



SOUTH WALES CAVING CLUB
CLWB OGOFEYDD DEHEUDIR CYMRU

Newsletter

No. 111

1993



South Wales Caving Club

Clwb Ogofeydd Deheudir Cymru

Newsletter No. 111

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- Editorial Address:**
**60 South Terrace,
Surbiton, Surrey
KT6 6HU.**
**Tel. 081-390-0515
(home), 081-943-
5629 (work).**

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Editorial

by *Tony Baker*

Much has been written, in the caving press and elsewhere, about the possible health risks associated with the presence of Radon gas in caves. In recent months I have identified a disturbing new condition, which may or may not be Radon-related but which seems to be affecting cavers in growing numbers. The affliction leaves sufferers unable, try as they might, to express themselves in writing. No matter how interesting the caving activity they've been involved with, no matter how often they're asked, no matter how many times they promise to deliver, they are simply unable to put pen to paper or finger to keyboard. The condition would appear to be spreading like wildfire through the caving community in south Wales, but a link with Radon may be hard to prove, since some active cavers remain free of it (see, for example, the article by Pete Francis which begins on the page 4, and the one by Gary Vaughan beginning on page 5). Further research is clearly required, but many sufferers appear reluctant to admit affliction, so I have developed a simple test for the syndrome, which I urge you to try on your fellow cavers; ask them if they've written anything for the Newsletter lately.

My request for some "Letters to the Editor" in the last Newsletter was met with a

veritable storm of apathy from members; in fact, I received more letters from non-members (who read the Newsletter through our exchanges with other clubs) than I did from members. Shame on the lot of you. Anyway, some of the letters I did receive are printed on p.48. I did, however, receive more than one comment regarding the number of columns per page in the last edition, and as I am here to serve, I've changed it. The thinking behind the four-column-per-page layout of no. 110 was simply that text presented in this way is easier to read than large, wide blocks - simply look at any newspaper for confirmation of this. It seems, though, that the size of typeface I use doesn't readily lend itself to four columns on an A4 page, so I've compromised and gone to three. I've also slightly increased the size of the type (from 10-point to 12-point) and the columns are now justified - that is, the spacing adjusted so that each line fills the width of the column. This does of course prove that I listen to and accept at least some of your views, so don't feel frightened to let me know what you think.

The other point which several of you made about the last Newsletter concerned the poor reproduction quality of some of the photographs. This,

unfortunately, was due to circumstances beyond my control; the originals were fine, but suffered badly in the printing. I have discussed this with Kevin Davies (who prints the Newsletter) and he isn't sure why those few pictures should have suffered, but he has said he'll endeavour to make sure this edition looks better. And yes, the picture on page 24 was reversed left to right; in other words Jopo was on the left not the right. Gremlins in the printing again, I'm afraid.

Following a suggestion from a member, the committee has decided that the Newsletter will now be available to the wider caving public. They will be able to buy it simply by sending a cheque to the club, and this facility will be publicised in the caving press. The thinking behind this is that the money raised will help to offset the cost of producing the Newsletter, with only a small additional outlay involved in printing a few more copies. Also, much of the material that we publish deserves a wider audience; take, for example, the work of the Greensites project, which has been extensively written up in these pages. This is very much an experiment, to begin with; after all, we may not sell any! I'll let you know how it goes, but if you've any views on the subject, let me know...

First Dive

by *Pete Francis*

To be back once more at this quiet place conjures up memories of the past; the last time, in my youth, on a sombre occasion. Then, a body, unrecognisable, being brought up from the depths, and I not even confronting the challenge that lay before me. The body of a diver, foolishly drowned attempting the unknown, and now I'm in his place, attempting the same but with more knowledge. I'm feeling - as he must have done - the unknown obscure before me.

I kit up slowly; the new configuration of bottles, slung on my hips, protecting their vulnerable valves beneath my arms - as strange and awkward to me as is the coming experience. Bottles slung heavily, I move deliberately, strapping contents gauges to each arm. Mouthpieces slung reassuringly close to my face, captive, near, in case of emergency. Cautiously I ask myself: "If the emergency comes, will I still have enough control to know what to do?" Knife strapped to arm: "Less chance of it snagging there", I'm told. Diver's slate and compass next to it - "Come back on a bearing if you get lost" - and I'm

disoriented already. A spinning whorl contraption, more at home in a folk museum, goes on the other arm.

"If you lose the line, take a bearing ninety degrees off your course, fasten one end to a rock and swim completely around the passage, then haul it in. You should get the line back then." Good in theory but I'm already lost, tension mounting with each breath. Mask on next, then the helmet and there's nothing else to hold me back except fear. I waddle to the water's edge, fins on and in I go. The water's biting my face, already making me cry out for breath, as I explore the surface pool. Dark openings loom below and I surface, suddenly feeling foolish in front of the interested onlookers; to hide my embarrassment, I plunge into the cave entrance.

A mixture of embarrassment, fear and curiosity drives me on and I immediately meet a world of blackness, my headtorch barely revealing anything. Deeper: my ears begin to hurt. Stop, clear them, at first unsuccessfully, then with great effort they pop. Holding my nylon guideline loosely for fear of pulling it and ripping it away from its preset course, I fin

steadily on.

"You'll go through a large chamber then come up over an obvious boulder. Look out for an air surface then on to a line junction." I swim in oblivious of any space until I cross a silty brown rock and, slowly ascending, see a mercurial glint above. Upwards quickly now, the thought of a large, safe resting place filling my mind, where I can reconsider the options, reconsider life. But no large space ensues; feeling cheated, I gaze in disappointment at my narrow aqueous tomb. A slanting crack affords a hand-hold in a space where my head only just fits, and I'm left dangling like a climber over an inky void. One sooty white stalactite glints scornfully at me and I know this is no resting place, no sanctuary, only a temporary grave and the breathing rate increases.

"Control yourself, control the fear." Fear closes in, as tangible as a hood around my brain. Gavin, following, signals that he's having trouble with a fin and is going below to fix it. I follow him, sitting on the bottom, able to control emotions there in a world I can comprehend rather than the half-world of air and death above. He signals he'll go

"I raise my head to look around, my helmet hits the roof, dislodging my mask and suddenly all is blurred as the cold water rushes in..."

ahead, I'm to follow close behind but immediately I lose him. I swim on, no choice of return left, and try to remember what he said about what comes next. "After the air bell is a low bit. The line tends to drag left under some overhangs - keep it at arm's length so you don't get caught under them, and remember to keep left at the junctions." Large projections loom suddenly out of sinister blackness, and I try to keep away, aware of the danger at arm's length. I raise my head to look around, my helmet hits the roof dislodging my mask, and suddenly all is blurred as the cold water rushes in.

"No panic, remember the drill", but I find myself trying to clear my ears instead. "O.K., try again."

I raise my head only to find roof above, there's no room to clear my mask. Faced with no other option I swim on, swirling lights all around me, direction meaningless; I wonder abstractly how long before up is down and I drift disoriented, out of control, into the narcosis of the underworld. I try once more; only a squeak emerges from my nose, sound but no air.

"Relax" I tell myself, "get the air out of your lungs". I try again and thankfully the mask clears. I swim on and there is Gavin signalling: "O.K.?"

"O.K." I reply. I follow on close behind, his fins barely discernible less than a hand's length in front, his hundred watt light a candle flicker ahead. We reach a junction and I thankfully retrieve his peg showing the way on. Another junction, and then another and at each I feel intensely aware of the menacing unknown stretching out before me; into the ominous infinities of my fears, and the enormity of the decision as to which way is correct, the safe way on. Awareness, as tangible as the cold around my body, telling me that the wrong choice will take me beyond the safe reserves of my air on one last adventurous misadventure. But no suggestion of wrongness enters my hypertuned sensitivity and, more confident now, I fin ahead. Suddenly, I'm awakened from my post-shock stupor by seeing that mud-encrusted boulder again. A feeling of relief starts to invade my consciousness and even as it begins I realise I must

fight it back, in case a false security leads to a careless, flippant mistake that leads me into the perilous passages, away from light. Angle down, angle up, look for brightness ahead. Nothing comes; was I mistaken, hopelessly disoriented, still going further in? Have I relaxed too soon, already taken that one, last fatal choice whilst distracted by more mundane, unimportant things? Then suddenly it's there, light, air.

I surface casually, look around at the waiting friends, make a wry, flippant remark: underplaying the emotion felt, bottling up, poker-faced, the kaleidoscope of feelings in this new multi-coloured world. But inside, back in that dark, twisting, turning web of confused and contorted routeways that makes up my mental world I hear a voice: repeating over and over, singular and quiet but persistent, stating the obvious; "You've dived Keld Head!"

Piaggia Bella 1991: An Alternative Prospectus

by Gary Vaughan



From the sun-drenched Mediterranean shores of the Cote D'Azur, the French/Italian border picks its way up through the steep-sided hills which form the southernmost limit of that most favourite playground, the Alps. The border twists and turns as it heads roughly North, steadily climbing through the Maritime Alps, taking in Mt Saccarello at 2200m and Mt Bertrand at 2482m, momentarily dipping down to the Col Des Signeurs before reaching the spectacular Pointe Marguareis at 2650m. This magnificent headland of rock towers majestically over the Vallon Del Satto which stretches away northwards over 800m below its near vertical face. Its south and west facing slopes form the centrepiece of an outstanding plateau area of karst scenery surprisingly referred to as "Le Marguareis". From the Pointe Marguareis, the border strikes due west across the "Conca Della Carsene" to wind its way down to the Col De Tende before pressing on further West to confront the Mercantor National Park.

The Marguareis massif measures approximately 10km by 5km and at its simplest consists of three

main basins, the Conca Della Carsene, the Plan Ambroise and the Conca Di Piaggia Bella, separated by the Pas De Scarasson and the Col Des Signeurs. Deep snow-plugged rifts divide large areas of fine limestone pavement. The moraine-covered valley floors give rise to fertile alpine pasture,

LOCATION SKETCH



peppered with edelweiss, lapping at the base of the bare limestone cliffs which rise like grey knarled knuckles from the tranquility of the sheltered basins. The literal translation of "Piaggia Bella" is "beautiful place" and on a warm summer day with just the slightest hint of a cooling breeze, it is easy to see how this particular basin gets its name.

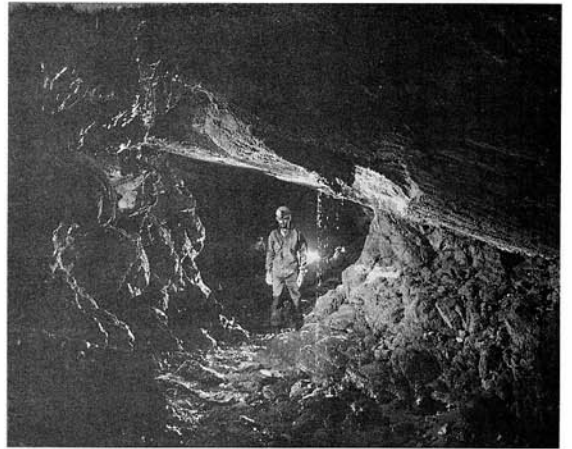
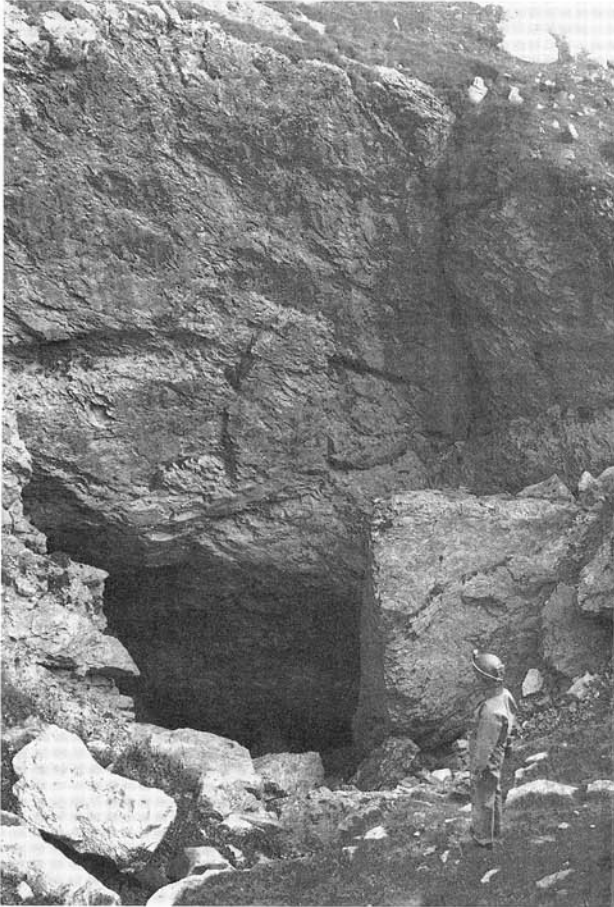
There are numerous known cave systems in the area, some of which are quite sizeable, some of which are not. The trick as we soon found out was to know which is which. Big systems in the area include Reseau Gouffre Cappa at -706m, Gouffre Straldi at -614m and the Gouffre des Perdus at -539m, but the big daddy of them all is of course the Piaggia Bella, now at -925m from its highest entrance with over 30km of passage.

The sheltered grassy basins are excellent for camping. Part of the area lies within the French National Park and there is no restriction on camping. On the Italian side permission for camping can be obtained from the Park Office. In the Conca di Piaggia Bella itself there is the Capanna Saracco Volante, belonging to the Gruppo Speleologico Piemontese. The club seem quite prepared to accept guests providing contact is made prior to the visit to "help in scheduling people presence". There is a second hut at the Col Des Signeurs, the Refuge Don U. Barbera, also available for booking through the C.A.I. Both huts suffer from dubious water supplies, water captured from surface



Hywel Davies reaches the top of a pitch in Piaggia Bella

Below left: Eleanor Flaherty at the entrance to Piaggia Bella



Above right, top: Brian Clipstone in the Piaggia Bella streamway
Above right, bottom: The view from the Col Des Seigneurs
Photos on this page by Tony Baker

streams but having said that, most of the people on the trip drank the water and appeared to suffer no adverse effects.

So there you have it. A stunningly beautiful area of alpine karst, excellent camping far away from the madding crowd or, if you prefer, bunkhouse style accomodation with cold running water. An abundance of caving potential both discovered and undiscovered and weather that will tempt you away from those big dark holes in preference for those splendid rolling hills. So what's the catch? Every form of paradise has its price and in the case of this one the price one has to pay is the drive up "The Track". Read on....

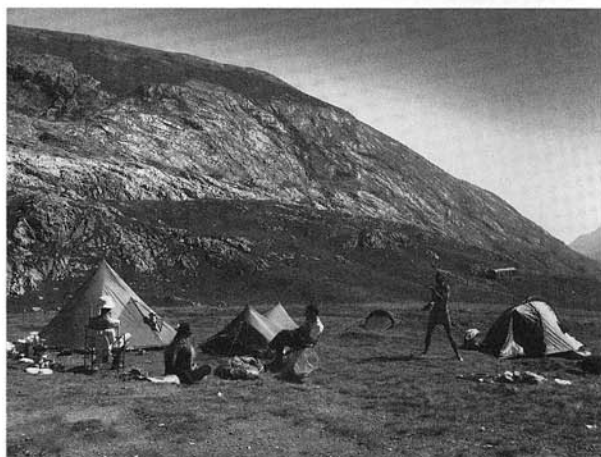
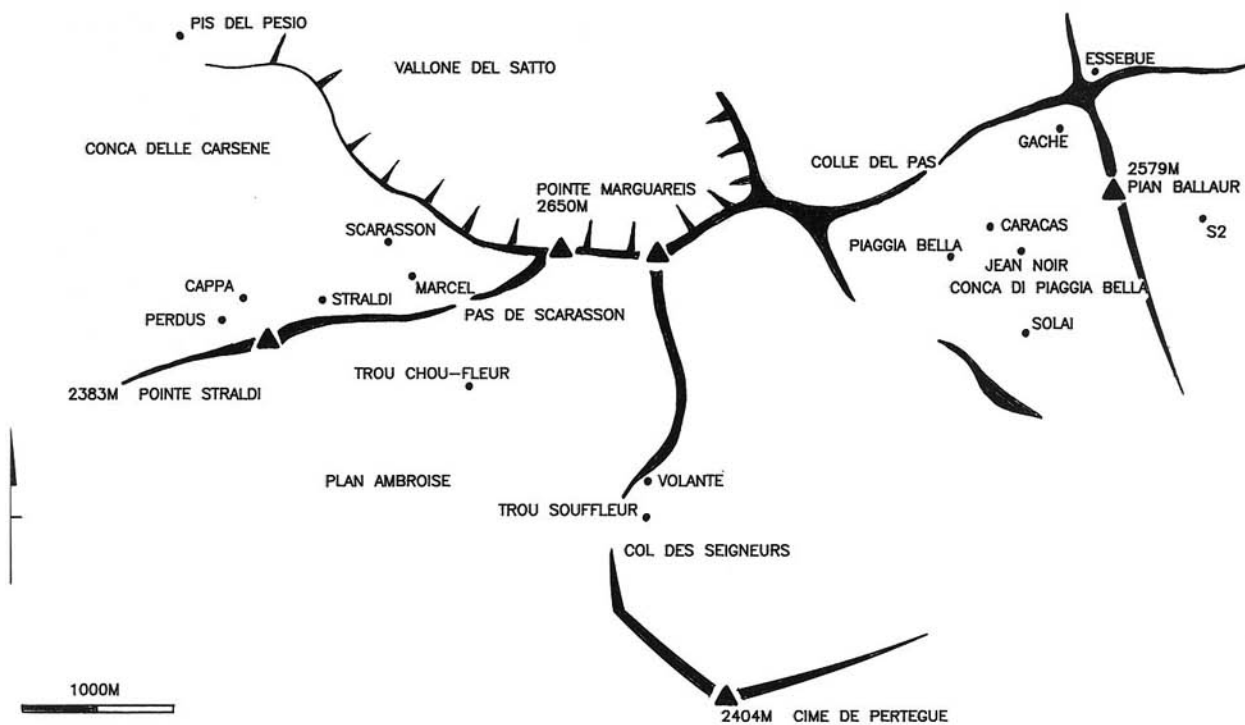
The Track

I had heard stories about "The Track", even before we had left home. Iain Miller had done his E.T. impersonation to give us advanced warning of a change in Base Camp location and to keep us updated on the latest score, Track 3, Cavers 1. Brian Clipstone's car was out for the count after a knockout in the third basin by an inauspicious looking piece of limestone no bigger than Mike Tyson's fist. Wookey, with co-driver Iain Miller, had also suffered a major set back when part of his suspension parted company with the rest of the vehicle. Neil Weymouth had been forced to make emergency repairs to his fuel pipe with the plastic pipe from his carbide generator. All in all, it sounded like something

out of "Monte Carlo or Bust". I could almost imagine Terry Thomas hiding around the corner waiting to spring another trap on the unsuspecting "Good Guys" (that's us). The only team to make it to the top unscathed were Baker and Davies in the "Astrix special". Things sounded grim. Tales of the alternative gruelling 3 hour slog up 800m of sun-scorched hillside did little to raise my hopes. That night I had an uneasy dream in which the van had broken down on top of the most incredibly pointed pinnacle of rock you could ever imagine. Hours of walking in search of a vandalised payphone only to learn that my AA membership had expired the day before. I woke up in a cold sweat! The day of our first attempt arrived (all too soon). An alpine start with sherpa Clipstone to guide our every move and keep an eye open for "Injuns". The natives up at top camp were restless, supplies were low and provisions had to be shipped up by mule train or the nearest alternative, a white Ford Transit. We had spent the morning becoming acquainted with the town of Tende, a quaint little market town with the most annoying restaurant hours I have ever come across. We staggered back to the municipal campsite loaded up with French sticks, cartons of milk, fresh vegetables and especially for the drive up, clean underpants. We headed out of Tende, climbing steadily up to the tunnel where we had re-crossed back into France at 2.00am the night before. The tunnel itself looked interesting, in the same sort of way as the

Fourth boulder choke in Agen Allwedd looks interesting! Driven in the late 1800's it was one of the first transalpine tunnels to be completed. Driving through one got the impression that the original contractors had gone into receivership or something and the tunnel was never completed.

A metalled road leaves the Nice to Cuneo route (SS20) ,and winds up from the border post through the small ski resort of Limonetto. Leaving the last of the chalets behind the road starts to wind back and forth across the gentle grassy "nursery slopes", climbing all the time to reach the old Napoleonic "Fort Central" which once guarded the old border crossing at the Col di Tende. The track loses its surfacing here and divides. The right hand branch carries on up to the col and then descends wriggly-snake style back down to the French end of the tunnel. The left hand branch strikes off across the side of the col, still climbing steadily but for the moment no steeper or rougher than the average farm or quarry track. I had little idea of what lay in store. The sides of the track were lined with wild raspberry bushes. It was a typical lazy lunchtime, the temperature was starting to creep up into the high seventies and the movement of air through the open windows was very welcome. Small insects and butterflies flitting from bush to bush became engulfed in the cloud of dust that spread cloak-like behind the van as we progressed at a snail's pace along the track.



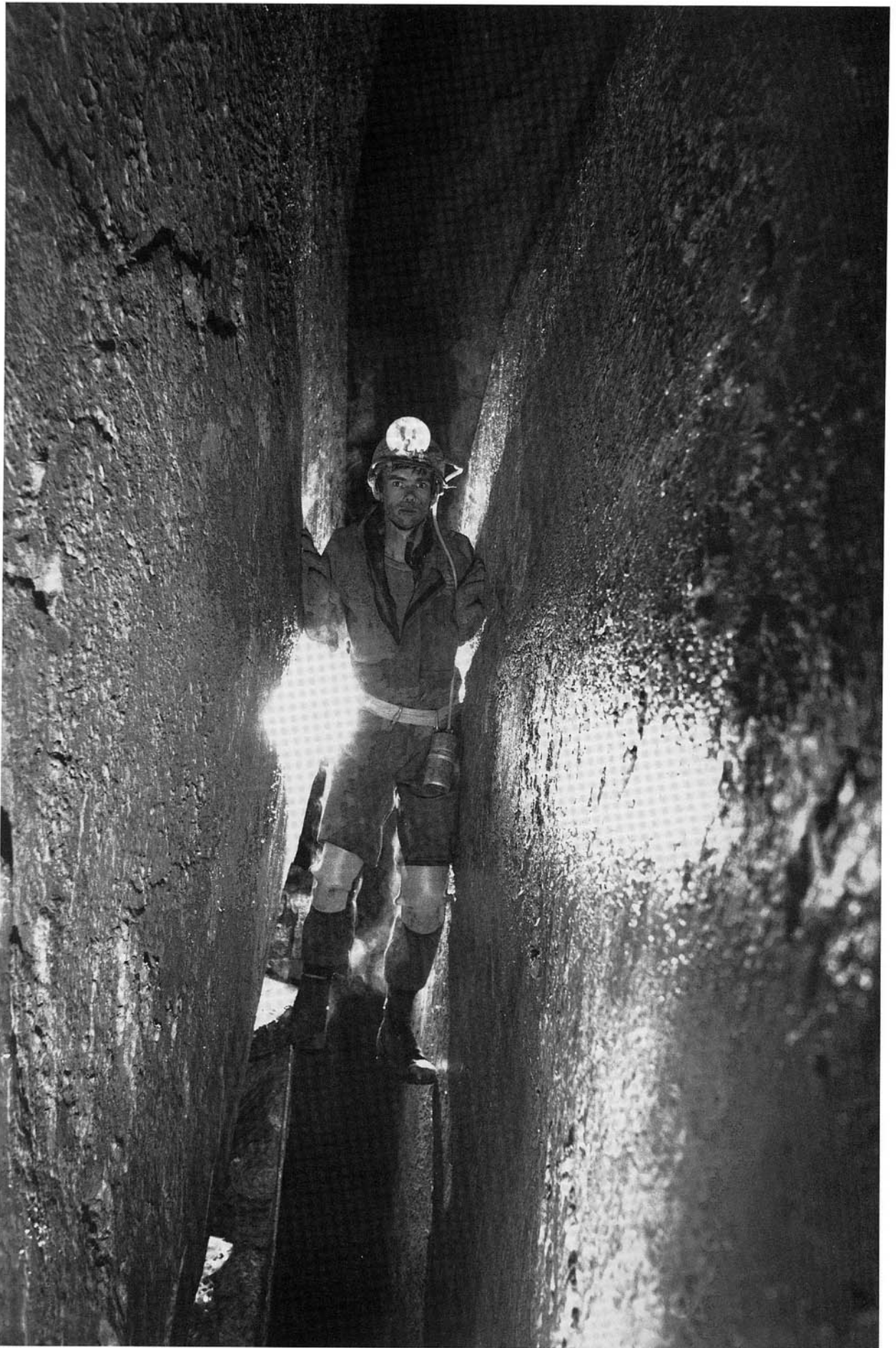
Clockwise, from top left: Gary's Transit negotiates the track; The Refuge Saracco Volante, near the Piaggia Bella entrance (both by Debbie Vaughan); The top camp at Col des Seigneurs; Brian Clipstone in Piaggia Bella (both by Tony Baker).

The track started to climb ever more steeply. It turned and started to climb up what I had thought from a distance was a cliff. A closer view did little to relieve my anxiety. The hairpin bends at each corner required full lock. Large uneven cobbles caused the wheels to skip and jump. We had been on the track for fifteen minutes, it was already starting to feel like hours. Someone commented on how awkward it would be if we met another vehicle coming the other way. I pushed the idea to the back of my mind and pretended that I hadn't heard the remark.

The view from the passenger side window was becoming impressive to say the least. The track had flattened off somewhat now and was winding its way along the side of what was, for all intents and purposes, a cliff. It was getting narrow! I asked Gary Nevitt for a distance from the nearside tyre to the edge of the track. After making a quick inspection of the situation he decided to swap seats with Brian on the basis that it wasn't fair for him to keep all the exciting bits to himself. They quickly swapped seats taking extreme care not to distract the driver. Things were exciting, the van was inching forward by slipping the clutch and Brian was calling out dimensions... "Six inches, OK, OK, four inches, your way a bit!" I was oblivious to the five or six hundred foot drop alongside as I carefully guided the wing mirror around each piece of the cliff face on my side of the track. It only lasted for a couple of minutes and we were

through the worst of it. The track widened slightly and I changed up from first to second gear as we eased into a righthand bend and came face to face with twelve or so trail bikes bearing down on us at a reasonable rate of knots. I think we were all taken a bit by surprise of this encounter, not least the chap on the first bike. His wide eyed expression of fear as he grappled with the brake levers was clearly visible to everybody in the van as he skidded first towards the van and then towards the point of no return. He stopped with about three feet to spare. The track was too narrow for the bikes to pass and in true gentlemanly fashion they decided to turn around and go back to a suitable passing spot. The first attempt to turn around managed to get the wrong combination of clutch and throttle and nearly shot uncontrollably off the side of the track. The remaining bikes turned around facing the other direction. They didn't have far to go, only a hundred yards or so there was a small passing place, just wide enough to get a bike past. We pressed onwards. I was impressed that Brian had got his Capri this far. We had been on the track for an hour and were just passing a large stone with a neatly carved "9" on its upright face. "Half way", said Brian. "9Km per hour" I thought to myself. We passed the point that had been the demise of Brian's car, just a few inconspicuous pieces of jagged rock, protruding from the centre of the track. The drop was on my side now and there appeared to be a bit of the road missing

just ahead. We slowed to a snail's pace again and I wished I'd brought a Mini. Brian was calling out distances from the wing mirror to the rock face, I was leaning out, looking at the offside wheels. The van tilted over in a menacing fashion as the wheel sank into the collapse. I was wondering if AA 5 star included recovery from the bottom of cliff faces. The front wheel clawed its way back up onto level ground but the rocks to the left were forcing a right turn. "Oh well", I thought, "here goes". The van trundled forwards leaning menacingly to the right. I couldn't see what was holding the wheel up but something was. Everyone drew a sigh of relief as the van corrected itself and we pulled back up onto the level track. I spotted a marmot watching us from a large flat rock off in the distance. In the days that followed I was sure that he would dig away at the collapse a little every night and then wait each day on his piece of rock to spectate on the antics of the hapless cavers, struggling across his little trap in search of caverns measureless to marmots. "That's the worst of it over", Brian tried to sound reassuring. "It couldn't get worse" I thought to myself and as tiny electrons of that misguided conception dived deep within that grey matter that sometimes doubles as a brain, a convoy of fourteen off-road vehicles of all shapes and sizes appeared over the horizon. I was starting to wonder what the Italian was for "my reverse gear has just fallen out on that last bend", when miracle of miracles, a small passing



Hywel Davies in the upper series of Piaggia Bella.

Photo by Tony Baker.

place magically appeared by the side of the road.

We attracted more than a few strange glances from the occupants of the assorted Shoguns, Landies, Patrols and Dusters as they slowly picked their way past, the UK number plate seemed to verify their suspicions. We set off again. Brian was right, the last five kilometres or so were much easier going, or perhaps we were just getting used to it. We arrived at the Col De Signeurs two hours after leaving Tende which considering the distance as the crow flies is approximately 8km and the length of the track itself is only 18km must count as some sort of record. Over the following two weeks we traversed the track another seven times. The marmots dug away at the collapse, thunder storms tried to ensure that there was no track at all and we fended off attacks from heat-crazed goat herding dogs. We attempted new load carrying records for Transits on mountain terrain when we ferried ten cavers complete with enough gear to sink a battleship up to top camp and despite all of this effort, it's still a one and a half hour walk to the Piaggia Bella. If you ever consider taking a vehicle along this track that's wider than a Mini or has less ground clearance than a Harrier Jump Jet, then my advice is make sure it belongs to somebody else! You have been warned.

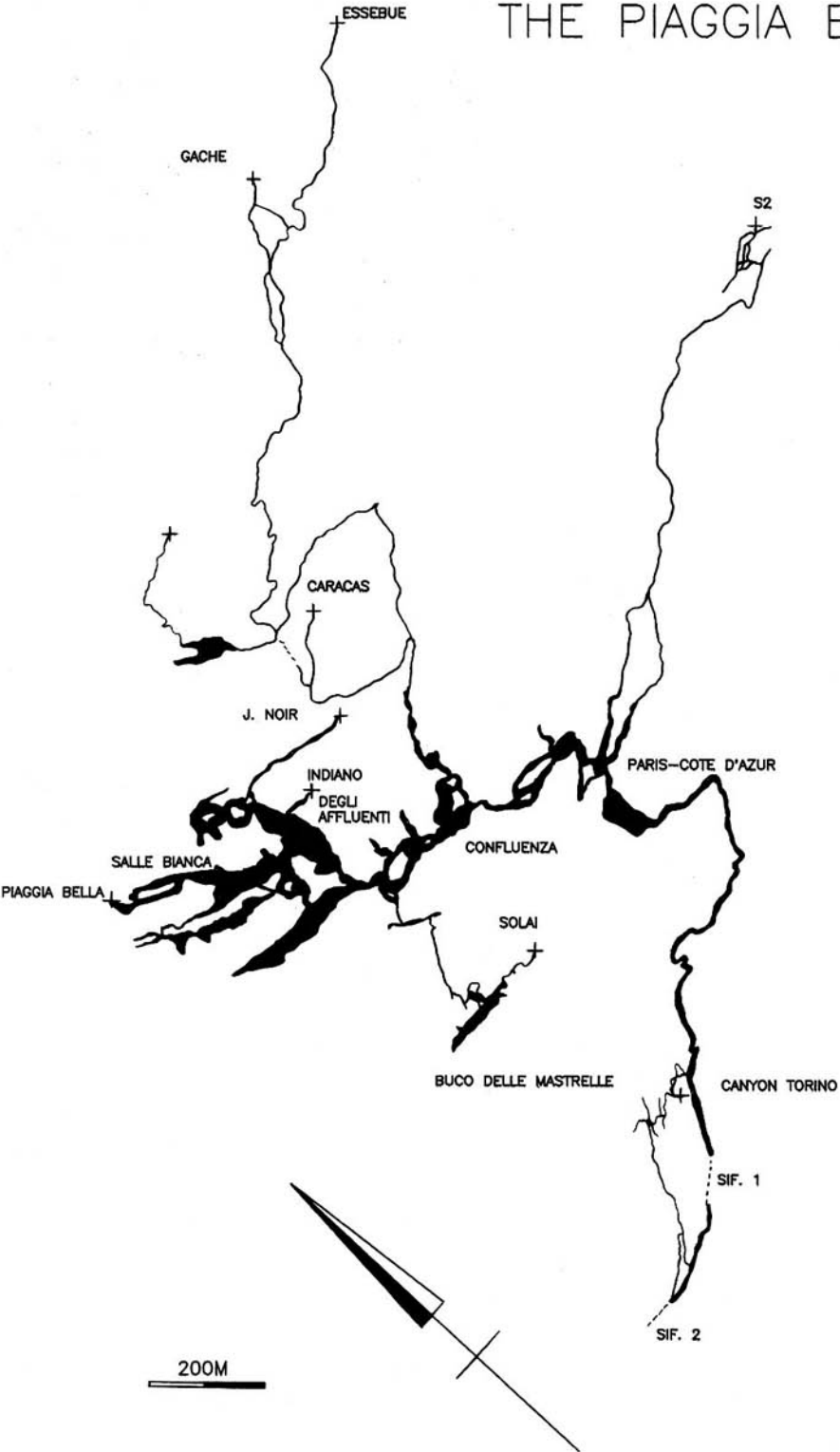
Mad Dogs and Englishmen
Top camp had been established by the advance guard of Messrs (and Madam) Baker, Davies, Clipstone, Miller and Flaherty

at the Col De Signeurs. Things were going reasonably well, the location was well placed to mount an assault on the caves of the "Plan Ambroise" or on the Piaggia Bella depending on their levels of enthusiasm. Reports had filtered down to base camp of "all day sun bathing", and an "arduous" walk around the mountain to reach the cave entrance. Tony, Hywel and Eleanor had made a painful trip into Gouffre de Sodome et Gomorrhe (the name should have told them something). A thunderstorm ensured that the search for the cave entrance was nearly as exciting as the "thrutching over needles" that seemed to be the cave's most notable attribute. (See "101 Great Caving Trips", elsewhere in this Newsletter - Ed.) The first attempt to walk from the Col around to the Piaggia Bella had led its participants up to the Pointe Margareis when they followed the wrong combination of painted marks. The thought of undertaking the walk at twelve o'clock at night, which was rapidly becoming the norm for the "B Team", didn't appeal to those of us who prefer a more nine-to-five existence and so we formed a cunning plan. We received looks of disbelief from Miller and Clipstone as huge bulging rucksacks appeared from the depths of the "White Slug".

"We've decided to camp over at the Saracco Volante hut" I declared in answer to the impending question. We deemed this to be a marvellous idea. The walk over to the hut would take slightly longer than the usual 90 minutes but once

over there, it would be a two minute stroll to the various entrances of the Piaggia Bella. Admittedly we had a fair amount of gear to move over but when it came to moving gear we had a secret weapon - Gary Nevitt. Miller and Clipstone were convinced that we were completely out of order. I conservatively estimated my pack at about 60lbs, Gary's looked even heavier. He was off though like a ferret up a hole before I could even get my pack on. The walk started nicely downhill over the grassy mounds of moraine that littered the valley floor. Unfortunately it didn't last long. The grass came to an abrupt end at the base of an imposing rocky slope. The track could be seen meandering back and forth as it climbed to a small col, a couple of hundred feet above. It didn't take too long in terms of light years to scramble to the top, but the midday sun made it seem like an eternity. The timing of our little stroll had been dictated by shop opening hours back down in the town. I was determined to get some sort of a trip in, even if it was on a respirator. The thought of cool dark cave passage stretching off into the distance lured me on. My strides lengthened again as I reached the first crest and the slight cooling breeze that drifted back over it was as welcome as a pint of 6X. I could see Nevitt, well off in the distance rounding the next buttress which stretched down from the Pointe Margareis high up to the left. Was I becoming delirious from the heat, or was he jogging? I wiped the sweat from my eyes

THE PIAGGIA BELLA



and looked again but he was out of sight. Debbie was doing well, she was about 400m ahead and just starting to climb the next rise. I spotted a stray dog higher up the slope, a particularly shabby looking beast which was eyeing me with obvious interest, or perhaps it was my rucksack. It was keeping at a respectably safe distance but I decided to keep half an eye open for it. I set off again. Going downhill was easier, just, the path was very uneven. Iain had managed to succumb to a marmot trap carefully disguised as a hole and had narrowly averted breaking something delicate. I wondered if the marmot in question was related to the one over at the collapse in the track, a distant cousin or something. I was finding the mental distraction useful. The view was improving all the time. A superb dry valley swept down from the Pointe Margaureis and holes started to appear all over the place. My expectations were running high, how big would the entrance be? Would we find anything new? Would Gary manage to carry enough beer over for the week? It didn't take long to find out the answer to the first question. Rounding the corner of another huge buttress I spotted the hut off on the other side of a large rock amphitheatre. I stood there for a while, quite taken by the atmosphere of the place. It was like standing in some huge open air library or theatre where the circle seats overlook the stage in silent anticipation. There it was, a larger than average depression tucked neatly to the side of a large flat meadow. A large rock dam downstream

of the entrance emphasised its importance in the local surface drainage. "That looks like one place you wouldn't want to be in a thunderstorm" I thought to myself as I picked my way down over the jumbled boulders that covered the side of the bowl.

The entrance looked imposing, situated as it is beneath dark towering cliffs at the base of a steep-sided canyon. Caution was required as you approached the mouth of the cave, the loose gravel and rock had a tendency to help you on your way faster than you would have liked. Large jammed boulders surprisingly chilled by the micro climate partially block the entrance. I peered inside. The roof dipped steeply down over boulders and blocks of all shapes and sizes. "Agen Allwedd on the slant" I thought to myself and headed back up to where my rucksack was basking in the early afternoon sun.

Top camp II was well under way by the time I'd slogged up the last five minutes from the cave entrance. There was a brew on. Gary had located the two hot and cold running hosepipes that no self respecting tent-wife should be without. Debbie had managed to find some food that hadn't melted on the walk over and had constructed a make-shift cool box in the shade at the back of the hut.

In many respects the Saracco Volante hut was just like any other, lengths of rusty Dexion, angle iron and soggy bits of plywood lay strewn around the back of the hut. A sizable carbide

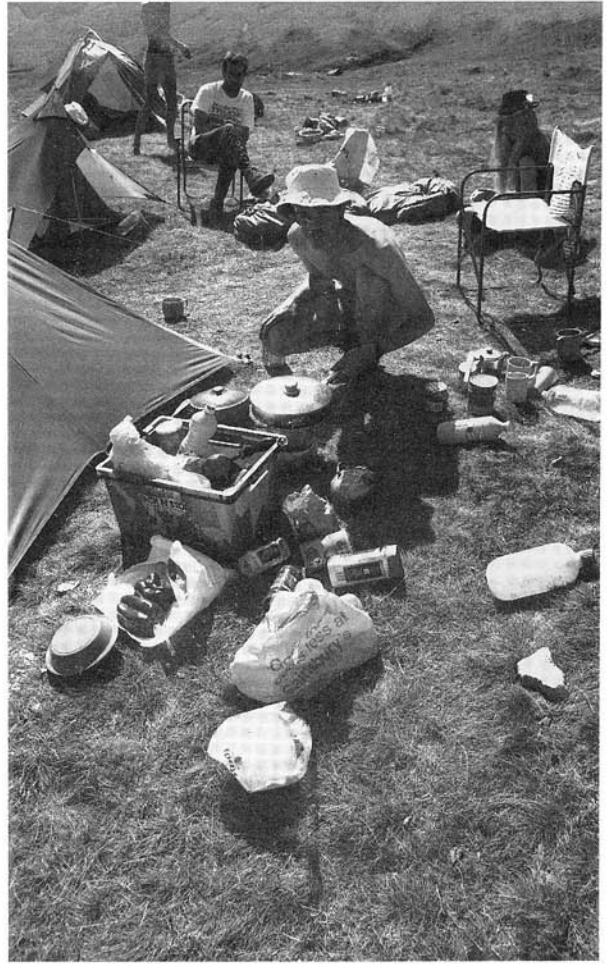
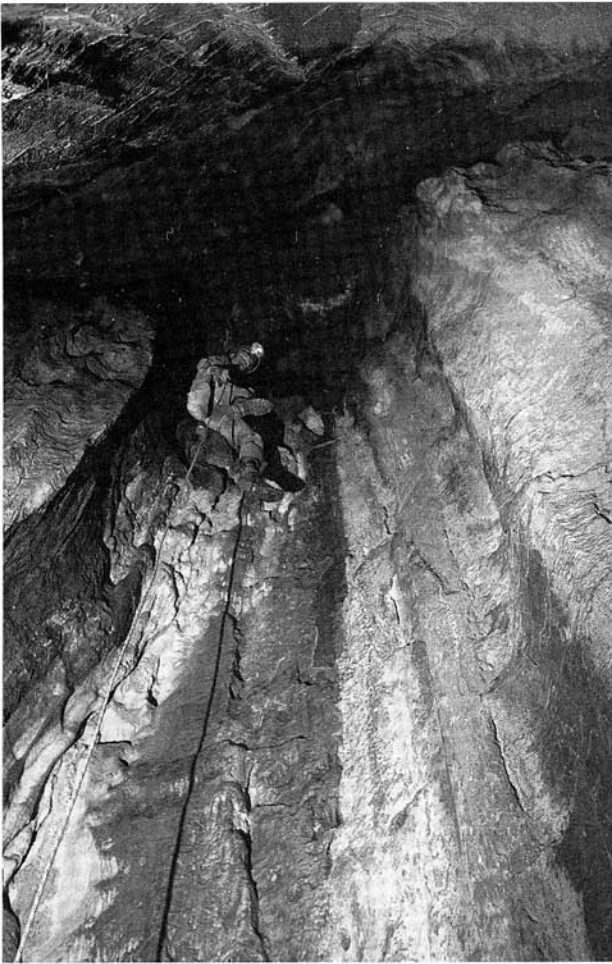
mountain had accumulated to one side and various artefacts left by previous visitors were very much in evidence. Debbie was complaining about the effect that the walk over had made on her knees.

"Well, its over now," I said. "Of course the walk back will be much nicer 'cos we'll have less to carry." Famous last words or what!

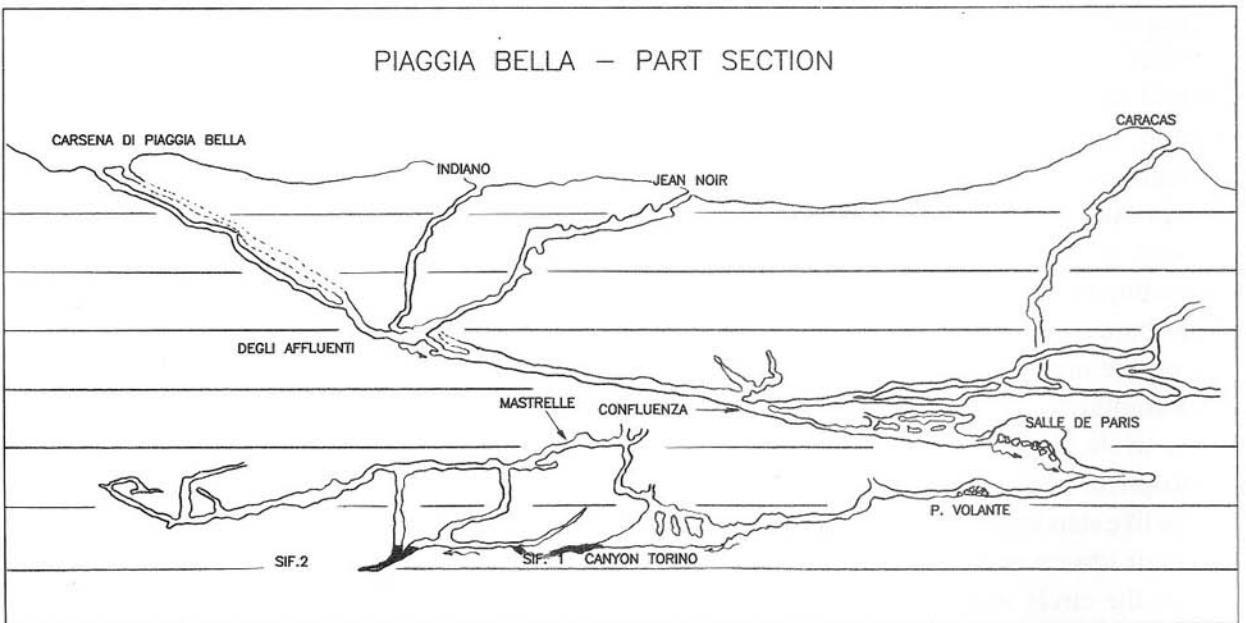
To the Bottom and Bust

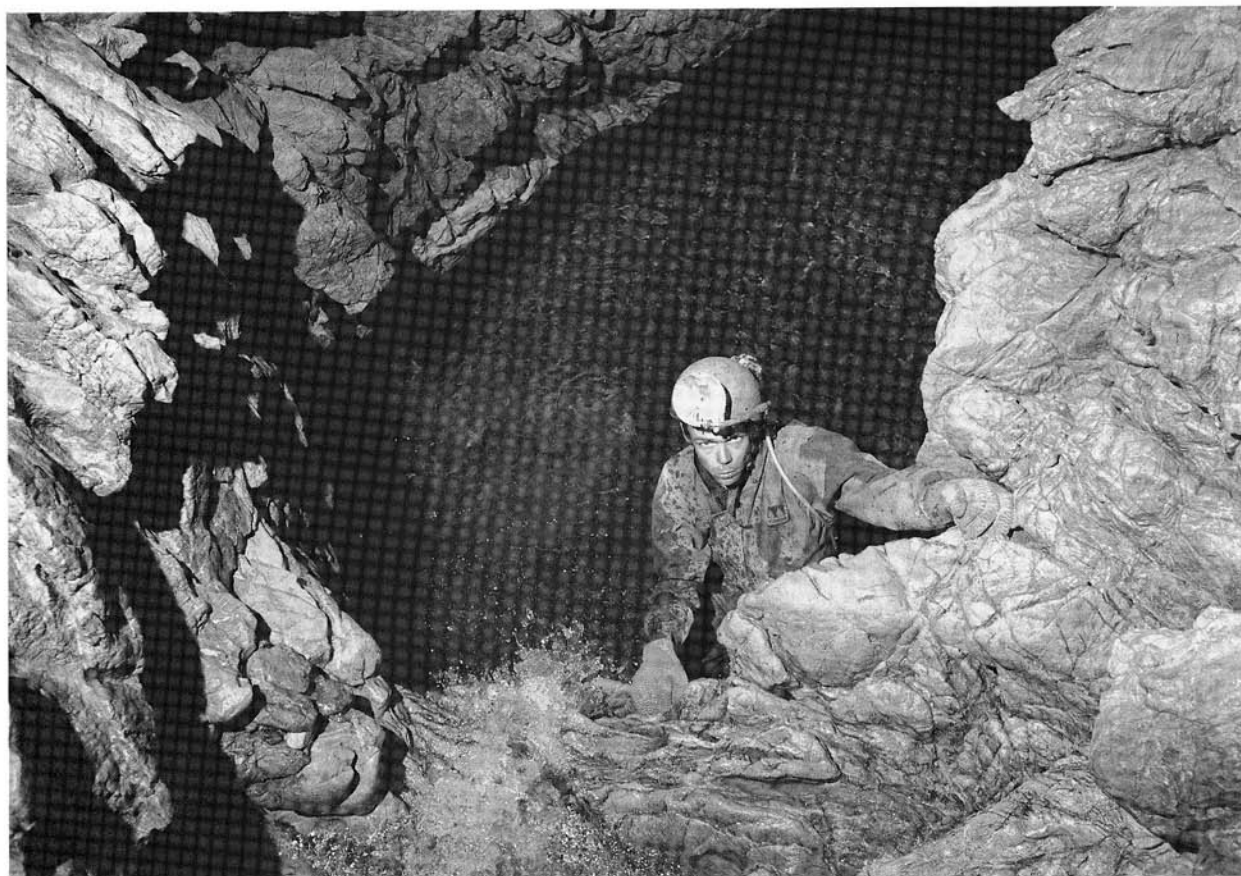
From the Saracco Volante hut, a short walk down the side of the grassy basin brings you onto a small alluvial flood plain which lies just above the entrance depression. In flood, a sizeable river would no doubt sweep down the basin to be swallowed up by the main entrance, but now only the slightest trickle was wearily picking its way across the valley floor. The few days preceding our attempt to reach the bottom had been spent making recesses of the main routes in and out of the cave and throwing the largest rocks we could lay our hands on at the stray dog that was ever present around the hut. We had been caught out on the first night, all meat and similar such food items had been stored inside the hut leaving only milk and cheese in our makeshift freezer outside. How were we to know that we had come across the only dog in Italy with a craving for French cheese!

From the mouth of the depression the entrance is not visible, but after filling the generators at the conveniently placed rock pool and descending



Above left: Hywel Davies abseiling. Above right: Hywel prepares another culinary delight at the Col des Seigneurs. Despite limited facilities - one Trangia stove - he managed to produce some amazing meals, including roast pork... Both photos: Tony Baker.





Hywel on one of the cascades in the Piaggia Bella streamway.

Photo: Tony Baker.

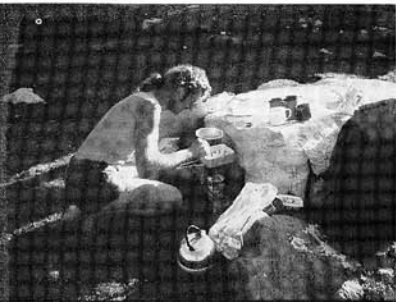
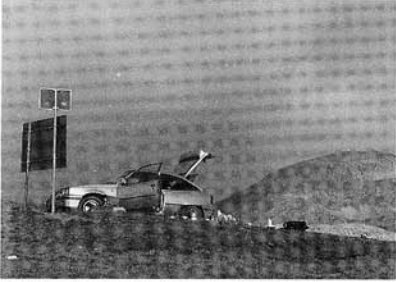
down over the boulders, the depression tends to the left and dives steeply down to the entrance. As you approach the opening, the temperature begins to drop quite noticeably and we found it comfortable to kit up outside the entrance “constriction”. Tight? Only in terms that you couldn’t park your car inside. Entering the cave the way drops quickly to enter a sizeable chamber/ passage. After a short scramble down a 5 metre climb the way on continues across the top of a large loose scree slope as the walls and roof recede off into the darkness.

The plan for the day was for Duncan Archard (EDSS member) and myself, the “A Team”, to rig into the cave and then for Messrs Baker, Clipstone and Davies, the “B Team” to

de-rig. This seemed like an excellent plan to me, firstly because all the rope had by now been carried into the cave so we would have only the minimum of tackle to carry in, and secondly we would have even less to carry on the way out. Smashing!

It was about 9.00am as we started to pick our way down through the chossy boulders which bring the large entrance passage to a rather unceremonious end. It’s tricky to follow any kind of set route through this part of the cave as we found on our earlier trips. Despite trying to memorise a route we had managed to get lost a couple of times. The boulders had an uncanny habit of looking totally different from underneath. The first recognisable landmark is the Salle Blanche, an impressive

chamber about fifteen minutes into the cave. From here the route splits into two possible ways on, a totally uninteresting scramble over, under, around and through boulders held in place by even more boulders, or, if you really felt like a change, a low grovelling stoop in the active watercourse between, yes you’ve guessed it, more boulders. We had inadvertently taken the lower route on our first trip into the cave and after getting totally lost and accidentally stumbling over the higher route, we didn’t bother with it again. After another 20 minutes of bouldering both routes bring you to the impressively sized Salle Bessone. You know you’re really getting into the cave now, not only because the name appears on the survey but also



because of the profusion of route markings that become obvious. There are red arrows, black arrows, bits of red tape, red reflective disks, red "F"s, black "U"s and one or two drawings of things that resemble kitchen sinks (I kid you not).

From the vast open expanses of this impressive chamber the way on degenerates into a well-watered little boulder ruckle. I must confess here that our first trip had ended shortly after this point at a miserable -210m. Faced with the prospect of the only way on being a rather impossible looking Mendip-style squeeze through boulders that looked like the jaws of a hungry cat, I convinced myself that the absence of route markings meant that we had re-discovered some long abandoned route now only frequented by people with lower than average aspiration to continue living. As it turned out, it was in fact the way on.

There were certainly no such navigational problems now, although I did manage to put my foot into a rather deep puddle. Once through the boulder maze you pop out into a broad uninspiring chamber - the Salla Degli Affluenti, or Salle de Bal - at -223m. This is a real happening place (man!). Abisso Jean Noir and Abisso Indiano connect into the main system at this point and their combined streams enter far over to the left to sink almost immediately in the Siphon Aval (a sump), directly opposite the point of our entry to the chamber.

The Siphon Aval prevents

further progress following the stream and instead the way on is far off to the right over huge fallen slabs. A rather interesting anti-gravity boulder marks the climb up to a slightly higher level passage and despite everybody's best attempts nobody was crushed to a pulp.

The way on continues now slightly smaller, the boulders becoming more interspersed with sightings of solid bedrock. A short climb down leads to a dried up stream bed, one of the flood overflows from the siphon but at this stage there is still no sign of the fabled Piaggia Bella Streamway. The route ahead degenerates again into crawling and thrutching through boulders in a steeply dipping rift. I started to wonder if this was all some sort of sick joke or perhaps I was lost again, it was starting to seem that there was no end to the number of boulders that were jamming this place up.

And then, just as I was about to declare that there was no place like home, we popped out from between the last of the boulders to find the streamway disappearing off into the distance. We were now at -247m and about one and a half hours in from the entrance. The streamway really was superb stuff. Nice large walking-sized passage with a level, sandy gravel floor meandering gently forwards with the occasional waterfall and calcite flow. After the boulder pile it was pure bliss. The passage started to grow in dimension, fallen blocks began to litter the passage floor and with the addition of one or two small tributaries, the stream volume was starting to grow.



Left: The campsite at Col des Seigneurs. Photo: Tony Baker. Right: Gary and team prepare to leave for base camp after several days on the mountain. Photo: Debbie Vaughan.

Some cosy-looking dry passages marked the location of the 1955 camp and indicated that we were approaching “La Confluenza”. The size of the passage continued to grow as did the boulders which now presented a real hindrance to progress. Some of the larger ones were so awkward to scale that there were fixed steel pins or “broches” driven into the rock to give a vital foot or hand hold. Slipping down the side of a larger than average specimen we spotted the “Pied Humidi” streamway entering from the left and connecting to such wondrous places as Abisso Caracas, Abisso Essebue and, the very top of the system, Abisso Gache. We were at the confluence, - 303m and approximately two hours from the entrance.

From the confluence the streamway becomes clear of boulders once more. A beautifully cleanwashed passage with small rock pools and waterfalls winds its way

downwards with an occasional oxbow and an ever-strengthening draught. At -354m several short cascades drop into the Salle de la Tyrolienne, the streamway sinks into the floor of the passage and the way on is over boulders and into a narrow rift with an unlikely piece of rope hanging from above. The climb was not as bad as it looked, plenty of footholds help with the task of thrutching upwards towards a small hole and before long your head pops out and you think to yourself “Funny, no one mentioned anything about another entrance down here and my hasn’t it got dark early today”.

This is the Salle de Paris, a chamber in the true sense of the word, not some small apology like Gaping Ghyll or the Time Machine, but a real man’s chamber. The Salle de Paris marks the start of the pitches. After you’ve followed one of the two wires which mark the route across the chamber you

arrive at a small hole which drops down between the boulders and the left hand wall of the chamber. All of the pitches had Italian rope in place, I use the term “rope” here very loosely. While some of the lengths looked fair, others resembled antique pipe cleaners and were obviously best avoided. Belays were also at a premium, no bolt rash here. As the rigging progressed it became obvious that there was going to be a shortage of suitable Maillons.

The easiest rigging option was to clip into the in situ hangers, usually all two of them that held the Italian rope in place. If you were lucky there was a natural belay to back up to but if you were unlucky the hangers would be so small that it was impossible to fit Maillons past the existing rope. This situation necessitated the removal of the hanger altogether (which never had a captive bolt) or simply belaying into the loop of Italian rope attached to the hanger.

The first two pitches of 8m and 28m drop down through the boulders into the impressive Cote d'Azur. Here the streamway is met again and the passage heads off in fine dimensions for a short distance before once again closing down into a narrower rift. Here was a second line heading up into the roof and the numbers "423, 1953" were scrawled on the walls. We had reached another major stopping point in the history of the cave exploration. The main passage continued on, large and impressive and although I wasn't expecting a second rope climb, it was obvious that the main passage was just a ruse on the part of the cave to make us waste time and effort.

We scrambled up the handline into a small cramped high level passage that appeared to choke both ways. "No way on," said Duncan who had just made an inspection of the downstream blockage. "Oh bother," I said to myself, "first wild goose chase of the day". Looking around the small chamber I was impressed by the level of graffiti that people had taken the time and effort to put on the walls, it had to be the way on. A second examination of the downstream choke revealed a pathetically small opening between the boulders. I peered into it and the draught nearly extinguished my light. The word awkward does not pay true tribute to the next 10 or 15 metres of passage. Tight jagged boulders which made the entrance series feel like the Dartford Tunnel is perhaps a more apt description.

After five minutes of cautious wriggling and passing of tackle sacks we both stood on the downstream side of the choke feeling as if the world was our oyster. Two or three tricky climbs led to the top of the next group of pitches, 8m, 10m and 6m down over boulders into a fine streamwashed canyon. The excitement had produced a Cheshire Cat-like grin on my face, we had one last group of pitches to tackle.

The streamway continued in magnificent style and the distance to the next pitch seemed incredibly short. I studied the drop of about 4m down to a steeply sloping ramp and decided that the rope in place was more than adequate for our needs. Around the next corner the stream thundered through an archway and down into an impressive spray-lashed chamber. Duncan tied off the spare rope that we hadn't used on the last pitch as I started to rig the traverse. I reached the main belay point. The stream thundered down along side in impressive style. I belayed the rope off and pulled a few handfuls out of the sack and as I did so the end slithered out and said "Ha Ha, you haven't got enough rope to do this". "That's torn it", I thought.

All of the earlier trips into the cave had run out of rope and now it looked like we had as well. Then it occurred to me that we had just saved a rope on the previous pitch. Duncan traversed across with the rope and before you could say "What, no rebelay", I was at the bottom

and desperately penduluming to keep out of the waterfall and a sizeable splash pool. The last pitch was again just around the corner, I hoped that there would be no more heart-stopping discrepancies with the rope lengths. It was every bit as impressive as the preceding pitch. Forty metres of rope was more than sufficient to descend to a broad ledge from where a climb up of 4m or 5m gave access to a nice dry if not totally free hanging pitch down into the Canyon Torino.

The streamway sets off again from the base of the last pitch, winding its way between smooth vertical walls. We splashed our way downstream in and out of the shallow pools and over the gravel banks, the roar of the last two pitches slowly receding as we approached the end of the cave. A quick wade through a thigh deep pool, the wettest I'd got all day and there it was. The thin divers line stretching off into the clear water of the terminal sump, -515m below the main entrance, we were at the bottom of the cave.

With the "B Team" en route to de-rig, all we had to do was to leave everything in place and saunter out to the surface. Progress was excellent, with nothing to carry we stormed up the bottom three pitches and moved effortlessly up to mount an assault on the next group. We had experienced a slight hiccup here on the second of the three drops. In our enthusiasm we had managed to get the ropes out of the bag in the wrong order and I ended up rigging the rope



Hywel Davies in the Piaggia Bella streamway.

Photo: Tony Baker.

for the third drop on the second and vice versa.

This had left me temporarily stranded above the floor of the chamber, using such expletives as "Bother" and "Drat" until I realised that I could simply pendulum into a rather convenient alcove, un-clip from the rope and simply step down to the bottom of the pitch. This all seemed rather too easy a solution to leave for the "B Team" and I had a cunning plan. The third pitch was conveniently close to the bottom of the second and with minimal effort I was able to generate 4 or 5 metres of slack by pulling up the rope and re-tying the knots. The spare rope was then looped up and joined to the bottom of the second drop producing a

knot pass only just out of toes reach of the floor. "What a helpful chap I am," I was thinking to myself as I pressed on after Duncan who was now some distance in front.

I caught up with Duncan some five minutes later. He was sitting on a boulder with a rather pained expression, holding his ankle.

It was broken. At the time we weren't sure but the swelling was sure as hell impressive. I set about doing my Florence Nightingale bit with the first aid kit, wrapping bandages this way and that, trying to make out that I knew what I was doing. I finished off the bandage and stood back to admire my handiwork, very nearly falling off the place where Duncan had slipped.

"I caught up with Duncan some five minutes later. He was sitting on a boulder with a rather pained expression, holding his ankle. It was broken."

We weighed up the situation. Tony, Brian and Hywel were on their way into the cave (we hoped) and could be of assistance. We had some painkillers and more hot food and of course there was my unequalled skill in bandage tying.

"It looks like you've had your lot then," I quipped referring to the bandage which was now inserted firmly back into Duncan's boot. We rested for a while longer, Duncan with his foot in the stream while I considered the logistics of the exercise in front of us. When it became obvious that the No. 27 bus wasn't going to arrive we decided to make a go of it.

The passage here doesn't really lend itself to three-legged races and after a few clumsy attempts at lending assistance we decided to let him get on with it, picking his way from rock to rock like a one-legged gymnast doing an exercise on the pommel horse. The cave seemed to lend itself to this kind of movement and although progress was painfully slow (and I mean painful), it was nonetheless progress.

The nasty tight bit now became a welcome hands-and-knees thrutch and even the climb down gave us a chance to rest Duncan's good leg for a few minutes as he abseiled

effortlessly to the main passage floor. I was desperate to avoid a navigational cock-up. While Duncan sat and rested for a minute or two the route ahead could be checked.

We started to lose track of time, the passage was increasing in size again and our first major obstacle was looming up in front, the two pitches up into the Salle de Paris. I prussiked up to the top and waited to offer assistance in getting off the rope.

He didn't need it. His one working foot was more than adequate to propel him up the pitches and into the chamber.

Spirits were surprisingly high. With all of the pitches behind us we felt like we were almost out of the cave, although there were still another 350 metres to climb and a good three hours caving if you had two legs. It seemed certain that we could exit without assistance. The B Team arrived just as we reached the Salle de la Tyrolienne. Tony looked concerned as I explained the situation and Duncan hopped into view right on cue. "Do you want us to abort our trip and help out?" he asked. I told him that I didn't think it would be necessary.

"If we get into trouble we'll just wait for you to catch us up".

"Oh, in that case then" said Tony reaching for his tackle sack,

"I've got just the thing in here". Duncan and I looked on in eager anticipation. What marvellous piece of equipment was Tony about to pull from his bag? A portable mini stretcher? A splint? Some quick set plaster? All flashed through my mind as I watched with baited breath. "Here you are," he said. "Have one of these each." He passed us both a boiled sweet. (Nice gesture Tony).

With Tony's tackle sack antics we were now in fine spirits. Duncan had almost forgotten about his ankle until he knocked against a boulder. Even so, he was becoming a "dab foot" at moving around on one leg. The final steep ascent through the boulder pile arrived. With the uncertainty of making an exit now removed, the adrenalin had stopped and Duncan looked knackered. The last climb out of the cave was tiresome after even the shortest of trips into the cave.

We both crawled out of the entrance at about 7.00pm. The sky was dark with rain, there was a storm brewing. I left Duncan in a heap and walked to within earshot of the camp. I called up the hill but there was no reply, Duncan was crawling across the grass on his hands and knees (everyone was inside laughing at our antics thinking



"The view from the passenger side window was becoming impressive ...the track was winding its way along what was, for all intents and purposes, a cliff..." Photo: Debbie Vaughan.

that he was feigning exhaustion). I picked Duncan up and we set off up the hill like a couple of drunks at the end of a very long pub crawl. Eventually the surface team realised that something was amiss and three or four pairs of helpful hands carried Duncan up to the hut.

Duncan was in good hands. The girls were all eager to play at being nurse and Duncan was in no real state to argue. His ankle had turned a rather fetching shade of black as had the sky outside. Gary Nevitt had moved some of the gear back over to the Col de Signeurs in an attempt to reduce messing around the next morning. He didn't appear too pleased when he arrived back to be told of our little escapade and of the fact that he

was nominated chief stretcher bearer for the walk back around the mountain. The skies burst at about 2.00am, just as the B Team had started up the boulder pile. A spectacular electrical storm lit up the mountain for over an hour bringing an eventful day to a seemingly fitting end.

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Dan y Rhedyn

by Clive Jones

On one of the few fine days of the summer of 1991 I was cycling back from Pant Mawr to Hendre Bolon. I crossed the Nedd Fechan at Blaen Nedd Isaf and headed for Carnau Gwynion. The intention was to go to Penllwyn Einon and then take the road to Porth yr Ogof. When I reached the first of the gates in the long dry stone wall I decided that this was the way to look at swallow holes - from a bike. I cycled around and everything was interesting. But where was the dig?

One place took my fancy; it was not one of the many big depressions but a small hollow which contained a range of ferns. If the Greensites project had any value then this should be the place to dig. The ferns were of a frost-sensitive variety; to have survived many a cold winter they would have had to have been protected by warm air, as they were in a frost trap - a small hollow.

I dug for a while but the place didn't seem right, it wasn't like what we normally dig. Anyway, it needed more than a one-man effort so I left it.

I returned on the Spring Bank Holiday of 1992, with Neil Weymouth. This was one of the few places in the valley not overrun with visitors, so it was a good place to be that weekend.

We dug for about an hour, lifting out small stones and the occasional piece of calcite. Then the floor started to fall in: rumble, crash - a classic caver's dream - and a pitch appeared. We dashed back to Hendre Bolon to collect ladder, doing six hundred pounds' worth of damage to a visitor's new Ford on the way.

Neil, being slightly younger, descended first, and found a reasonable chamber with ways leading both up and down dip. The down dip passage entered a bedding plane which was tight with a floor of rounded pebbles. After a short distance it became too tight to follow. Upstream the passage contained a bank of silica sand and soon ended in a boulder choke, with no obvious way on.

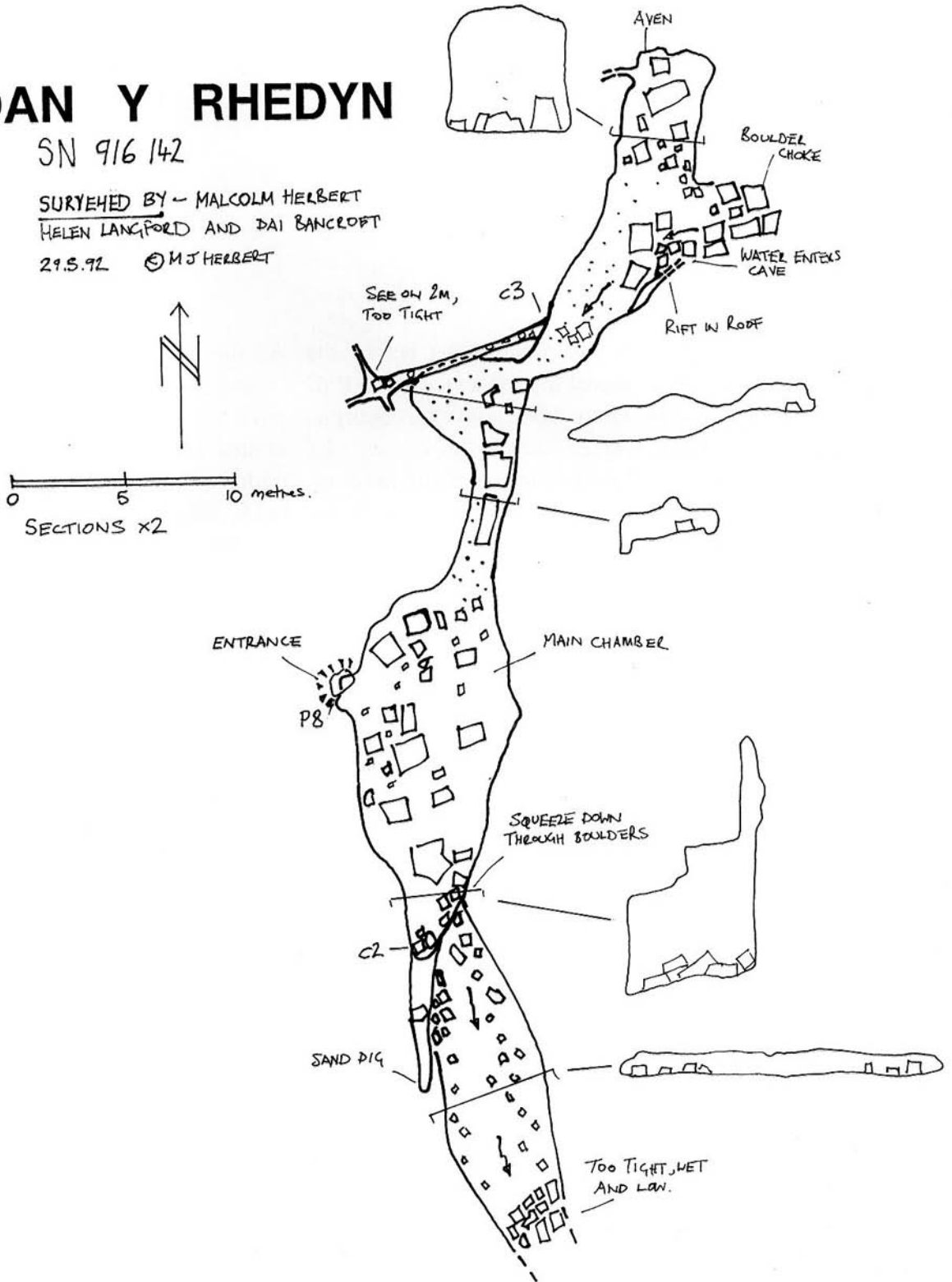
We decided to call our find Dan y Rhedyn (under the ferns). A few weeks later a crowd from the club joined us to survey and pursue all possible leads - so far no joy, but as usual we live in hope. Neil has calculated that we are close to North-East Inlet in Ogof Nedd Fechan (Little Neath River Cave), and about a hundred feet above it.

"Then the floor started to fall in: rumble, crash - a classic caver's dream - and a pitch appeared..."

DAN Y RHEDYN

SN 916 142

SURVEYED BY - MALCOLM HERBERT
HELEN LANGFORD AND DAI BANCROFT
29.5.92 © M J HERBERT



Fantastic Pit; A Trip to Ellison's Cave, Georgia, USA

by *Tony Baker*

Regular readers will already know something of the trip that the late Ian Anderson and I made to the USA in 1990; if this is your first look at an SWCC Newsletter, you'll find a comprehensive article on our trip on page 12 of no. 110. One cave that we visited stood head and shoulders in my memory above the others, however, and I felt it deserved an article all to itself.

Ellison's Cave is the longest (63400 feet) and deepest (1049 feet) in Georgia; it is also the fourth deepest in the entire USA. The cave is best known for its two massive pitches; Fantastic Pit (586 feet) - the deepest in the USA - and Incredible Pit, at 440 feet the second deepest. Ian and I were invited to take part in a trip with Smoky Caldwell, co-founder of rope manufacturer PMI and self-appointed guardian of Ellison's. Smoky had agreed to take a group of visiting cavers from Ohio into the cave and was happy to extend the invitation to two Brits abroad; the plan was to go in and out via Fantastic Pit, and see some of the more interesting sights.

Our encounter with Ellison's

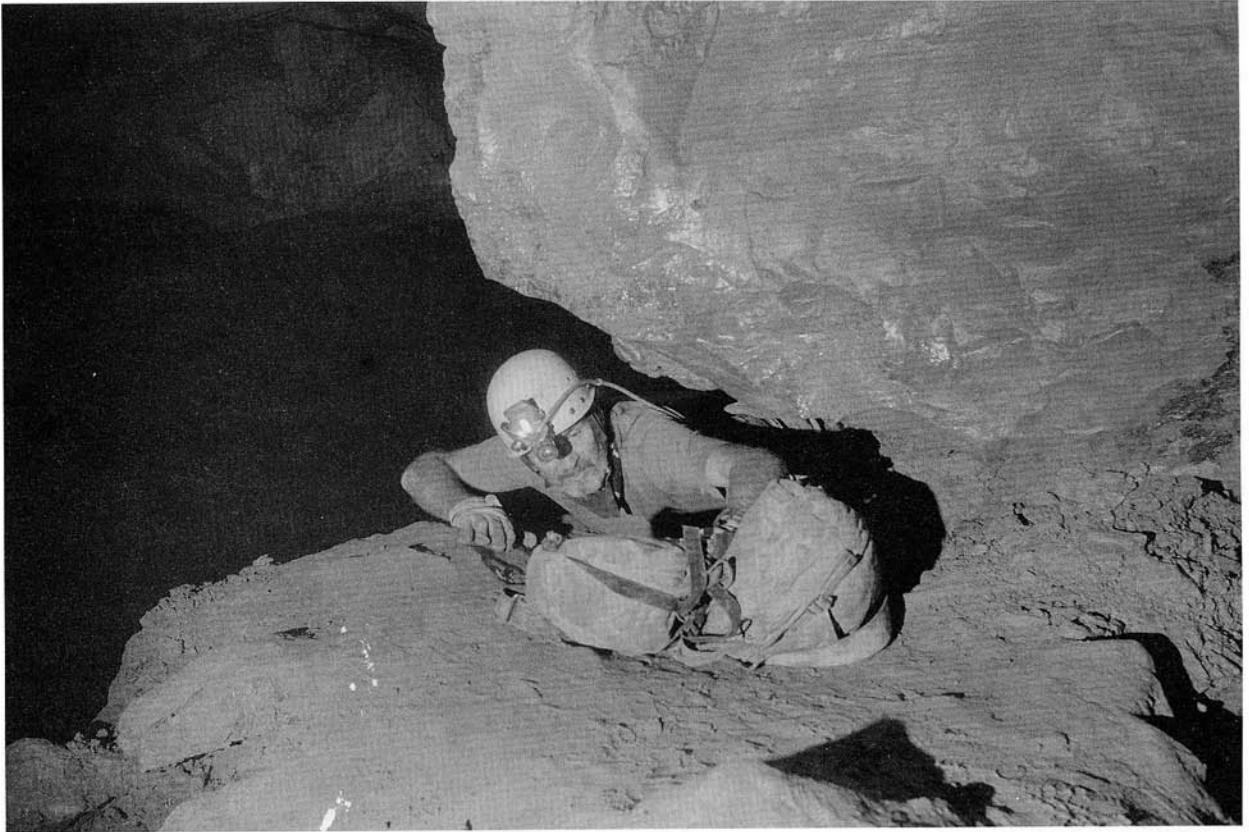
began a few days before the actual trip, on a visit to the PMI factory at Lafayette, Georgia. After he'd shown us the intricacies of rope making, Smoky took us to his home (behind the factory) and played a video he'd made of Fantastic Pit. This had been shot while descending the pitch itself; Smoky had slung the camera from his waist and left it running while he abseiled down. Although it was clear that he was descending very quickly, the video seemed to last for ages - just how long did it take to abseil down nearly six hundred feet of rope? We were soon to find out...

Later that week we were installed in the campsite at Sequoyah Caverns, Alabama - home of the TAG Fall Cave-In (which you can also read about in Newsletter no. 110). The morning of the trip began with the sound of rain hammering on the tent; the Alpinex suit I'd left hanging on the fence to dry was wet through. Breakfast at the nearby truckstop improved our spirits slightly, and then we piled into the van for the drive of nearly an hour to Lafayette.

All the time I was wondering: "Can I do this?" - the biggest pitch I'd done previously was around 150ft., a very different undertaking to this massive pitch, which many Americans seemed to think of as perfectly normal. As I mentioned in my previous article, the ropewalking technique has been universally adopted for SRT across the Atlantic; were our "frog" rigs going to be a liability, hopelessly inadequate for prussiking up nearly one-eighth of a mile of rope? On the other hand, I thought, I'm reasonably fit - I'll just have to keep slogging away at it.

Parking was right beside the Blue Hole, the cave's resurgence pool, and after changing into our wet gear we walked up the steep wooded hillside to the entrance, the rain still filtering through the trees. There were a total of nine of us on the trip; Ian and myself, Smoky, and six from the Ohio team - Russ, Kathy, Billie, Mike, Mike and Ed. They'd come to TAG for a few days, with Ellison's as their primary objective.

After a walk of some three-quarters of an hour, we were



Smoky Caldwell negotiates the awkward crawl around the corner to the Attic. To his right ; 586 feet of black hole. Photos by Tony Baker.

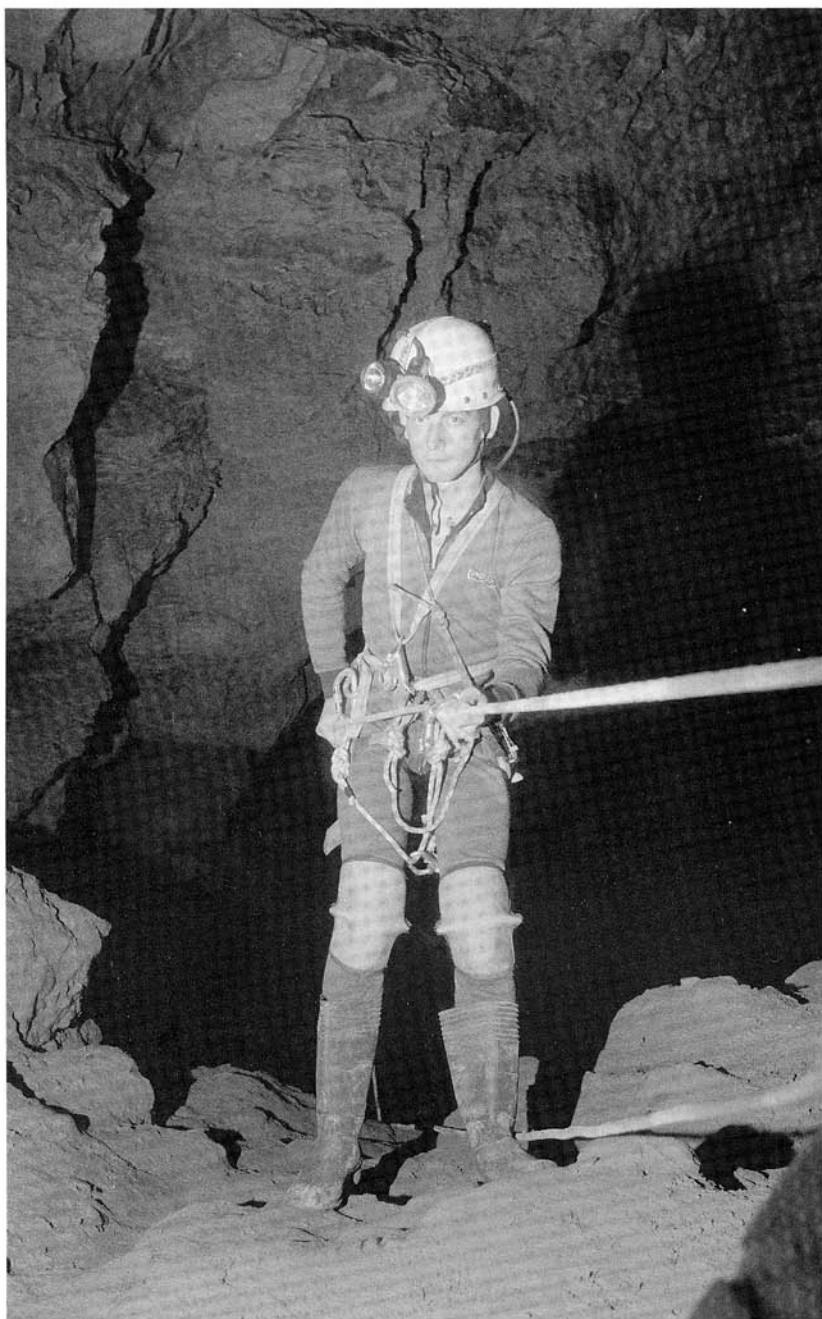
there. The entrance passage was a walking-sized tunnel which ended abruptly at the first pitch - the "Warm-Up Pit", a mere 125 ft. appetiser for the monster main course. Once again, our concerns about American rigging technique were awakened; Smoky attached the rope to two rusty Petzl hangers, left permanently in place. Bite your lip, I thought - this is the way they always do it, they trust it, you'll have to as well...

Once at the bottom, Smoky left the others to take the usual route while he introduced Ian and I to "The Escalator", an awkward slippery traverse that made me wish I'd taken off my SRT gear before attempting it. This brought us to a tricky crawl around a corner, with the wall on one side and a big black hole on the other; Fantastic Pit. The

take-off at the pitch head is known as The Attic, and a massive boulder provides the sole belay for the rope - from there it goes straight over the edge with no protector at the lip. The rope is left permanently in place, and replaced periodically by Smoky. This saves visiting cavers having to drag six hundred feet of rope in and out of the cave, even if it doesn't inspire confidence - still, Smoky made the rope and if he was prepared to trust it, why shouldn't I?

We were to descend first. I suggested Ian go ahead of me, on the rather flimsy pretext that I wanted to take some pictures as he went over the lip. If he was as nervous as I was, he certainly didn't show it as he rigged his rack and lowered himself into the broad chimney that forms the top of the pitch. I took some pictures and then he was gone,

"It was an eerie experience, dangling on this thin strand of rope with nothing visible above or below..."



Ian Anderson embarks on the descent of the Warm-Up pit.

his light disappearing into the void. After what seemed like hours, his voice struggled up from way below: "Rope free". My turn. Trying hard not to let my apprehension show, I threaded the rope through my (borrowed) rack with difficulty; that much rope is heavy, and slack had to be heaved up with both hands. Progress downward was difficult for the same reason, and the first few feet seemed to

take forever and require an incredible effort. Once below the first section of chimney, the pitch belled out, so that soon the walls were only just visible with the beam of my electric light. It was an eerie experience, dangling on this thin strand of rope with nothing visible above or below - I couldn't make out Ian's light unless he was looking straight up at me. My arms ached from the effort of heaving

up rope and feeding it through the rack, but the further down I went the easier it became. Soon I was making good progress, but the bottom didn't seem to get any nearer. Eventually, the tiny pool of Ian's light appeared below me, almost making the feeling of isolation worse; now I could begin to judge just how far up I was. I finally hit the deck exactly ten minutes after I'd set off, my pulse racing and the feeling of exhilaration tempered only by the knowledge that later on I'd have to go back up.

It took the others ages to come down, so Ian and I had a wander and took some photographs before we all re-assembled at the base of the pitch. This was when we finally began to appreciate the scale of the place: Russ and Ed fired two magnesium flares up into the darkness, and as they spiralled away, the enormous chamber that forms Fantastic Pit was briefly visible. An awesome sight, quite unlike anything else I've seen in a cave.

We all duly signed the register, kept in a watertight plastic tube bolted to the wall near the base of the pitch. Smoky's original plan had been for some of the slower members of the party to head straight back out, but everyone seemed keen to see more, so all nine of us set off into the further recesses of Ellison's. The passage led over climbs and through crawls to the Gypsum Room, a chamber simply oozing with the stuff. We took some more photographs while waiting for the others to catch up, and Smoky kept leaving waymarks -



Ian with a limestone wall at the base of Fantastic Pit.

in the form of bits of plastic bag - at all the junctions, still anticipating that some would turn back before others and would need to find the way easily. More well-decorated chambers led to the Snowball Dome, a massive aven that had been bolt-climbed to a height of more than 400 feet over a three-day trip, to find only a short section of horizontal passage at the top. The name comes from a huge calcite formation that resembles a snowball and resides at the base of the aven.

Everywhere we went now was covered in gypsum; it coated the walls and the floors in a variety of forms, and we had to take care to keep to the narrow pathways.

Eventually we reached our objective - The North Pole. This is a bizarre formation made of Epsomite, looking not unlike a

cluster of icicles. Smoky picked up a small piece of the stuff that was lying nearby and suggested we taste it; it had a peculiar salty taste. Kathy patiently acted as model while I shot nearly a whole roll of slide film, we ate our food and then set off out.

Back at the Gypsum Room, Smoky proposed that we all wait, and make our way back to Fantastic Pit in pairs, at forty minute intervals - this would avoid long waits in the cold draught at the base of the pitch. We were to prussik up in pairs to save time, so Ed and Mike set off first while the rest of us settled down to wait. Forty minutes later it was the turn of Ian and I to go. The trip back to the pitch took ten minutes, and we were disappointed to find Ed and Mike still not on the rope. We waited there rather than trekking back to the Gypsum

"Prussiking in tandem is an unnerving experience, not least because the other person's efforts cause the rope to swing around and bounce up and down alarmingly..."



Kathy Wallace admires the Epsomite formation at the North Pole.

Room, watching their lights progress slowly up and away. An hour passed before the yell "Off rope" filtered down; I attached my jammers to the rope and set off up, progressing around fifty feet before Ian followed me. We took it in turns to prussik up, each taking a breather while the other moved. Prussiking in tandem is an unnerving experience, not least because the other person's efforts cause the rope to swing around and bounce up and down alarmingly. I kept thinking about the exposed rope sawing over the lip, all that distance above... The bursts of prussiking became shorter as we tired on the way up - eventually we were moving around twenty feet at a time, constantly breathing hard. Once

the floor was out of sight, we had no way of even guessing how far up we were; we just kept going, for what seemed like hours. All we could see was a short section of rope above and below, with the walls just visible through the surrounding blackness. When it finally came into view, the bottom of the chimney was one of the most welcome sights I've ever seen. I struggled over the lip, breathless, 45 minutes after leaving the bottom - a reasonable time, especially given that some of the others took longer using ropewalking. Ed and Mike had waited for us, and headed towards the entrance while Ian and I waited for the next pair. We emerged from the entrance at nearly three in the morning,

after fourteen hours underground, and it was nearly three hours before the last of the others arrived at the car park. Beers from the coolbox in the van tasted good, but the night air was cold and neither Ian or I had anything warmer than T-shirts to wear.

Ellison's Cave was the highlight of the entire holiday as far as I'm concerned, one of those caving trips that I shall never forget. There's certainly nothing in Britain to compare with Fantastic Pit, and there's plenty more to recommend the cave; if ever you're caving in that part of the USA, try and get yourself a trip.

Memory Lane: The 1962 Gouffre Berger Expedition

by *Frank Salt*

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the successful British Berger expedition of 1962. Prior to this, the cave had only ever been bottomed once before, by the French-organised international expedition of 1956. To mark the occasion, some of the thirty-eight members of the British expedition will be retracing their steps to the cave for a reunion.

Nostalgia aside, the cave remains a classic even if it is no longer the deepest in the world. Because of this, a few points about the 1962 expedition are worth remembering. The roots of the trip were in youthful arrogance, and tragedy.

Until the late 1950s British cavers had always regarded themselves as poor seconds to their French counterparts. That the French were infinitely better was reflected in the caving

literature of the day, which course was 80% French. The first cracks in this edifice appeared in 1959, during a cave rescue in England. On the weekend before Easter a young caver called Neil Moss became trapped in a tight vertical tube in Peak Cavern, Derbyshire. The scene of the accident produced a logistical nightmare, being nearly three kilometres from the entrance, in an extremely tight location and the wrong side of a muddy sump.

The attempts at rescue were long, protracted and unsuccessful. They were also disrupted by the arrival of a French caving expert, in the form of Jo Berger, flown over to show the English how to do it.

He was borne into the cave by a mass of newsmen and police officers, like a talisman, to solve

the problem. However, it quickly became apparent to those having to work with him that he had no magic to offer, in fact if anything he was a liability to the party. I was amongst a number of aggressive and spotty-faced young cavers who assisted him out of the cave. In giving his thanks afterwards he casually said: "If you're coming to France, look me up, I'll organise a trip for you."

Having realised that the gods had feet of clay, a few of us jumped at the idea and the Combined Clubs Speleo Expedition of 1960 came into being. This was a small group - around ten people - from various southern English clubs, who in 1960 attempted to descend the Berger to the original French Camp One at -500m.

Initially a series of heavy storms produced impossible water

"I can still remember sitting before the Grants Committee and being told that 'caving has little place in the quest for geographical knowledge...'"

conditions in the cave; I can remember coming up one pitch and being greeted by a half-metre wall of water coming down the passage. We both arrived at the head of the pitch at the same time. In addition, towards the end of the expedition the early arrival of snow resulted in our having to abandon the cave and our camp. The expedition had failed, we had only made it down to the river gallery (-240m), but it was the conditions and not the cave which had beaten us.

In 1961, planning was soon underway for the 1962 expedition. This consisted of 38 members drawn from clubs all over England - a necessary approach not for the manpower, but to call upon the combined tackle stores of all the clubs concerned.

Requests were made to various trusts and companies for food, money and equipment, with some success. If I remember correctly, the cost to each member was only £25, with a later reimbursement of £15 after we had sold articles to the press.

One of the unsuccessful requests for support was to the Royal Geographical Society. This body didn't actually give out money, but if one had its blessing the number of organisations that would help greatly increased. I can still remember sitting before the Grants Committee and being told that "caving has little place in the quest for geographical knowledge", and that they had no wish to be involved with such a foolhardy project. Clearly they believed that world depth records were the sole property of the French.

The expedition left in August 1962, with an advance party arriving at the cave two weeks before the main group. In this first two weeks, an almost holiday atmosphere filled the camp and the cave, with spells underground being interspersed with parties, good food and sessions sitting around in the sun. Despite this, the cave was laddered down to -700m, Camp One established at -500m, and nearly a ton of food and equipment stockpiled throughout the cave.

With the arrival of the main party, the cave was quickly laddered to the bottom, with two parties visiting the final sump. For the first time this was examined below water level (with mask and snorkel only), and the basis for future diving expeditions made. To make the most of the cave a time and motion study was made, with parties fitting onto a kind of critical path. This enabled us to make maximum use of the underground facilities at the two camps; as one party climbed out of their sleeping bags, another would climb into them, thus saving on the amount of gear in the cave.

Camp One, in fact, was only set up to accommodate eight people, but for a period of five days at the peak of the expedition handled three times that number, with parties seldom meeting each other.

Not all of the groups were dedicated to bottoming the cave, however. A large balcony had previously been noted above Camp One, which it was believed might lead to a dry upper series (this was later called

"We developed the 'Gourmet Drive': this saw the quality and quantity of food increase the deeper one went into the cave..."

the Pegasus Bridge). The expedition had brought enough steel scaffold bar and clamps to make a 12m maypole in an attempt to gain access to this area. We also had a number of heavy batteries and lamps to provide lighting for a short cine film, while one team of eight was totally dedicated to the photography and remained based at Camp One for five days. All of these activities took place with an almost military precision.

With so much equipment underground, its removal required almost as much effort as the placing. Realising the difficulties of team motivation in the later stages, we developed the "Gourmet Drive". This saw the quality and quantity of food increase the deeper one went into the cave. Thus one could be in the sun on the surface and eat only Complian (an invalid diet food), or go underground to get gear out and eat well. The system worked well, although it did cause some resentment among some of the groups involved. In all, the expedition was a fantastic success, achieving all

of its many aims. For two weeks, the activities of the expedition were covered daily by the press, radio and television services of both France and Britain. With the success of the underground trips, visitor level at the surface camp increased, with the big names of French caving turning up by the hour, waving bottles of wine and celebrating with the English cavers (they even gave me honorary membership of the Speleo Group of the French Alpine Club). British cavers were suddenly the flavour of the year and our inferiority had gone forever.

With the main party on its way home, four of us remained on the Sornin plateau for a couple of days. Around the camp fire, over a bottle of wine, we planned our next expedition. We had a report from a BP exploration team in New Guinea, which referred to vast areas of limestone and vanishing rivers; nothing would ever be the same again.

Epilogue

In 1963 I sat once again before the grants committee of the Royal Geographical Society. This time I explained a proposal to run a four month, sixteen-person caving expedition to the Star Mountains in New Guinea. Their reaction was openly hostile, with the trip described by those around the table as "a wild day-dream". The remark was made that it would be fifty years before New Guinea had opened up enough to allow such a trip. Two years later, the Australian Star Mountains Expedition, a direct offshoot from those day-dreams, arrived in New Guinea. The seeds from the Sornin plateau had germinated...

First Impressions

by Sue Williams

Before visiting SWCC for the first time in the winter of 1991, the closest I had ever come to a cave was my annual Christmas visit to Santa's Grotto in the James Howells Department Store in Cardiff, between the ages of 4 and 9.

I was told - or was it warned - before my visit to wear my oldest and warmest clothing, and to keep Sunday free for a simple caving trip, to introduce me gradually to the true wonder of caving.

I pictured in my mind a cottage, with garden, in the middle of the Brecon Beacons, with central heating, wall-to-wall carpeting, breathtaking views and hot and cold running water. Consequently I wore my best white jeans, a t-shirt... and make up. My hair had been freshly washed and curled for the occasion.

My, was I surprised when on arrival, all I could see were men and women dressed in orange, red and yellow plastic suits covered in mud, wearing wellies and hats with lights attached - and this was designer gear!

Before I got out of my car, the white jeans were back in my Gucci holdall, replaced with black tracksuit bottoms (which I had intended to wear as pyjamas) and my t-shirt was covered over by a BOSS sweatshirt - it was the best I

could do. I would have washed off the bright red lipstick and blusher but alas there was no hot and cold running water to do so. The people in red, yellow and orange plastic suits seemed very friendly - they appeared a little later in what seemed to be the SWCC uniform - tracksuit bottoms and non-matching tops. All activity seemed to take place in the kitchen - a large well-equipped room, with no less than three fridges and four ovens. Contrary, however, to my expectations of white Schreiber fitted units and a Marley tiled floor, my first SWCC story was how a few well-oiled cavers had one evening succeeded in squashing behind a food box one of the several mice that scamper around the kitchen, and how they had chopped the tail off another. Delia Smith would have had a fit - I didn't eat all weekend.

My night was spent in a tent. It was the middle of winter, the wind was blowing a gale and it was throwing it down outside. Due to the number of gin and tonics consumed before going to bed, I was forced three times to brave the weather and venture through the SWCC garden to the ladies' toilet at least 500 yards away. Nevertheless it was quite an experience.

Although I had slept in a tent before it had been a four-man

luxurious model with two double bedrooms, a separate lounge and toilet, in Antibes in the South of France. The beds actually had duvets there. This was a little different from a two-man bivvy bag in the middle of the Welsh mountains on a winter's night.

The following day I was awoken by the sound of a beetle attempting to enter my ear from the sack I was using as a pillow. I decided to get up immediately and prepare for my first caving trip.

I was given what is called a furry suit and yes, you've guessed it - a yellow plastic suit. I proceeded to put the furry suit on over my tracksuit bottoms and sweatshirt, with the plastic suit on top of that - I looked four stone heavier coming out of the changing room, and was highly delighted when my photograph was taken to mark the occasion. It was some consolation, however, when it was pointed out to me that my yellow plastic suit matched exactly the yellow wellies I had brought with me! At least I was colour co-ordinated.

By the time I had climbed the hill to Top Entrance, which incidentally took three-quarters of an hour, with at least three stops on the way, I was sweating like there was no tomorrow. It must have been the three layers



Sue Williams after her first caving trip. Photograph by Tony Baker. Miss Williams' wardrobe by Inglesport. Hair courtesy of Caving Supplies' plastic helmet. This photograph not reproduced by kind permission of Vogue.

however, told by my chaperone that I hadn't done too badly on the trip.

I didn't care; despite my aching bones, I literally sprinted down the hill to the cottage in order to leap into a hot shower.

Despite the novice's nightmare described above, I am a glutton for punishment and have been caving several times since. I now have my own plastic suit, the yellow wellies have been replaced with proper caving wellies and believe it or not, I have been appointed a member of the SWCC Committee.

I have never before gone to so much effort in order to make a good first impression. The efforts did, however, pay off. My chaperone informed me when I emerged from the cave after my first trip covered in mud, with hair everywhere, that he had never seen me look more attractive and I believe he meant it. On a serious note, though, I believe those first efforts have further been rewarded by being accepted by SWCC as a valuable member of the club, and now I too have acquired the feeling of belonging that membership of SWCC provides.

I had on. Having reached the entrance I was faced with a metal door smaller than that leading to my loft at home. I was expected to climb through this into an abyss of complete darkness. My chaperone had decided to do what is called a round trip. By the time I got to "Gnome Passage", an hour and a half had passed since we had set off from the cottage. I had by that time broken three nails and bruised both knees. I was also knackered! Nevertheless I was determined to make a good impression. I kept going, too

busy looking where to place my feet to look at the beauty around me. In fact during the whole trip - which took five hours to complete - I do not think I saw one stalactite or stalagmite other than the "gnomes". I don't think I took my eyes off my feet once.

When we eventually emerged from the "black hole" I have never been so tired, cold, wet or bruised in all my life. My aching limbs took five whole days to recover. I had pulled muscles in places I didn't know there were muscles! I was,

Underground Activities in the Forest of Dean

(or: Reasons for not often getting down to SWCC)

by *Paul Taylor*

For some considerable time, the Forest of Dean has provided underground interest; early Roman iron scowl workings, the deeper iron mines and, of course, the variously-sized coal mines. These were all used for commercial purposes, and true speleological interest did not begin until the late 1940's. Interest was first shown in the area by members of SWCC, Hereford Caving Club, and British Nylon Spinners Caving Club; including Cecil Cullingford and others. Exploration centred around the few natural caves that existed, notably the "C" caves at Symond's Yat, and digging activity at Digger's Hole and Wet Sink - known in those days as Ryland's Cave, and much later to become Slaughter Stream Cave.

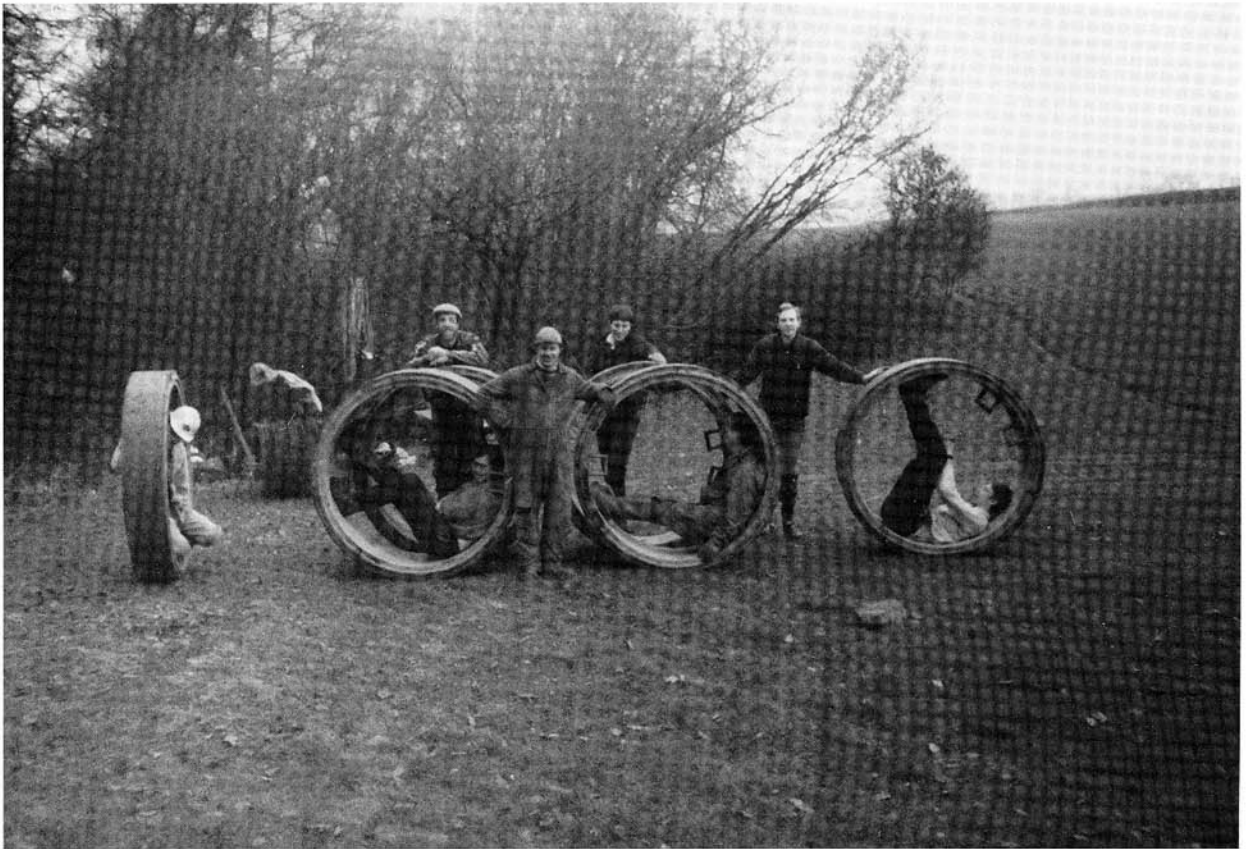
The formation of Gloucester Speleological Society in the mid 1950's saw a considerable increase in caving activity, with the exploration of the Clearwell iron mines. This was assisted by George Hall, who had worked in the mines during the Second World War. Further digging of

the natural sites gave some progress, although the breakthroughs were usually measured in tens of metres. During these early years, other caving regions were developing fast, and it seems that local cavers visiting other areas soon realised that the Forest must contain caves of significant size. A number of major resurgences were noted and surface exploration revealed other interesting sites. Digging at some of these provided a few hundred feet of passage with Cursit's Cave, Kiln Hole, Seymour's Swallet and Coldwell Swallet being the most notable successes. Digging at Wet Sink continued during this period; however, with greater developments happening in other areas it's true to say that only a few dedicated people kept plodding away in the Forest.

The formation of the Royal Forest of Dean Caving Club saw a number of the iron mines re-opened and considerable extensions achieved. As far as natural cave was concerned, however, only Dunderhole and Clana were significant

developments. Even by 1974, when Otter Hole was discovered, the total length of all the cave in the Forest of Dean was probably not much more than a thousand metres. Otter Hole, although not strictly in the Forest, changed that by adding around 4000m. This discovery generated considerable interest and certainly changed a few peoples' minds about the area. A great deal of digging was started in the Otter Hole drainage area, and a few small finds made. There were further developments elsewhere; Coldwell Swallet was extended to around 110m long and 55m deep. Cross Joints went to a similar size, and extensions were made to the "C" caves and a number of lesser sites. In the late 1970's work was started at Ban-y-Gor Cave, on the banks of the Wye, which resulted in around 180m of cave. Later work in a subsequent upper series brought the length to around 650m. It was, for a number of years, the longest cave in Gloucestershire.

The area that was widely



Some of the Red House team with the concrete rings used to line the shaft. All photos: Paul Taylor

considered to have the best potential for a cave of significant size was right in the middle of the Forest, near Joyford, and contained sites such as Kiln Hole, and the Wet and Dry sinks. Access to these sites was denied by the landowner for around twenty years, following an unfortunate incident involving a cow in a hole. It wasn't until the farmer died and his son took over that negotiations for a return to the area were possible. This was in 1987, and the primary objective was Wet Sink, that is, the one that's usually dry.

Prior to the ban on access, many people had expended considerable effort at this site, and it's fair to say that they probably came close to breaking through, only to be beaten by floods, infill, and then the ban. Norman Flux was the first to

resume work, and his team certainly removed large quantities of spoil with their elaborate counter-balance system. Their visits were relatively infrequent, however, and local help was required to keep the project going. This came initially from Di Court and other RFDCC members. They continued digging during Norman's extended absences. Di found that she wasn't always able to be involved and so enlisted the help of four other Forest club members; John Sibley, Andy Clark, Andy Rolles and Graham Crote. These four became the mainstays of a considerable digging effort during 1989 and 1990. Their reward came in late 1990 and early 1991 with around 10 000m of fine cave. A Forest of Dean mastercave had been penetrated; the Slaughter Stream Cave.

What, you're all asking by now, does this have to do with my excuses for not coming to SWCC very often? Well, myself and John Elliott had been heavily involved with the work at Ban-y-Gor, with regular Wednesday night and weekend visits. When we get the chance to get back, there's more cave to be found there. For the last two years, however, our time, along with that of others (some of whom were among the original diggers of Wet Sink and Kiln Hole of thirty years ago), has been spent at a site known as Red House Lane Swallet. This dig has swallowed enormous quantities of time, effort, materials and money.

Although it lies in a different valley to the other sites, the land was owned by the same farmer so access was lost for the same period. It had received some



The last ring goes onto the stack; this photograph was taken from on the jib above the hole.

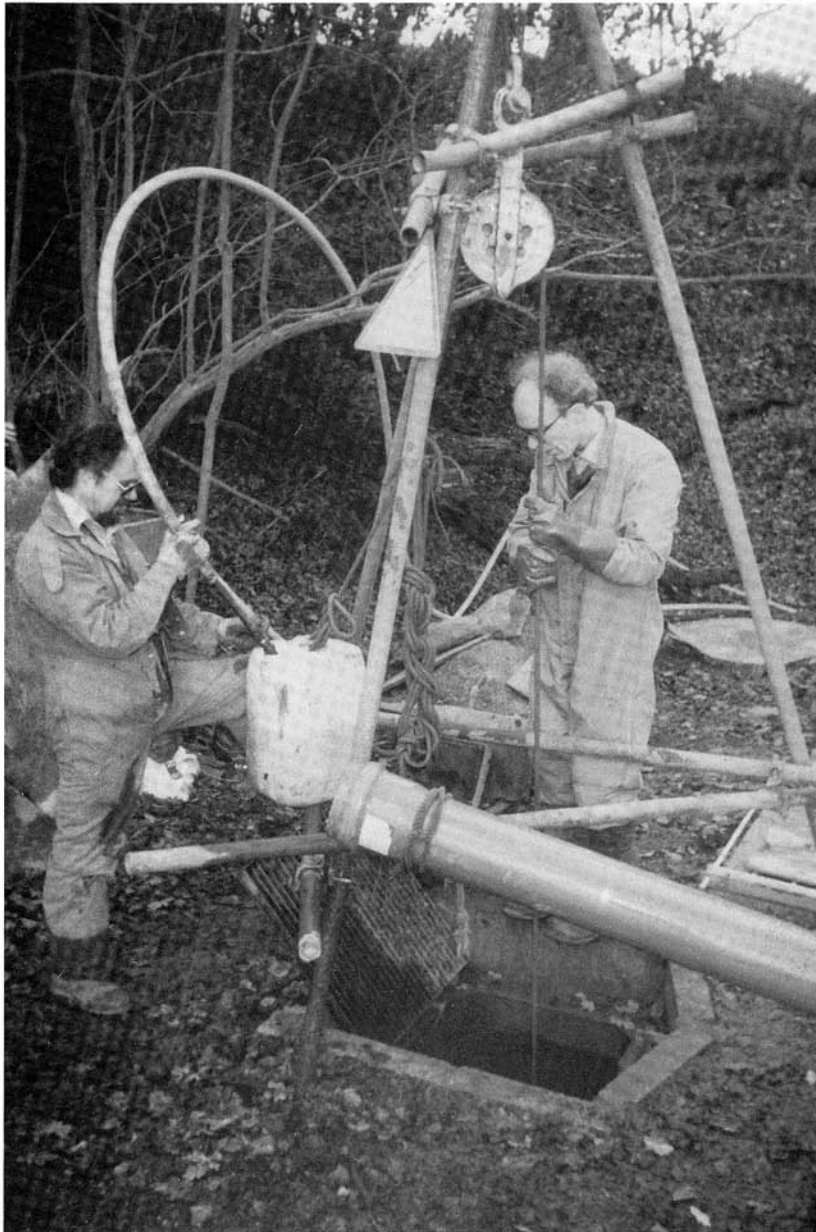
spasmodic clandestine attention, but as the site was excessively silted it was realised that only a concerted major effort was likely to yield results. Mother Nature fortunately intervened and played an Ace; when Norman Flux visited the site in 1990, the normally rabbit-sized holes had been replaced by a hole five metres in diameter and five metres deep. Bedrock was exposed, and the dig had a much more promising look about it. With a change of landowner, official access was gained to the area, and along with Dave “Sparks” Parker (a Forest caver and digger for around forty years) we visited the site to establish the best approach. We soon realised that a shaft of concrete rings was going to be needed, set above the exposed rock with the surrounding space

filled in. Pipes would be needed to carry the stream, and a lid with a gate would be fitted at the same time. A few hundred pounds, a couple of months work, and we’d be digging our way into caverns measureless. Well, to cut a long story down to a manageable size, it took nine concrete rings (1200mm diameter), around 28 tons of reinforced concrete, 60m of variously-sized plastic pipe, twenty tons of rocks, various steel grills and a gate, plus 130 trips over fourteen months and we had four metres of passage. There was a good draught, a lot of water disappeared underground, and we did have a lot of fun. It still seems, you’re probably thinking, an awful lot of effort for four metres of cave.

Well, the water and the draught

did give us a good idea that there must be something there, and there were other factors that spurred us on. The site had been previously dye-tested to the major resurgence, the Slaughter Rising, on the banks of the Wye.

Some of the area’s dowsers had some good indications from the site. Plus, of course, Slaughter Stream Cave had “gone” and we knew that Red House must connect with it. Although this last factor encouraged us, I still feel that we would have continued without it. Now that the major civil engineering works have been completed, our efforts have been directed to improving on the four metres of passage. The work has been concentrated in two directions; lowering the floor of the shaft, and continuing along the original



The finished gate; Dave Parker and John Elliot using a counter-balance system to haul spoil out of the shaft.

rift. Following the rift involved removing a lot of infill and the use of a lot of chemical assistance; after around twelve metres, a side rift was dug and a very wet vertical passage reached. This was named Anniversary Rift, as we broke into it on my wedding anniversary. My wife, Rose, was waiting for us in the pub.

The stream on the surface was diverted down the shaft and Anniversary Rift became dry. Eight metres of descent was made and blasting was needed

to open up a squeeze. While all this was going on, digging in the floor below our original breakthrough point provided a route down through a series of rifts and small chambers, to the base of Anniversary Rift, almost providing a short round trip. A good draught was still evident, and a number of diggable routes were available. This was called Christmas Extension.

Unfortunately, the main way down was a silt-filled rift, and a lack of storage space for spoil made it difficult to follow this

for far. Blasting a side rift, and further digging gave access to a very tight bedding plane, which took most of the water.

Digging in the shaft couldn't continue while the water went down it, but even though we'd gained few metres of passage we now had a means of diverting it. Deepening the shaft became our main priority, and from the original 5m this is now down to 25m, with a series of platforms, put in to allow spoil to be raised in a few short lifts rather than one large one.

At 25m depth, we encountered a boulder choke, which can only be described as nasty - hence the name Horror Choke. We created a scaffolded and well propped route through this, and subsequent digging on the far side has yielded a short flat-out crawl into a chamber, 10m high, 4m wide and 7m long. A number of rifts come into this from above, and digging is currently taking place in one corner, following a descending rift. There is still a good draught, and much evidence of water erosion. Depth to date is around 40m, with a total of 120-150m of passage.

The project to date has cost around £1200, as well as donated items which would have added another £2000-£3000 if we'd had to buy them. All of us that have been involved have had a lot of fun doing it, however, and there are other benefits; access to one of the Slaughter master cave sinks has been maintained, which without this work would have remained as silted rabbit holes. With continued effort, we should get into a lot more cave.



The settling tank upstream of the hole.

It is difficult to mention everyone who has helped with donations and work at the site, but I'd like to thank them all, especially the farmer who has been very patient and co-operative, and also provided the use of a JCB and fifteen tons of stones (used in filling around the outside of the concrete rings).

Between October 1990 and July 1992 we have made around 175 visits to the site, either on Wednesday evenings or at weekends. Work goes on, and if anyone would like to come over and see the site they're welcome to get in touch. I hope that we can get another article together soon, reporting further discoveries.

Author's footnote: There are bound to be people whose efforts in digging something I have



Concrete slab over the rift, and water pipes from the settling tank.

overlooked in writing the above. I apologise if I haven't mentioned you; the article was not researched but written entirely from memory.

STOP PRESS:

Since this article was written, we have been able to make significant further progress by pumping out a flooded section of passage. This gave access to a draughting squeeze; with this enlarged we were able to crawl into a bedding plane, pass two more flat-out squeezes in the stream and enter two hundred more metres of passage, through sand crawls and walking-sized rifts to a duck. This was passed by Martyn Farr soon afterwards, and a further 500-600 metres gained. Work is now progressing to survey and fully explore this new section, but the rain continues to be our biggest enemy. A full report and survey will follow. At last, all our hard work and expense has paid off.

Paul Taylor

Whitesides Mountain

by *Tony Baker*

Six hundred and sixty feet is exactly one-eighth of a mile. It is the distance an Olympic athlete can run in around twenty seconds, while a car travelling at sixty miles an hour will cover it in seven and a half seconds. Prussiking that distance, however, takes a great deal longer.

There is a major difference in attitudes to SRT on opposite sides of the Atlantic. While we Europeans use it as a means to an end - simply an aid to descending caves - many Americans see it as an end in itself. They'll happily go and "drop a pit", and then come straight back out without having explored any more of the cave. Hence it follows that to enjoy yourself in this way, you don't really need to be in a cave at all; anywhere with a big vertical drop will do just as well.

Whitesides Mountain, in North Carolina, has a sheer face of nearly seven hundred feet, and so makes a great place for SRT freaks to have their fun. While in the USA in the autumn of 1990 (see articles elsewhere in this Newsletter and no. 110), I was invited to join members of the Tennessee Central Basin Grotto on their annual weekend pilgrimage to this ropewalker's temple.

The mountain itself rises dramatically from amongst the

trees of the Nantahala National Forest, its southern face a giant white scar towering above the green carpet of conifers that covers the surrounding hills. Driving from the nearby village, however, you don't see this view, as the road loops and



Mark Moore rigs the carpet pads used as rope protection. All photos: Tony Baker

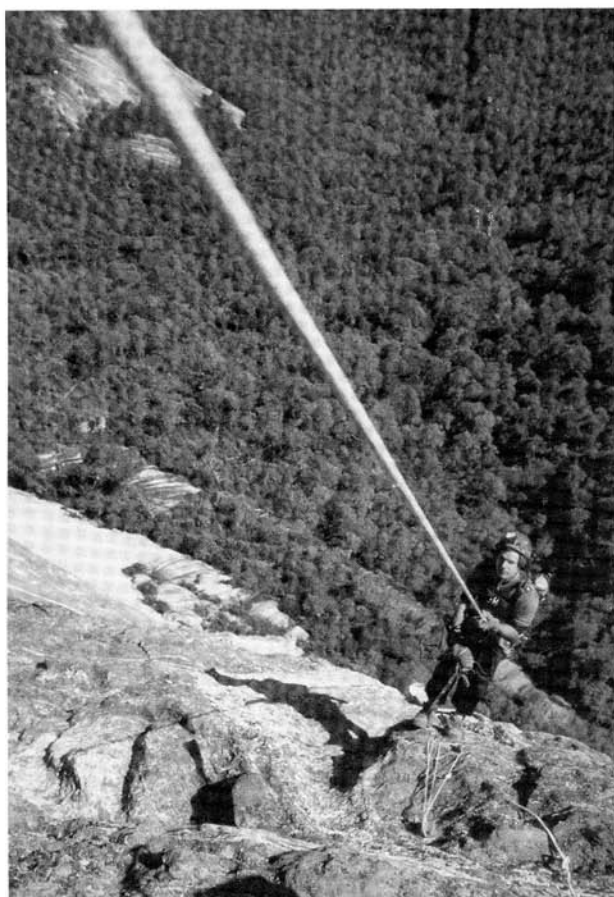
twists around the sides of the hills behind the cliff, before bringing you to a car park at the base of the slope that forms the back of the mountain.

Mark Moore and I arrived at lunchtime on Friday and began ferrying gear up the steep footpath that climbs the rear side, taking several trips to establish our campsite just yards from the top of the drop. The rope - a single 700ft. length - filled a vast canvas tackle bag that Mark said he'd carry. I

didn't argue. The remainder of the afternoon was spent rigging the first short pitch. This takes you to the belay point for the main event; six hundred and sixty feet straight down, free-hanging nearly all the way due to the concave profile of the cliff. As Mark struggled to untangle the rope and place carpet pads on likely rub points, I watched from the top, freezing in the cold wind that howled across the edge.

Saturday morning dawned bright and cold, and we were treated to a superb view as the sun burnt off a few remaining patches of mist from the sprawling ocean of trees below us. Mark went down to rig the main rope, while I walked the few hundred yards to the viewing platform further along the clifftop, from where I could see the full extent of the drop. Already a tiny red dot was visible near the base of the cliff, a climber making his way up from the bottom. This was a sudden and dramatic indication of the sheer scale of the place; I swallowed hard as I thought about prussiking all that way, later the same day.

By now, other members of the grotto had arrived, and Mark - an SRT freak of the first order - was already down and beginning to prussik up (I can't remember whether he made three or four trips down and back up before



Left: Bobby Biddix begins the ascent of the main pitch. This picture was taken whilst dangling on the top pitch. Right: Bobby begins the ascent. An accomplished ropewalker, he completed this in less than twenty minutes.

we left on Sunday morning). After a lazy morning sitting around at the top chatting, my turn came.

The first bit was easy. Climb over the fence, thread the rack, and abseil down the forty or so feet to the rock platform that forms the main belay. I clipped on with my cows' tails and took some photographs as Bobby Biddix made his way over the edge of the main drop. After what seemed like no more than a minute or two, he was off the rope and it was my turn.

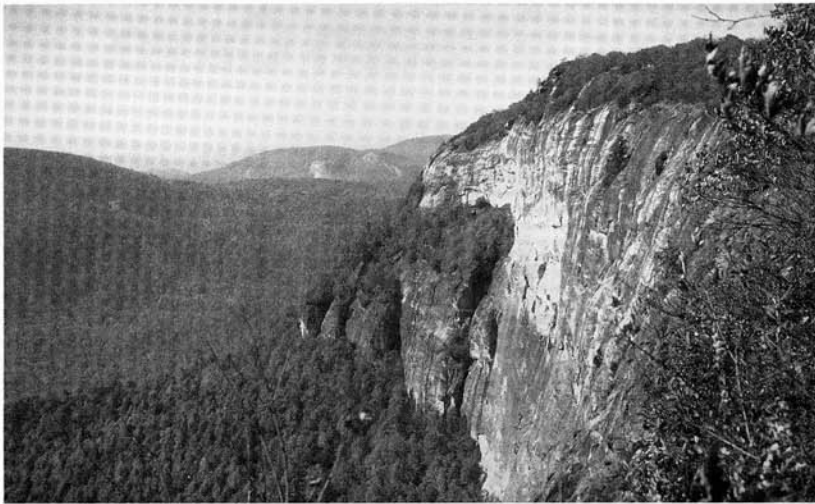
As a child, I disliked heights intensely. I couldn't look over a railway bridge without feeling dizzy. Caving has helped me conquer my fears; after all, if you suffer from vertigo there's a limit to how much cave you

can actually get to. The difference, though, between pitches in caves and those on the surface is that outside you can see the bottom. The view between my feet as I hauled rope up and fed it through the rack was awesome; my pulse raced and the cold sweat down my back made me shiver.

"Keep calm. Keep going. You're getting there" I muttered, concentrating on getting a smooth abseil going as the rope below became lighter and slid through the rack more readily. I tried not to look down, but it was compulsive; I was transfixed by the scene, adrenaline rushed every time I looked and I kept coming back for more.

I didn't feel a great relief at

reaching the bottom, probably because I knew I had to go back up and that was going to take a lot longer. I had a twenty minute break while Bobby made his way up, then clipped on my jammers, took a deep breath and started. The first section was okay, as it was against the rock - which seemed to give a feeling of security, for some reason. Then, just over a hundred feet up, as the rock sloped away from the rope to leave it free-hanging, there was the register. This is a log-book, stored in a plastic tube bolted to the rock, which you sign to record your passing. Nearly every cave we went in the USA has one, and since Whitesides is frequented by so many cavers, it has one too. With an unsteady



Top left: The sheer face of Whitesides Mountain, as seen from the viewpoint along the cliff.

Bottom left: The view from around four hundred feet.



Top right: The view from the top of the mountain, looking down at the forest.

Bottom right: The view from the top of the mountain, looking down at the forest.

hand, I signed my name, put the book back in the tube and carried on prussiking.

Swinging about in space, with the only sound the faint rush of the wind, the feeling of isolation was incredible. The ground didn't seem to get any further away, and all the trees below looked like the ones you stick on model railway sets. I kept thinking of the rope at the top rubbing through the carpet pads; two had already been replaced earlier in the day. (Unlike limestone the volcanic rock of Whitesides was a threat even to the "indestructible" PMI rope.) Prussiking long distances is tiring, and I was sweating hard, gasping for breath. Just over half

way up, I stopped and took some pictures. This was difficult as the rope kept swinging round.

After that I didn't want to look down again, so I concentrated simply on the rope in front of my face, trying to push my top jammer as far up the rope as I could each time. Eventually, I could hear voices - nearly there! An extra burst of energy accompanied this realisation, and soon I was clipping my cows' tails into the bolt at the top with a wonderful sense of both relief and excitement.

"Did you enjoy that?" someone asked.

"Ask me in a bit" I panted, my mind racing too much to answer the question sensibly.

It had taken me around forty minutes to prussik up, a fair effort given the acknowledged inferiority on long single pitches of "frog" rigs when compared with the ropewalking techniques the Americans employ. Anyway, I was proud of the fact that I'd reached the top ahead of a ropewalker from another party who had started up their rope (rigged parallel to ours) just before me.

Did I enjoy it? Well, it was certainly a good way of getting an adrelinin fix, and it was one hell of an experience, but I think I prefer SRT when you can't see the bottom.

Diving in Slaughter Stream Cave

By Andy Ward

Slaughter Swallet, or Slaughter Stream Cave, was discovered in recent years by members of the Royal Forest of Dean Caving Club (see also "Caving Activities in the Forest of Dean" by Paul Taylor on p. -Ed.). The entrance series consists of several ladder pitches, connected by crawls, which drop into the main streamway. From here, the upstream sump is only fifty metres away; it's very constricted and has been dived, feet first, for ten metres where the passage turns a tight corner. There's little hope of further progress here, but the water resurging at this point is probably that seen elsewhere in the cave. Moving downstream, the passage follows the stream under an aven before reaching a junction: from here the stream goes down to Sump One which hasn't yet been dived. Back at the junction, the dry passage which starts as a low crawl soon enlarges to become walking-sized, ending at a two metre climb. The water resurging here is Sump Two, and the report about the exploration of this is in the Cave Diving Group Newsletter, no. 101, October 1991.

On the 10 October 1991, divers Gareth Hardman and Andy Ward went into the cave. Sump Two was passed after a four metre dive in a low passage to a canal. This was 30 metres long, with a squeeze into a large chamber

18m high, 12m long and 6m wide. A streamway led to a pool which was ducked through to a passage 4.5 m wide by 6-12m high. Two large rocky chambers were passed through following the streamway, to a duck into a further chamber with no dry land; the pool was out of our depth, with water welling up. A rough survey gave 300m of passage heading towards Sump One, although more water comes out in the streamway than goes in, so other sinks may be found beyond the upstream sump. This streamway has been named Drake's Series.

A survey was done on the 17 October by Gareth Hardman, Andy Ward and Roger Smith: the streamway in Drake's Series has a few oxbows, but no side passages, and in some parts large blocks cover the floor necessitating a climb to roof level to continue. The walls are loose in places, requiring some care. The passage ends in a duck into a chamber 5m across and 6m long with water welling up. To date (Dec '91) no dive has been made at this site but a connection with Sump One would seem likely, with other inlets a possibility.

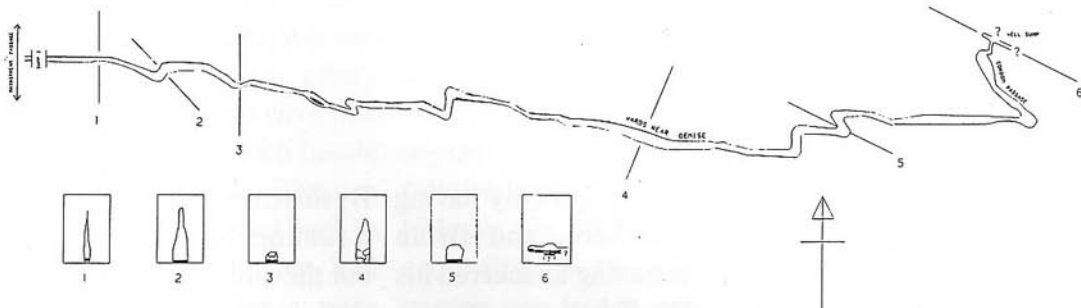
From the start of Sump Two, the streamway is a straightforward carry in good-sized passages with a few narrow bits. Sump Three is found at the end of the main streamway - a flooded pot marks the start. This was first

dived on the 18 May '91 by Gareth Hardman and Andy Ward, and is a constricted dive of 10m which surfaces in a canal with a low airspace. The next dive was on the 7 September '91; the exploration report is in CDG Newsletter no 102.

The aim was to dive Sump Three and to continue exploration beyond the canal found on the last dive. After a rapid carry, Gareth Hardman and Andy Ward kitted up and dived Sump Three, and a way on was found at the canal. Gareth dived, base-fed by Andy, but returned as the line was too hard to pull through. The only belay was a large loose rock which Andy carried to the start of the sump.

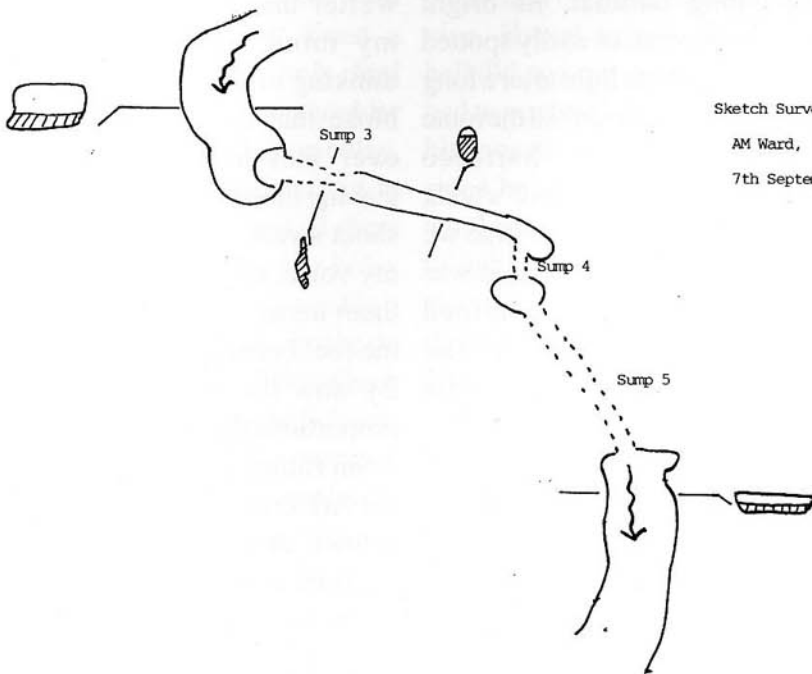
Gareth dived again with the line reel, followed by Andy, for a 4m dive to a small air bell from where an 18m sump led to another streamway. The way on was 6m wide but only 0.5m high, and as the exit from the sump was tight neither diver felt like de-kitting in the space available. The streamway could be seen for around 25m, where it went round a corner.

Gareth Hardman made a return to Sump Three on 15 December 1991, supported by Dominic Hyland, when he dived through to the end of Sump Five. Here he de-kitted and made his way along a passage 6m wide but only 18-20cm high, with water flowing across the whole width of the passage. He crossed a few



SLAUGHTER SWALLET - Drake Series
 (FOREST OF DEAN) NGR S058121373
 Surveyed by G.Hardman, A.Ward & R.Smith SEPTEMBER 1991
 SCALE 1cm : 5m
 BCRA GRADE 3 SURVEY

SLAUGHTER SWALLET, Forest of Dean



Sketch Survey of Downstream Sumps
 AM Ward, G Hardman
 7th September 1991

pools, up to a metre deep, making the passage higher for a short way. The passage then closed down to a very narrow rift which marked the end of a good cave, -30m from the sumps.

Thanks to RFDCC, Roger Smith, Rob Franklin, Dominic Hyland and Neal Harman.

Descriptions:

Sump Three - 11m, then 20m of canal with small airspace.

Sump Four - 4m, very tight to small airspace.

Sump Five - 18m of body-sized tube.

Note; all airspaces from Sumps Three to Five would disappear in high water conditions.

101 Great Caving Trips

by *Tony Baker*

No.2 Gouffre de Sodome et Gomorrhe

Well, we should have known by the name, shouldn't we?

The summer of 1991 was marked by a trip to the Massif du Marguareis, on the French-Italian border, the primary objective of which was to explore that classic Italian cave, the Piaggia Bella (you can read about this on p.5 of this Newsletter). Most people visited the area for just two weeks, but a few of us added an extra week at the beginning to get some more caving in. This worked out very well to begin with - we made a couple of forays into P.B., sussing the place out, and with a couple of days before the main contingent arrived, we looked through the book for something a bit different.

Now there are various reasons why we chose a cave with a horrible sounding name, chief among them being that the guidebook told us it had "beaute intrinseque". Lesson One: Never Trust a Guidebook.

The other main reason for our choice of Gouffre de Sodome et Gomorrhe was a practical one; as the advance party, and having travelled out in a Vauxhall Astra, a Ford Crapi and a Volvo 240 saloon, the seven of us hadn't managed to stuff much rope in. Lots of other things in the book sounded more fun, but weren't possible with our limited resources.

With Wookey and Olly having gone elsewhere, and Brian Clipstone having knackered his car on The Track (see Piaggia Bella report, for details), which kept himself and Iain Miller at base camp trying to sort it, it fell to Hywel Davies, Eleanor Flaherty and myself to bravely go, etc.

We set off from top camp in high spirits and light rain. The track around the mountain was already becoming familiar, its bright orange waymarks easily spotted even by carbide light after a long trip. The book described the route from the Refuge Sarracco Volante, most of an hour's walk from top camp. By the time we reached the refuge the rain was heavy, but we remained undeterred as, from the description, the cave wasn't far away.

An hour later, we were still slogging around the hillside looking for the entrance. The book contains a sketch map which supposedly shows you where all the caves are. Some hope: the scale of this map is such that a needle in a haystack would be a mere bagatelle by comparison. Infuriatingly, we kept finding Gouffre des Pieds Secs, Grotte Jean Noir and so on (each cave has an identifying number painted on the rock at the entrance), but Sodome et Gomorrhe remained elusive.

By this time we were wetter than a summer Sunday at Penwyllt, but the situation was alleviated slightly by our finding a handy rock shelter.

"You wait in here" I told Hywel and Eleanor, "there's no point in us all getting soaked. I'll carry on searching, and come and tell you when I find it." Actually, this wasn't quite the chivalrous gesture it may sound: after all, I couldn't get any wetter than I already was, and my mind was occupied by thinking of things to say to the bloke that drew that map, if I ever met him. Besides, by leaving the others behind I could shout swear words at the top of my voice, rather than muttering them under my breath; it made me feel better, anyway.

By now the rain had reached proportions that would have sent Noah rummaging in the loft for the Ark drawings. It ran off my helmet, down my back, down my front and filled my wellies. I sloshed around through the grass that was by this time under an inch of water, looking at every crevice that might contain the cave. Eventually I found it - nowhere near where the map or the description said it was and so obscure that, having fetched Hywel and Eleanor, I couldn't find it again.

When I did, after another ten minutes tramping, morale

among the team was at an all-time low. Eleanor was feeling very cold, but I think Hywel and I shared the same gritty determination that no cave that had caused us this much hassle was going to win. Eleanor decided she would head back to the refuge (which, we had discovered earlier, was unlocked) and keep warm while Hywel and I continued. The refuge was only ten minutes walk from the entrance it had taken us most of two hours to find.

At last; the cave. Looking forward to all that *beaute intrinseque*, I set about rigging the thirty metre entrance pitch. Despite what the book said (Lesson Two: Never Trust a Guidebook) I could only find one grotty bolt, so using a boulder just outside as the back-up belay, I went on down. According to the book (Never Trust...) there was a bolt in place for a re-belay half-way down but I couldn't find this either so had to make do with a sling over a flake which didn't inspire much confidence. The bottom half of the entrance shaft was almost completely filled with a snow plug, with just enough space down one side to pass. Fumbling around at the re-belay, I unclipped the wrong krab and sent my tackle bag whistling down this space, where it lodged in a tight bit at the bottom. I could only reach this by scooping out big handfuls of snow with my (ungloved) hands, making me even colder and more miserable than I already was. The air in these Alpine caves is close to freezing (hence the presence of the snowplug in

September) and I could feel it biting into my face despite my exertions on the pitch. Still, at least I was down.

"Rope free" I panted, and sorted myself out while Hywel followed me down. We decided to leave our SRT kit on, since according to the guidebook survey we had a section of straight stream passage to follow, then another pitch. Firstly, though, there was a squeeze through a tight rifty bit. Then another. And another. One was a squeeze up, the next down. Oh, and they were all full of sharp bits that caught on *everything*. After I'd thrutched through a particularly tight downward vice, Hywel asked: "How the hell did you get through that?" I had to confess I didn't know, but his question had me worried since he's a lot slimmer than I am. I thought, "Shit, am I going to get back through this?" but since I still had my SRT kit on I thought I might stand more chance if I took it off. Still, I'd cross that bridge when we came to it later on. For the time being I had to worry about the next awkward thrutch. And the one after it. Suddenly this didn't look anything like the survey in the book said it would (Lesson Three: Never Trust a Guidebook).

My memory records the time spent squeezing up and down through that rift as being several hours; it was probably fifteen minutes. By that time we'd gone far enough to realise that the whole passage was going to be like this. Hywel was the first to voice what we were both

thinking: "I think I've probably had about enough of this" he said, with that wonderfully understated tone of his (Translation: "Let's piss off out of here NOW"). With great relief, I agreed and we headed out.

We emerged onto the surface half an hour later, where it was dark and the rain was still coming down in tankerloads, and set off to find Eleanor; she was huddled under a pile of blankets in the refuge, blissfully unaware of the nightmare she'd missed.

"How was it?" she asked, and it was difficult to make the reply communicate the true horror of the experience.

I present this tale as an educational one. If any of my readers ever visit the Massif du Marguareis, they will at least know of one cave to leave off the itinerary. They will know not to trust that damned book (if you ever meet the author, or the bloke that drew the map, let me know...). They will also, hopefully, realise that caves aren't usually given horrible-sounding names without good reason (and if any French speakers would like to let me know what "*beaute intrinseque*" really means, I'd be grateful - I obviously got it wrong).

However, if having read this you decide to go and experience Gouffre de Sodome et Gomorrhe for yourself, you might like to know that there is, in the snow plug at the bottom of the entrance shaft, a blue tape sling that I dropped while de-rigging. You're welcome to it.

The Ballad of Hurnell Moss

by Gary Vaughan

Foreword...

In the week preceding Easter 1991 a small number of club members were paying their annual visit to the Yorkshire Dales. In addition to Iain Miller, Dave Holder, Debbie Stephens and myself we were fortunate, or unfortunate as the case may be, to be joined for a quick trip into Hurnell Moss by a young chap of the name of "Wookey" from the Cambridge University Caving Club.

This small verse, written shortly after the trip recalls some of the finer points of the trip including the very special affection that Wookey developed for one of the club's "Gold Flash" tackle sacks...

The sun was shining brightly on the door of 1 Moor Lane
While those inside debated,
would it snow or would it rain?
Will Inglesport be open? Do they
really make a loss?

"Enough" I cried, "the time is
late, let's go to Hurnell Moss".

And so we loaded up the car,
with bags and bags of gear,
With so much crammed inside,
it's nigh impossible to steer

I said "You'll have to walk my
dear, we'll see you at the cave"
"I've got your wallet" Debs
replied, "you bloody well
behave!"

And so subdued we hit the road
and headed for the fell
Arrived and parked, unpacked
the gear and started up the trail
"I'll rig" said Wook to Iain, "cos
I know it's such a chore"

Oh no! I've left the hangers on
the @%*@**! cottage floor".

Poor Iain, he was so dismayed,
with such an awful frown
I said "It's OK, never mind, I'll
nip back to the town"

And so with foot pressed to the
floor to cut the time we'd lost
I hurtled back at double speed, a
bit like Alain Prost.

It was twenty minutes later till
we started off in force
And twenty minutes after that I
wished I'd brought a horse

Instead of all this caving gear
that hung around my neck,
But then the caves near Gaping
Gill were always quite a trek.

We walked for miles and miles
and miles, and then we walked
some more

And by the hour of twelve
o'clock I wasn't really sure
Of where the hole was s'posed
to be, or even of its size
I thought "Before we come
again, a guide book would be
wise".

"So which direction should we
go?" I asked while on the run
And Iain said "I've got it lads, a
bearing from the sun
Will take us to the cave we want,
without terrific fuss"
And that is how we came to find
the cave called Hurnell Moss.

Now Wookey led with bolts and
rope and Iain close at hand
Then Debbie, me and David H.
a most intrepid band
All gathered round the second
pitch, to see what Wook might
do

If we had brought a turnstile
then we could have formed a
queue!

Below he progressed, working
hard with four bolts ready placed
Considering the day outside it
did seem quite a waste
To sit around this dark damp

hole, all fastened by a thread
And by the time the fifth was
placed I wished I'd stayed in
bed.

A mutiny was duly formed that
numbered two plus one
All prussiked up the entrance
pitch to sit beneath the sun
Until a dim and distant shout
was heard to softly whine
"It's OK lads, please come on
down, he's off the traverse line".

And so we entered yet again to
find the line in place
With not much more to place
your feet than dark and gloomy
space
Which disappeared between
your legs into the depths beyond
A situation I confess I'm not
extremely fond.

But Wook was on the next ledge
down and Iain nearly there
And so with nothing else to do I
had to grin and bear
But actually 'twas rather fun,
the pitch was very nice
Descending in this huge vast hole
with rock as smooth as ice.

I landed on a roomy ledge and
shouted up "Rope free",
And then climbed up to Iain's
side to see what I could see
The second hang was under way,
with knots in great profusion
I said aloud "That durn't look
right", to add to the confusion.

And so began a long defence
which led to a debate
Until the other two arrived and
moaned about the wait
"I'll get on then" said Wook at
last, and started to depart
We watched his light descending
slow into the waiting dark.

I looked around and up and
down and thought "My what a
pitch"
And from the depths came
Wookey's voice, "I think
I've got a hitch
I'm near the bottom, fairly close,
but now I must abort"
We shouted "Why?" and the
reply; "The ropes too
@@%\$* short!"

So up he came and in a jiff we'd
rearranged the rigging
To get the extra rope required
and cut out all this frigging
It wasn't long till things were
right and we had all descended
And after this terrific pitch, the
cave abruptly ended.

A tortuous and awkward climb
led to the final sump
Made easy by the use of rope,
it's not a place to jump
So Debbie, Iain and myself
decided to retreat
Whilst Dave and Wook de-
rigged the lot, I think that's rather
neat.

I said "We're off, we'll see you

out, ta-ta for now, must dash"
And left them both together with
a tackle sack called Flash.
The exit was a jolly spree, we
three were out by five
An hour later I exclaimed
"D'you think they're still
alive?"

And then as if I'd conjured them
with some old ancient spell
They both crawled out the
entrance hole and Wookey said
"Oh hell! The next time that I
take a bag it won't be so damn
hard
As lugging this old thing around,
this bloody fat b'stard."

And so the moral of this tale is
simple to explain
Your party's late, they're
overdue, so who the hell's to
blame?
Well if they're doing S.R.T., a
really mega bash
It's probably your friend and
mine - the tackle sack called
Flash!

Ah - Ah.....Saviour of the
Universe!

Letters to the Editor

Dear Tony,

one Saturday evening whilst drinking in the Copper Beech, I was most perturbed to overhear the drunken conversation of some SWCC members (whose names I will not mention) berating the effort and cost involved in renovating the ladies' toilet area at Penwyllt.

The criticism concerned newly-painted walls, tiled sink area and extra toilet which were part of the recent improvements. It was stated that the club was "a caving club", and as such these were "unnecessary luxuries".

As one of those that regularly uses the ladies' toilet area, I should like to place on record my heartfelt thanks to those members who worked so hard over the working week and at other times in making the "ladies" what it is today.

We do not all wish to spend our weekends in squalor - surely membership of a caving club should not mean that we are denied the use of reasonable facilities?

Sue Williams

Penarth,

South Glamorgan.

Dear Tony,

you may have been expecting a letter from me. I doubt if many people have a caving club named after them! (see "The TAG Fall Cave-In", p.9, SWCC Newsletter no. 110). When John Elliot first told me about the "Phil Schwarz Caving Group", several months ago, I thought he was taking the piss. However, Jim Hay recently showed me a copy of the SWCC Newsletter and I had to believe it. When I have given talks on the discovery and exploration of Otter Hole, I have always said that while it was a fantastic experience to be one of the first into the cave, what

we did was nothing compared to the immense beauty of the place. When we are long forgotten, the cave will still be there in all its majesty. I would never have named anything after myself, so it was quite a surprise to find out about the Phil Schwarz Caving Group. Everyone in the RFDCC thought it was very funny. Please could you send me a spare copy of the SWCC Newsletter if you have one - I'd like to have one for posterity. Please could you also let me know the address of the P.S.C.G. (How many cavers are there in the group? Are they all long-haired hippies, looking like I did in the film?) Yours,

Phil Schwarz

Lydney,

Gloucestershire.

Dear Tony,

you should soon receive some Newsletters from the past few months at the Tennessee Central Basin Grotto. Iran into Kathy Mackay at the recent TAG Fall Cave-In and she told me about the sad death of Ian Anderson; I conveyed the news to other members of the grotto and everyone who knew Ian was dismayed to hear of the tragic accident.

On a brighter note, TAG was wonderful this year - 1446 people were there and enjoyed all the usual attractions. This year's bonfire was a record-breaking 32 feet high and 155 feet in diameter.

The Phil Schwarz Caving Group is still going strong; a few members left and some joined. We've even had our own T-shirts printed up, which say "Phil Schwarz Caving Group does TAG '92." I'm not sure when you'll receive this letter so I'll wait to hear from you before sending a shirt. Until then cave softly,

Bobby Biddix

Conservation Chairman of the Tennessee Central Basin Grotto (and P.S.C.G. Chairman).

Murfreesboro,

Tennessee,

USA.

I've put the writers of the above two letters in touch with each other, and asked them both to keep me informed of developments - it will be interesting to see what happens when the P.S.C.G. finally makes contact with their inspirational mentor! - Ed.

Dear Tony,

in response to your request for photographs, I had a look through my collection and found the enclosed selection, which I don't want back. Some are pre-club, like myself! Hence I have forgotten who took them - I'm not a photographer. Make any use you like of them.

Many thanks for a super Newsletter; it cheers up my 95th year quite a lot (I am one of the three who started the club, with Arthur Hill and Ted Mason). All my hard caving was done before the war, from Manchester. Cheers,

Charles Freeman

Sully,

South Glamorgan

Enclosed with Charles' letter was a fascinating selection of black-and-white photographs - forty in all - including some of early dives at Ffynnon Ddu, caving in Derbyshire and on Mendip. I shall publish some of these in the next Newsletter, then pass them on to the Librarian, for safe keeping in the club's photo collection. Many thanks to Charles for such a kind donation - the pictures are a valuable historical record. - Ed.



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