

Where there Once was a Cave

Between Merricks Beach and Balnarring Beach there was once a popular feature known as “Pirates’ Cave”, or “Smugglers’ Cave”. The opening was located about half way up the west face of the headland referred to simply as The Point. Above it the cliff face rose vertically, dotted with small shrubs that clung to the rock face. Below was a steep, slippery, exposed slope dropping down to the beach. The shallow cave, barely high enough for an adult to stand upright, was most easily reached by a track along a very narrow shelf of rock. Clumps of grass offered a hand-hold for the adventurers who wanted to reach the cave’s mouth. The descent was often by sliding directly down to the beach.

Although there were several tales as to how the cave was formed – an Aboriginal shelter, a lookout during World War 2 – it was actually the result of mining undertaken in the early years of the 20th Century. In 1911 Joseph Davis took out a licence to remove cobblestones from the rock shelf at the base of The Point and to extract pigments from the limestone for use in paints. There was also a second, smaller cave excavated on the other side of the headland, facing south and closer to the base of the cliff.

Davis worked the area intermittently over a fifteen-year period, often employing several men to assist. During the mid-1920s this venture drew opposition from a number of people who had bought land along the clifftop in the new subdivision of Manly/Merricks Beach. Alarmed by increased erosion, they protested to the Department of Land and Survey and a study was undertaken. It concluded that erosion to the area was the result of ‘natural causes’ and not related to the mining. However, Davis did not renew his licence when it expired in early 1927.

The Cave remained a landmark and an adventure point for many years. Accelerated erosion in the early 2000s saw the erection of warning signs which did little to deter climbers. In 2004 the Merricks Beach Foreshore Committee, concerned by the danger that climbers faced from rockfalls while scrambling on the cliff, had the opening filled in.

Vegetation was planted so that, over time, it would once again merge into its natural surroundings.

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Photo of The Cave taken in 2001.