

Dinosaur Cove, the first and almost last dinosaur dig.

Dinosaur Cove was discovered by Dr. Tom Rich and his associates in December 1980 as part of an extensive search of the Early Cretaceous Otway coastline. They initially found four thumbnail fragments of bone at the base of a ninety metre cliff in the then un-named cove. They returned the following year and six more bone fragments were discovered in the same fossil deposit. As the fossil layer was at the base of the cliff it became obvious that to follow the deposit meant tunnelling into the vertical cliff face. Initially reluctant to proceed, Tom Rich was persuaded by the "Friends of the Museum of Victoria" to take up the challenge of Dinosaur Cove and the first official Victorian dinosaur dig took place in February 1984.

The first dig took an enormous amount of preparation. As there was no accommodation nearby, a tent city was erected in a farmers paddock approximately 2km from the site. An advance party of volunteers built a cookhouse, erected a large mess tent and laid telephone lines and air hoses. A large compressor was installed at the top of the cliff directly below the dig site and the Surf Lifesaving Victoria helicopter flew the heavier equipment from the paddock onto the shore platform close to the site.

Sixty five volunteers carried in the rest of the equipment, including wood to build a portico over the excavation area to protect the diggers from falling rocks. The volunteers toiled day and night for sixteen days, in eight hour shifts. Lights powered by a generator permitted volunteers to work at night, although it was pretty scary navigating ones way across the shore platform and up and down the cliff using just a torch to light the way.

There were teething problems with the equipment but by the end of the first week the constant drilling produced a 1.3 metre tunnel into the base of the cliff, which allowed the palaeontologists access to the fossil layer in the floor. The concentration of bones indicated that the direction of flow of the ancient stream channel was parallel to the cliff face, which meant that the tunnel needed to be widened rather than go deeper.

On the penultimate evening of the dig the generator powering the lights at the dig site stopped working, so the crew decided to abandon excavations for the night and return to camp. Next day the morning crew was met with devastation at the dig site. Large equipment which took four people to carry had been tossed off a ledge 2 1/2 metres above normal high tide level. The wooden portico, covering the excavations was gone and all that remains were splinters of wood strewn around the head of the cove. One air hose was trapped beneath a boulder the size of a small car and many pieces of mining equipment were later recovered in rock pools or buried under tonnes of debris. It seems that during the night a king tide swept into the cove and demolished the excavation area. How fortuitous that the generator had stopped working nine hours earlier, otherwise the results could have been fatal. In the dark, with their backs to the sea, the diggers would not have been aware of the oncoming king tide until it was too late.

After this display of Mother Nature's might Tom Rich decided to discontinue night excavations and stick to day time activities when the diggers could see what was going on around them

Despite the set back it was obvious that Dinosaur Cove was worth returning to as the dig ended with a tally of nearly two hundred bones and teeth. Next time the diggers knew what to expect when they came back and they all had a very healthy respect for Mother Nature.

You can read more about the first dinosaur dig at Dinosaur Cove and all the adventures that followed in "Dinosaurs of Darkness" by Thomas H. Rich and Patricia Vickers-Rich. Published by Indiana University Press, 2000.



Excavating under the wooden portico at Dinosaur Cove.
Photograph courtesy of T.H. Rich Collection



Rescuing equipment after the King Tide hit.
Photograph courtesy of T.H. Rich Collection

Next month: Other sites within Dinosaur Cove.