

# Wonder under the paddocks

A SUCCESSFUL PRIME-LAMB OPERATION LIES ATOP THE UNIQUE NATURAL WONDER OF KILSBY HOLE, ONE OF THE BEST CAVE-DIVING SITES IN THE WORLD.

BY GRETEL SNEATH



Bringewood's Merino and first-cross ewes are in top shape after grazing on paddocks irrigated with pristine water from Kilsby Hole. OPPOSITE: A diver seems to be suspended by threads of light in this gin-clear natural wonder beneath the paddocks.

IT'S CRUTCHING TIME at Bringewood, 15 kilometres south-west of Mount Gambier. The ewes are typically creating a fuss, but the mood among the men in the modest shearing shed is one of calm. Nothing much fazes these blokes – not even a mighty big hole out in the eastern paddock that people cross the world to see.

When father of two Graham Kilsby became the fourth generation of his family to run the successful prime-lamb operation in the farming district of Moorak, he also inherited a jaw-dropping natural wonder. The Limestone Coast area in the south-eastern corner of South Australia is world-renowned for its extensive subterranean network of caves and sinkholes, and a spectacular example lies beneath the Bringewood pastures. Created when the roof of an underground chamber collapsed, possibly thousands of years ago, Kilsby Hole is rated among the world's best cave-diving sites due to its exceptional water clarity.

"They like it because they can see somebody who's right over the other side and it looks like they're floating on air," Graham says. "It's 65 metres deep and a classic bell shape, which flares out like a football oval at the bottom, and in the middle of the day, when the sun is directly overhead, it sends down a beam of light that illuminates the entire chamber."

Legend has it that travelling stockmen would water their weary cattle by tossing a bucket tied to a rope into the abyss and slowly hauling it back up. Graham gets it a little easier when it comes to the welfare of his 3000 head of Merino and first-cross ewes; a centrifugal pump draws the pristine water into a centre pivot that irrigates the surrounding paddocks. "We've got this great, clean and green circle of pasture, which we use to finish off the lambs," he says.

Kilsby Hole appears to have been overlooked during an 1857 survey of the district, but a tooth found on an underwater ledge hints at its age. The tooth is believed to be from a marsupial lion, a species that

has been extinct for about 46,000 years. Underwater exploration of the sinkhole began in 1962, just as scuba diving was taking off and, as word of its beauty spread, the adventurers came knocking.

"Divers used to come to the place on Saturdays and Sundays – sometimes we'd have 30 to 40 a day, and they were all going down," Graham's father, Ross, says.

During Easter 1969, two novice divers drowned. "I was at a barbecue and my friend turned on the TV and saw a report saying that there had been a death in Kilsby Hole," Ross says. "From what we understand, they were not experienced and had only recently bought their gear. It was a bit of a shock because they were the first cave-diving fatalities in Australia."

Not long after the tragedy, the Commonwealth Government's Defence Department leased the site for several years for weapons research and closed it to the public. "They had a machine that used to fire sonar devices into the water and every time they fired it, my neighbour reckoned the windows used to rattle," Ross says.

Graham recalls being invited to climb into a dry testing cylinder for a trip below the surface. "I was probably primary school-age and they put us in harnesses and sent us down the cylinder on a ladder that was about 80 foot long, and there were spotlights under the water," he says. "We were almost diving it without getting wet, which was the best thing about it."

Surprisingly, the experience hasn't enticed him to further explore his own backyard. "People can't believe I haven't been down," he says. "I will one day ... I really must do it one day."

Graham's younger brother Ben lives in the Solomon Islands, where he loves to dive, but he is also yet to test the waters back home. Their father must be the adventurous one. "It's really marvellous to see – some visiting divers put the weight belt on me and said, 'Come on – dive down!' but all I was doing was paddling

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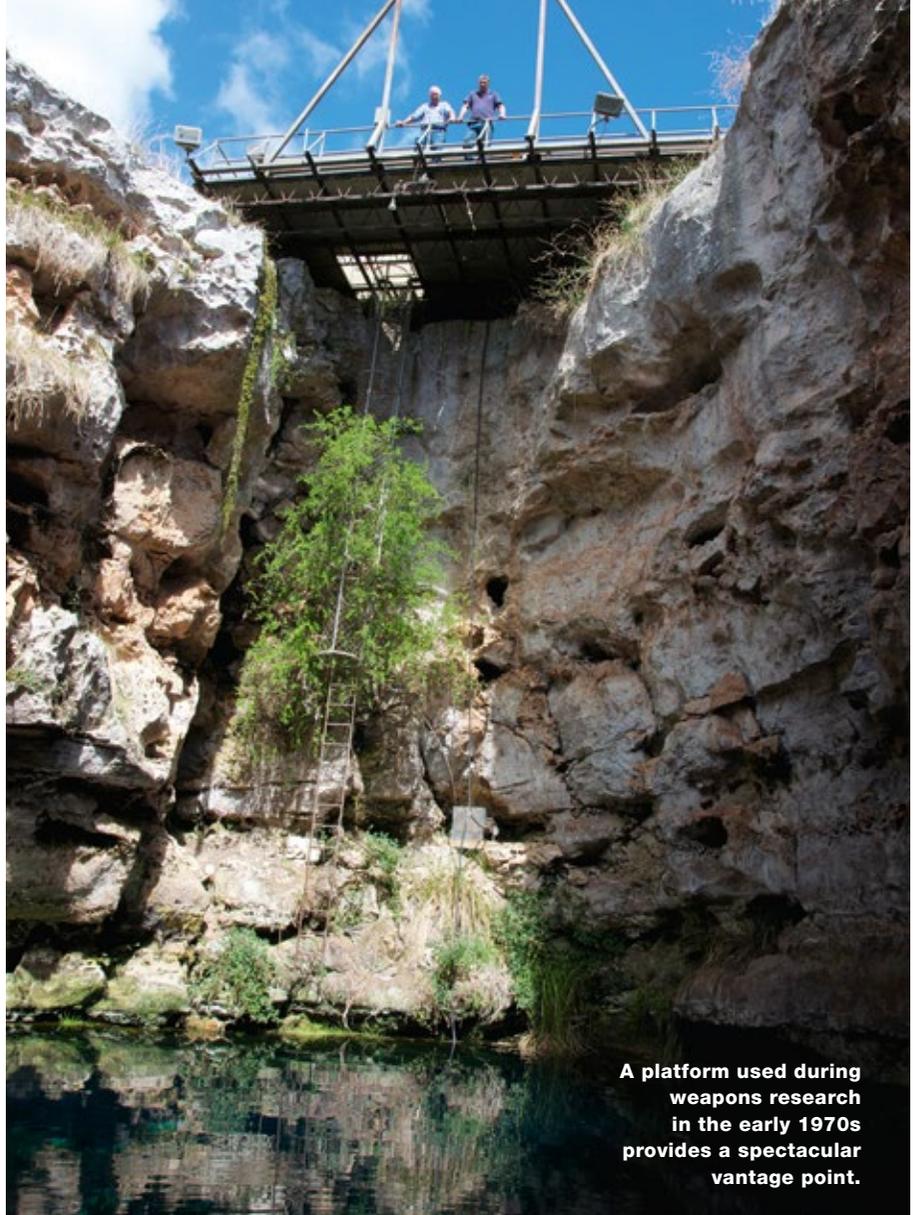
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A platform used during weapons research in the early 1970s provides a spectacular vantage point.

along the surface, and next minute, two sets of hands came along and yanked me down. I got to about three feet but the pressure on my ears was too much," Ross says. "Another time, I took a quick dip after a long, hot day carting hay and just about died – it's so cold it takes your breath away!"

Both police and Navy divers have used the sinkhole for training purposes, and anyone else wishing to brave the 15 degree Celsius water must seek permission from the Cave Divers Association of Australia (CDAA), which has now taken over management of the site. National director, John Vanderleest, says members are "exceptionally grateful" for the opportunity.

"We are very reliant on the goodwill of these people; cave diving is not their core business, and farmers like the Kilsbys have no reason to let us on to their properties other than a willingness to share the opportunity to go diving," John says. "We have a simple rule that access is a privilege, not a right, and that's a saying that we have had in the association for a long time."

The CDAA has helped to place Kilsby Hole under the world spotlight; in addition to the constant trickle of international cave

divers there are also regular visits from film crews. "It's a good expanse of water, which is exceptionally deep, yet crystal clear, and you can easily see straight down 60–65 metres – you can't get that at many other locations in south-eastern Australia and that's why it's rather unique," John says.

Graham's boys Robert, 14, and Adam, 12, recently stayed home from school and spent the day snorkelling in awe while a film crew captured a group of free divers. "We watched one bloke, I think he dived down and stayed on the bottom – we were waiting for him for about four or five minutes!" Graham says.

The family is concerned about the lack of facilities for visitors, and would like to be able to provide toilets, a sheltered barbecue area and even accommodation. "At the moment, they come here in the middle of winter and it's blowing a gale and they're trying to put up a temporary shelter to get changed in," Graham says. "Although you need to be qualified to dive, anyone can snorkel it, so there is huge potential for outdoor education or sporting groups."

Tourism is a little different to farming prime lambs, but he's willing to take the plunge.