our top caving mate and young genius, was able to find a rare book written by an E. Broadhurst giving a cross-sectional drawing of the mine. Now what to do?

And so we are planning a much more detailed visit to this fabulous area.

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I didn't mention the bats did I? 🦇

View video clips of this trip at www.DiveNewZealand.com

