

South Wales Caving Club Newsletter 127



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Cover photographs:

Ice formations in Castleguard Cave by Jules Carter; The Berger by Tony Baker

Karstic Dye Tracing in Peak Cavern

By Bridget Hall

Modelling the results to predict contaminant transport in a Carboniferous limestone aquifer.

Three springs, Peak Cavern Gorge, Russet Well and Slop Moll, drain 13km² of Carboniferous limestone in the Peak District. Castleton is situated on what was once a large limestone reef, therefore the limestone is particularly resistant, forming steep hillsides and crags. The aquifer is recharged from a non-limestone catchment, water runs off shales and sinks in a series of swallets. There are 12 main swallets, some are just sinks and some are well known caves such as P8 (Jackpot) and Giants Hole (P12). This allogenic water resurges at Russet Well and Slop Moll. Autogenic (from rainfall) water percolates through the limestone from the plateau above and resurges at Peak Cavern Gorge.

In karstic aquifers, groundwater tends to be stored in enlarged joints, fractures and bedding planes. There are three types of porosity, primary pore porosity, secondary fracture porosity and solutionally enlarged integrated conduits making up the tertiary porosity. This makes karstic aquifers susceptible to contamination. An investigation was made into the potential for transportation of contaminants in Peak-Speedwell.

Point source contamination is common in limestone areas caused by burst septic tanks or unlined landfills in shakeholes, leaching contaminants. Springs are common in karstic areas and are often used as drinking water supplies, as is the case in the Peak-Speedwell system, therefore contamination poses a risk to human health. The travel-times tend to be much shorter than for other aquifers because the flow is mostly conduit, reducing the time for remediation or spotting that the contamination has occurred. Karstic systems are also at a greater risk of contamination because no natural attenuation has time to occur during transport and there is no “filtering” of the water through pores, during intergranular flow. This increases the threat to drinking water supplies and river ecology.

The investigation was carried out by using a

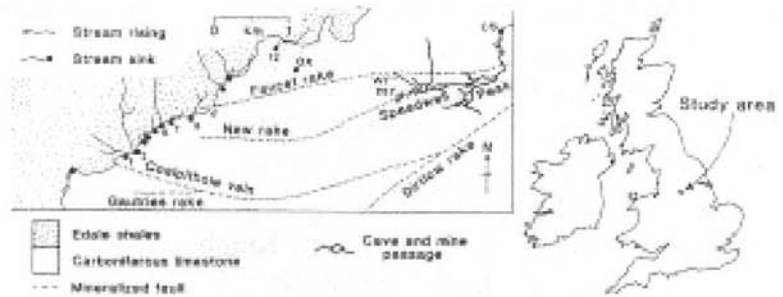


Figure 1. Map of study area.

fluorescent dye to mimic the contaminant travelling through the system. Nine traces were carried out over different route lengths of phreatic conduit. The Environment Agency approved the use of two fluorescent dye tracers, Rhodamine WT and Florescence. The EA has set out guidelines on the use of tracer testing in aquifers and encourages its use to determine information about aquifer properties. Field fluorometers, water sampling and granular activated

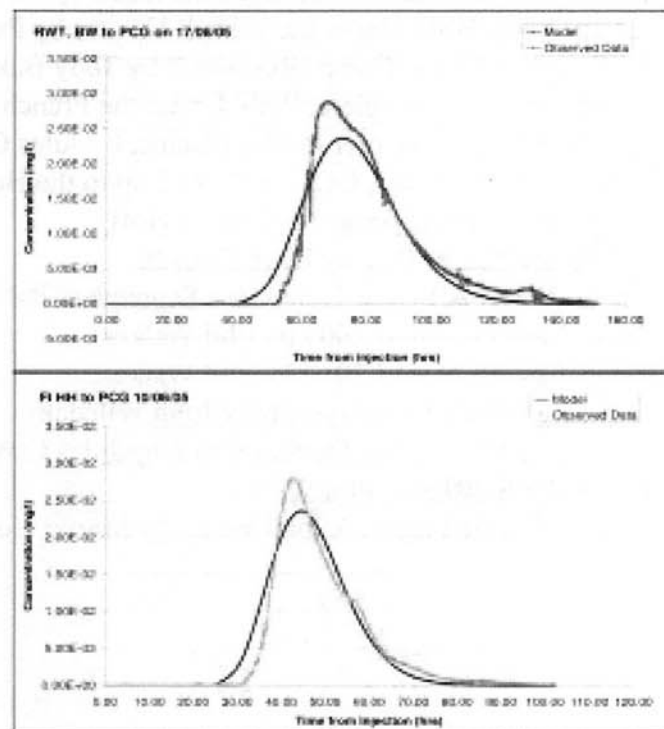


Figure 2

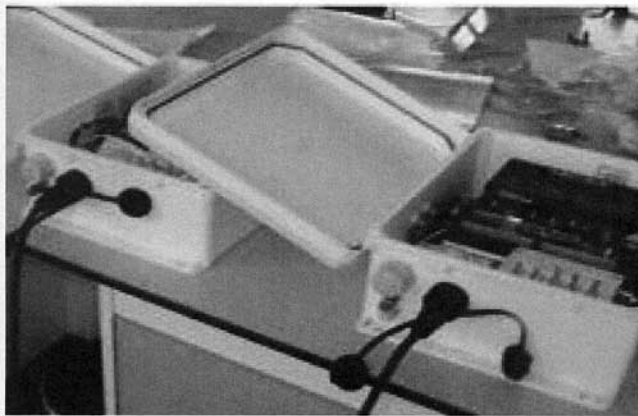


Figure 3. Field fluorimeters being prepared for use.

charcoal were used to detect the dyes at the resurgences. Permission to access the Peak and Speedwell system was granted by the manager of the Showcaves.

Discharge of the resurgences was measured by two methods for comparison. Stage (height of water) was recorded using loggers at three weirs and used to calculate discharge theoretically. Standard dilution gaugings were carried out to obtain field discharge values. Dilution gauging values were used for further calculations because the theoretical measurements were not well calibrated. Values of 74l/s for Russet Well and between 14l/s and 6l/s for Peak Cavern Gorge were used.

Field fluorimeters record the concentration of dye over time and were set to log every 5 minutes for the traces. The loggers can be downloaded in the field onto a laptop and the data imported into excel. Concentration-Time plots were produced for each trace and clear breakthrough curves were obtained for six of the traces. These breakthrough curves were analysed and the percentage of dye recovered calculated.

The field fluorimeters required calibration when two fluorescent dyes are used simultaneously. The filters in the probes are not able to completely distinguish between dyes causing a small peak on a Rhodamine-WT curve when a Fluorescein trace is being carried out.

Problems were encountered in obtaining reasonable recoveries for the traces because the discharge data was unreliable. The tracing equipment gives clear breakthrough curves and one would expect recoveries between 80 and 105% but this was not always the case. Recoveries of between 60% and 130% were obtained from the traces. I would recommend that for future work dilutions gaugings are carried out more frequently during each trace to gain a better understanding of the discharge at the resurgences.

Advection causes solute transport in a laminar flowing system according to Darcy's Law, however this idealisation cannot be made to the system studied because turbulent flow occurs. Not all solute transport is advective, some dispersion of solute occurs during transport due to variations in flow. This causes problems for predicting the travel-times of contaminants in an aquifer. Mechanical dispersion can be described by Fick's Law and can be longitudinal or transverse.

A fissure flow model from John Barker (University College London) was used to model the breakthrough curves. The model only models the dispersion of the dye as it travels through the system and this is the parameter obtained from the model. The model inputs are source function, route length, scale factor and advection time. The source function is the concentration of tracer in mg/l at the start of the trace and concentration at some time later and is inputted as a step function. A travel distance must be inputted into the model in meters. The model allows the scale to be adjusted using the percentage dye recovery. The advection time is the time for the centre of the dye mass to reach the sampling point (fluorometer probe).

Two examples of the model are shown in figure 2. It can be seen that the field data fits the model fairly well apart from some distinct features. These features may be caused by:

- * dye loss in the system to unknown resurgences,
- * a second unrecorded peak may have occurred at the monitored resurgence due to transport by a second route,
- * dye may be retained in dead zones and the tail may extend for much longer than the peak section of the trace as the dye is gradually released, this is not occurring in the system,
- * dye may have moved into the wall rock or sediments and not out again,
- * water levels may have fallen during the trace period and left dye in pockets where it can only be released when water levels are raised.
- * dye may be being released below the detectable limit this is particularly a problem for very long tails.
- * dye may be being absorbed onto clay particles

Shoulders are an important feature of the field data and show secondary conduits exist in two of the phreatic conduits traced.

Percentage dispersion for the traces ranged between 1.75% and 2.00% of the route length. The results of the modelling have shown that it is reasonable to use the dispersion only model to model the transport of contaminants through the system. This provides an estimate of the travel-time and residence time of a contaminant in the system. This is only possible for soluble contaminants and pathogens that would be transported in the water in a similar way to the dye. It may be possible to adjust the model for other contaminants such as DNAPLs using laboratory experiments to compare them to the dye.

Summary:

* The same hydrogeological regime exists in the aquifer as had previously been observed for non-flood conditions.

* Travel-times are considerably longer in drought conditions.

* The equipment can successfully be used to gain quantitative measurements of dye recovery in a system.

* A significant finding of the research is that percentage dispersion is the same for all route lengths, showing that dispersivity is independent of conduit route length.

Thanks must go to the following for help with the project:

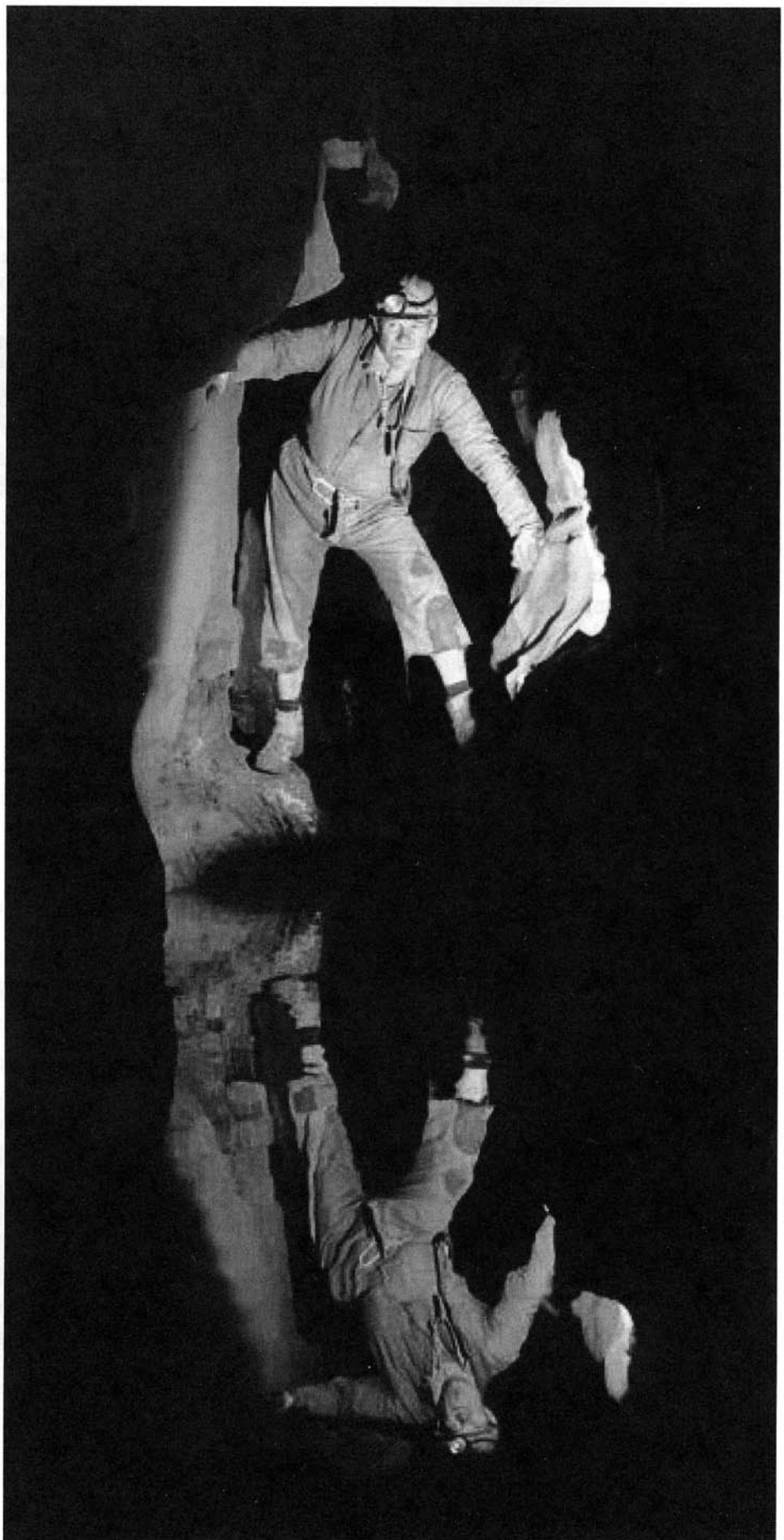
Funding Body: NERC
NER/S/M/2004/12977

Field Personnel: Sheffield
University Speleological Society

Specialist consultants: Prof. John
Gunn (Huddersfield Uni) and

Prof. Simon Bottrell (Leeds Uni)

Model: Prof. John Barker (UCL)



Peter Harvey reflected in Salubrious Passage, OFD, photo Jem Rowland

Peter I. W. Harvey 1921-2009

An Appreciation

By Jem Rowland

Peter Harvey was discoverer of Ogof Ffynnon Ddu, founder member of the South Wales Caving Club, its president for 33 years, a great character and a great friend.

Peter was born in 1921 at the North West Frontier in India, where his father was high-ranking army officer. His mother was from the Branson family, a name that is familiar today. Shortly after Peter's birth the family moved to the UK and settled first in the Mendips and then in south Devon. A visit to Wookey Hole at an early age sparked his interest in caves and later he explored holes he found whilst cycling around south Devon during holidays from boarding school.

He had a public school education at Clifton College in Bristol, though I had the impression that he hadn't enjoyed it much. Its saving grace seemed to be a school outdoor activities group that introduced him to the caving world.

School was followed by a prestigious engineering apprenticeship with the Bristol Aeroplane Company at Filton, and Peter took the opportunity to cave with some of the main Mendip clubs and to develop a taste for digging for new caves.

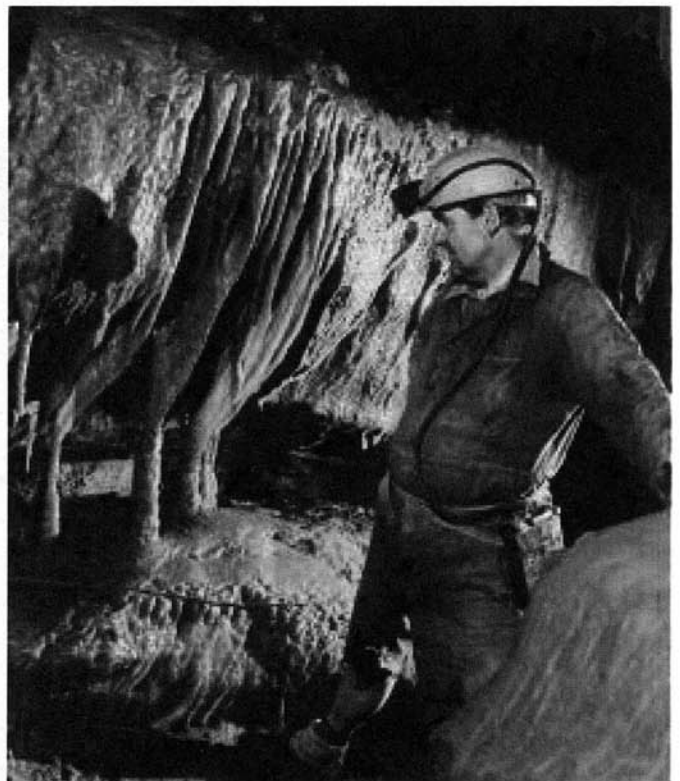
World War II, with its pressure on the aircraft industry, put a temporary end to his caving but, as the war drew to an end, he began to cave again, particularly with the UBSS, the University of Bristol club, though he had to join as a so-called 'outside' member because he was not a member of the University. This brought him into contact with the Dragon Group, which was led by Gerard Platten. It was an informal group of mainly Mendip cavers, but also including some from South Wales. Its aim was to develop the caving potential of South Wales, particularly the Swansea Valley area. It led directly to the formation, of the South Wales Caving Club at a meeting held in the Gwyn Arms in 1946, with Peter as one of its founding members. Soon after, and following some careful investigation, came his discovery, with Ian Nixon, of Ogof Ffynnon Ddu, which of course became a cave of major international importance. He always took great pride in this discovery and in the success of the South Wales Caving Club. He was delighted to be elected its president in 1976, a position he would hold, unchallenged, for 33 years.

For most of his life Peter was a fit, capable, and inspirational caver with a nose for promising digs and new passage. He is, of course, the Peter in 'Peter's Pretty Passage' which, when we found it after Peter had looked upwards and spotted a hole, was one of the most finely decorated in the whole cave.

On his 60th birthday, accompanied by Bob Radcliffe, he completed the challenging trip from OFD I up to Smith's Armoury and back, determined to be the first person over 60 to do the trip. The fact that he completed it in not much over 8 hours is testament to his fitness at the time. Bob tells me that, to ensure success, Peter had insisted on rehearsing it two weeks before!

Peter caved regularly until the age of 85, when he and I went via the OFD I streamway and up to Roundabout Chamber, on what was to be his final trip into the cave that he had dug into almost exactly 60 years before. His diaries reveal that, in all, he completed well over 900 trips into Ogof Ffynnon Ddu.

He took up cave photography in the late 1940s, in the final days of glass plates and flashpowder, and took



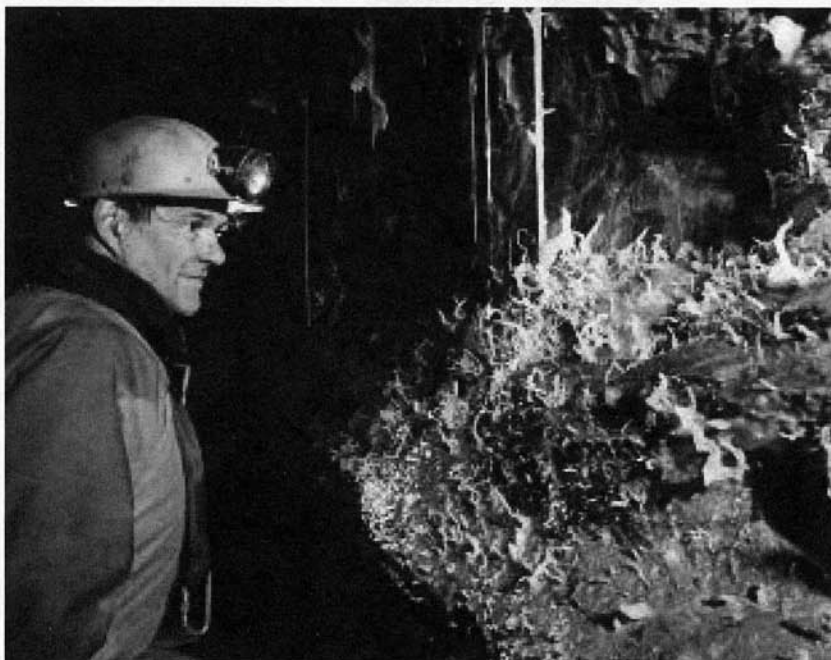
Peter on his 500th trip into OFD, photo Jem Rowland

some fine shots. He maintained that he was never as comfortable with film as with plates, nor as comfortable with bulbs or electronic flash as he was with flashpowder but, nevertheless, cave photography remained a passion for the rest of his life, recognised by a special award at the Hidden Earth national caving conference in 2004.

He had remained at the Bristol Aeroplane Company and its successor for many years following the war, later pursuing business interests in South Wales, and purchasing the stately Llandough Castle, near Cardiff, where he lived until 1963, when he bought a yacht and sailed off to the Mediterranean - for four years, during which time he explored caves in Sardinia and Tunisia. He returned to Bristol in 1967 and joined the team designing the supersonic Concorde.

At the end of the Concorde development, he applied for a job with a highly specialised gearbox design company at Rhayader in Mid Wales, a company which at that time was part of the Vickers Group. At interview he was shown a set of drawings of a particularly complex engineering design and was asked a technical question about them. His response was to point to a set of initials in the corner showing that this was his work! He got the job, and later became a director and joint owner of the company, working on the design of epicyclic gearboxes for wind turbines, battle tanks, and more. As a caving by-product of his skills, he designed the ingenious 'Sky Hook' for retrieving and replacing fixed ropes from high places.

I first met Peter when he returned from the Mediterranean in 1967, though I had certainly heard of



With helictites in 'Peter's Pretty Passage' OFD, photo Jem Rowland

him before that. I was talking to Clive Jones outside the Club at Penwyllt; a car drew up, Clive said "good grief it's Harvey". Peter walked up to us, scowled at me and said angrily to Clive "Who's that?". Clive said "that's Jem, he's ok" and thereafter we were the best of friends, frequently caving and digging together.

During the 1980s he used to come over from Rhayader to stay with us at home near Aberystwyth, to explore mines, to drink beer, and to enjoy being cooked for. He particularly enjoyed visiting when our strawberry patch was producing far more than we could eat - that wasn't a problem for Peter! I well remember his "Hmmm... strawberries" and the copious quantities he used to eat.

His caving career was not without mishap. The relatively innocuous traverse of 'President's Leap' in OFD II commemorates a momentary lapse of concentration that led to Peter's rapid descent onto the boulders below, miraculously without serious injury. On another occasion, while 'victim' on a rescue practice using an experimental stretcher of canvas and plywood, the head ropes were attached incorrectly. Suddenly finding himself dangling by the feet over a large drop, his somewhat characteristic comment was simply "Hmmm... what did you do that for?".

Despite his wicked sense of humour and the glint in his eye, he tended to be a shy and, for much of his life perhaps, a lonely character, with his close caving friends providing his 'world'. One of his closest friends, until his sad death in 1985, was Gwynne Sanders, whom many of us remember with great affection.

Meeting Wendy, in 1982, transformed Peter's life. She became a loving partner with an extremely supportive extended family. Possibly for the first time, Peter was truly happy, and remained so until Wendy's early, sudden and tragic death in 2003. It shattered him, and it was a trauma from which he never recovered,

Peter, you were a great friend, a great character, and one of the greats of the caving world. We will miss you.

These words were read by Jem Rowland at Peter Harvey's funeral on 6th November 2009. An obituary written by Jem and Tony Baker appeared in The Guardian and is available online at: www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/nov/30/peter-harvey-obituary

SWCC in the Jura, July/August 2005

In late July 2005, some thirty-two SWCC members and guests assembled at a campsite in the French village of Ornans, with the intention of exploring some of the fine caves and other attractions to be found in the Franche-Comte region (usually referred to by Brit cavers as 'the Jura', although the Jura is just one of the four departements that comprise the Franche-Comte).

The latest foreign jaunt organised by Fearless Leader Gary Vaughan, this one, in common with the others, had a major objective: the Verneau traverse, an epic, flood-prone 8.1km through-trip from the Gouffre des Biefs Boussets to the Grotte Baudin. As usual on Gary's trips, however, there was to be no shame in shunning the major objective and sampling some of the more leisurely caving options (or, indeed, not caving at all), as you will read over the following pages.

I count myself among the fortunate few who have exploited Gary's research and organisational skills on

foreign caving trips as far back as the Piaggia Bella expedition in 1991, and must once again express grateful thanks to Gary for all his hard work in setting up yet another successful excursion. The fact that we are all able to turn up and do so much superb caving with so little hassle is entirely down to the work that he put in beforehand, and I'm sure I speak on behalf of everyone who went in summer 2005 when I express our gratitude.

Thanks are also due to Clive Westlake, who was not only the source of most of the background information, surveys and cave descriptions that ensured the smooth running of the whole trip, but also showed some of his fantastic cave pictures at SWCC and inspired us to visit the area.

Finally, thanks to everyone who gave in to relentless nagging from me and provided the articles and photos that make up this section of the Newsletter. I hope you enjoy their efforts.

Tony Baker



The magnificent domed roof of the Salle de Bon Negro in the Grotte Baudin, photo Tony Baker

Grotte Baudin

By Tony Baker

Despite the wealth of caves on offer in the Jura, for several members of the summer 2005 trip there was one over-riding attraction: the Verneau traverse, a 9km through-trip from the Gouffre des Biefs-Boussets to the Grotte Baudin. Reading through the accounts written by previous British teams, it was clear that this trip was likely to take in excess of twelve hours and was a serious undertaking, and the exit through the Grotte Baudin was likely to be muddy and arduous. So, taking the bull by the horns, Martin Hoff, Jules Carter, Brian Clipstone and I volunteered for the job of rigging the Baudin entrance on the first day in France.

Walking up the hill from the car park in Nans-sous-Ste.Anne on a hot morning, with our gear in big rucksacks, we were grateful that Brian had been this way before – he and Andy and Dave Dobson had spent a few days in the area the previous summer, and had established the locations of the more significant entrances. The cool draught (or should that be ‘gale’) coming out of the low entrance was a relief and we kitted up, leaving our bags a short way inside the cave as we wriggled through a succession of low, mud-floored crawls interspersed by small chambers, all the time facing a howling draught that removed any possibility of taking a wrong turn. A larger chamber was rigged with a curiously redundant rope (perhaps put there for no grander purpose than to assist with draughtless route-finding), and after another couple of minutes’ grovelling we were at the top of the first pitch. This was rigged with the customary in-situ tat, but as veterans of many a campaign in French caves, we’d come prepared with our own ‘proper’ rope.

This was the extent of Brian’s knowledge of the cave, but having read the accounts mentioned above I was equipped with all the information I needed: 5m down to a ledge, from where the draught emerging from a cunning sump by-pass route would lead me to the final drop to the streamway. One account had led me to believe that the whole pitch could be rigged with a single 45m rope, so having tied in to the existing hangers off I went. I soon found the sump by-pass, but a short way down the awkward, muddy crawl I realised the flaw in the plan: I could see a good way down the passage and there was no sign of the rest of the pitch. At this rate, my 45m was soon going to be used up. I

shouted back to Brian to untie the rope and throw it down after me, and to install instead the 10m rope we’d brought for just such an eventuality. Isn’t it great to be prepared?

I was soon at the final section of pitch; an awkward take-off at the end of the crawl had me hovering over 30m of space above the streamway, but the in-situ tat showed the way – a pendulum across to a fixed wire traverse. The previous visitors had described this ‘fearsome’ traverse in their accounts, without mentioning that it was rigged with a fixed wire, so we can only assume this is a recent installation. Don’t believe what other accounts might suggest about the difficulty of this traverse; for anyone who has tackled the Airy Fairy in Ogo Ffynnon Ddu I, this poses no great problem, although in a couple of places the lack of footholds requires a bit of arm strength to induce the necessary slack into the short cow’s tail to move it past the bolt. If you really get fed up with traversing it’s a simple matter to rig a rope part-way along and drop straight into the streamway, although the view from above leads me to suggest that this wouldn’t necessarily be an easier option – there are a couple of awkward-looking cascades to climb, and these are no doubt the reason the traverse is rigged for the distance it is.

Once off the wire, we dispensed with SRT kit and set off up the Baudin streamway, and this is a real treat. The stream runs along the bottom of a high passage, with occasional large chambers, one of which has a magnificent domed roof. There are deep pools (which can mostly be avoided if you’re in dry gear), and some fine sculpted rock formations. This is a fine a streamway as I’ve been in, and I soon realised that a photo trip in here would have to be added to the list of Things To Do. After a few hundred metres of this we reached a sump pool, but a short way back an inlet passage gave access to a bypass route, and after a few route-finding glitches the magnificent large passages continued. With time running out, we eventually stopped at an awkward-looking roped climb down, although subsequent visits proved this to be no more than a slippery slope, the rope useful as a handline.

My next encounter with the Grotte Baudin was with Jules Carter, on our through-trip from the Biefs-

Boussets. We'd encountered the foul-smelling streamway at the base of the Puits de Jonction, and spent the following hour or more trying to keep out of it, so it was a pleasant relief to climb up the (rigged) traverse into the dry passages of the Baudin. After some more wading, through thankfully clean water, we clambered up into the Salle de Bon Negro, and our jaws dropped. We were at the top of a huge boulder pile, and some 20m or so above our heads was a magnificent domed roof, 50m or more in diameter, that wouldn't have looked out of place in one of the great European cathedrals. It was a truly awesome place; we were a long way from daylight and this fact, combined with the eerie silence, added to the experience. I was really enjoying this trip, and memories of the stinking stream were fading fast.

More impressive passages followed, before we arrived at the Salle de Petit Negro, just as stunning as its bon predecessor. This was magnificent cave, and it would have been good to explore some of the other passages in this section, but this far into a long through-trip the focus naturally falls on the exit and we plodded on, emerging into warm sunshine some

eight-and-a-half hours after we'd entered the Biefs-Boussets. (Interested readers can find more details of our exploits in Jules's account of our trip elsewhere in this Newsletter.)

Good though the Verneau trip was, personally I would recommend visitors to the Jura to spend time exploring the Grotte Baudin rather than aspiring to complete the traverse. According to the description, there are some impressive formations and plenty more passage and I would have loved another long trip to experience some more of this superb cave. Sadly, few other people shared my enthusiasm for the Baudin: the polluted streamway had indelibly imprinted itself on the consciousness of everyone who completed the Verneau through-trip, while many of those who didn't attempt it were put off the bottom entrance by reports of the wire traverse. Although I managed to coerce a couple of willing victims for my photo trip there was no real willingness to go on a longer trip, especially when there were so many other fine caves in the area. Personally I think this was a shame; I rate Grotte Baudin as one of the finest caves in France, and if (when?) I go back to the Jura, it will be top of my wish-list.



The main Baudin streamway, photo Tony Baker.

To find the entrance to Grotte Baudin: Park in the large car park opposite the laiterie in Nans-sous-Sainte-Anne. Turn left out of the car park and cross the road to a gîte, then take the footpath that leads past the right hand side of the building and past a small cabin that rents out the equipment to tackle the via ferrata. On entering the woods, this path meets a forestry track; turn right. After a couple of hundred metres you come to a sharp left-hand bend, with signs about fees for the via ferrata. Follow the track, for another thirty or so metres, to where a path up the hill can be gained by using tree roots on the right-hand side ('Treea Ferrata' as one wag put it). Follow this path, and further up the hill you will

pass the end of one of the via ferrata wires; ignore this one and continue up to the next wire, which leads around a short section of cliff (cow's tails not necessary) to a path that contours the hillside, created by using logs to make a ledge. This path comes to the base of a small cliff and you will see the sign warning about the dangers of flooding at about the same time you'll feel the cold draught howling out of the cave entrance and spilling down the hill. (Footnote: once back at the car park, the river is easily reached and this is a useful way of cleaning off the quantities of sticky mud that will be coating you and your kit.)

The Verneau Through Trip

By Andy Dobson

A crack of dawn start? Well not quite, but we surprised Jules by being up and breakfasting while he was still waiting for Tony so they could head off for their own through-trip ahead of us. We dropped Brian's car at Nans sous Sainte-Anne and I drove round to drop Brian, Dave and the gear in the lay-by next to the Bief Boussets entrance. Fortunately Sue was still there from dropping off Jules and Tony, and she kindly ferried me back after I had parked in Deservilliers village (the lay-by is notorious for break-ins to cavers' cars) with Emily's silly songs cassette entertaining us! Presumably the locals are used to people wearing just caving undies, wetsocks and wellies as they did not bat an eyelid. We kitted up in the shade of the trees in the gully leading to the entrance – Brian had a real fight to get his Warmbac on after years out of use, while our £33 Asda surfing wetsuits (bought specially for the trip) were easy (and almost comfortable).

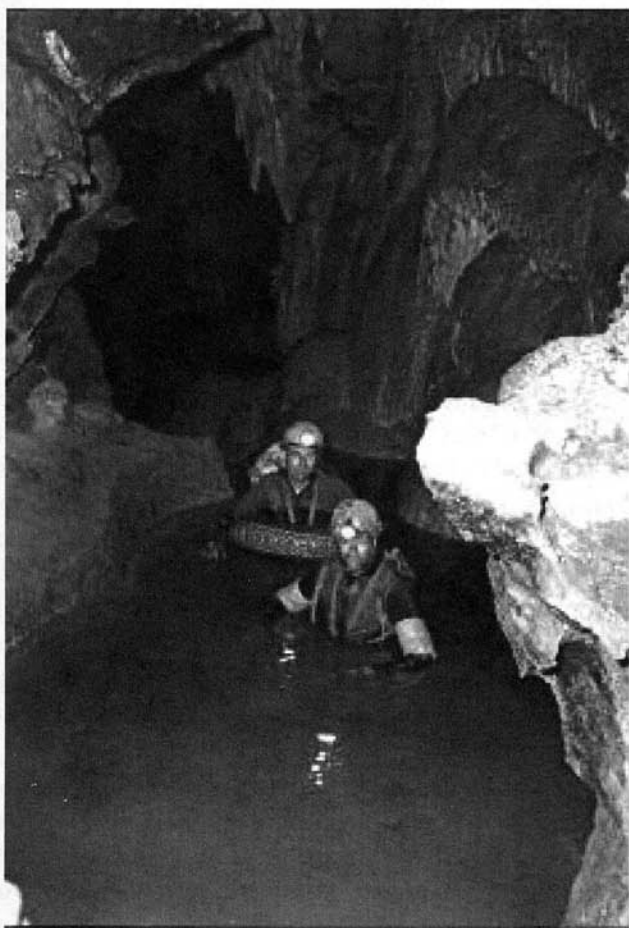
About 10.30am Brian led off down the daylight entrance pitch to walking meander passage, with wedged tree trunks testifying to how flood prone the entrance is. After several simple pitches, then a 2m climb down, a short crawl brought us to a bouldery chamber. Here we dekked our SRT rigs ready for the tight thrutching in the meanders and crawls – having been in Bief Boussets the previous year on our recce trip we knew what to expect. Slow to steady progress followed as Brian overheated in his thick wetsuit while Dave and I took care to avoid trashing our thin ones. We seemed to take a slightly different route to last year in the sump bypass crawls, but the experience of doing the meanders

before helped us find the best level to progress. After lots of thrutching and grovelling (and the odd swear word) we reached Salle Machin for a few metres of walking and an out-of-balance climb, remembering to stay high for the way on, then back to flat-out crawling to the top of the second series of pitches.

We kitted up again in a small low chamber, then off down three short drops, around a corner, to pleasant longer pitches landing at the bottom to wade in the deep gour pools. The duck was only armpit-deep but certainly cooled us off! A few minutes' diversion to dead-end passages left and right fooled us before we remembered that if all else fails, read the instructions. A quick consultation of the route description enabled us to locate the low passage back behind the rock shelf where we had climbed down and moments later we were stood in the Grand Collecteur, the main streamway.

After a brief stop for a cereal bar and some water we soon continued as the soaking had left us a bit shivery in our thin wetsuits. A short section of ledges and pools led to an impressive gravel-floored stream passage, 2-3 metres wide and perhaps 10m high, in a sandy beige-coloured rock. This impressive streamway proved ideal to warm up again as we stomped along for about 1.5 km, pausing for photos, before reaching the sump. This looked thoroughly uninviting although the low water levels had probably shortened it slightly from the quoted 5m long – in any case we had already ruled out a free dive!

A short way back along the streamway a muddy climb into the bypass was immediately obvious. A muddy crawl led to a dripping aven, then a muddy passage led to the base of the bypass pitch, which strangely enough was muddy. In case I have not made it clear the essential element of the whole bypass is...mud! With 35m of prussiking on muddy fixed rope we took the ascent very gently – especially as the re-belays splitting the pitch into four sections involve wide horizontal swings. It certainly seemed a very long 35m and I was glad to get off at the top. A short muddy passage led to a succession of even more muddy short pitches, and climbs down on fixed ropes so coated in mud they were hard to feed through the descender, eventually dropping back into the Collecteur a few metres downstream of the sump.



Brian Clipstone and Andy Dobson in the Salle de Corniche, photo Dave Dobson

This next section of streamway was much smaller and quite slippery. I was glad to find the U-tube completely dry and we plodded on to reach the large Salle du Petit Loop. Here we duly noted the old bivouac site and consulted the route guide. Opting for the easy route, we found the short rigged pitch

back into the streamway and on to the boulder pile where the classic and alternative routes diverge.

We had decided to try the high-level alternative route that had been dug through a few years back. After a climb up the boulder slope on the right I found a short rope climb up through a small hole, which led up through a squeeze and crawl into walking passage. A short search for the recent connection located a bouldery rising passage on the left. I clambered up into a stunning high gallery (the Galerie de la Cote Jamey) with fantastic flowstone and formations. A photo stop was required, although it was hard to frame the superb flow down the wall. At the far end of the gallery another section of flowstone and gours must have been beautiful before someone stomped mud all over it.

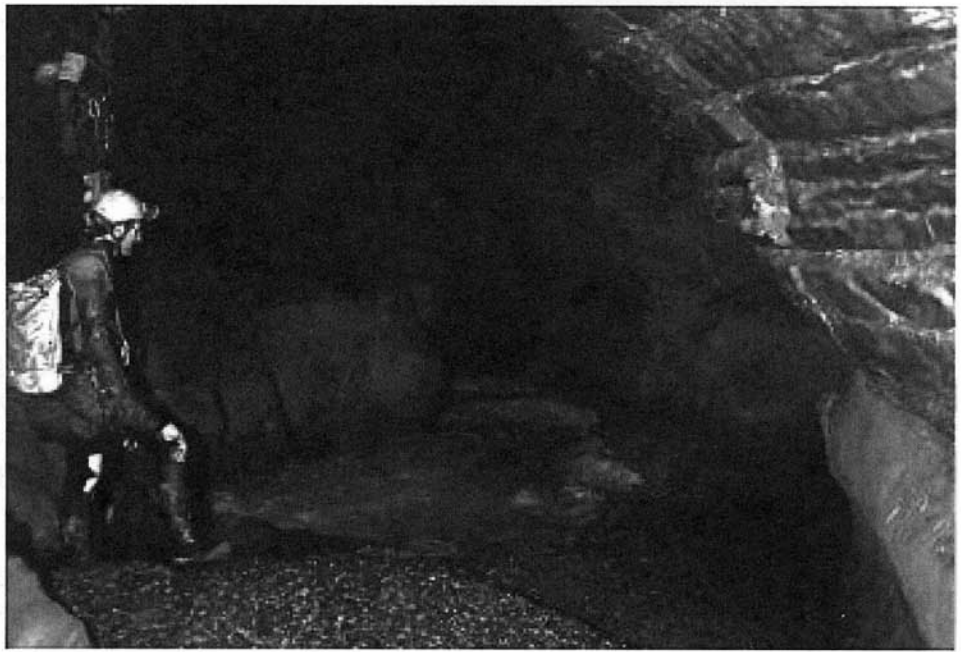
After this a short pitch down on iffy rigging - with a rub point tied out on the in-situ rope - landed us in what was presumably the Collecteur Parallele, although the cobbled floor was dry. However a noticeable tang in the air was becoming stronger and soon we reached a viscous black noisome pool of decaying organic matter – the stench was terrible. We could not see around the corner to ascertain if it was a lake or the start of the sump. Brian waded in thigh deep but it was still dropping sharply away and was obviously a swim – definitely not an option, it was nauseous just to stand by it. I waded a short way to a shelf on the right but this only led to another thick stinking sump. Looking for a high-level bypass on the right (which the description gives as the way past the sump) we first tried the obvious ascending sandy passage some way back along the Collecteur Parallele but after climbing steeply this closed down to ratholes. The only other alternative was an awkward and unlikely looking climb up the wall. This did lead to a passage heading in the right direction but the near-pristine floor made it obvious it was not a trade route. After traversing and walking as gently as I could to avoid damaging the crystal floor, I ended up on a sloping balcony looking straight down into either the same or another stinking black pool many feet below.

Out of options on the way forward we had to retrace our steps right back through the high level route to rejoin the streamway at the boulder pile in the Salle du Gnome and take the classic wet alternative, collecting a tatty dumped rope we found on the way in case the 7m pitch was not rigged. Not only had this taken a considerable amount of time it had rather dented my enthusiasm and fragile self-confidence.

Fortunately, after a hesitant start, the streamway route proved to be much less fearsome than the description implied, though the low water levels undoubtedly helped. With the intrepid Brian now leading the way again we found the deepest sections had fixed wires to help, though these were presumably mainly to combat the current rather than the depth. The chokes were easy to pass, and the climbs usually had some tatty rope on them where needed. From one of the chokes we came to a 2-3m drop back into the stream and what looked like deep water. Using our tatty rope doubled Brian slid down and ascertained it was only chest-deep, and we also established that the tackle bags were buoyant thanks to the Daren drums inside them.

We were soon in the high-level passage, with superb milled potholes in the floor, leading to the 7m Puits de Jonction. The pitch was rigged with both a rope which reached the out-of-depth water and a ladder, the bottom of which had broken just above a small ledge about a metre up from the water level. We inflated our kiddies-paddling-pool-style flotation aids – Brian had water-wing arm bands while Dave and I had plastic rings to go around our chests. Brian carefully abseiled down and checked that he floated, then had to fight to unlock and detach his descender while swimming in diluted effluent. Learning from this, Dave and I descended to the ledge, unclipped and then lowered ourselves into the pool. A short swim across the pool landed us by the confluence of the Grand Collecteur and the heavily polluted Collecteur Parallele. On the plus side the description told us this was about halfway through the system and we had planned to stop here for a lunch break.

Unfortunately with the Collecteur Parallele stream being almost neat sewage, as we had previously discovered, even with the much larger volume of water coming from the Grand Collecteur to dilute it, the resultant mainstream was still very polluted. Every rock surface near or below water level was covered in slime and the air stank – not an ideal picnic spot. We decided to forego lunch and get on with swimming in shit. Given how heavily polluted



Andy Dobson looking at foam in the Collecteur, photo Dave Dobson

the streamway was we were amazed that no one who had done the trip before had mentioned it in the literature, the sheer volume and extent of it meant it could not have been a recent phenomenon.

Anxious to get clear of the pollution (we didn't realise it at this point that it went on for kilometres), and to get the out-of-depth sections behind me, I led off and was soon swimming in the sewage. Fortunately the flotation rings sitting under our armpits kept our faces clear of the water level, although this near-vertical position made swimming awkward. Wherever possible I used the walls to pull along or kick off, while trying to protect the fragile plastic ring from getting punctured. The swimming section actually proved much easier and shorter than anticipated, perhaps because I was concentrating so much on avoiding a face full of excrement that I forgot to panic about the risk of drowning (I have never been happy swimming underground). There were no noticeable lakes as such, just out-of-depth sections of river passage interspersed with clambering over boulders and ledges. As everything was covered in slippery slime the non-swimming parts were quite precarious, with the added difficulty that the black liquid made it impossible to see how deep the water was and the floor level continually fluctuated with flakes, ledges, marmites and basins to trip us up.

It was a great relief to reach the balcony climb at the Salle de la Corniche up into a fossil gallery – I

prefer an exposed traverse to out-of-depth water anytime, even if the water is clean. The high-level passage contained some fine, unpolluted chest-deep lakes – it was wonderful after the filthy Collecteur to swim and moonwalk in clean water. From the lakes we climbed up into the large Salle de Bon Negro and some pleasant boulder-hopping through huge chambers – at first with our flotation aids on as we were unsure when the swimming sections ended. We decided to finally stop for a short water and munchies break in the clean, dry high-level gallery. With 600m of high-level passage bypassing a sump system in the mainstream we hoped to be clear of the pollution, but the stench greeting us as we descended from the end of the Salle du Petit Negro to rejoin the Collecteur indicated otherwise.

Another 400m of stinking, slimy streamway brought us to a boulder choke and another unnecessary diversion as we misunderstood the route. Having clambered up the large ramp (as described in the route guide), and around part of the Salle Belauce, failing to find the way on, we realised the description was for information only for people looking for the Tripod formation. While Brian re-read the instructions Dave took his watch out of his Daren drum, we expected to hear it was about 9pm. Instead he informed us it had just gone midnight! Joking about it probably being light again by the time we got out, we climbed back down to the choke to take the crawl at the bottom on the left just above stream level.

Plodding on, we soon reached the bottom of the Puit du Legionnaire on the right, and went up into the fossil Galerie des Plaquettes. Here there was the psychological boost of passing Martin's stash of food and water that he had placed on a rigging-and-recce trip from the bottom entrance in readiness for his own through-trip. We followed a passage in very white rock, more reminiscent of a mine tunnel than a cave. Pushing on we rejoined the (now only slightly smelly) streamway for a short while to another pitch up, Puit du Balot, and the start of a long, dry fossil section.

The Galerie de la Betoneuse and the Salle de Momies were in part similar to the PSM-style huge boulder chambers, with a variety of different routes along at various levels. We knew we had to stay high, although at some point we had a minor route-finding mishap in a smaller, very muddy-floored passage with the way on not obvious. Brian retook the lead from me and rapidly found the correct route as we clambered over more boulder piles back to the

now rather more pleasant streamway. We were definitely plodding by now as tiredness took its toll, with various climbs, bouldery passages and bits of streamway passing in a bit of a blur. There were some very pretty formations but mostly I was just concentrating on caving by now.

Eventually we reached Salle Nanette where the stream drops down, and an aerial traverse leads across the chamber wall to the pitch up into the Baudin entrance series. I had been to the end of the flat-out crawl to look down this pitch on our recce trip the previous year, so at last I was almost on home ground. The aerial wire traverse proved to be hugely easier than I had been led to believe (though admittedly I am a traversy type of caver) with many small footholds and only a couple of completely free-hanging changeovers. However, getting off the end of the traverse and onto the rope up the pitch, with no foot- or hand-holds, was interesting. Even more entertaining was getting off at the top into the roof level flat out crawl with my helmet hitting the ceiling while I was still on the rope. I threw my tackle bag (on a long haul-cord) into the crawl first, hauled myself up and into the crawl then promptly head-butted my own tackle bag!

On known territory at last, we now speeded up through the knobbly crawl with a howling gale blowing through it, up the short final pitch and at last took off our SRT kits. The muddy thrutch out through the crawls in Baudin went in a flash – while it is dirty, gritty hard work it is not the awful grot-hole described in the guide. In what seemed like no time we crawled out of the cool draught of the entrance into surprisingly hot night air, after about 16 hours underground, with broad grins and cheapo wetsuits still intact.

The stomp back down the wooded hill seemed longer than remembered (as it often does once out of the cave after a long trip) and we reached Brian's car as the church clock struck 3am. Funnily enough there was no one about so we changed in the car park. Brian dropped me off by my car in Deservilliers and I was glad not to meet any other traffic on the bleary-eyed drive back, as my concentration was a bit frazzled by now. Back at the campsite at 4am for a beer and a very thorough shower, with no prospect of rattling any pans. A fantastic through trip with an incredible variety of caving and cave passage (despite the shit). However I still had the hardest and longest part of the trip to come – I had to write it up for the Club Newsletter!

The Verneau Traverse

By Jules Carter

It's approaching midday on a hot summer's day in a gorgeous part of France. And what are we doing? Languishing beside the pool with a cool beer? Nope. We're stomping up the side of a hill with whopping great big PVC sacks stuffed with caving gear, that's what we're doing! Caving is a strange sport when you think about it, so don't think - just enjoy. As walks go it's not that long, and soon this amazing blast of cold air spills across the path. Looking upslope a battered sign hints at our destination - the Grotte Baudin - the bottom entrance to the infamous Verneau system. Today's aim is to rig the Baudin so we can complete the through-trip. I'm quite apprehensive about this; the write-ups I've read hint at a hard and miserable trip.

Keen to escape the sweaty heat, we quickly kit up in our PVC sweat-traps and slide into the low entrance crawl. We're greeted by a cold wind blasting in the face, against which Tony's carbide light fights to stay alight. A series of crawls and chambers and we're soon at the first pitch, rigged with French tat. Tony rigs down on new rope and quickly finds the blasted crawl that forms a bypass to the more water-volatile traditional way. I'm last in line and eventually follow. The crawl is fairly sordid, SRT kit jamming as you thrutch through, but after 20 odd meters rope appears in the roof and you arrive at a most fantastic pitch take-off. Lying flat-out the crawl opens straight into the huge main collector. 20 meters straight below is the ominous sump pool, but around 10 meters below the rope joins a long traverse against the wall, which eventually meets the main streamway prior to its cascade into the sump pool below. The view is superb. The team are ahead of me and their lights give a sense of exposure and scale of the passage ahead. "Rope free" calls, the Stop is clipped on and I swing out, and drop down to the traverse. A fixed wire now replaces the line of crumbling spits, but the traverse is almost hanging so its needs a bit of initial brute strength to haul along.

Together again the group stomps upstream to explore. The caving is a superb, big atmospheric streamway. Our meandering eventually takes us into large fossil galleries until we're stopped at a muddy slope equipped with an equally muddy rope. We choose this point to return. On the surface again we scurry back to the cars, passing a small group on a

section of the local via ferrata bemused by a band of mud-covered Brits!

Two days later and myself and Tony are rigging the bottom pitches of the Bief-Boussets. The rest of the team have turned back, not amused by the long section of thrutchy meanders and low crawls we've just negotiated. The entrance started big! But after the first set of pitches the cave degenerated into the expected misery. A last pitch drops us into a pool, the way out from which is a wet duck in a gour pool, followed by more low wet bits in gour pools... it's superb fun and we soon find ourselves in the Grande Collecteur - the big stuff. We stomp quickly down stream admiring the sense of scale until eventually we're given the choice of getting very wet again, or a very muddy climb with a very muddy rope. The sump can't be much further so it's head back time, taking a few pictures on the return. However, the trip out gets a bit soul-destroying. We've still got a big sack each and they're just right for jamming in the thrutchy, meandery crap that's the way out! The sense of humour gets challenged but generally holds out.

It's two days later again, and it's time. The weather forecast suggests it's going to rain heavily in a day or two, so Tony and I are going for it, with the dynamic Dobson/Clipjoint flying circus following behind. This is it: the Verneau through trip. We've read the descriptions and gazed lovingly at the survey. Beardy's advice in his Descent article has been absorbed, and it's off we go. Car juggling is successfully achieved and we're quickly back in the Bief-Boussets. We're quickly down the initial pitches, then thrutching through the meanders.



Jules in the Bief Boussets, photo Tony Baker

Tony's pressurised carbide is, at times, resembling a thermal lance. Into the second set of pitches, through the cooling ducks (we were in wetsuits on this trip and at this stage steaming nicely) and back into the Grande Collecteur again. We start stomping excitedly



Tony realising the limitations of his victorian technology, photo Jules Carter

onward...BANG!...sudden brightness.. I turn to see Tony's head a mass of light! Is this a Holy sign? Thankfully not: Tony's carbide jet has just gone sub-orbital and set the pipe alight! Rapidly the fire is extinguished by flinging the helmet in the streamway. Alas there is no spare jet, and searches for the original are in vain (it was probably embedded in the ceiling twenty metres up). So LED technology it was then.

We are quickly at our previous limit and jump into the deep water, using a handline to pull ourselves along, after which the sump soon arrives. Though apparently short, and the water levels currently low, it did not appeal as a free-dive so we set about the bypass pitches. These are rigged with in situ ropes up into a huge atmospheric aven. The ropes are very brown, and suitably abraded on the sheath, by the passage of numerous bits of SRT kit rubbing the fine grit ever deeper into the rope. The prussik up is very steady, passing a number of rebelays. After 35m the top is reached. A short bit of horizontal passage and then...it's back down again, but this time through a series of inclined passage and shorter pitches. Soon it's back into the master cave the other side of the sump. This section is muddy and dark, so we stomp on. Soon the area of the Salle de Gnome is met, and we drift to the left to find a rope down into the main stream again. Fine caving follows through pools and wades, until we hit a large boulder pile. Here an alternative (and flood-safe) route goes off to the left, but the only route we can find is high above the stream and involves an exposed move to gain a rift. We decide to stay wet, after all we're in wetsuits.

We continue to wade and wallow through fine cave passage, with the odd short pitch and climb down. On route we spot a pretty little cave salamander which almost got a close encounter with a size 9 welly, but soon we arrive at the Junction pitch. A

tatty rope, an even tattier ladder and a whiff of something unpleasant hangs in the air. Tony slides on down first. There's a handy ledge just above the water which lets you slide into the deep pool below without trying to unclip a Stop and swim at the same time! However the source of the unpleasant whiff becomes too clear – it's the pool we have to swim in...urrgh. Surface effluent is entering the cave from an inlet on our right giving the fine, huge cave passage we're in all the auspices of cow-dung slurry pit on Mendip. Still we're in it now, so off we sliver, releasing slimy mats of black and white bacteria as we disturb the water, and memories of an overflowing SWCC septic tank come frequently to mind. (Mind you it doesn't have the same sort of lumpy bits or pieces of carrot). We continue to sliver, slip, wade and eventually swim through the shite. Looking up the cave is superb, with sections of fabulous flowstone and fine straws, but the smell and texture of the streamway pushes us on. After a longish swim we arrive at a pitch head. The stream disappearing down the pothole, whilst we negotiate an airy traverse on fixed tat.

At the end of this traverse we're back in fossil cave, and importantly out of the slime, so we risk a lunch stop. Just as the wetsuit chill starts to bite we set off again only to immediately end up in neck-deep wading. Fortunately, whilst cold, these pools are clean and the scenery is excellent. Flowstone-decorated walls career up to the ceiling above. Soon we're on the warming stomp up the Salle de Bon Negro, a huge and very fine domed chamber. The caving continues in a fine and rewarding style, and the streamway is regained in far less smelly state. We canter on admiring the cave, chatting about the world, and enjoying the trip immensely. Soon we're at a 7m pitch that takes back into the fossil series. Some initial muddy passage follows but we are soon again in a wonderful series of large fossil galleries and back into known territory.

The trip out through the Baudin is a blast and we arrive at the entrance after a through trip of eight and a half hours. It's a warm and glorious early evening as we wallow in the river by the car park cleaning ourselves and our kit. Soon we will be back at camp drinking some well-earned beer and reflecting on an excellent trip. Despite the polluted section of cave, it's been an excellent through trip that's been easier than expected.

The Jura was an excellent trip with good company, and thanks must go to Gary Vaughan for organising. A return is a must.

Baume St Anne

By Dave Dobson

We drove through the village, parked on the wide grass verge near to the cave and then stood around in the sun while we ate lunch. After a short stroll across the field the rope was belayed to a large tree and we stood around again while Jules rigged the pitch. Tony got several shocks from the electric fence, much to everyone else's amusement. Jules made the rebelay loops somewhat economical, as we weren't sure if the rope was long enough, but as it turned out there was rope to spare.

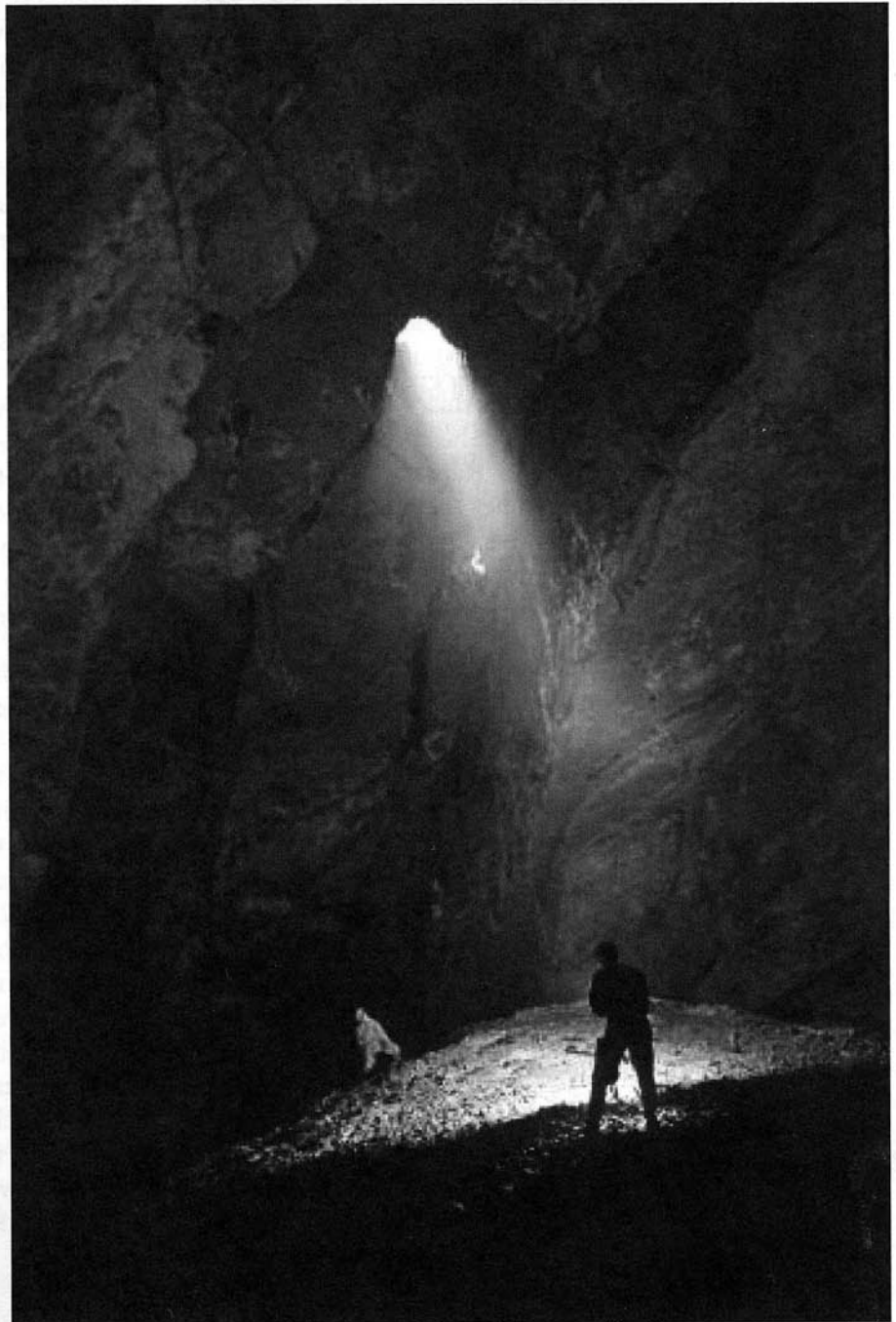
The cave starts off with a steep slope down to a rebelay, followed by a short drop and then the final one onto the freehang into a massive domed chamber.

With everyone down we went to look at the lake, Jules and Tony played on the tensioned traverse while the rest of us observed; it was very easy to slide down to the middle of the line but much harder to pull up the other side.



The 'stone cactus', photo Dave Dobson

A photo fest followed, with Tony's industrial-size flash bulbs really lighting up the main chamber, this at least gave the model



The impressive Baume St Anne entrance shaft, photo Tony Baker

prussiking up the rope a chance to rest. While the others were starting up the rope we took a few photos of an odd bent stal column which looked a bit like a stone cactus. We had a warm prussik out to the evening sunshine and drove home in time for a beer. This is an excellent SRT trip with opportunities for acrobatics as well as photos, but do take plenty of big flashes if you intend to take photos.

Gouffre de Granges-Mathieu

By Tony Knibbs

The trip

The description of this cave, given amongst the various sources obtained before our visit, mentions permission being required from the Groupe Spéléologique de Belfort. I was duly surprised to hear, after a few days at the campsite, that somebody had found the cave unlocked and had

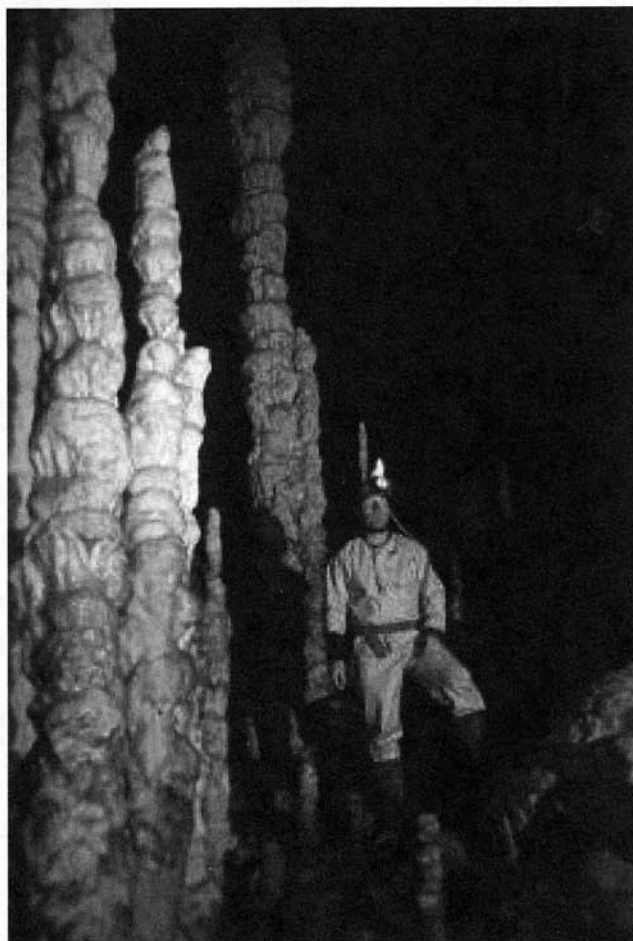


Martin Hoff descends the aluminium ladder on the entrance shaft, photo Tony Baker

explored it. The visit description mentioned no difficult obstacle, so Tony and Denise Knibbs, together with Allan Richardson and Malcolm Craik set off to find the village of Granges-Mathieu. This done, the next objective was to locate the cave. A road off to the right, Chemin de la Grotte, looked interesting. It became an unsurfaced track and led to a clay pigeon shooting site. We looked around for several minutes without finding a cave, then met a farmer who readily pointed out the cave, drew our attention to a plaque saying that permission was needed, giving details of somebody in the Belfort club to contact. The farmer explained that the normal sequence of events was to obtain permission but explained that the person named on the plaque had died and that there was a new owner whose name he didn't remember. He indicated that whatever we did was not his concern, and left us to ponder our next move.

The entrance was an impressive daylight shaft in which an aluminium ladder had been installed. The shaft was ringed by a chain-link fence with a substantial padlocked gate between concrete posts. However, the fence on one side of the gate had been

deformed so that access needed nothing more than an easy clamber over it. Allan was first down the ladder. He confirmed that the cave entrance in the side of the shaft, though gated, was unlocked as previously reported. Malcolm decided that the laddered shaft was not his scene and decided to stay at the top. Denise and I went down to join Allan who was just disappearing through the gateway, then down a short drop to reach a sloping continuation of the rubble floor, which led down to a roomy passage where electrical installations made their appearance. Apparently the cave had been equipped with electric lighting for the benefit of visiting groups of young people led by a caver. Some aspects of the installation gave the impression of work in progress or very recent; there was also a number of empty plastic drinking water bottles and other litter left about. The wiring did not appear to be live and the placing of the bulbs was too crude to be of show-cave standard. Movement down into the



Tony Baker amongst the columns in the Gouffre de Granges Mathieu, photo Martin Hoff

cave was aided by the occasional stemple made from lengths of concrete reinforcing rod cemented into the wall. Although the wiring was an eyesore, it did, at least, indicate the route to follow. The passage continued at very roomy proportions, providing easy walking. We soon reached a 12m fixed iron ladder reaching up to an overhead enlargement of the passage. There was now so much stal formation that progress became a matter of crawling around and through huge shapes of stal. A couple of traverses above open passage below were equipped with crude handrails made in the same way as the stemples. At one point the handrail had pulled out from the wall, so care was needed not to pull in the wrong direction!

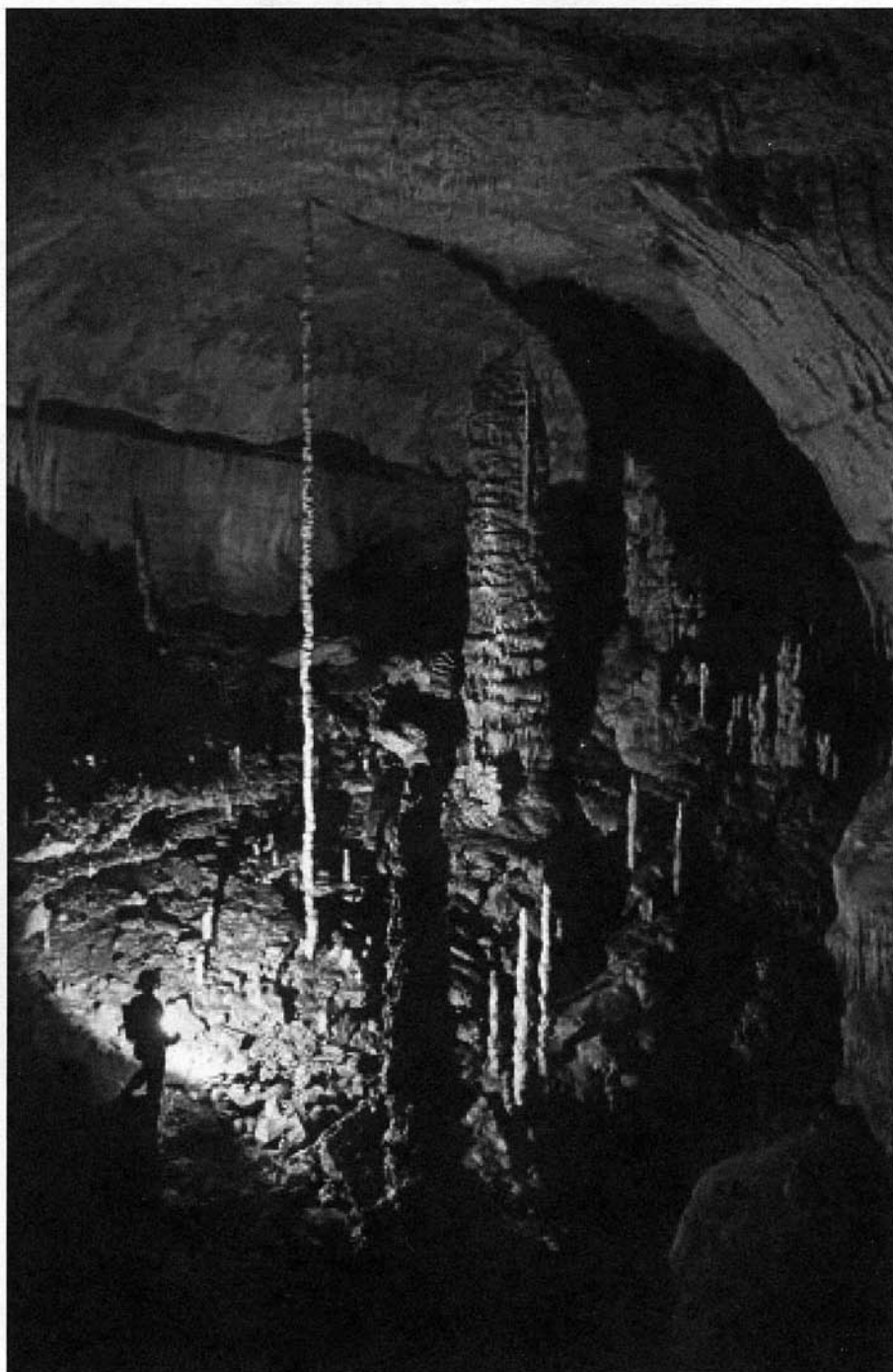
An hour and a half of easy and enjoyable progress brought us to the highlight of the visit, La Salle des Mille Colonnes, a roughly circular chamber up to 12m high and maybe 75m across, simply crammed with slender stalagmite columns. Most were intact and very clean – the effect was stunning! Beyond the chamber the cave soon closed down at a muddy boulder choke. For the record, the cave is just over a kilometre long and 40m deep, our visit lasted three hours.

The sequel

A couple of days later Denise and I visited the show-cave La Grotte d'Osselle. As cavers, we got a reduction in the entrance fee, enjoyed the visit then started chatting to the owner afterwards. He kindly opened up his impressive mineral collection for us to examine. During the conversation he mentioned a cave with lots of stalagmite columns (apparently he was saying that he owned the cave). I didn't pick up this point and told him that we had recently visited a cave (Grange-Mathieu) with similar formations. A few awkward moments followed as he informed us that we had

visited his cave without permission. He seemed surprised that the gate was without a padlock. He is an ex-caver himself and seemed not to be too upset by the unwitting trespass.

For what it's worth, we now know that the owner of Gouffre de Granges-Mathieu is a Mr. Hardy who also owns Grotte d'Osselle. It may be deduced that Mr Hardy has commercial plans for Granges-Mathieu, but that may not become clear for a few years. Also, the padlock may have been replaced when you next visit the cave. Sorry about that!

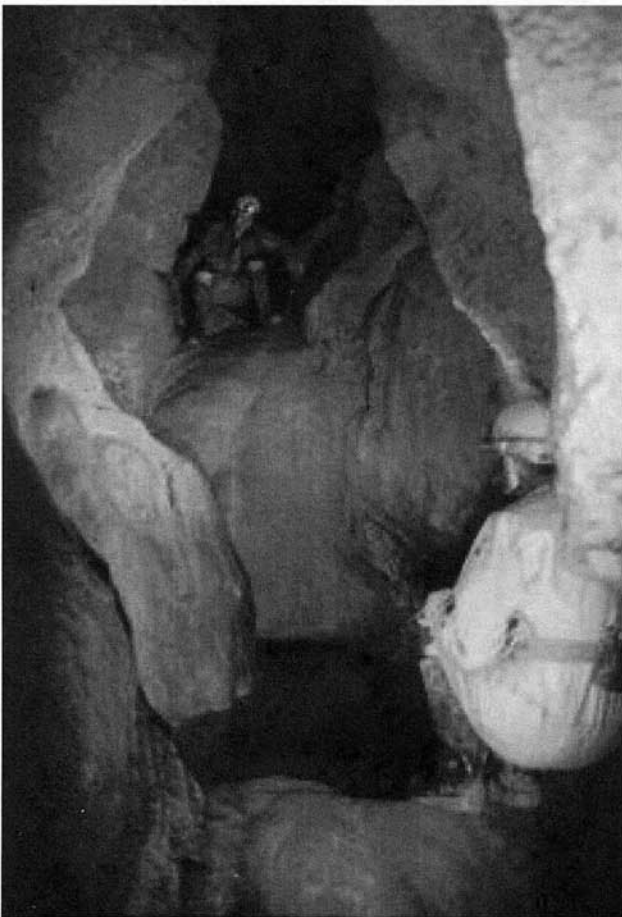


Formations in the Gouffre de Granges Mathieu, photo Tony Baker

Gouffre de Jerusalem

By Andy Dobson

Why is it called Jerusalem? – well, when we were in the mucky flat out crawl we kept saying “Oh God!”, and realised that if it rained we hadn’t got a prayer! The standard Verneau system notice by the entrance warning of the danger of flooding is even more appropriate here than anywhere else, but in settled weather this is an excellent caving trip, provided you don’t mind a couple of minutes of squalor. A short walk along an obvious path leads to a descending gully and the entrance shaft in a lovely wooded glade. In 2005 the cave had not been P-hangered, but there were lots and lots of bolts, though, of course, not usually where you actually wanted them. As we



were the de-rig party we were able to kit up in the shade while watching the rigging team have fun on their return, Gary helping Jon to struggle off the entrance pitch.

An easy traverse along the wide ledge on the left leads to a short freehang landing in a daylight chamber, then a second short pitch to a lower level chamber still with some natural light (ideal for

photos). From here a climb down on the right over boulders and flood debris leads to a rift and a high-level traverse to the third pitch. This landed in a pool with the festering remains of a dead animal, possibly a small deer, providing a delightful aroma. A section of walking stream passage ended in the wet flat-out crawl complemented by a mixture of semi-liquid mud and rotting matter mentioned earlier. Fortunately the crawl is quite short emerging into a thigh-deep pool in stooping height passage, where I washed the worst of the gunge off my SRT kit. After this an easy walk follows to the traverse above the fourth pitch.

On our recce trip the previous year I had experienced a real bad hair day in this section, managing to drop my SRT bag into a perched pool part way down the pitch, so I was extra careful this time. The pitch itself is pleasant, slightly sloping to land in an undercut pool which makes it difficult to avoid rope rub, especially when prussiking. As usual, better-placed bolts would have avoided this problem, but there did not seem to be any just where they were needed. Here we met the second party of our group excursion on their way out. We climbed around a large block then followed down some easy climbs past pools and cascades to the Salle du Confluent junction. This section is the highest accessible part of the Verneau mainstream.

Downstream a gravelly stream with some pools made for 50m of pleasant walking to reach a sump(two separate sumps of 60m and 40m separate Jerusalem from the upper end of the Baume des Cretes streamway). Upstream from the junction consisted mainly of traversing and climbs over gours and pools, some narrow, to the Salle de Charniere. A steeply ascending section of larger, deeper gours and cascades for about 50m from the end of the chamber provided further photo opportunities. The other two parties on our trip went no further than this but we knew from last year that the best of the cave was still to come – it just takes a lot of effort to get there!

Either a difficult climb from above the gours or a much easier ascent up the boulder slope in Salle de Charniere, followed by a further climb, a traverse then another climb leads to the Affluent de la Brochette. The survey shows this as straight on from the stream and chamber, but actually in the cave it

seemed as though we were doubling back on ourselves at a higher level. On the left at the top of the final climb, by some stals, a series of small, muddy passages with several alternative loops leads through crawls and climbs to a tight rifty meander. After lots of thrutching a climb up at a tiny junction followed by a high-level crawl (it is too narrow to fall down the rift) brought us into a superb 14m high aven chamber, the highlight of the trip. Most of the walls are covered in very white calcite flow with one black section of flow providing a fascinating contrast and sparkly bits everywhere, though the floor is very glutinous mud. According to the survey there is a short length of passage at the top of the aven but attempting a climb would damage the fine calcite flow.

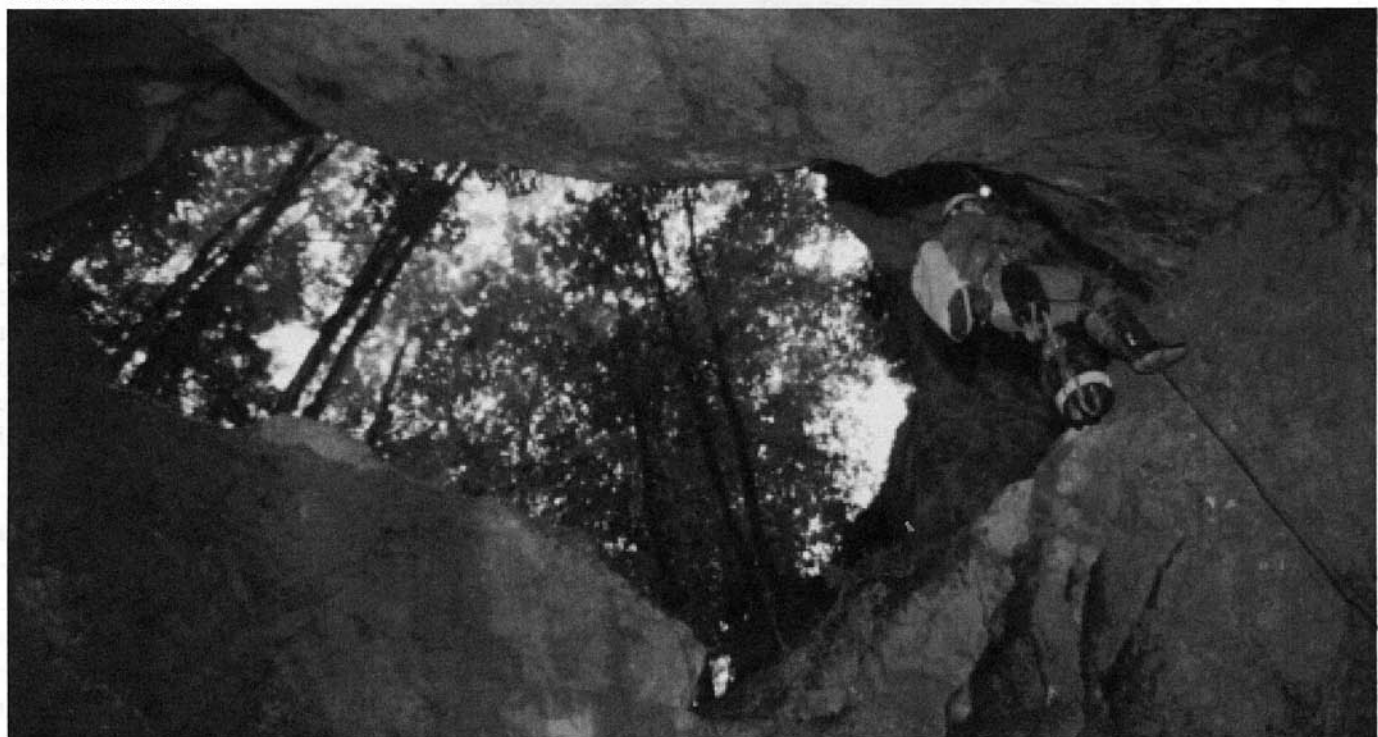
On the way back out Brian and I each attempted a couple of tight, awkward, very bendy side passages until we did not fit along them anymore, while Dave gave the required recital of Jerusalem. Back in the collecteur passage I crawled a short way up the Affluent des Clavettes inlet, opposite and just upstream of the main junction, but gave up at a flat-out crawl through a gour pool, with a low continuation on the other side. The survey shows this passage goes for 300m but I expect very few people go along it! Brian volunteered to de-rig, so I portered out the full bag of rope while Dave took more photos. Jerusalem provides a varied, short day's caving with the reward of the wonderfully decorated aven for those willing to suffer the crawls and meanders. Just avoid it if there is any chance of a thunderstorm!



Above and left: Passage in the Gouffre de Jerusalem

Below: the entrance pitch

Photos Dave Dobson



Baume de la Fraite

By Mike McCombe

Over the last few years, Jon Jones and I had organised our own mini-expeditions to Mallorca and Ireland with a couple of friends. This year, with our usual team members fallen by the wayside and feeling keen to go somewhere we hadn't been before, Jon's suggestion that we join the SWCC expedition to Franche-Comté seemed ideal. A quick check on the internet showed that even if we found we couldn't manage the major SRT trips, there'd be no shortage of other interesting caving to keep us amused.

One such gem was Baume de la Fraite, a resurgence cave 750m long with a vertical range of 10m. No need for SRT kit here, though for some reason we took a bag of rope "just in case". In the same cautious way, we also took along two descriptions of the cave, one in English and the other in French, and a handheld GPS pre-loaded with the entrance coordinates. The first challenge, as always, was to find the cave. The English description told us take the road to the 'Moulin de Fraite' and turn left 400m beyond the mill. However, at the mill, the road became a track and the only way on was over a rotten-looking wooden bridge clearly marked 'No Vehicles'. After a bit of head-scratching we decided to risk it and drove gingerly over the bridge, only to discover that there was no left turn and the GPS was telling us that we were getting further and further away from the cave. All we could do was turn round and go back across the suspect bridge, passing another 'No Vehicles' sign facing the other way. Approaching desperation, we decided to see if the French version of the description contained any extra information. 'Turn left... 400m before the mill'. In fact, armed with the French description and the GPS coordinates, the cave was very easy to find. There was even a signpost to 'Grotte' at the junction.

The cave itself is a few yards up the hill beyond a disused watermill. The entrance is very grand - 8m wide and 3m high with a respectable stream emerging despite the long drought. Sadly it doesn't continue at this height for very long and we were soon crawling in a low, wide bedding plane half-filled with water. This wasn't too bad on a hot dry summer's day but the place was obviously flood-prone. Still dragging our bag of tat and our emergency rations (a packet of dried apricots and a

tin of tuna), we pressed on - sometimes stooping or walking but mostly crawling, trying to keep to the best line as slabs fallen from the roof gave extra headroom or blocked the path. After a few hundred metres, a more extensive bedding-plane collapse makes a dry chamber above the stream-level - and no doubt contributes most of the vertical range of the system. A slightly delicate descent of a mud slope and a squeeze between boulders got us back to the stream beyond, feeling that perhaps the bag of rope and the tin of tuna might have been overkill.

At the end of the cave, the stream wells up out of a tight rift in the floor which didn't look like a great digging prospect. We looked for the 'well-decorated gallery' mentioned in the guide but only found a small chamber with a few broken formations. OK - I exaggerated a bit in calling the place a 'gem'. It's really a bit of a collector's piece but an interesting contrast to the other caves we visited and well worth seeing.

As the only caver on the expedition who was not a member of SWCC, it's fair to say that I started with a slight concern about being an outsider. Other than Jon, I didn't really know many of the other members and hadn't caved with more than one or two of them. Neither of us could claim more than 'basic competence' at SRT so were going to need a bit of patience and guidance from others on the team if we were to tackle some of the trips without killing ourselves!

Needless to say, in the event we had an excellent time. The variety of caving available was huge - and just about everybody sampled some of each. By the second week I think I'd been underground with everyone on the expedition and been made to feel welcome on every occasion. Whilst we still don't see ourselves as SRT specialists, we both learnt a lot from being coached through a few exciting moments at the tops of pitches. In return, we doubtless provided a little amusement with our nightly 'Sea of Flames' display around the primus stove.

Would I go again? Yes, definitely! A club trip on this scale makes it possible to experience big continental systems that we don't have in the UK and that we couldn't possibly have considered tackling on one of our mini-expeditions. And, as we showed, you don't necessarily have to be young and super-fit.

Chauveroché

By Gary Vaughan

There are times when I really cannot get enthused about caving. I am particularly cool after a wet or windy week at work, or if there is some particularly nagging or urgent part of the Vaughan household that needs to be re-adhered to its proper place. Conversely, if the weather is gloriously hot and sunny (or flyable) the lure of the depths is somewhat reduced. I must also confess that at times the prospect of assisting on a photographic trip has proved less than inspiring and of course, given the choice, I would rather be dangling around on rope than wallowing through lakes or muddy slimy ducks. So it was with rather mixed feelings that I found myself heaving my rucksack into the back of Mr Baker's car one bright sunny morning on our excursion to the Franche-Comte. Our companion for the day was to be Mr Hoff. A fine fellow who, unfortunately, has also become noted for his ability to say "Watch the birdie". I ask you, what could be worse than going on a sporting caving trip with a cave photographer?...going on a sporting caving trip with two cave photographers!

The drive at least was mercifully short. I had been introduced to the delights of 'New Country' in Mr Baker's car earlier in the expedition. On that occasion I had learnt a very small amount about the subtlety of 'New Country' as opposed to 'Old Country'. Apparently it's all in the lyrics or so I was previously advised. Not being big in 'Old Country' lyrics I simply played dumb (not hard for me) and listened to the vocalist telling a tale of wow about his dead budgie or some such dearly lamented pet which had 'gawn orf' to meet its maker. I know I should not cast stones in the musical glasshouse (being an AC/DC fan myself), but whenever I meet somebody putting forward the intellectual aspects of 'Country' (new or old) I find my memory straying towards those wonderful scenes from the Blues Brothers. Well suffice to say that in the Jura we were definitely treated to both types of music, 'Old' and 'New' Country.

So, as I was saying, the drive was quite short, about five minutes from the campsite at Ornans along a nice smooth tarmac lane frequented by an unusually high number of local types who all appeared to be heading for the supermarket at the same time. The tarmac ran out at just about the same time as my 'New Country' attention span which was lucky

really. Trying to gnaw your own ears off is exceptionally difficult even with false teeth! There was a conveniently sized car parking area on the right at the end of the track which we rather inconveniently ignored. With hindsight I now realise that this was almost entirely due to the fact that both driver and co-driver had become immersed in the lyrics of the song, a particularly sad song about an unfortunate series of events that had befallen a pet chinchilla. We carried on un-necessarily until the track came to an abrupt end at about the same time as the pet chinchilla. Realising the error of our ways we reversed back and parked. Engine stopped. Doors open. Song finished. Bliss!

For our little sojourn we had all three elected to wear wetsuits. Tales of lakes measureless to marmots had spurred our ingenuity motors into all manner of variation and configuration ranging from full-blown 6mm Warmbac to 'I'll tell you who's hard' 3mm-shortie-with-lightweight-nylon-oversuit. In the event it was of little consequence. Nobody got too hot and nobody got too cold. The moral....wear what you bloody well like but don't hang about in the deeper lakes!

The walk from the car park to the entrance was not unpleasant, at least the 'New Country' was now far behind us. The other snagging point however with my elected company was their propensity for inexhaustible conversation about Bournemouth FC. [AFC Bournemouth, to be correct – Football Ed.] To be fair, given the choice between Bournemouth FC. and 'New Country' I would have to opt for game of two halves every time. Whilst it does not quite have the pathos of 'New Country' it does involve blood, sweat, mud and tears and as a rule is usually easier to empathise with than tales of doom and gloom sung melodically over the sound of electric slide guitar. So believe me when I say the walk is short, it really is. Probably five or ten minutes of quite level walking followed by about ten minutes climb up a loose-ish scree slope. A robust ladder gains access to a wide ledge which can be negotiated with care over mud-stained tree trunks. The entrance arch nestles at the back of a small cleft in the vertical crags. A healthy draft in the roomy entrance chamber was very welcome after the heat of the morning sun. Lights were lit. Final conclusions about Bournemouth FC's



Gary Vaughan in the Chauveroche, photo Martin Hoff

promotion prospects were drawn and we set off into the gloom.

Almost within sight of daylight the cave turns sharp left and closes down to the first duck, a modest affair involving immersion to above the waist. Beyond the draughty orifice the cave resumes reasonable proportions and progress continues over uneven muddy floor which in places proved a tad slippery. Progress was quite straightforward. We tended to follow our noses and I cannot say that I noted much in the way of junctions. Five minutes or so beyond the first duck and we were treated to a second lower (one ear in, one ear out) duck which according to the guide book sumps for extended periods of time in wet weather. The balance of the entrance series was a slippery, slidey walk-come-skate along roomy passages which gently meandered into the mountain. Another duck led to a choice of routes. To the left a Vaughan-stopping duck looked like a desperate option for those who may be out to prove a point. To the right, and not immediately obvious, was a broad ascending escalator of mud and boulders which opened out into a comfortably sized chamber with two ways on. To the left was 'lake direct' and to the right 'lake indirect' via an easy climb-come-splither down over the mud and boulders. Splash! We had arrived at Lake 1.

It is at this point that those members of the party opting for the light approach removed their car inner tubes from their trusty tackle sacks. The lakes had already been reported as being quite a swim and

additional buoyancy always provides that pleasant illusion of security that is so re-assuring when one is faced with a potentially lethal situation. Rubber ring in place, we set forth once more. The first lake was more of a 'welly-wash' than a swim but having heaved ourselves over the first gour barrier and dropped into something a little deeper, we soon realised the shape of things to come. Although not long, the first dozen or so lakes all involved water that was out-of-depth or wading chest deep. None of the swimming sections were long enough to get out of breath. A lot of the time in fact it was easy enough to gently pick one's way along the wall gliding swan-like from handhold to handhold. The gour dams were all straightforward climbs and offered little in the way of resistance. Our rate of progress was quite steady and within a matter of ten minutes or so we noted a significant change in the passage after climbing a particularly big gour dam. We were about twelve lakes in.

The water was now flowing and much shallower, thigh-deep or thereabouts. After five minutes or so of splashing down fine passage, the water gave way to a short length of sand floor and an executive decision was made with respect to stowing the rubber ring. Convinced that our swimming days were over, we all set off at a pace. A section of gloopy mud-floored passage led into progressively deeper water and before too long we were balancing on tip-toe in chest-deep water again. The big difference this time was that the water was clearly flowing and a few yards ahead of us the roar of a cascade beckoned us on. The first cascade was about five metres high with a fixed handline up the right hand side. This was fine caving. Not quite what the brochure had promised but in actuality far, far better. Roaring cascades within fine high stream passage were not exactly what we had expected from the description. We were all unexpectedly on a bit of a high and definitely in 'Go For It' mode.

A few hundred metres later and another cascade, this time without a line but easily free-climbed out of the flow of water which thundered down into a deep basin. Superb caving in such a fine streamway made up for earlier expedition disappointments, where streamways had turned out to be not quite so clean-washed as they could have been! Cheesy grins were mandatory as we stomped along through pool and puddle, with the cave drawing us ever deeper with new and finer splendid passage. And then, without realising how far we had come, we were at a junction, The Confluence, just over 4kms in. The intention had been to reach

Lac Rond, the end point of the dry cave, and so this meant turning away from the larger of the two ways on. Our route led to the left and immediately the character of the cave changed. We kept a fair proportion of the flow of water with us but now we found ourselves in a more awkward, twisting, winding passage more reminiscent of Swamp Creek than the main streamway. I can indeed confirm the existence of shin-barking potholes and ledges that jut uncomfortably out into the passage at inopportune locations. Despite the reduction in 'wow' factor the passage was still interesting for the first twenty minutes or so, before we all secretly yearned for a change from the tedium that was setting in. A novel duck at one point almost had us thinking that we had taken a wrong turn. A low arch under the left hand wall in very deep water was not immediately obvious but, having bobbed through, dryish land was soon regained and thankfully the passage started to enlarge soon after this.

A quick stop for a Mars bar was made at what turns out to be the Salle du Chaos. Progression after this is relatively straight forward over mostly gravel floor. The survey shows best part of a kilometre between Salle du Chaos and Lac Rond. I would not have put the distance at anything like that. Ten minutes at max and we were stood looking at the thin little dive line descending into the sump pool. Three-and-a-half hours in without injury or incident. The best trip of the holiday, by quite a long margin.

After posing for the press we made a very efficient withdrawal from the cave, whereby all cave photography seemed to be shot on the move, so to speak. I do not recall the opening of a single ammo box or the placing of a single slave unit. If only all cave photography could be so unobtrusive! The twisty-turny shin-biting bit didn't seem half as long on the way out. Similarly with the mystery of the lakes blown away they were almost a trivial event on the return journey. Having regained dry land, inner tubes were deflated and stowed and the plod out was commenced. Testament to the ice-like nature of the mud banks was provided when one of our intrepid number (who shall remain nameless) had a little fun and games with diminishing coefficients of friction whilst trying to extricate himself from an almost imperceptibly shallow depression on one side of the passage along which we were progressing. Ice axes and crampons would have been quite handy.

Despite having a thorough splashing session in the final duck we all emerged like chocolate soldiers to a grey dreary mid-afternoon. My new caving companion for the week (Mr Nylon Brush) came in very handy at a small stream pool about five minutes down the hillside from the entrance. Apologies to local residents for turning the local stream an orange sort of colour. All in all one of the best days caving for a long time, with a grin factor of at least 9 out of 10!



Gary Vaughan enjoying a 'muddy slim duck', photo Tony Baker

Borne aux Cassots

By Allan Richardson

Very hot day, went with Steve, Ian, Mike and Jon to do Borne aux Cassots. Hour and a half drive, made worse by road closures for repair, before we arrived at the pull-in below the cave. We decided to go and see if we could get in before getting changed. The entrance is about 75 metres uphill and is in a large overhanging porch with a rubble slope at the back, formed by breakdown from the roof and walls of the porch. The entrance itself is in a concrete bunker with a very large slab of rock held in place on the slope above it by two wire ropes fastened to the ceiling, one of which was very rusty. At the back of the bunker is a steel door with a combination padlock, we had been told the numbers were 4422, Mike, Jon and Steve tried to open it without success, Iain 'Fingers' Miller then had a go and discovered that the numbers were 9922: we were in, back down to get changed and in we went, removing the padlock and placing it in an alcove a metre or two down the passage. The entrance series are easy walking passages, made easier by all the loose rocks from the floor having been used to make dry stone walls on either side of the passage, it was more like being in a mine, albeit much more stable.

Heading further into the cave, and ignoring the occasional side passage, we came to a rubble slope at the top of which was the rescue telephone cable, as the passage ahead sumps in wet weather and can stay sumped for weeks, this was also the reason for the access controls, as the local commune have to pay

some money towards the cost of a rescue. Down the slope to the current water levels which were very low, the water was very shallow, we then went into a strongly draughting series of tubes and rifts which led up to the dry upper series. This in turn led to a very large stream passage, which we followed upstream. The path crossed the stream in several places, and blocks had been placed to make it easier. Eventually we arrived at a large junction, we chose to take the large dry passage which led to the areas of gypsum. The route was initially easy walking on dry mud banks, but then the rubble heaps started and went on and on. Near the base of one of the rubble slopes the route was punctuated by a traverse along the right hand wall above a stream, which once Iain had crossed he found it could be bypassed by a fixed ladder which you could not see from above. The rubble slopes now got smaller along with the passage, there were some nice formations to be seen, we then ended up in a dry rift with small gypsum crystals and a few gypsum flowers. We got to the end of the easy walking bit, the route on was up a narrow passage in the boulders, or down through the boulders in the floor. Mike went down the hole in the floor, and reported it went on and got bigger, we decided though to start out as time was getting on. Near the downstream end of the main stream passage we found some camera gear, we could not see the other team though. Back on the surface it was still daylight and still very warm.

Château de Joux

By Nick Davies

Whilst staying in Ornans, situated in the Jura region of France, some of us decided to visit the Château de Joux, which is located just south of Pontarlier. The château is signposted from the outskirts of Pontarlier, so it isn't hard to find! This is a must-see if you are visiting the area, especially as it is only a thirty-minute drive from Ornans. The car park is located very close to the entrance to the château, and has its own café. Ticket prices are reasonable, The trip is guided (in French), but you will get handed a rough translation of the tour at the ticket desk (make it obvious you're British!). The tour was quite long-winded in places, so if you are taking children think of something to keep them entertained at these points (just tell them you're

going to ask them questions on the château at the end, so they should take note of everything).

The tour itself takes you onto the roof (giving impressive views of the Jura mountain range) and continues through many various periods in history, starting with the medieval drawbridges, through the mini French Revolution Memorial Museum, and takes you down to the dungeons down to a large well built in 1690, which has been carved straight through the rock, making it quite impressive. I hope you intend to visit if you go to the area, and, if you do, I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. (Not suitable for pushchairs and wheelchairs due to the large spiral staircase, consisting of 202 stairs!!)

Gouffre de la Baume des Cretes

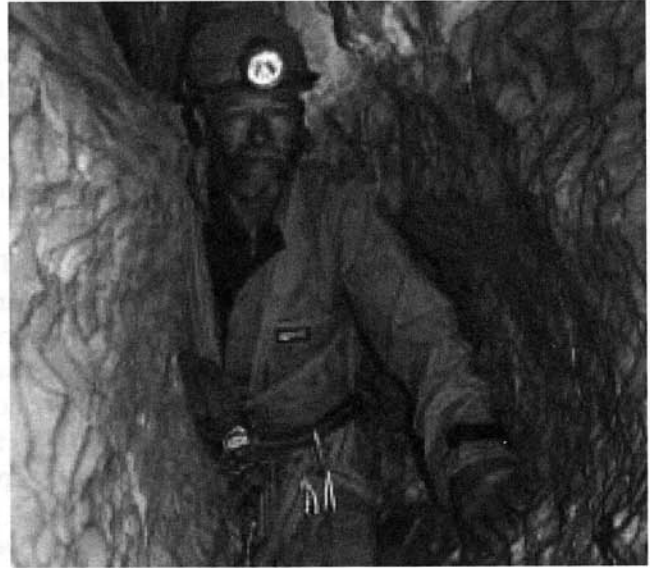
By Brian Clipstone

One of the three top entrances to the Verneau system, and I think it is the best entrance pitch of the three. A trip by the Dobsons with B.C. rigging.

A crack of noon start saw us hunting for rope for the trip: I had a 60m rope for the entrance, but we needed at least four other short lengths of rope to do the trip. Predictably, the only ropes left were 100m and 40m club ropes. We went to Gary's chalet and under the veranda we found a black plastic bag of old rope, including a 97m length. We had calculated that we would need at least a hundred metres, so we decided to take this and cut it in situ. This worked quite well, as we were able to cut all the pitches to length, leaving the rope hanging a foot above the ground.

The entrance pitch is started from a tree and continues with a traverse using at least seven 'P' hangers, which I rigged missing out some of the 'P' hangers; easy, I thought. I descended the large 40m pitch and landed at the bottom. I stowed my dry clothes in a tackle sack up a side passage, and then started to descend a large rubble slope to sit in the dark and wait for the others. Dave was next, no problem, then Andy. I listened to a large vocabulary of swear words from Andy, as he was having trouble on the traverse. I had tightened it as much as I could but this wasn't enough for Andy, who had a large tackle sack of rope on his back; that will teach him.

By this time my eyes had got used to the dark and could see a very large chamber, well decorated with large stal columns. When we had all assembled we walked down this large slope for ten minutes, to an equally large passage and then to the chamber containing the rock table and chairs. We knew we had to look for a climb down though the rocks on the left here. Carbide arrows and a proliferation of 'P' hangers guided our way down the first few easy climbs. We chose not to rig these, only the last short traverse and a 5m pitch were rigged. We dropped into a medium-sized chamber and after a crawl and a sloping squeeze we entered a large, well-decorated chamber which we crossed keeping to the right, up over a squeeze and dropped into a small chamber, the start of the next pitch. A 15m pitch down, with one rebelay, led to a clean water-washed chamber with lots of flowstone; the way on is to the right, to the left leads to a blind pot (15m).



Brian Clipstone, photo Dave Dobson

We followed a small streamway to a 5m pitch, rigged it and descended to continue along a small streamway to a muddy rope up (an easy climb if it wasn't for the mud). A short crawl drops into a small chamber then along a passage to the boulder choke. It says in the description 'drop down low on the left to bypass the boulder choke', but dropping into a pool of water up to your waist and ducking down to a 30cm roof was not on the Dobsons' agenda, so on my own I went through the boulder choke and eventually found my way through, after many false ways on well-worn but with dead ends. The way to go is to keep low and left all the way through, I went back and called for the others but only Andy came through, after a short crawl on the right bypassing a big drop we climbed down to the streamway. We continued along a large streamway passage (the best bit of the cave), to the head of the 12m pitch down to the collector (ho, ho), the top we came to must be at least 20 metres above the collector, the intermediate level might be 12 metres, but the bottom in the lower pools is the best way, all rigged with spits. As we had no rope we back tracked to the other side of the choke and joined Dave, we left the rope for the others to rig the last pitch to the collector.

We exited the cave with no problems, a good trip in a well-decorated cave with not too many crawly bits, my type of cave, the trip took about five hours, not too bad.

Grotte de Saint Catherine

By Jon Jones

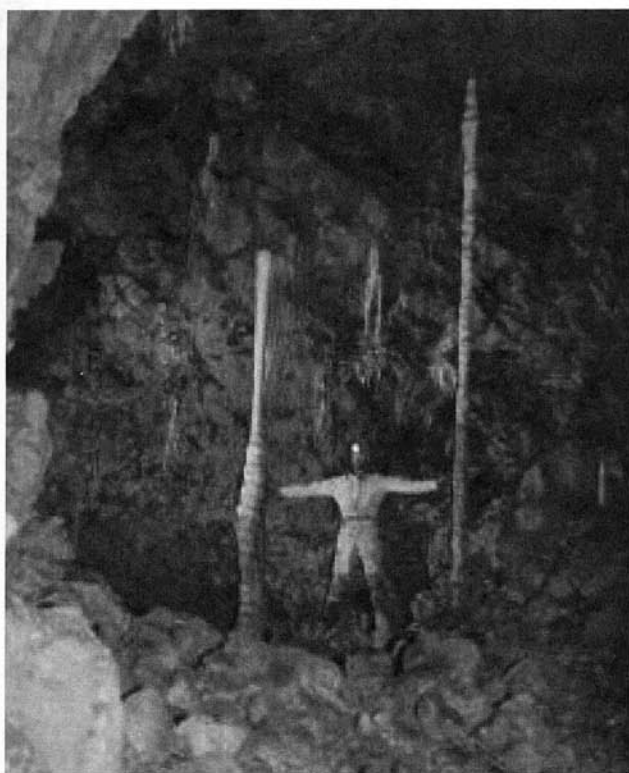
Inspiring memories of a SWCC caving trip to the Jura, France, July/August 2005.

This SWCC trip to France was organized by some of the more enthusiastic and technically competent members of the club. This led to certain hesitancy on my part when I considered joining the trip as I was not sure that the objectives of the 'tigers' and myself would coincide. In this instance rather than drive a long way with an uncertain outcome, it was considered prudent to find another participant who did not mind caving in wet and/or muddy passage.

The result was a superb trip in which some trips were made with the more technically minded members and some interesting wet caves were visited in addition. As such I can recommend the Jura as an example of a SWCC expedition that provided caving at all levels in the company of a great set of people.

One of the "wetter" trips included;

Grotte de Saint Catherine, length 3260 m, Saturday July 30, Mike McCombe and Jon Jones.



Brian Clipstone in the Pourpevelle, photo Dave Dobson

The UTM GPS coordinates for this cave are correct, 32 T 0318260 5226990 . The cave is located NNW of the Cirque du Consolation. Follow the D39 into the Recluee de Consolation, and park close to the hairpin. The correct direction of the path to the cave from the hairpin bend on the road is however NNE, not E (back into the forest past the flood resurgence).

The cave is approximately 100 m from the road. The entrance is very obvious (plaque on the wall to a German caver, Schild) and has an active bat colony. Generally route-finding in the cave is easy and the way on is usually obvious. At the time of our visit, water levels in the region were very low but the cave was still rather wet and inner tubes were used in one section for about 50m where the water was deep. Parts of the cave seem to have been used as an occasional adventure-caving venue as there is some carbide graffiti.

The cave is an interesting example of phreatic development that has occurred at an angle to the main vertical joint set. In the guidebook part of the route description notes that there is a crawl by the side of a hole in the floor. This proved to be entertaining as the guide omitted to say that the cave at that point was very muddy and that the crawl was only possible as the 'adventure cavers' had jammed two or three pieces of old rotting tree trunk against the wall of the passage that made a very slippery crawl over the edge of the hole (shaft) possible. Beyond this point there was a lot of wading in water until an active streamway was reached. This eventually led to a sump.

There is a large chamber described in the guide off the stream way just before the final sump: we couldn't find it but the Salle Schild is reported to be 50m x 40m and muddy. It is probable that in wetter conditions the cave would be very sporting and that the still lakes that we waded through would be higher and part of the active streamway.

In summary, a relatively easy trip that requires a wet suit and a flotation device. There is an additional cave, Grotte du Bief Airoux, immediately above the point where the path leaves the road. To reach this cave, climb the path to the left of the flood resurgence. The cave is immediately over the flood resurgence and is mainly dry.

Les Grottes de Vallorbe en Suisse

By Lel and Nick Davies

For those looking for something less strenuous to do for a day in the Jura, I can recommend a trip to Les Grottes De Vallorbe in Switzerland. It's an extremely interesting and informative show cave just over the French-Swiss border.

From Ornans it took us about one-and-a-half hours. We went down to Pontarlier and then over the border; Les Grottes de Vallorbe were clearly signposted all the way.

There was a spacious car park and then a short shady forest path to the source of the river Orbe and to the Grottes. With no tour guides, it meant that we could wander around the cave at our leisure. No photos were allowed to be taken (but many people did!) We were each given an English information sheet to help explain the sound and light shows; the sheets were then collected in at the exit.

Once through the entrance passage we came to Lake Cairn. Onwards then, to Salle des Aiguilles (Lake of the Sheep). Next, there is a climb up to the Medusa hall, which is completely solidified. The thunderous roar of the underground Orbe was pretty impressive too! At the very end of the cave there were a couple of grilled walkways and quite a few steps. Just before we ventured back into the open, we entered a total of four rock domes which housed a really superb exhibition of minerals from around the world. The minerals were all in triangular glass viewing cases, and well worth a look.

As we were so close to the border the show caves accepted Euros as did the Restaurant de la Source just up the road. We had a meal here but could only order "cold" as the hot food stopped at 2pm.

Don't forget to take your passports with you just in case; also it is worth taking your club membership card with you, as some of the show caves will let you in for a discounted price.

and...What not to do in France..

After deciding to do a supermarché trip with Barbara Hyland, Nick and I jumped into her car and off we went. Nick and I finished our shopping and went outside to wait by the car for Barbara. A man who was quite near us was on a mobile phone and kept looking over at us. Bored with waiting, Nick went back into the shop to ask Barbara for the car key so that we could put our shopping in it. After several tries, we could not get the key to fit the lock. The man on the mobile then started walking towards us and said in British accent "Excuse me, but that's my car! I had a lot of explaining to do but luckily the man saw the funny side and accepted my apology. We hadn't taken any notice of the colour of the car or the make that we had got into. One was a gold colour and one was dark blue. Totally two different types of car but the number plates were both British so it was an easy mistake to make, wasn't it?



Andy Dobson in the Moulin des Iles, photo Dave Dobson

The Great Ladies Showers Modernisation Debate

By Gary Jones' Daughter

(To be read with a very highbrow accent)

A visit to the caving club, at the start of 2008,
Enlightened me somewhat, to the great ladies
shower modernisation debate.

The time had come, you see, for improvements to be
made,
To the facilities on hand to lady members, when
showering post-cave.

But who could have anticipated the discussions that
did unfold,
The bizarre and the zany objections, that shall now
be all retold:

The first objection raised was to an open shower
design,
And whether ladies should shower together, but this
was far from fine.

Modesty proved quite a point, and disagreement,
there was enough,
As it appeared that ladies, do not wish to see, each
other in the buff.

This desire for modesty was much considered by
some,
Who said "if ladies faced the wall when showering,
then all that could be seen is their bum"

But this proved controversial as ladies did point out,
That they "rotate" when showering, and need to turn
about!

One fine upstanding member, suggested with delight,
That women could wear blindfolds when showering,
to avoid any line of sight.

A further objection raised, to an open shower design,
Was difficulties with maintaining, a clear wet-and-
dry area, divide.

It was considered in debate and postulated thus,
That ladies spray when showering, when water hits
their bust.

These various trajectories could cause a great deal of
spray,
And for ladies in the dry area, an awful lot of dismay.

Discussions continued on, way into the night
And it was considered that cubicles might in fact be
right.

But ladies who considered this, were concerned
about erection,
And issues of size, number and cost, and available
colours on selection.

Drainage was Grimmit's concern, as he sighed and
thought of cubicles,
Reminded of previous blockages and ladies hair,
detached from their follicles.

And so the debate continued and for a selected
female few,
Excitement at the option of mixed showers, with
male members, "woo hoo"!

The positioning of a mirror was also much discussed,
As angling, if right, could result in men glimpsing
one's bust!

It was sometime in the early hours that I left and
went to bed,
And considered all these discussions rolling round
my head.

From hot tubs, to sheep dips and some things more
depraved,
And all because ladies wish to be clean and smell
nice, post-cave.

I concluded that it was now, the poor old
committee's thankless fate,
To continue and resolve the great ladies shower,
modernisation debate.

Pwll Cwm Sych 1997-2001

By Rhys Williams

It's now several years since I abandoned digging work at Pwll Cwm Sych and a proper write-up of what went on there is long overdue. Hopefully, this article might be a useful reference for anyone keen to work the area in future.

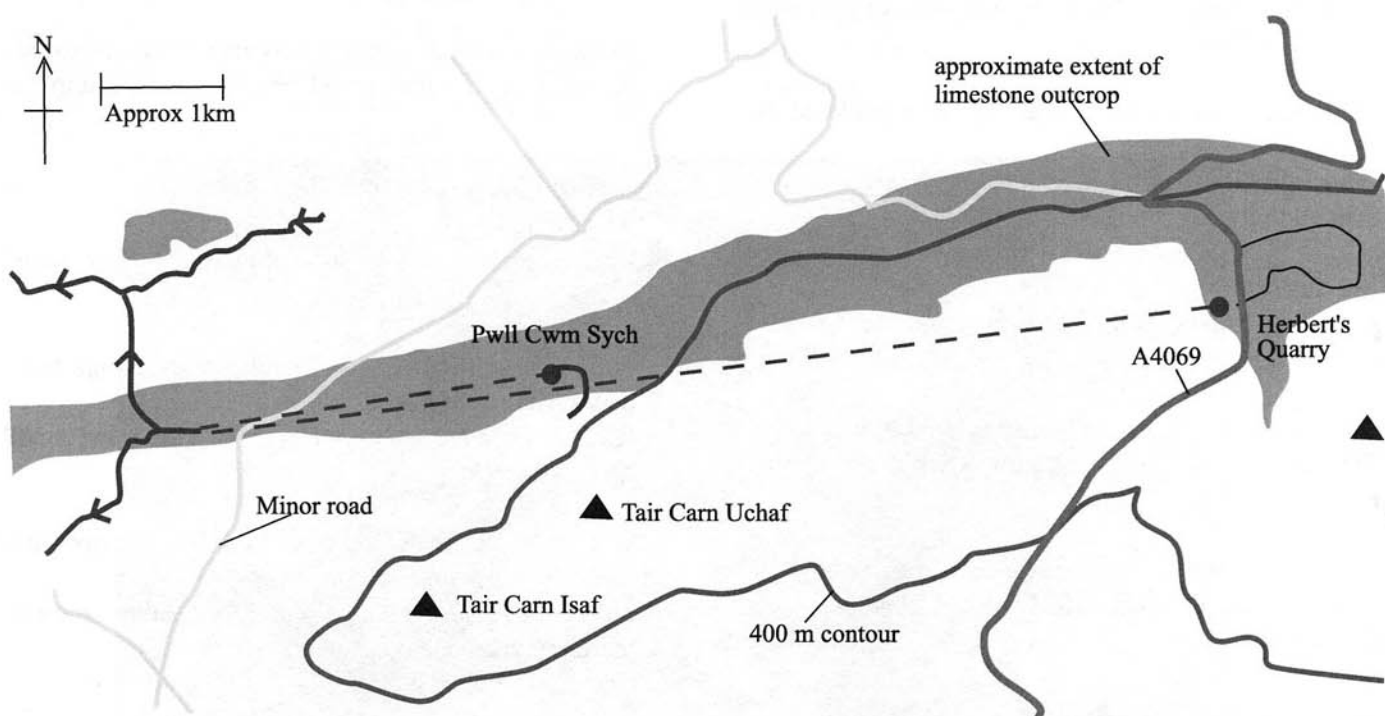
Background

I first noted the site whilst studying maps in my university halls room in Swansea in 1993. As a student caving club, we made regular trips to the impressive resurgence cave Llygad Lluchwr. The large river emerging there, with relatively little known cave suggested that there was much more, as yet unexplored, cave to be found. Just about 2km away on the map was an obvious large depression with a stream flowing into it. Surely that must be a significant sink for the Llygad Lluchwr system... As my student days wore on, I fell in with a bad crowd at Penwyllt – the “Number 8 Boys”; a renegade gang of hard digging, hard drinking, womanisers with a talent for flatulence. I joined them digging at Herbert's Quarry at just the right time. On about my third trip, Steve West prodded the wrong boulder with a crowbar, causing an almighty

collapse that temporarily entombed him and I along with Ian Alderman. We dug our way out and on subsequent trips several large breakthroughs were made beyond this collapse into hundreds metres of passages, discovering several pitches, streamways and sumps.

Water sinking in Ogor Foel Fawr near Herbert's Quarry has been dye-traced to Llygad Lluchwr [1] which gives an impressive sink to resurgence distance of 6.7km and about 320m vertically, compared to that of 3km and about 300m for Ogor Ffynnon Ddu. For this reason alone hopes were high. However, after a while exploring with the Number 8 Boys and student friends we drew blanks on all the new leads in the cave (Ogor Gwynt yr Eira as it became known) and it was clear that there was no easy way to the Lluchwr from there; we would have to look elsewhere.

With my Swansea based caving partners Martin Groves and Lou Maurice, I poked around at some other sites in the Herbert's Quarry area with little success and eventually I felt it might be worth looking a bit closer to Llygad Lluchwr. My theory was that the master system would be of bigger proportions if we



Sketch map of the Llygad Lluchwr catchment area

broke into it nearer the resurgence. We could then explore it back upstream towards Herbert's Quarry! We arranged to take a look at Pwll Cwm Sych, the obvious sink on the map, and see if there were any good prospects. Martin, Lou and I took a walk out to the site on the evening of Wednesday 28th May 1997, to see what we could find.

Location, description and history

Grid reference: SN690183 [2]

Altitude: 355m

Pwll Cwm Sych (meaning pool or pit of the dry valley) was, and still is, an impressive site. It lies 2.2km to the east of Llygad Llŵchwr and about 130m higher. A stream flows out of a peat bog to sink into a depression some 7m deep and 15m across. A large portion of cliff has peeled away from the far wall of the shakehole to form a rift about 8m wide and 4m deep. The stream flows for most of the year, only drying up during prolonged spells without rain. It is the largest and most active sink in the Llygad catchment. I'm no geologist, but I reckon the shakehole is towards the top of the limestone sequence, above the honeycomb sandstone marker bed, which is visible on the hillside nearby. I believe that Llygad, however, is in the lower, Cil-yr-ychen limestone (equivalent to the Dowlais limestone beds of the Swansea Valley that contain the majority of the known bits of Ogof Ffynnon Ddu and Dan-yr-ogof). The water sinking at Pwll Cwm Sych was traced by Lycopodium spores to Llygad Llŵchwr in 1983 with a flow through time of 4-7 days [3].

In around 1988 [4], members of SWCC worked on excavating the rift at the site and installed timber props to hold it open. Before this and at least as far back as 1966 [5], members of Hereford CC, worked on the sink proper, at the foot of a hawthorn tree. According to their sketch survey, they reached a depth of at least 12 feet (3.7m). By the time I first saw the place, the stream had been diverted away from the original sink and into the rift by persons unknown. We felt that the sink dig was the better prospect. The dig was capped with some rotting timber and a rusting wire mesh. With this and all the flood debris and leaves removed, it was possible to squeeze vertically down a through couple of metres of loose rock to a small crawl that was choked with peat and cobbles. There was no sign of any recent digging activity at that time, so we decided to adopt the place and give it a go.

Round one

The site is a reasonably level ten minute walk from the road, so on the evening of Wednesday 20th August 1997, we quickly transported scaffolding across to stabilise the slightly dodgy entrance and started work. We recruited Paul Thornton out of semi-retirement to help and he also used his tree surgery skills to prune the entrance tree and allow easier access.

At only forty-five minutes drive from Swansea, mid-week evening trips were easily possible to supplement the weekend digs. Enthusiasm was high and we rapidly enlarged and secured the loose entrance shaft, installing scaffolding and stripping out the old rotten timbers as went. The crawl was then enlarged and gardenised to make it safe. Going right at the bottom of the shaft was a horribly loose wet chamber that had the stream pouring through it and sinking in the floor. We put in some work here to see what would happen, but only a trip or two. Heading left seemed a better bet where, at the end of the crawl, downwards seemed to be the obvious way to go. We proceeded to dig a second shaft. Soon enough this required scaffolding too and we passed the apparent limit of the Hereford CC work. Other members of SWCC such as Clive Jones, Tony Donovan and Ian Alderman were invited along to help with scaffolding and banging problem boulders. On the surface, we also spent a few hours here and there investigating and excavating the rift a bit to see what might happen there.

In September 1999, I was forced to take gainful employment to the east in Newport, which saw me moving to Cardiff. The extra distance to the site for a number of key diggers meant that the momentum was lost and progress all but stopped.

Round two

Quite unexpectedly, in February 2001, the British caving scene came to an almost complete standstill; Foot and Mouth Disease had broken out and the countryside was closed. There was no access to most caves for several months. In a surprising move, by July the Brecon Beacons National Park had decided that the risk to livestock was sufficiently small that they would reopen access to the Black Mountain; this at a time when much of the country was still closed. I seized the opportunity to get back out there with a team of cave-starved diggers raring for some action! Refreshed, we dug on downwards. At this time the team had developed into more of a Cardiff based one and our main mining engineer and bang expert was Jon Jones.

Jon often used to bring along his wife, children and cans of Strongbow - so he was always welcome. We were so keen at that time that we even managed Thursday night digs from Cardiff with a round trip of 120 odd miles down the M4 in my Rover Metro!

In the second shaft, the stream reappeared from the wall and it sank at the base of the shaft as we dug downwards. This did mean that digging was limited to spells of drier weather when flow was low. We were able to dam the stream up on the surface for periods long enough to have a good digging session. We could release it, have lunch and then dam it up again. Toby Dryden was unfortunate enough to be at the dig face on one occasion when the dam was prematurely removed without warning. I think the sound of roaring water urged him to retreat quite rapidly!

At one point we hit what appeared to be a totally solid floor. When attacked with a lump hammer, this cracked and turned out to be a bed of limestone around 10cm thick. Below this was a strange soft light-grey bed (presumably shale of some kind - but I'm no geologist) that we quickly dug through and regained the dark limestone. From there onwards, the deeper we went, the more solid the rock became. The water still ran away into cracks, but we were effectively mining out the bedrock rather than excavating water worn, collapsed material as we had been at the top of the shaft. The routine became: clear spoil, drill, bang, retreat - this continued for some time.

It slowly became clear that we were getting nowhere fast. It seemed like we'd missed the natural route of the water and had dug below it somehow. We may have passed it just before the shale band, but I saw nothing obvious to follow at that level. Eventually (with the second shaft about 6m deep and the total depth about 9m) we lost heart and gave it up, despite having invested bags of time and effort into the project. My diaries show that I made fifty trips to the dig between 1997 and 2001. Thirty of those trips were in the space of five months or so during a period of living on the dole in Swansea!

The aftermath and future prospects

Over the years I have periodically revisited the site to see if anything has changed and to check the integrity of the cover over the entrance. The second shaft has a tendency to fill up with peat after heavy rain, but the depth of this seemed quite minimal last time I looked (August 2007). Recently, whilst digging at another site in the area, I have been over to clear up and remove some of the years of digging rubbish, tools and old

buckets. I've noticed that the point where the water sinks on the surface is now migrating back from the rift and a new hole is being washed out in the stream bed, so it's worth keeping an eye on the place. Also, persons unknown appear to have done some more work to excavate the rift.

In conclusion, I think the odds are against the way into the master system being in the immediate vicinity of Pwll Cwm Sych. Whilst digging, I never detected anything that I would call a convincing draught (but I do take some convincing in that department). At the time, the presence of a sinking stream was a big enough encouragement for us to continue. My opinion now is that, geologically, the sink is quite a recent feature. The water is probably travelling through some very immature passageways before breaking out into the big stuff. I have seen a flood debris tidemark indicating that the entire floor of the shakehole has been underwater after very heavy rain, so there are certainly constrictions in the underground conduit. Throughout the digging, we never saw any real sign of proper solid cave passage either; it was choke, collapsed beds or solid rock. But what do I know? I'd love to be proved wrong and the dig is currently free for anyone who wants it! Perhaps in these modern times, someone with a digital draught meter on a very cold (or very hot) day might locate the direction to dig... Alternatively, there are lots of other sites to try; nowhere between Herbert's Quarry and Llygad Llchwyr is the full width of the exposed limestone outcrop more than about ten minutes walk from the road. There's numerous small cave and shakehole sites that could be dug along that outcrop. Let's get some of the current generation of active SWCC cavers out there digging!

Acknowledgments

Thank you to everyone who helped at the dig and shared my dream or just laboured for me over the years. My diaries are not 100% accurate and I'm sure I've missed a few people, but, listed below are the names of the helpers and the numbers of trips made. Apologies to anyone that's been left out.

Rhys Williams (50), Jon Jones (16), Toby Dryden (16), Paul Thornton (15), Martin Groves (14), Ali Garman (13), Al Braybrooke (11), Ian Alderman (8), Steve West (8), Jules Carter (6), Pat Hall (6), Idris Williams (5), Gary Evans (4), Ben Lovett (4), Louise Maurice (3), Liam Kealy (3), Marie Jones (2), Pete Francis (1), Tony Baker (1), Claire Garman (1), Tony Donovan (1), Clive Jones (1), Tim Long (1), Andy Harp (1),

Rhiannon Cardwell (1), Danny Boothman (1), Oliver ? (1), Alice ? (1), Andy ? (1), Nathan Critchlow-Watton (1), John Wills (1), Phil Walker (1), Lisa Williams (1), Jenny Johnson(1), Ash Burrows (1), Sam Jones (1)

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The Caves of Worm's Head

By Peter Francis

The limestone sea cliffs of Gower are riddled with caves. If you go to Rossili at the far end of Gower (park in the church car park - its free!), you can walk west along the cliff tops and find some.

Rather than keep to the raised beach that forms this flat cliff top you can take the fishermen's paths that wind up and down the cliffs below. Towards Kitchen Corner there is the remains of a stone quay used to load ships with the limestone quarried here, to be taken over the Bristol Channel to be turned into lime for the farmlands there. Vadose Rift caves can be seen in the cliffs here, filled with red clay put down during the desert-like conditions that prevailed during the Tertiary Era. Watch out for the large rock falls that have occurred here recently.

When you reach the Shipway you'll see a Pericline formation to the left (east). The beds of limestone dip steeply inland until they reach its hollowed out centre and then dip even more steeply seaward, while at either end they dip down to create its classic "upturned boat" shape. A major fault runs across the sound at its lowest point and initiated the sea eroding away the land here and causing Worm's Head to become an island.

On reaching the Inner Head of the Worm go across to the northern side. If you're quiet and keep a low profile against the skyline, you should see seals basking on the rocks below. There are no caves on this Head though there are a couple of arches where it drops onto the wave cut platform on its western end.

By crossing the jagged, tooth like rocks on the low neck that separates it from the Middle Head you'll be able to get up to the Devil's Bridge, an impressive arch; all that remains of a large sea cave. If you can get a boat and dive below here then you'll find another couple of arches underwater but unfortunately much smaller! It's an excellent dive site.

Following the path on, just before you reach the end of this Head; if you skirt right; you'll come across a rock window that allows you a view along the northern cliff line. In the nesting season you're not allowed any further but at other times of the year you can go right onto the Outer Head.

Where it joins the Middle Head, on the northern side is a square cut zawn. If you dive here, in the eastern corner is an underwater cave that gives you a swim

through, with you exiting a few metres from the entrance passage. You might be followed through by an inquisitive seal!

Carrying on, on land you pass a bare vertical limestone area with narrow vertical fissures in. This is the Blow Hole and any grass put in them is blown forcibly out. Try sitting over one with a waterproof on and the hood up. If positioned properly you'll blow up like a Michelin Man.

For years I thought that this was caused by a large swell entering and filling the large cave that is on the other side of the Head. This cave, in really rough weather emits a spout of spray high enough to rise completely over the crest of the Head and at low water, in calmer conditions, is large enough to take small boats such as canoes into. It is possible to canoe in, become sealed inside when the next swell passes before re-emerging in the trough. During the time you get sealed in an eerie green light shines up through the water! This is also an exciting place to dive into and during certain times of the year the whole of the rock surfaces underwater can be covered with hundreds of large spider crabs making everywhere a moving tangle of legs and bodies!

There's plenty of depth underwater and air space above, even when the cave entrance is sealed at high water. The reflected light rays, coming in from underwater are amazing. While the sea bed outside is largely devoid of life with dramatic, large undulating gullies running parallel with the cliff above, caused by the huge swells that can surge along here.

In recent years I found another smaller cave that is wholly underwater about halfway back towards the low neck that connects these two Heads. On diving into it a Vadose like rift was followed that went in some distance, gaining in height all the time. Although it was a calm day, as I went further in the underwater swell increased dramatically so that I was soon being thumped into the walls. In the end it was getting very unpleasant and only with some difficulty was I able to manoeuvre backwards out of it.

In anything but the calmest conditions this could become extremely dangerous as the swell is capable of hurling you forward several metres and if the passage were to suddenly close down you could become permanently wedged if using a back mounted cylinder. The passage was not pushed to its end but must be the one that links with the blow hole on the surface.

You can go on up the rough scramble to reach the very end of the Worm and enjoy the panoramic views at its

end. For most the walk ends here but if you want it is possible to scramble down the cliff at the very end.

By climbing down it you will reach a broad ledge that descends south to the sea. There are two cave entrances here and there are prehistoric human remains still calcified in them – an incredible burial site! Providing there isn't too big a swell you can escape at the foot of this ledge, climbing a low cliff to get back to the path and so back to the mainland.

If you've still enough energy left on returning to the mainland you can continue on around Tears Point into Fall Bay. At the head of the gently sloping beds of rock that make up the fore shore here you will find a layer of rounded limestone pebbles naturally cemented together. If you search carefully in this layer you will find many limpet shells. This is the remains of a fossil beach level, now ten metres above the present beach. It is called a "Patella Beach" after the Latin name for these shells. (If you look carefully at them they look similar to a knee bone – the patella bone).

Immediately above this beach layer is a thick layer of jagged, angular rocks. This is the remains of an Ice Age deposit and as it sits on top of the beach layer, must be more recent than it. If it is from the last ice age then the beach layer must be from the warm period before that. At the interface of these two layers the teeth of a Straight Tusked Elephant have been found in this bay. Gower was home to many cold and warm period animals and some of their remains are on display in Swansea Museum.

Each bed of limestone here is only about a metre thick. They are covered with fossils of corals, crinoids and mud casts of giant worms.

If you look across the bay the headland of Lewes Castle stands out prominently. If you count the bedding planes that mark out each bed of limestone there, you will find that it consists of only four beds despite being two hundred feet high. The thickness of these beds made it much harder for the sea to erode, leaving it standing out much higher than the thinly bedded rocks.

Half way up a thin ledge gives access to another small cave where there are also human remains. You can follow the path at the top of the cliffs, back to the lookout and on to Rossili or go on to the head of the bay before returning through the fields to the same destination.

SWCC Expedition to the Berger 2007

The declared objective of the South Wales Caving Club 2007 Expedition was to allow as many participants as felt able to visit both the bottom of the Gouffre Berger and the top of Mont Blanc.

The Berger was the first cave to break the 1000m depth limit. It was discovered in 1953 by Mr Berger and exploration continued at a pace over the next ten years with many of the original explorers giving their names to the obstacles which confronted them. In 1953 an expedition to -712m took 142 hours to complete which I think gives anyone some idea of the scale and magnitude of the place. It is truly a stunning cave and offers a good sporting challenge to any person who would plan to visit the bottom. Having visited quite a few of Europe's classic systems I have to say that the Berger offers a truly superb outing to anyone who undertakes to descend to camp 1 (-500m) or beyond. At 4,807 metres (15,771 feet), Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Western Europe, and is an irresistible magnet for climbers of widely differing abilities. Its location at the western end of the main Alpine chain means that it catches the prevailing weather, and is prone to sudden and violent storms, even in summer. To climb Mt Blanc takes good fitness, preparation, determination and luck with the weather!

The timing of the 2007 expedition came some fifteen years after the previous club trip to the Berger. Many things had changed over that time, not least of which was a notable shift in the demography of the attending SWCC members in 2007. To balance this, Sheffield University Speleological Society were invited to join us to try and bring the average age of attendees to below the sub 40 years old mark! Other notable changes were that of lighting. In 1993 Carbide was probably the main form of lighting used by participants. With the advent of LED bulbs and better battery technology things had changed by 2007. Carbide users were very much in the minority, a result widely approved of by those who had abandoned carbide as 'obsolete Victorian technology' some fifteen years earlier.

Those of you familiar with SWCC expeditions over the past ten years will have a good idea of how things operate. The participants operate as a collective team. Issues that need to be discussed are settled at the nightly camp meetings. The next day or two are planned at such meetings. Teams are formed, tasks

agreed and progress is reported on. All participants are encouraged to contribute as much to the team effort as they are able.

As in 1993 the cave was rigged for SRT with 10.5mm static rope using conventional European rigging techniques, i.e. deviations and re-belays. In this respect at least, the two expeditions were remarkably similar. Most of the entrance series as far as Starless River was again double rigged to ease congestion on the upper part of the cave. Although the cave is deep most of the SRT is very straight forward single drop pitches with simple pitch head manoeuvres. You do not need to be an 'SRT god' to do the Berger. Lake Cadoux was mercifully absent again.

As in 1993 many people choose to camp at least once on a trip to the bottom and back but it was completed as a day trip by several participants with a typical trip time of 14-18 hours. Best time to the bottom and back was something like 9 hours 20 minutes which was a very impressive feat. Radio communications were established again but unlike the 1993 trip we did not lay our own cable and instead elected to use the in-situ radio Nicola that works in a very similar way to the Heyphone. Although no longer mandatory we established a control tent at the entrance again (as we had in 1993) with gas stove (at the start of the expedition at least), sleeping bag and carry mat etc.

The 2007 expedition to the Berger was enjoyed by 25 South Wales Caving Club members, 8 Sheffield University members and four Kendall Caving Club members. Out of a total of 37 participants, 25 bottomed the Berger. The efforts of Paul Mackrill and Jules Carter should not go un-mentioned in dispatches. Having bottomed the Berger in around 9 hours and 20 minutes, the two immediately took to their cycles and cycled to Mont Blanc pausing only for a brief kip in a lay-by just short of Chamonix. The ascent of Mont Blanc then followed on without delay with Paul reaching the summit and Jules stopped only metres from the summit by altitude sickness! The expedition was a great success giving those who participated the chance to enjoy some fantastic caving in one of Europe's most celebrated caves and in the fine company of some great British cavers.

Gary Vaughan

Been There, Got the T-shirt, Read the Book

By Tony Baker

Saturday 4th August, 2007, around 1pm. We reached the top of Claudine's Cascade. Gareth Edwards was first down, and I waited and watched as Sue Mabbett listened for his shout and then edged her way along the metal pole that is wedged across the pitch-head, to where the rope hangs to keep it clear of the water. As she rigged her descender I said: "You're on a real piece of speleological history there, Sue." She looked at me quizzically. I explained: "You see that metal pole you're standing on? Fernand Petzl made that. When the original explorers first got here in 1954 they couldn't keep their ladder out of the waterfall and that put a stop to their exploration. They explained the problem to Petzl, and he went off and made this mast, in two sections. They dragged it in later the same year, with a great deal of hassle, and rigged it to keep the ladder out of the water." Sue was clearly more concerned with getting safely on to the rope than with my history lesson – despite the fixed aid the pitch-head manoeuvre

is a tricky one – but for me the tired-looking metal pole was a fascinating artefact that heightened the whole experience of being in this remote part of the cave.

The Gouffre Berger was, of course, the first cave in the world to be explored below the hallowed -1000m mark and for that reason alone it will no doubt always hold a special place in the minds of cavers everywhere. (It is currently the 28th deepest in the world, while Krubera Cave, in Georgia, became in 2005 the first cave to go below -2000m). But aside from its place in caving history the Berger will continue to attract cavers because it is, frankly, an awesome place. To stand on the Great Rubble Heap or in the Grand Canyon, (vast, near-silent chasms, almost five hundred and nine hundred metres below ground respectively), or at the bottom of Hurricane pitch (more than a thousand metres underground and aptly named, with the ferocious draught and drenching spray conspiring to



Gary Vaughan, Bill Buxton and Dominic Hyland on Le Grand Eboulis [Great Rubble Heap], Gouffre Berger, photo Tony Baker

extinguish carbide lights and chill even the most well-equipped caver) and consider the forces of nature that created this place is a moving experience. It is one made all the more remarkable when you consider that until the mid-1950s no-one even knew that this vast system existed, and that the total number of people who have been to the lower reaches in the intervening years is probably numbered in the hundreds rather than in thousands.

One Thousand Metres Down is the account of the exploration of the Gouffre Berger by the original explorers. It is not, truth be told, a great work of literature; it is not even a great work of speleological literature, being let down by a stilted writing style and, for the English-speaking reader at least, by what seems a clunky translation. There are some choice phrases that mark the book as a product of its time – you don't often read a sentence like this nowadays: "We had been getting ready for this expedition for a whole month, working like blacks to have all in readiness for a big attack on Sornin." But for anyone who has been to the Berger, or is planning to go, the book is an essential and enthralling read. Written by Jean Cadoux and others, it throws into sharp focus the unbelievable efforts that the team put into exploring the cave and the incredible hardships they endured to do so.

If you're a past or present Bergeree planning to read the book, my advice is to skip the first few chapters. These consist of a long-winded and unnecessary account of the cavers' initial exploration of the Vats De Sassenage, and some tedious stuff about their exploits in making a caving film, *La Riviere Sans Etoiles*. Jo Berger doesn't come across the entrance to the cave that bears his name until page 59 of my edition and even then, on their next visit to the Sornin Plateau, the explorers elect to pursue another cave, clearly a lost cause, that Jean Cadoux found nearby at the same time. This despite having descended the Gouffre Berger as far as Garby's pitch; what were they thinking?

Once you get to the bit where they start exploring the cave in earnest, though, the stoicism of these remarkable men leaps from the page. Long before PVC oversuits (and even wetsuits), descending many of the pitches meant getting soaked to the skin but they would tie themselves on and take a deep breath, before remarking to the next man down: "If you would be good enough to come forward, sir, the bath is ready...would you like some soap?" There was little possibility of clothes drying out during the extended stays underground. When the explorers encountered the deep, cold waters of the canals they would grease themselves up in much the same way as Channel

swimmers do. To continue exploration further down they dragged boats to the canals and beyond, determined not be beaten by deep water. They didn't have cordless drills, or even bolting kits, yet pitches nearly a kilometre underground didn't stop them: "for hours on end we had to use the punch trying to drive in pitons as we stood up to our waist in pools in order to fix the ladders away from the waterfalls". And as they got ever closer to the -1000m mark, a ten-day assault on the cave took them just 82 metres lower.

The modern caver who swears at a tackle bag full of wet rope as he fights with it through the Meanders (an awkward, thrutchy passage between Cairn Chamber and Gontard's Pitch, split in two by Garby's Pitch) should pause to reflect that in 1954 when Cadoux and Co made their way out they had three sacks each. And they'd been underground for six days.

Aside from highlighting their efforts, *One Thousand Metres Down* offers numerous clues that in many respects the original explorers shared an outlook and a sense of humour that modern cavers would readily identify with. At one point a caver's sarcastic comments to another about his weight are quoted, tents are let down as a means of waking sleeping cavers, and there is a great deal of mickey-taking at every turn. This was no doubt a way of diffusing the intense hardships of the exploration, but one can easily imagine almost any of the explorers' conversations taking place around Penwyllt or on an expedition campsite (well, if you can get past that clunky translation).

But what really marks those original explorers out in comparison to their modern counterparts is their unbelievable selflessness. Their primitive rigging techniques meant that a caver had to remain on station at the head of each pitch while the others explored, and this would often entail cold, lonely vigils of twenty-plus hours. Yet team members would happily volunteer for this and wish their companions luck before settling down to shiver with nothing but a pack of Gauloises for company. While the others went off to explore one of the most exciting caves in the world.

In one moving exchange Potié, Cadoux, Garby and Marry have finally succeeded in rigging Petzl's aforementioned mast at the head of Claudine's Cascade, and there is the thorny issue of who will wait while the others enter virgin territory that they have been waiting months to get at. "None of us made a move to start; some scruple held us back. For now one of us had to be left at the top of the cascade to secure the men on the mast...one of us had to be unselfish and stay behind." Marry is the one who volunteers: "Get on with it, you

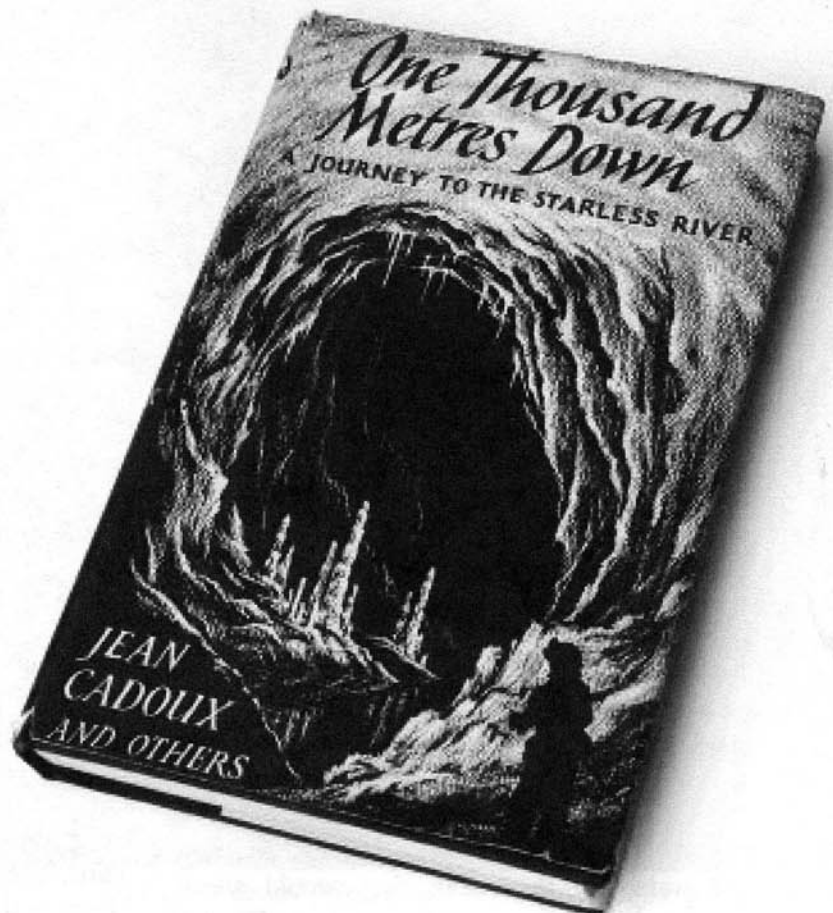
three! It was you who came here in July, you are the men to pursue the search. I shall stay here to see you down". A few paragraphs later, Garby has descended the pitch and Cadoux is about to follow him when Potié elects to stay and keep his friend company: "I'm stopping with Marry...you go on and reconnoitre." In the next paragraph Potié writes [of Cadoux]: "Our eyes followed him enviously as he disappeared" and one can only admire the remarkable generosity of men who would make such a sacrifice after the intense efforts they'd all made to get the mast this far down the cave. (As an aside, Claudine's Cascade was named after Garby's girlfriend – a member of the team herself, she acquired the then-depth record for a female caver in the course of cooking for the others at Camp One. Every one of the book's contributors talks of her in glowing terms and praises her 'femininity', and I think we can infer that she was, to use modern parlance, quite a babe).

The book has a rather curious ending: despite the title the last chapter ends with the protagonists some way short of the magic -1000m mark, and the reaching of the historic landmark (close to midnight on 11th August 1956) is covered in a postscript of less than a page. For anyone who has been to Hurricane this is a disappointment, as first-hand accounts of the exploration here would be fascinating.

A caver reading One Thousand Metres Down and then visiting the cave will find that the Gouffre Berger is pretty much as those original explorers left it, aside from the presence of modern spits at the pitch-heads and piles of dumped carbide here and there. One of the benefits of an environment as remote and inhospitable as a deep cave is that there is little to interfere with it: conservation is a natural consequence rather than a difficult-to-achieve ambition. Consequently there is evidence of the exploration history everywhere in the Berger. A photograph in the book, albeit one that grates with modern sensibilities, shows one of the team patiently chiselling the names of the explorers into the wall: stay high on the traverse line as you get to Gontard's shaft and you can read the inscription for yourself, in an alcove above the pitch. As you pause for breath having struggled up Hurricane pitch and crossed the exposed traverse at

the top of Little Monkey, take a look at the right-hand wall just before you get to Baignoire and you will see the letters 'SGCAF' chipped into the rock: Speleo Grenoblois, Club Alpine Francais, as the loose association of cavers who first stood here called themselves. Below this, in small letters, are the names of the individuals concerned, including an unfortunate misspelling of 'Petzl'. (Sadly, a carbide-soot scrawl just a metre or so away records the presence of SWCC in 1975). And, of course, it's not possible to descend Claudine's Cascade without shuffling across the mast made by Fernand Petzl.

Published in 1957 by George Allen and Unwin, One Thousand Metres Down is long out-of-print. But the wonders of the internet mean that owning a copy is possible with only a few clicks of the mouse and the typing of a credit card number. Second-hand book site Alibris (www.alibris.co.uk) is probably the best starting point: a search in March 2011 came up with around a dozen copies, with prices starting at £6.45: each listing gives details of the book's condition. (Some of these were copies held by US bookstores and clearly the postage costs will add to the price.) Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk) came up with five copies, from £15 upwards.



A Very Short Walk Under the French Vercors

(With Apologies to Eric Newby)

By Paul Meredith

I have been a member of SWCC long enough to have had the opportunity to go to the Berger in 1993, and deciding that, for somebody who is actually not that keen on hanging his rear 40m above the deck, and trusting his life only to a couple of bits of string and a few bent drawing pins optimistically stuck into the rock, the Berger could probably wait until another day.

It was therefore with some trepidation (stupidity?) that in early 2007 that 'another day' arrived and I signed up to go to the Berger. The opportunity to descend one the world's classic systems could not, it seemed, be refused a second time.

"Fitness and SRT training." they said. "That's the thing." "You need to be fit to go to the Berger." "Right, I said." However despite the very best laid plans, personal preparation and fitness training was, I am afraid to admit, limited and confined to a few months of three mile runs a couple of times a week. Not much, and astute readers will also notice completely lacking in any form of SRT training. Not good, but possibly better than nothing - just.

Living on the South Coast it is quite possible to do the trip to the Vercors in a day but, with two little folk on board it is a whole lot easier, and a lot more fun, to make an over night stop and avail oneself of an opportunity to sample some of the shoulder shrugging hospitality for which the French are so justifiably famous.

As in previous years we stayed 'comfortably' at a family run camp site mid way between Meudres and Autrans. Good pitches, an excellent pool and an on site eatery for those feeling too overcome with emotion or red wine to pump their primus or walk/drive to one of the restaurants in Autrans or Meudre.

It took about 45 minutes to drive from the camp site to the car park at Le Moliere car park and then a further 45/60 minutes to walk to the entrance depending on what you are carrying and personal pace. The walk is quite straightforward and although the path is well marked there are opportunities not to take a critical turning, especially in poor light.

Our first trip to the Goffre Berger, was a sunny afternoon 'en famille' gear ferrying trip to the entrance, which also included a descent of the short entrance pitch by way of a trial of my newly purchased aide to SRT, the 'Panten'. My feelings about these cunning little boot hugging devices are probably best described by asking readers to arrange these three adjectives in order 'essential', 'f...g' and 'brilliant'. Don't buy one and weep! You get the picture?

The aforementioned entrance pitch foray apart, Dominic Hyland and I had not done any SRT for about nine months so a trip into the Berger seemed like an ideal way to get back into things. We therefore planned to do a short two man trip to the top of Aldos to get our eye in, as it were. It was however well understood that this objective was, in the best traditions of all great caving trips, flexible and open to being redefined in the light of changing events.

Up, breakfast, ablute (yes, thank you darling, a little too much information if you don't mind) and a reasonable start as I recall. Not too early, but on the other hand, not too late. An uneventful 45 minute drive to the La Moliere car park followed by the standard 45 minute walk to the entrance tent and an opportunity to engage in banter with Monsieur L'attendant d'entree, drink tea and otherwise faff about whilst we changed/kitted up.

However we eventually even ran out of faff and had to get on with it. The 10m daylight entrance pitch is quickly followed by the first proper pitch, Ruiz, with it's ever present and, one suspects, continually replenished, arsenal of pitch head memorabilia supported on a friable 50 year framework of wooden stemples. Nice. Stand well back those that sit and wait. A short, and being our first time on SRT for nine months, slightly nervous, traverse led us quickly out onto the main down rope and an interesting 30m descent to the amusingly named, short series of pitches which are the Holiday Slides which immediately follow Ruiz. No problems here.

We descended the next pitch, Cain (30m) together with all it's attendant deviations and re-belays, with ease

and were feeling quite pleased with our progress as we started the meanders which start immediately, and obviously, from the bottom of Cairn.

I think that it was probably fair to say that it was at this point that both Dom and I began to privately have some concerns viz a viz our ability to exit. Although we were both moderately competent at SRT neither of us had done any SRT by way of training and here we were already down two major pitches and about to commit to another three of similar length. We started off along the meanders but, and I am sure I am right here, when I say it was Dom who was the first to openly question the wisdom of what we were doing and suggest that a light lunch in the warm sunshine of a French summer with some pain de francais, cold cuts

and decent bottle of chilled chablis might be more... what do you think? Ok, let's head back.

We were quickly back at the bottom of Cairn pitch where we stopped for a chew bar, a contemplation of the task ahead and a short wait while another party who were going in passed by.

The trip out was surprisingly straightforward and uneventful and, thanks in part I am sure to our now not so new 'panten' devices. As a consequence we surfaced significantly fresher and more quickly than we had anticipated, more confident in our SRT ability and suitably stirred, but not shaken, and ready for a more substantive return trip. Definitely.

To Camp, or Not to Camp?

(Revisited)
By Tony Baker

After the 1993 Berger Expedition I wrote an article explaining the approach that Bob Hall and I took to our trip to the bottom of the cave that year (To Camp, or Not to Camp?, SWCC N/L No.113, 1994). This article is an update based on my experiences in August 2007.



Gareth Edwards, Tony Baker and Sue Mabbett about to journey into the Berger.

In 1993 Bob Hall and I took the decision to camp on the way in to the Berger and although we had a successful and thoroughly enjoyable trip, with hindsight we both felt this wasn't the best way to do things. At the time I wrote: "If I were doing the trip again I'd go for the 'one hit' approach. I think most fit, active cavers would have no problem doing the trip this way..." and it was with this in mind that I arrived at our Meaudre campsite for 2007's return visit to the cave.

I made the decision not to camp based on the knowledge that I was unlikely to sleep comfortably or well at Camp One, and that once back at that point on the way out you've really 'broken the back' of the trip and might as well plod on out, even at a snail's pace. You have, after all, still got to go the same way when you've had your sleep at Camp One.

I was confident enough in my decision that I opted not to stash a sleeping bag and Karrimat at Camp One. While there were expedition 'contingency' bags and mats at the camp, with the number of people planning to 'bottom' in the few days' window between the completion of the rigging and the start of the de-rig there was a strong possibility of arriving back there to find them all taken, plus it would have been selfish to deliberately avoid carrying one's own stuff into the cave and then expect to use kit placed in case of emergency or dire need. (There was another motive behind my decision not to take sleeping stuff into the cave: I could instead use the time and effort involved to ship quantities of big flashbulbs into the cave in advance of the photo trip I was planning, written up elsewhere in this Newsletter.)

As ever with a big trip, choice of companion(s) is a crucial decision and there were several other members of the trip with whom I would have been happy to cave and who were opting for the in-and-out-in-one-hit approach. However, party size in the Berger is an important factor – time spent waiting at the top or bottom of pitches soon mounts up – and most of us formed into pairs or threes. Although Gary Vaughan, Martin Hoff, Sue Mabbett, Gareth Edwards and I left the campsite in one car and walked over to the entrance together, it was clear from the outset that Gary and Martin were keen to adopt a rather more urgent pace than the remaining three of us, and so Sue, Gareth and I became a separate team – an arrangement that suited everyone involved. The three of us had already done a Hall-of-Thirteen-and-back trip earlier in the week and this seemed to work well, and with Sue having leaned heavily on the generosity of babysitters for Emily she was also intent on avoiding a Camp One sleepover.

A 5.00am alarm setting saw us all up and breakfasted ready for the planned 6am departure from the campsite, and we walked across from La Moliere on a beautiful clear morning. Once at the entrance Gary and Martin were quickly changed and made their way into the cave, and after a commemorative photo the three of us followed.

We maintained a steady pace down the pitches and once in the Petzl Gallery I deposited another bag of big flashbulbs. By now we were familiar with the route and the scenery down to Camp One, and we just plodded on at a steady rate.

Soon we were beyond the Hall of Thirteen and into the less familiar section of the cave. I had little recollection of the lower reaches from my trip with Bob back in '93, mostly because we had concentrated on just getting to the bottom and back in one piece and not on admiring the scenery. Now I was glad of the opportunity to enjoy this magnificent cave; while the canals are hard work once you're through them some of the passages and pitches are superb, and our brisk-but-measured pace allowed some time to take it all in.

At the top of one short pitch we encountered Jules Carter and Paul Mackrill on their way out of the first stage of their epic 'Berger-to-Mont Blanc' trip (written up elsewhere in this Newsletter) and after a photo and a few pleasantries they disappeared up the passage in a metaphorical cloud of dust.

We stood for several minutes at the top of the Grand Canyon and took in the sheer scale of the place; it is truly breathtaking and we talked enviously of those who had been the first to enter this place. Here keeping to the right-hand wall leads to the rather tatty-but-useful fixed lines, especially helpful to tired legs on the way back up the steep slope. At Camp Two (at the bottom of the Grand Canyon) we took an extended break for a hot drink, food and a carbide fettle. I was determined not to run out of energy and hit the 'wall' that so often does for marathon runners, and regular stops for sensible food were an integral part of my plan. Hot drinks take a few minutes but for my money the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

Beyond this point the cave starts to feel like a very remote and intimidating place but we were caving well; personally I was well within my comfort zone, enjoying myself on the pitches and confident that I would 'bottom', having psyched myself up for all this well in advance.

I was first down the Grand Cascade and even had time to attempt a photograph of this impressive pitch; sadly



Gareth Edwards on the Little Monkey traverse, photo Tony Baker

the results I achieved using only one flashgun don't do it justice. Soon we met Gary and Martin, a few minutes apart but making good headway on their way up through the cave. Gary warned us that the traverse at the top of Hurricane was rigged in such a way that getting on and off the pitch was tricky and so, suitably forewarned, we headed on.

A minor route-finding blip added a minute but here one of my '93 memories helped, as I recognised the point at which we should be looking for a bypass to a low wet bit ('Baignoire'). A minute or two later we were at Little Monkey: I remembered the exposed traverse from my previous visit but I was still going well and had no hesitation in clipping in and pulling myself up the awkward first section. Armed with Gary's wise words I negotiated the awkward Hurricane pitch-head and, as Sue and Gareth weren't snapping at my heels, I had time to savour, if that's the correct

word, the pitch and the chamber into which it drops. Make no mistake, this is one of the most awesome, but brutal, places you're likely to encounter. The wind and spray are sufficient to extinguish a carbide light and chill you to the bone, all you can see looking out into the vast inky blackness is the spray in front of your light, and the rebelay is awkward, but these factors are magnified by the fact that you are a very, very long way from anywhere. A slip-up here and you will be extremely fortunate to escape alive.

I landed at the bottom of the pitch, and could just make out the glow from Sue's and/or Gareth's lights in the spray at the top of the chamber. Confident I had a few minutes to play with, I set up the camera and flashgun to try and shoot some pics as each of them descended. After a few more minutes I could see Gareth's light as he made his way onto the pitch-head, but a while later he hadn't appeared and I moved to where I could get a clearer view. He seemed to have gone back up: what was going on? Even with my notoriously loud voice top-to-bottom communication was impossible – I could make out something of a shouted reply but had no idea what was being said. This enforced pause did at least give me a chance to appreciate the surroundings.

What must the original explorers have felt when they first descended into this cauldron of wind and spray?

I waited some more; I could see lights but there was no sign of anyone on the pitch. I was trying to work out what was happening – it seemed likely that either Sue or Gareth had a problem, or didn't fancy the pitch, but I hadn't made out a single word of what they'd been shouting. It was beginning to look as if I was going to have to go on from here alone, but the prospect didn't trouble me: I was still caving well, I'd been here before and while I didn't expect Sue and Gareth to wait for me in the harsh environs of either Hurricane or Little Monkey I reckoned that, solo, I'd catch them up before they'd gone too far back up the cave. Although there were others in the cave on their way towards the bottom there was no way of knowing they'd get this far, but, in any case, I resolved that I was going to the pseudo-siphon that marks the limit for dry cavers.

Eventually, though, I could see that at least one light

was coming down towards me; it turned out to be Gareth, who confessed to having struggled at the pitch-head and had retreated briefly to sort himself out. Sue landed a few minutes after Gareth, and we were back as a team. Yet again, though, none of my attempts at photography with a Rollei 35 and single Vivitar 283 yielded a worthwhile result. (As an aside, if you're interested in looking at some photos of the lower reaches of the Berger (few people seem to take photo kit that far into the cave) then I recommend www.scavalon.be/webalbums/Gouffre%20Berger/)

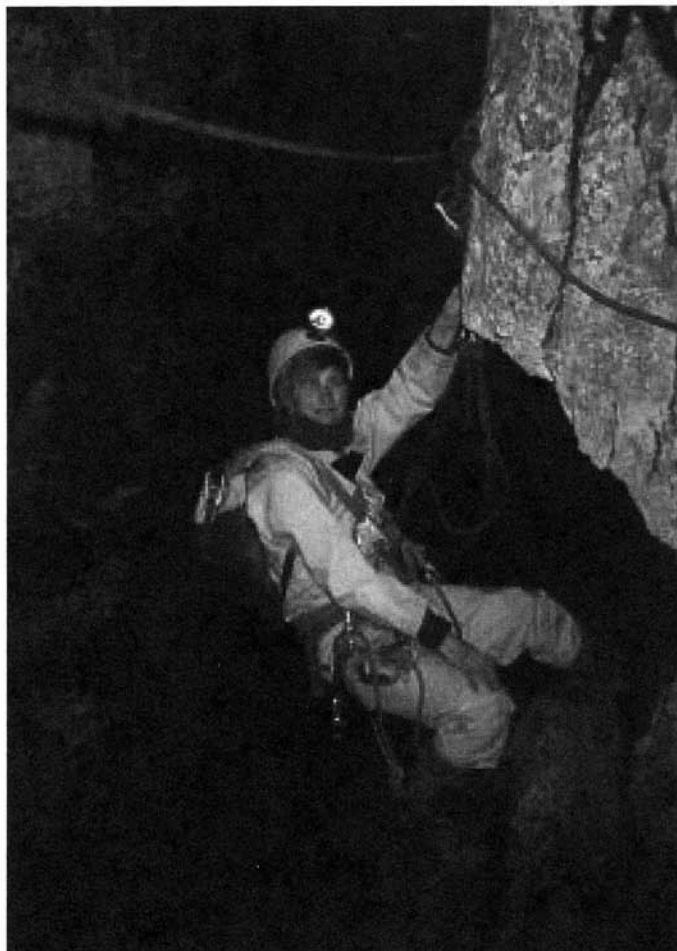
We made our way down the impressive chamber that leads to the farther reaches of the Berger but, once in the narrower section where we encountered the stream, Sue opted to turn back at a point where a waist-deep pool was unavoidable, keen to remain dry-ish and warm-ish for the slog out. Gareth and I eventually reached a small climb on the left-hand wall, rigged with very iffy tat, which I vaguely remembered but was clearly access to an oxbow that avoided a deep section of the stream. Once back in the stream it really felt as though we must be close and, sure enough, after a couple more minutes we arrived at the point where a piece of blue polypropylene tied to the right-hand wall at an ominous-looking pool signals the entrance to the pseudo-siphon, the furthest anyone in a furry-and-oversuit combo is going to venture.

At this point Gareth produced a woollen hat resembling a tea-cosy that he insisted on wearing for his commemorative photo (there's no doubt a story behind this...) and in turn he took pictures of me grinning in front of the pseudo-siphon (one of which now greets visitors to the downstairs loo at home). Not wanting to keep Sue waiting, we packed the camera away quickly and headed back, and once the three of us were together again we stopped at the Camp des Etrangers for food and another hot drink. Des Marshall's Vercors Caves guide book describes this as 'not a particularly good place' but it is at least out of most of the draught. By now we could make out the distant glow of more lights above us and expected to have company before long, but we later learnt that Andy Harp and Nicky Bayley, having seen our lights, had turned back not far from the base of Hurricane to avoid causing a traffic jam on the pitch.

Still caving well, we made good progress back up through the cave, with another hot-drink stop and carbide fettle at Camp Two. I made rather harder work of the canals than was sensible, and only realised too late that when water levels are low the fixed lines aren't really necessary and it's often quicker and easier to plough through the pools. At one point my foot slipped

off a ledge and I bashed my shin painfully on a sharp spur of rock – I still have the scar on my leg and the hole in my wetsuit sock to bring back the memory. It was well after midnight when we finally trudged across the Hall of Thirteen with Camp One in our sights, to be greeted by a vision of Paul Quill standing on a boulder and looking out across the chamber, his hi-vis jacket like a beacon in the darkness.

Camp One was full: Quill and Clive Westlake had opted for an overnight stop en route to the bottom, Andy and Nicky had arrived a while before us and were preparing a late meal before settling down for the night, while another group were already asleep in the makeshift shelter made of suspended space blankets. We cooked a meal ourselves and Gareth opted to grab one of the remaining unoccupied sleeping bags and squeeze into the shelter for the night. Sue and I packed our tackle sacks and set off up the Rubble Heap at 2am, our tired limbs starting to feel the effects of so many hours underground. From the camp to the surface it became a case of mentally ticking off landmarks: the Great Rubble Heap, Pool pitch, the Tyrolean Traverse, Little General, then the bottom of Aldo's. Once on the rope I made every effort to get my SRT rig as efficient as



Sue Mabbett emerges into the early-morning light after twenty hours in the Berger, photo Tony Baker

possible, not wanting to expend the slightest bit more energy than was necessary.

By the time we reached the Meanders I was a little way ahead of Sue, but took advantage of frequent pauses to make sure she was still following. Occasional snagging of the tackle sack elicited some choice language; fortunately Sue's been caving long enough to be used to this.

The sight and smell of the early-morning air were acute after so many hours underground, and I hauled myself off the traverse at the entrance and paused to savour the moment, before heading over to the tent to remove my SRT kit. I went back to take photos of Sue at the pitch-head and then we both posed for an 'after' pic, taken by the morning's entrance-minder (who we'd just inadvertently woken, and who very kindly made us a welcome cup of coffee). One advantage of coming out early in the morning was that we were able to walk back to La Moliere with the sun streaming through the trees, although our tired legs and eyelids took the edge off the experience somewhat.

Back in Meandre, the warm sunshine rather hampered my attempts at sleeping in the tent but at least I was better off than Sue, who had to spend her day entertaining Emily while Jules was still slogging up Mont Blanc. An overnight entrance-minding session allowed me to catch up on sleep (with apologies due to the Dobsons and Brian C, as I didn't get up and make them a brew when they emerged from a photo trip in the early hours). Meanwhile Gareth and the others who'd camped didn't make it back to the campsite until late afternoon, but reported a warm and comfortable night spent in the space-blanket shelter. So, while it's clearly a matter of personal choice, my original conclusion stands: "most fit, active cavers would have no problem doing the trip this way..."

While I recommend the 'one-hit' approach, there are several things I should point out; all of the following are recommendations but are based on my personal experiences of two trips to the bottom (fourteen years apart) combined with good caving sense...

1. Do not underestimate the scale of a trip to the bottom of the Berger. It is a very, very long way and while it is a fantastic trip it is also extremely arduous, especially on the way out (© Statements of the Bleedin' Obvious Ltd.). The bottom section of the cave is a remote and intimidating place, and no amount of training in British caves can properly prepare you for a trip of this magnitude.

2. Contingency plans to sleep at Camp One are a sound idea, in the form of a decent sleeping bag and Karrimat. Taking this in can be part of the all-important familiarisation trip, and even if individuals choose not to take personal kit the expedition should make provision for overnight stops enforced by exhaustion, flooding or accident.

3. Take a stove, food and a bivvy bag all the way to the bottom, or as near as makes little difference. Anyone in any doubt about this should read Ian Wilton-Jones account of his 48hr trip, at: <http://www.cavinguk.co.uk/berger/ian.html> Sudden flash-floods are a regular occurrence in this cave, even at the height of summer, and the lower sections of the cave may be impassable for long periods. (See details here: <http://www.cavinguk.co.uk/berger/flooding.html>) Sitting such a flood out in nothing more than a damp furry suit and oversuit, with a couple of Mars bars for sustenance, would be at best desperately uncomfortable and would more likely lead to the onset of hypothermia and even death.

4. Your choice of companion(s) is important: the base of Hurricane is not the place to learn that you're with an unknown quantity who prussiks at a snail's pace. You should only embark on this with someone you've caved with extensively, and whose abilities and stamina you trust completely. It also helps if you decide beforehand on how often you plan to stop, and for how long – on our trip Sue, Gareth and I were all of the same mind on this. Personally I recommend travelling as a team of two, or at most three, and while this might sound as though it leaves little margin for error in case of an incident the reality is that being in any bigger party will inevitably involve a lot of waiting at the top and bottom of pitches. In any case, with most expeditions it's likely that several parties will be aiming to get the bottom in a relatively small window of time between rig and de-rig, so you would be unlikely to be stranded for long if one of you was injured or if both your lights died.

5. Start early. While it's a drag getting out of bed in the dark on holiday a bottom-and-back trip is going to take even super-fit cavers 16hrs or more, and there's the walk to and from the entrance as well as the drive to La Moliere and back again. No-one caves at their best in the small hours of the morning after a day and a night underground and while it's tempting to think that a lie-in and a leisurely start will set you up nicely this can only mean having to do significant amounts of the trip with your Circadian rhythms screaming their disapproval.

A Longer, and Incomplete, Walk Under the French Vercors

(With Apologies to Eric Newby)

By Paul Meredith

The Berger. Big name, big cave, a long way down, and strangely, an even longer way back up.

I'd been in France nearly a week and I'd only been in to the Berger itself as far as the bottom of Cairn pitch. Something a little more ambitious was clearly called for and a photographic trip to the camp one area was born.

'We need an early start.' said Martin. 'That'll give us a full day's shooting and enable us to make the best of the light'. Either this man knows exactly what he's doing or...

An early start? Yes. This apparently meant leaving the camp site at 06.00. What?

Slept badly, got up late, had a very rushed on the hoof type breakfast and managed to roll into the camp site car park just gone 06.00. Not good. It got worse. Dom (Hyland) appears. 'Er, actually I'm not feeling too well and I'm not coming'. (Wimp.) Martin appears. 'Grunt.' We're still on then. It's getting better again.

Early summer mornings in high altitude France are strangely beautiful and we cruised peacefully for 45 minutes up from the camp site to La Moliere car park.

An uneventful walk over to the entrance was interrupted only by the barely audible workings of Martin and his digital camera seeking to capture some early morning atmosphere - that'll be that important early light I thought.

We exchanged banter with the gendarme on duty at the entrance tent while Martin went through his normal pre trip rituals (if you've never been on a decent length trip with Martin I'll perhaps leave out the finer details of what this comprises) kitted up, flashed up the carbide and waddled towards entrance.

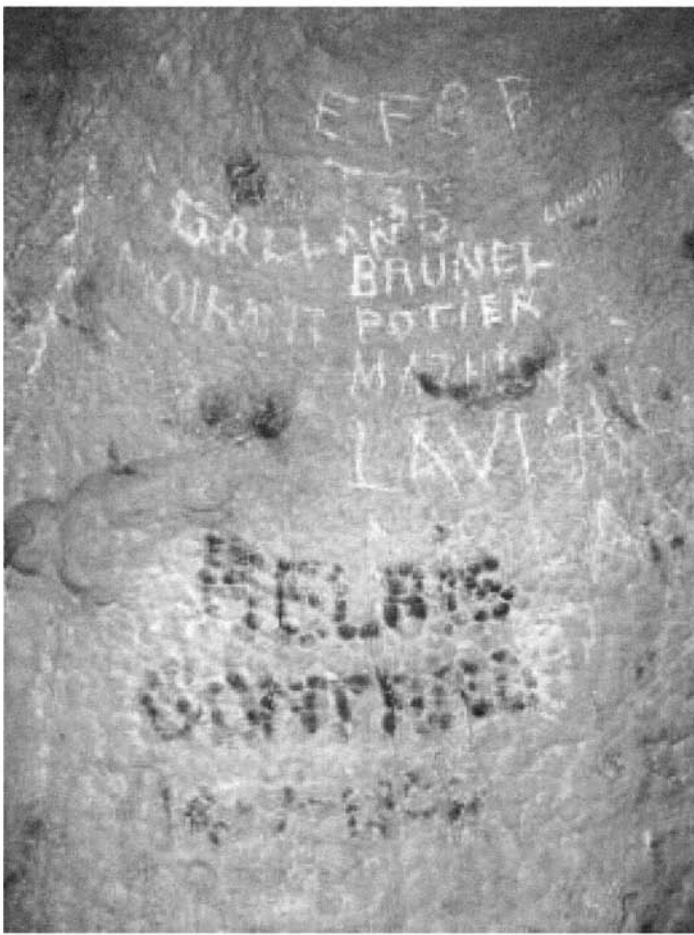
The 15m entrance pitch is immediately followed by the 35m Ruiz pitch, the 20m Holiday slides and the 30m Cairn pitch. Many of these top pitches were double rigged by this stage of the expedition and this enabled some interesting double descents and

ascents. I say interesting in that even as I write this trip report some many months after event I can still recall Martin having a visit from Monsieur Le Cock Up at the top of Cairn.

No matter, onward and downward and it wasn't long before we started the Meanders. I'd heard a lot about these, and none of it good. You won't like them, a real killer. The reality is, I am happy to report, that apart from being a bit of a pain, especially with a tackle sack, this is really an extended Yorkshire type high level thrutch series with the added thrill (!) of being above various pits of doom. Fortunately the ever thoughtful French have placed what appear to be self destructing wooden stemples at strategic points to aid the weary caver - EU grant funded I dare say, which means I have probably paid for them - trust them at your peril. After a 150m or so a traverse line appeared and the start of the 40m Garby's pitch, followed by another 100m or so of meanders before we encountered the traverse line for the 40m Gontard's pitch. Nothing particularly remarkable about either of these pitches other than that they both exceed my personal physiological maximum pitch length of 30m.

Time has unfortunately dimmed the memory of the next bit but we came fairly quickly to the top of Aldo's. 'Athletic' is probably the politically correct, and only printable, adjective to describe the antics required by those, like myself, who are of smaller stature and 'trust the gear' is also another piece of good advice here. Martin, I remember, was very keen to show me some squitty little alcove where a couple of the original explorers had sat and carved their names in the rock. I am sad to say that I my level of interest was, at this point, uncharacteristically limited.

Having bold stepped and swung about on the traverse line I slipped silently down this airy 40m shaft, with the ever present thought that the return prussick was going to be very long, and very, very slow. Gloom. At the bottom of Aldo's the whole character of the cave changes and we entered a big horizontal passage which just goes on and on and on.



Historic graffiti, photo Martin Hoff

That it is big there is absolutely no doubt, and if you've only ever caved in say, Devon, then the sheer scale will undoubtedly impress. However for me, and call me a philistine if you will, I am afraid this was just another big (OK, very big) continental passage. Martin and I trudged on down Starless Rive passage, across Lake Cadoux (dry) and we then started to meet folk who, having spent the night at camp one, were on their way out. Judging by the tired faces it had clearly been some party.

Having descended the 20m Little General and 20m Tyrolienne pitches we came to the great rubble heap, 300m of steeply descending chos and huge boulders - it must have been a fun place to be when this lot was coming down from the roof - which brought us finally to Camp One. We had not been fast but it was still good to get there, take off the SRT gear, have a pee and a brew and flake out in our very sweaty fury suits and boil in the bag over suits. Nice.

Replenished, we set about the main business of the day, recording for posterity the formations in the Hall of Thirteen. Martin set the shots from behind the camera and yours truly did his best to add a human dimension to what are, by any standards, impressively

massive formations. If size is your thing then you won't find bigger. Prettiest? No. Sexiest? No. Most famous? Probably. But biggest, definitely. Does size matter I hear you ask? Well when you're this big it's the only game in town.

We took photographs - or at least Martin did - wandered and potted on to the top of Balcony pitch but without SRT kit this was clearly going to be as far as we were going. Back to camp one, another brew and some food - strangely I did not feel like eating very much - and then it was time to begin the long haul back to the surface. Fortunately Martin wanted to take more pictures on the way out, which I thought was a brilliant excuse for a relaxed exit journey - even so, the 300m climb up the rubble heap was something of a sweat.

The truth of course, was that however relaxed our pace it was only delaying the inevitable and in no time at all we were back at the bottom of the physiologically important barrier of Aldos pitch, which we tandemed. 40m of pushing and panting - it took a lot longer than sex and was nothing like as good. The bold step at the top was fun (not) - thanks Martin for talking me through this.

Having got up Aldos' I felt a lot more relaxed and I really really enjoyed the rest of the journey out, despite managing to swig my way through 2 litres of water.

M L'attendant at the entrance tent - sorry I have forgotten who you were - heard us coming up and dutifully responded to my unequivocal request, shouted from the top of Cairn, to 'get a ...ing brew on'. We brewed, changed and shouldered our packs for the walk back up to the car park.

At this stage it became apparent that my internal energy management system had, it seemed, been programmed to stop as soon as we got out of the cave. All of a sudden I was completely knackered and the 60 minute walk back to the car was an absolute trial. So much so that when we got back to the camp site I only had enough energy to eat a few crackers and some cheese before falling into what I hoped would be a very deep sleep.

Not an epic pushing trip then, not really even an epic sporting trip in the great scale of things. But on the plus side we saw some great formations, all the gear worked, nobody was nearly killed and we enjoyed a great day's caving.

In the words of Wallace and Gromit 'It was a grand day out'.

From the Gouffre Berger to Mont Blanc

By Jules Carter

So what's this article about then? Well it's about a little trip involving some caving, bike riding and mountaineering. The Gouffre Berger is a cave system in the Vercors region of France. It is famous for being the first cave to go beyond the 1000m mark in depth and is hence an icon in the world of caving. Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Western Europe at a little over 4800m. Linking them is 100 miles of road. The challenge? To go from the bottom of the Berger at -1122m, to the top of Mont Blanc in a continuous journey. Why? Well Paul Mackrill came up with the idea to celebrate his 50th year and raise some cash for a friend paralysed in a climbing accident, and it seemed a good way to celebrate my 40th year!

The journey begins on the Vercor plateau south of Grenoble as part of the SWCC summer expedition for which we have booked the Gouffre Berger. Over 30 people have joined the trip for the caving, with partners and families also taking part in the 'holiday'. The trip starts well with good weather and low water conditions, and within a few days we have the cave rigged to the bottom. This involves almost 1000 meters of rope, plus additional equipment such as emergency food, sleeping stuff for Camp 1 (in case of flood conditions or for some to break up the caving trip), and boats for a lake that appears if it rains!

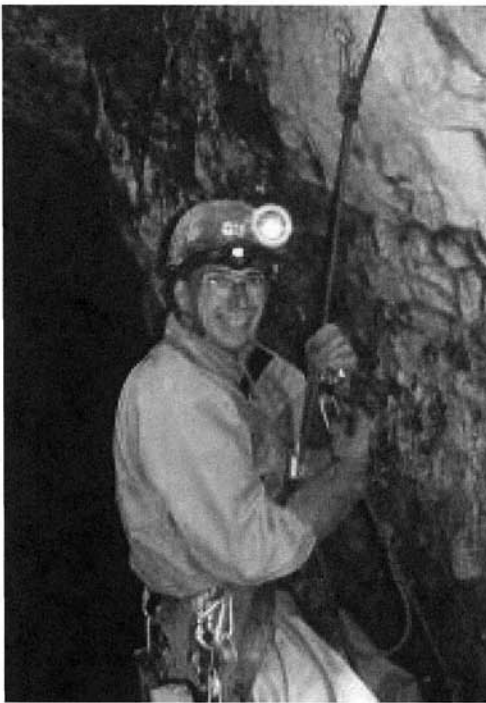
Now that the cave is rigged we check the weekend



Jules Carter and Paul Mackrill at the entrance to the Berger

forecast. It is good both in the Vercor and on the Mont Blanc Massif. The challenge is on! At 6.00am on a Saturday morning myself and Paul Mackrill meet at the Molières carpark at sunrise. A quick photo and we scurry off to the Berger entrance on a pair of old rigid mountain bikes. These will also be our transport down to the road once out of the cave. The bikes are hidden off the tracks before heading to the Berger itself. At 7.10am we set off down the cave making excellent progress. The caving is superb. The entrance series drops to -240m within 400m of horizontal distance with a series of fine fluted shafts. This then pops out in huge cave passage with a river. Various small pitches and steep boulder strewn descents see us arrive at what is known as Camp 1. Just beyond is the Hall of Thirty with its huge stalagmite bosses. Here we carry out a radio check with the surface and head on into the cave. The caving remains big until we arrive at a section called the Canals. Here an assortment of tatty rope can be used to keep you out of the deep water. The cave then becomes an active streamway that's very dangerous in flood conditions. Further pitches are met and then it's a steep descent down the 'Grand Canyon' which is just stupidly big! Here the final series of deep pitches are met. The caving is wild and many of the bolt belays for the rope are past their best. The pitch drops are exhilarating, with waterfalls plummeting into the chambers. The final pitch is 'Hurricane' which is a 44m drop down a very 'airy' pitch with water cascading down next to you. By 11.00am we arrive at the pseudo-syphon – as far as we can go without swimming! A few pictures and it's back to the surface meeting a number of other bottoming teams on the way out, one of which includes my partner Sue. By 4.30pm we are out of the cave – a very impressive 9 hours 20 minutes in and out.

We spend some time drinking tea and eating before heading up to retrieve the mountain bikes. The ride down is hilarious and somewhat shaky on the old bikes. We meet the road at the village of Engins and it's here we pick up the road bikes. By around 6.30pm we are cycling the 160km towards Mont Blanc. The first few miles are straight down into Grenoble through sweeping hairpin bends followed by a scurry through various back roads to get through Grenoble itself.



Jules Carter exiting the Berger, photo Paul Mackrill

Fortunately Paul knows the route well as he lives and works in the area. Before long we are on the 'route nationale' roads pacing along at a steady pace but stopping for pizza at a mobile van after about 35km!

From here darkness starts to fall so lights are fitted to bikes and helmets. The route takes us to Albertsville, which proves to be a soulless grind along flat straight roads in the dark. Paul's wife Gillian is acting as support and following in the car, and this enables us to have regular stops to break up the journey, feed and drink tea. After Albertville the cycling changes character as we face a hard grind up to the ski town of Megeve followed by fast descent to St Gervais. Close to the end of the cycle ride we are then faced with the hardest section. With only 5km to go we have to gain around 600m of ascent to reach the car park at the alpine hamlet of Bionnassay nestled at about 1400m. In the early hours and after almost 24 hours on the go the climb is brutal. Paul has a granny ring on his chainset and is able to grind slowly up through the hairpins. I am on a compact chainset and have to be more brutal with the climbs requiring a bit of a recovery stop now and again! At around 3.30am we trundle into the carpark.

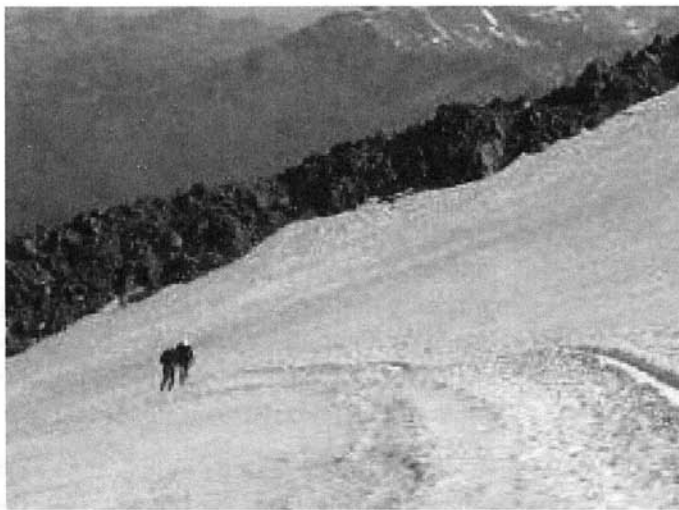
The plan is now to get a bit of sleep. Paul squeezes into the back of the support car, I find the luxury of a picnic table to sleep on. After around an hours worth of sleep I'm aroused by a bursting bladder and simultaneous need to crap! A quick dash to the newly installed 'eco-turd' box in the car park and normal bowel service returns. Some more food and tea is consumed before packing sacks for the mountain section. With the morning light I now look up and suddenly before me is a huge snow-capped mountain. I have been up the Blanc before but that was now over 20 years ago and I had forgotten the size of this brooding mountain.

At around 6.30am we begin the slog up the mountain. The walk up steadily gains height and after a few hours we cross the snowfield before the Tete Rousse refuge at 3167m. Here we meet two friends of Paul's who have kindly carried up our boots and iceaxes, and who feed us on French sausage and cheese. I realise I'm ravenous and attempt to stuff as many calories as I can. I also realise I have not carried up nearly enough food. Refuelled and now more suitably equipped it is time to start the climb up to the Gouter Refuge at 3817m. We enter the Tete Rousse refuge with trainers on our feet but we leave with proper mountain boots. However Paul had previously been up to the Gouter refuge in just a pair of Walshes (classic fell running shoes) but not to be recommended! The route to the Gouter involves crossing a notorious gully which has constant rock fall both from parties ascending the ridge to the Gouter hut and from snowmelt. We cross the gully without incident and begin the ascent up the loose rocky ridge. On beginning this ascent I watch horrified as a rockfall comes down the gully whilst someone is crossing. He has to stay put and watch the rocks, looking out in case one comes towards him. He makes it across ok. However when I was last here I did see someone knocked off by a rock. The next stop is the crevassed glacier below.....

During this part of the ascent Paul got ahead of me and I arrived at the refuge about 25 minutes behind. The altitude and tiredness was starting to hit me and I needed to stop for food and drink. Paul meanwhile was conscious of the time and wanted to press ahead for the summit. This challenge was his idea and was down to his organisation plus the fact he was using it to raise money. We quickly decided that Paul should continue on his own, with me to follow if I felt good enough. I stopped in the refuge for tea and coffee, and some food. After about 50 minutes I set off towards the Blanc. I'd come this far; I should at least get on to the final slopes of the mountain. The altitude was the one factor I could not prepare for on this trip. Pen y Fan doesn't quite get



Jules Carter laid out on a slab (or rather a picnic table), photo Paul Mackrill



On the snowfield before the Tete Rousse, photo Paul Mackrill

enough height! Thus I knew the summit was a longshot but I did want to break that magic 4000m mark.

I trudged up away from the refuge onto the rounded Gouter ridge itself then onto the long snowslope stomp towards the Blanc itself. Steadily I gained height in fantastic calm and clear weather conditions. For a while I was alone on the slopes of the Blanc. My target was to get at least as far as the Dome du Vallot and hopefully meet Paul on his return. On reaching the summit of the Dome the Vallot refuge at 4362m came into view the other side of the col. This became my next goal and I made my way towards this, but found the final 100m of ascent tough as the altitude started to hit me hard. Here I tried to find a comfortable spot to



Paul Mackrill on the summit of Mont Blanc

wait for Paul but this wasn't possible. Thus I returned to the Gouter refuge. Paul made it back to the Gouter refuge at around 6.30pm. Looking pale and tired he had given his all to make the summit. His time from the bottom of the Berger to the top of the Blanc was 29hrs and 29mins – a superb achievement.

The original vague plan was to get back off the Blanc on the same day, however Paul was trashed and needed some recovery time. We had to spend the night at the

Gouter refuge which we hadn't planned on. As we were travelling light we didn't carry sleeping bags but I did have a credit card. The bunks in the refuge were typically full thus we initially slept on the floor or on a bench in the dining area, paying 25 Euros for the privilege and not even getting a blanket! However we did jump into bunk space when the first teams left for the summit at 1.00am, but only after raiding their leftover bits of breakfast! We slept well and made our way back down the rubble heap at around 9.00am meeting Paul's wife Gillian at the Tete Rousse hut on the way back down. We even stopped for a beer at a café close to the station for the mountain train.

Overall it was a superb trip that was well worth the effort. If I attempt it again, acclimatisation at altitude is a must beforehand, but I simply didn't have the time to do so for the trip as it was basically carried off on the back of the caving expedition which came first. It was good doing such a challenge with Paul. Despite the arduous nature of the challenge both our spirits remained high. A big thanks goes to all who helped us in the challenge particularly Paul's wife Gillian, but also to the SWCC expedition for allowing us the luxury of a fast lightweight trip to the bottom of the Berger, and to Sue, Barbara and Haley (the suffering wives of friends on the caving expedition) for looking after my daughter Emily whilst both myself and my partner Sue were in the cave at the same time! I think Paul has managed to raise in excess of 3000 Euros which will fund an all terrain wheel chair for their paralysed friend.



The team celebrate their success

"Three...Two...One...GO!"

A Photo Trip to the Hall of Thirteen

By Tony Baker

The command will be horribly familiar to anyone who's endured one of my big-bulb photographic trips. The notoriously unreliable slave unit is the bane of cave photographers as well as their models and assistants, and on shoots with the expensive and bulky M22B flashbulbs (each the size of a household light bulb, and considerably more costly) there's no room for wastage. So in common, I suspect, with other cave photographers I rely on less technologically sophisticated means to fire big bulbs – cavers.

I'm still using the wonderful bulb guns that Bob Hall made for me back in 1994 (see SWCC N/L no. 114, p.30, Edison-Screw Flash Guns for Caving Use) and the technique works as follows: give models/assistants bulb guns and bulbs and send them off to required places within the shot with appropriate instructions. Set camera on tripod, shout at models/assistants to screw bulbs into guns, give the "One, two, three...go!" command making sure to open shutter as you shout "one", cavers press button to fire bulbs on "go", close

shutter. Occasionally bulbs fail to go off, for any one of a variety of reasons, and this open-shutter technique allows the opportunity for the caver concerned to try again, even re-inserting the bulb if necessary, before the shutter is closed. This reduces the number of shots ruined by duff bulbs.

I usually give each caver three bulbs for each individual set-up, allowing for a bracket of the exposure setting and the odd faulty bulb, so for a typical three-caver shot that's nine bulbs used – probably fifteen quid's worth unless I've managed to secure some eBay bargains. The problem then becomes one of carrying enough bulbs to shoot a worthwhile number of pictures, especially on something like a Berger expedition where the overall demands of the expedition mean there is only going to be one opportunity to take photographs. I was in the fortunate position, having been to the Berger in 1993, of having a pretty clear idea of the places I wanted to shoot, and used a couple of 'warm-up' trips to ferry bags full of



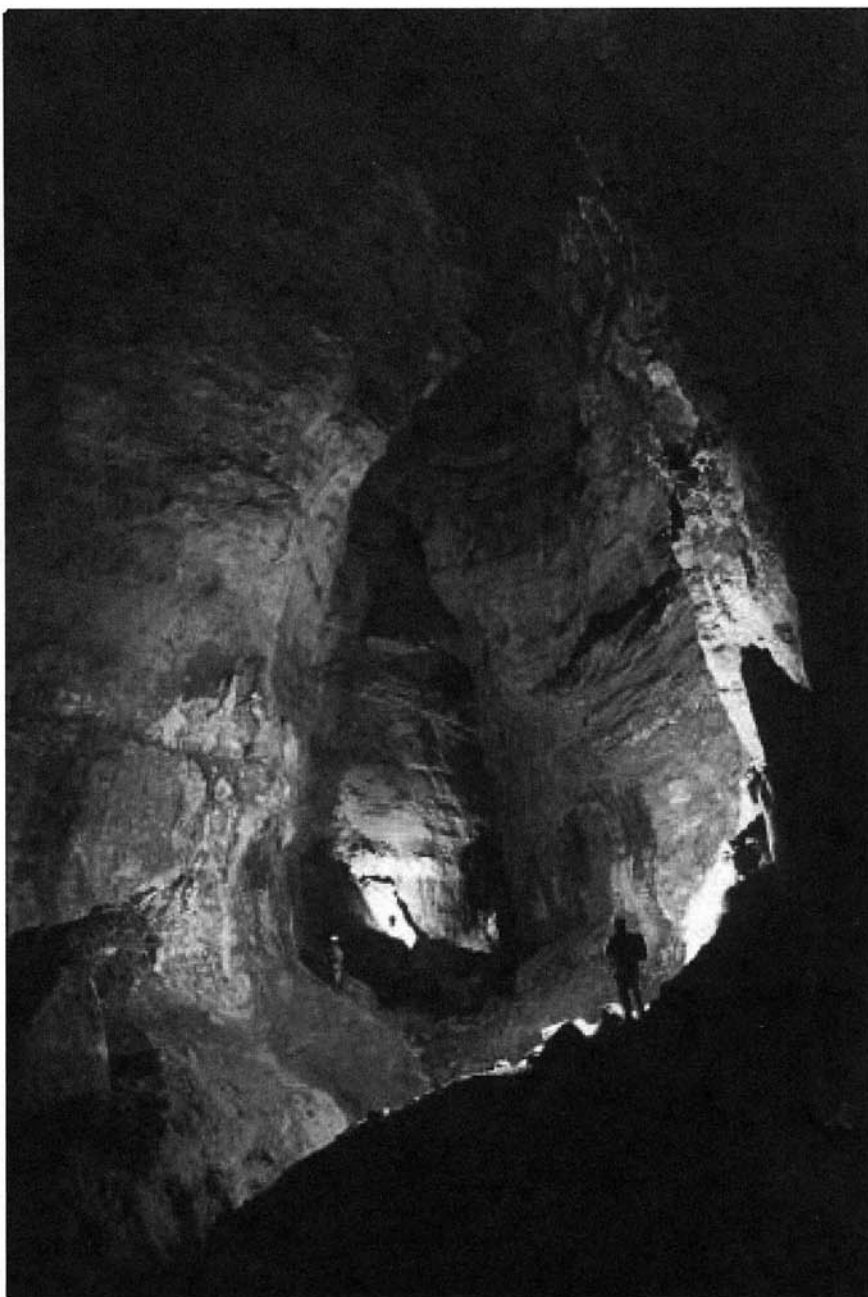
The Hall of Thirteen, photo Tony Baker

bulbs into the cave, stashing them in out-of-the-way places close to my chosen locations. I even dragged a tackle sack full of bulbs in as far as the bottom of Aldo's on my bottoming trip (although bulky, the bulbs themselves weigh very little). In total I used 74 bulbs on the photo trip, which I then crushed in order to facilitate taking them out of the cave (and 74 crushed bulbs weighed more than I'd expected, and took up more space, making the tackle sack a beast on the return from the Hall of Thirteen!).

For me big passages are far more exciting, photographically speaking, than formations, so I planned a trip as far as the Hall of Thirteen, intending to shoot in the Petzl Gallery, the Salle Bourgin, and the Great Rubble Heap as well as the Salle des Treize itself. I was fortunate to have the patient help of Sue Mabbett and Gareth Edwards on a previous trip as far as the Hall of Thirteen, and by sending them off to stand in different places and watching the effect of their lights, I was able to carefully plan each of several different set-ups, making for greater efficiency and saved time on the actual photo trip a week later.

In the Berger I was still using a film SLR for cave photography (which attracted some sarcastic comments from some of the expedition's younger participants), but having become so used to shooting digitally at work I found myself glancing at the camera back expecting an image to appear after each shot, and shortly after returning from France I surrendered to the inevitable and started researching reasonably-priced digital compacts. (I eventually bought a Panasonic Lumix DX-2, a pocketable camera with a 28mm-equivalent lens and the facility to shoot RAW files).

Of course, there are advantages to using more traditional technology: one of the aforementioned younger participants, who shall remain nameless, came to rue his earlier tongue-in-cheek comment about film cameras ("Film? What's that?") when he turned up in the Hall of Thirteen to shoot an important image for the fabled SUSS naked calendar only to realise he'd left his digital SLR's battery at the campsite, thereby rendering



Gary Vaughan, Bill Buxton and Dominic Hyland in the Petzl Gallery, Gouffre Berger, photo Tony Baker

the camera useless. As he was reduced to borrowing a humble compact from a companion for his shoot, I took great pleasure in pointing out that my trusty film SLR relied on nothing more sophisticated than four AAs.

All of the pics reproduced here were shot on a Nikon F-301 (another eBay bargain) with 24mm or 28mm lenses, on Fuji Provia film rated at ISO 100, and the transparencies were subsequently scanned on a Konica Minolta Dimage 5400 scanner. I am grateful to Gary Vaughan, Bill Buxton, Dominic Hyland, Dave and Andy Dobson and Brian Clipstone, who all spent inordinate amounts of time helping with photos on what turned to be a long trip, due not just to my photography but also to a significant flood pulse that hit the cave.

Happiness is a Wet Berger

By Martin Hoff

"Quill? <pause> QUILL!" I moved off the pitch-head as he appeared out of the mist surrounding the entrance depression and started to tell me it had been raining for about four hours. Of course, Paul Quill, me, France and water – what other combination of factors do you need for a story to develop out of nothing?

This was to be hopefully the last day of our activities in the Gouffre Berger, and I'd headed over to the entrance nice and early with Clive Westlake in order to try and get down the cave and out of people's way before the crowds of rope deriggers, Camp One dismantlers and sundry photographers and tourists came in. All the same it was 8.30am by the time I got underground and soon got caught up by the Baker/Vaughan/Hyland/Buxton party. No matter, we were the first wave of cavers to follow the deep derigging party in and we reached the bottom of Aldo's in reasonable order.

Leaving the others to start photographing their way down the Starless River, I headed off to play the fun game of hitting the 10 second delay button, running

round the gour pools in the floor of the Hall Of The Thirteen, assuming a suitably dynamic pose and cursing the flashguns which failed to go off, or slipping and emerging just into the side of the picture as it was taken, or one or two other possibilities for things going wrong. On the other hand, at least in the digital age you can see whether it did or didn't work and carry on until either your patience or batteries run out.

With Nicky appearing at Camp One just as I'd finished with the camera there, I moved on down the Salle Germain, planning to go no further than the canals. A photo trip with Paul Meredith a couple of days previously had had some interesting results, but there were a couple of things I want to have another go at, and that's another benefit of solo photo trips, you can don't have to worry about keeping other people hanging about. Down Balcony Pitch then, round to the Vire du Vagin for a few shots of the water spout that sounds like a thunderous waterfall from some distance away, but turns out to be rather less spectacular when you get there.



Martin Hoff in the Hall of Thirteen, photo Martin Hoff



The Vire du Vagin, photo Martin Hoff

My batteries started giving up in the section of small stalagmite pillars before the Salle Saint Matthieu, and mindful of the need to get out before the party below me emerged laden with rope, I turned round and met Nicky just above Balcony. My return to Camp One coincided with Gary Vaughn finding the mysterious, invisible sleeping bag, I picked up some stuff of my own and some gear for removal, and headed back towards the entrance with Bill Buxton. Progress back up to the bottom of Aldo's wasn't exactly at fired up racing speed, and the first of the photographer's models party caught us up there. At the head of Gontard's, and with a queue of people on both of the double rigged ropes between me and the Starless River, there wasn't much to be gained by hanging around, and equally making my own speed through the meanders would make my trip a lot more comfortable, so I headed off.

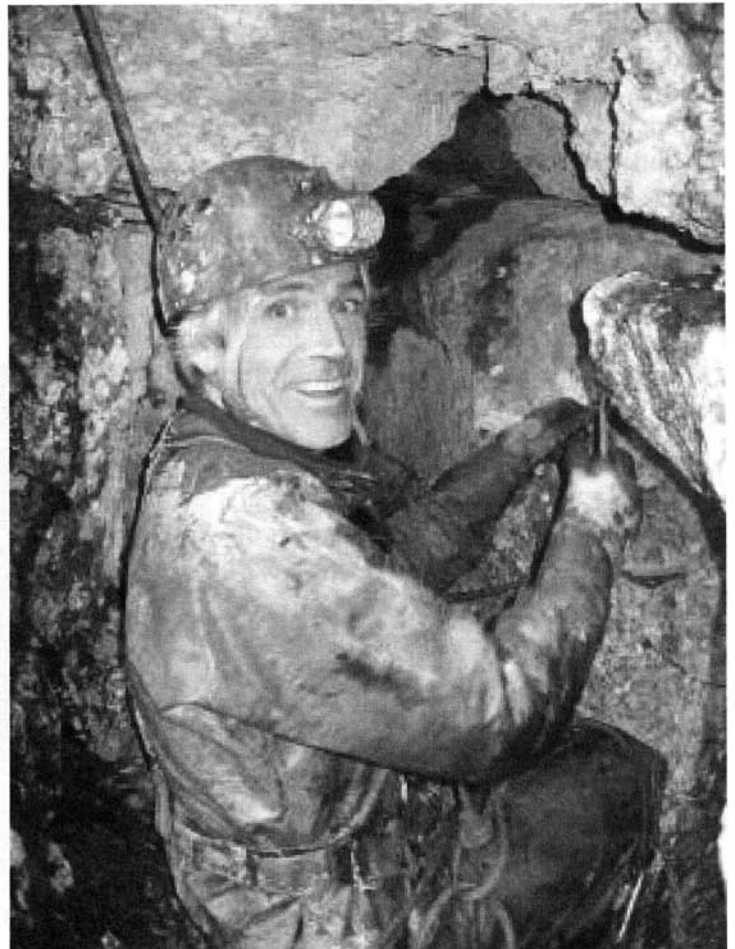
Garby's didn't give me so much trouble getting off the top this time, and in a couple of spots where the meander widens a little, I stopped and got the camera out again, listening for the noise of people approaching as my cue to get on with it. Nothing, but I'd more or less had enough of the camera by then, so I moved on. And came round a corner to find drops of water dripping through the roof of the meander. And pooling in odd spots where the floor was visible. Interesting, I didn't recall seeing those on the way in.

By the time I got back to the foot of Cairn, I was fairly clear that conditions on the surface had changed. Where the tackle sacks on the bottom of the ropes on the main Cairn pitch were hanging, they'd previously provided a landing point for the odd drop of water coming down the pitch, with a

single distinctive pttt noise coming every second or two. Now they were echoing with a non stop pitterpatter of water falling down the shaft, and as I climbed up into Cairn Hall the noise was accompanied by a noticeably moist draught.

After a quick look up the ropes to see roughly where the water was falling, I stuck on my thin fleece hat under my helmet and reasoning that with more than a dozen people below me in the cave, someone had better have a go and see how passable it was, I set off up the rope. Once above the rebelay I could see a bit better where the water was coming from, and trying not to look up more than I had to, I made my way up the ropes to the foot of Ruiz via a couple of brief legs of prussiking while using one foot to try and keep me braced against the correct wall to stay out of the water. Ruiz was pretty unpleasant, as the water was coming from directly above the pitch and there was no way to avoid getting it down my neck, so it was with a certain amount of relief I crossed the vintage wooden platform and started calling for Quill.

Always obliging, he had a brew on while he



Paul Mackrill derigging the alternative entrance, photo Martin Hoff

explained how long it had been raining, and how he had already run out of credit on his phone. I tried making a couple of calls, and as my phone became waterlogged this turned into a series of ten second long calls, but it was all fairly clear that there wasn't much we could do about it anyway. In some ways that's the hardest thing about that sort of situation, when there's nothing that can be done but wait and hope people make sensible decisions for their circumstances at the time. The rain had eased a little as I emerged, and with no clear idea of whether it would stay like that or get worse, it seemed quite important that the people in the cave knew that they could get out now, and at that point Quill had a brainwave.

In the previous few days, Paul Mackrill had pioneered a new route to keep the antennae wires for the Systeme Nicola radio system properly earthed and in a place where they wouldn't get damaged by the constant passage of cavers passing through that way. This remained rigged, just next to the entrance depression, and Quill suggested I'd be fine to go down it on just my cowstails and see if I could hear or see anything. In another moment of inspiration, we'd written a message to say the rain had eased and that getting out was possible and put it in a plastic bottle that I could chuck down the pitch if voice communication wasn't possible, and in full SRT kit I slipped down to the first squeeze, and let gravity do its thing. Another twenty foot down to a floor, then a proper squeeze through into a thin meander smeared with moonmilky whiteness everywhere. Following the rope I worked my way along the traverse, round half a dozen corners, and the rope dropped through another squeeze.

On the moonmilk smeared 9mm rope, it was quite exciting dropping through the slot with nothing but blackness below me. By this point I was back through to a point where I could just catch the unmistakable Baker voice over the sounds of roaring water. I couldn't pick out any lights on the floor, and having established that where I was remained pretty dry in the top section, I abseiled further down with a bit of spray coming through as I neared the floor and by the time the movement in the rope I was on was spotted I was nearly already down. Tony's voice hadn't sounded entirely calm and comfortable, and I asked Nicky, who was sitting round the corner from the cairn with Bill, where Tony was. Expecting to be told there was an ongoing discussion about whether to risk the watery pitches taking place back down in the start of the meanders, "He's stuck up there on the ledge with



Dominic Hyland strikes a heroic pose, photo Martin Hoff

Gary and Dom," was not the answer I was expecting to hear.

Explaining that I'd made it out ok, that the rain had eased a bit and that the way I'd just come in was fine for people with waistlines no bigger than mine, I headed back up the rope. At about 30m up I stopped to have a conversation with the ledge party, who sounded just a little surprised to hear from me right there and then, and passed on that same information before heading back out. Getting back through a couple of the thinner bits was interesting, and by the time I was out, Gary, Tony and Dom had all beaten me to the surface depression, where more warm, dry clothing was awaiting me in my rucksack.

With the weather getting no worse and people gradually taking their turn on Cairn and the other pitches, it was time to head back, marvelling at the amount of water that had collected at various points of the walk back to the car park. And time to be thankful that that was all the rain there was – in itself it was enough for people further down the cave to have significantly more exciting moments than we did, and it's easy to see how little rain is required to change the nature of the place in potentially serious ways.

Ode to the Berger Bog

By Dave Dobson

This short ditty started to come to mind as, once again, Andy was portering a large Daren drum into the Goufre Berger for use as a toilet at Camp One, he had done so in 1993 and had an especially large tackle bag custom made by Dragon Caving Gear for the purpose. Once again he also carried it back out, somewhat heavier...

This is about some of the problems encountered both in the cave and with understanding French labels on the surface (Ceilidh awards have been given!). Apologies in advance to those mentioned.

The Elsan Blues (To the tune of The Diamond Ring Blues)

Well I woke up this morning
I got the Elsan Blues
Yeah, I woke up this morning
I got the Elsan Blues
'Cos when we're in that Berger cave
We'll need somewhere to put our number twos

I got myself an Elsan
It was a Daren Drum
Well I got myself the Elsan
It was a Daren Drum
Now when we're at that Berger camp
There'll be somewhere to park our bums

Now Brian got the fluid
He thought it was the thing
Yeah, he got that Elsan fluid
He thought it was the thing
But when we reached the Entrance Tent
We found he'd bought some paraffin

If we'd used that fluid
It would have been a sin
Oh, if we'd used that fluid
It would have been a sin
'Coz someone using carbide
Could have really scorched their ring!

We 'abbed down the pitches
It was an awesome sight
We 'abbed down the pitches
It was an awesome sight
But in the Meanders
That drum was an awful fight

Well on the de-rig
'Twas an evil plight
Well on the de-rig
It was an evil plight
That big old Daren drum
All brimming full of sh*te

Now that hummin' Daren,
It had to come back home,
Oh, that hummin' Daren,
It had to come back home,
So we called on Andy,
To do it on his own

Martin emptied it,
He bravely volunteered,
Yeah, Martin emptied it,
He bravely volunteered,
But where he put the contents,
I haven't an idea!



Andy Dobson in Camp One, photo Dave Dobson

Oh, To Be Small!

Otter Hole, 23rd September 2007

By Peter Devlin

Paul Meredith had organised a club trip down Otter Hole on the Sunday of the Hidden Earth weekend. I had a CDG Exam committee meeting at the conference so I went along to the conference for the first time. On Saturday Gareth Davies who was also due to do the trip rang me to say he had broken his hand in a cycling accident so wouldn't be on the trip. Chatting to Nicky Bayley on the Sunday morning, about the 1pm meet-up for the trip, she pointed out that it being an over the tide trip, we would not be out until very late. She also mentioned the walk up the hill after a long trip. Out for midnight, drive home to Oxford, up at 6am for a busy week leading up to working all the next weekend on a major project: oh joy! Mandy and Rhys warned me it was a hard trip. Mandy looked me up and down and pointed out that there were tight bits. Driving to Chepstow I remembered that fellow Welsh Section member Laura Trowbridge had had a hip injury in Otter which had involved a lengthy rescue. All these thoughts weighed up against my desire to do the trip and I considered crying off.

Arriving at the car park half an hour before the meeting time I found that our leader, Hades member, Pete Mason, and Mick Davies were already there. I asked Pete how tight the cave was and he told me he had taken bigger folks down and that the tightest bit was right at the entrance. He pointed out that the cave was spectacular, but that the cave made you work for it. Being an over the tides trip the plan was to see a fair amount of the cave beyond the Hall of Thirty. Since we were ahead of the tide we got kitted up and got underground shortly after 1pm.

I got through the tightish bedding right by the entrance and soon we were wallowing in gloopy mud in the entrance series bedding plane. Shortly after that I was struggling to get through a bedding that was marginally tighter than the entrance one. Getting through involved a good amount of breathing in and pulling and shoving. Soon we were at the sump and in the streamway beyond. I didn't like the sound of the Mendipian Way, bringing back memories of the time I had had to turn back from an attempt to do Eastwater Swallet. I don't generally have to take my helmet off to get through stuff, but I had to do so a couple of times in Otter. Following Mick through a particularly tortuous and grotty passage I could see that Mick, who is

considerably smaller than I am, was working hard. When it came to my turn I had a bit of an epic: helmet off, thrutching like crazy, I was reminded of the time I turned back in the Last Sandwich (in the Dollimore Series?) in Draenen and ruined Pete Talling's trip... do we see a trend emerging? With the sump closed off behind us and Pete pointing out that the Hall of Thirty was just around the corner in easy passage I dismissed thoughts of giving up, and paused to catch my breath and muster my determination. Soon more violent contortions and awkward thrutching got me out into bigger passage. I'm not sure whether Pete and Mick were frustrated at the antics of the fat boy or sympathetic to my plight, but they appeared to bear the delay patiently.

Soon we were back on the road, Mick forging ahead and Pete gently me coaxing on. Mick kept exclaiming as each corner brought new pretties while Pete kept telling him it was not the Hall of Thirty yet. When we got to the Hall of Thirty Pete and I stopped while I took some snaps. Unfortunately between our two lights and my little camera I couldn't do the chamber justice. Still it felt good to be there, having heard so much about it. Pete pointed out that most between tide trips just go to the Hall of Thirty and turn back: it felt good to be going further. Just beyond the Hall of Thirty is the chamber where the diesel and arsenic seepage make the stal dangerous to touch: the lovely white stal is an evil, unnatural black.

We went on to Camp 1 to have a break and a bite to eat. It was now 4pm with the hard bit behind us, so it felt good to take a rest. A summer of less caving than usual and no visits to the gym due to work pressure had left me less cave fit than usual (astonishing as this may seem). My convulsions getting through so far had left me somewhat tired, legs already aching and I was aware that I had to be careful to avoid a dangerous mistake. After the break we headed on into the cave. At one point I tripped and Pete pointed out that we were a long way from home and a rescue from this point was not advisable: Laura's rescue from just beyond the sump had been a long one – and we were much further into the cave.

The pretties beyond Camp 1 are spectacular. Chamber after chamber have beautiful curtains, straws and flowstone. At a certain point we were skirting

magnificent gour pools: we were in Gour Chamber. Soon we were in Long Straw Chamber: some of these straws were 4 to 5m long. About an hour after Camp 1 we came to a 3m climb with lovely stal just beyond. Pete suggested we turn here, so we had a peek at the stal beyond then popped into a side chamber with outstanding stal. Here Pete suggested that in the smaller scale my little camera might take better photos. This turned out to be the case. This was only the second time I had taken photos underground, so I have a lot to learn, but I was pleased with the results.

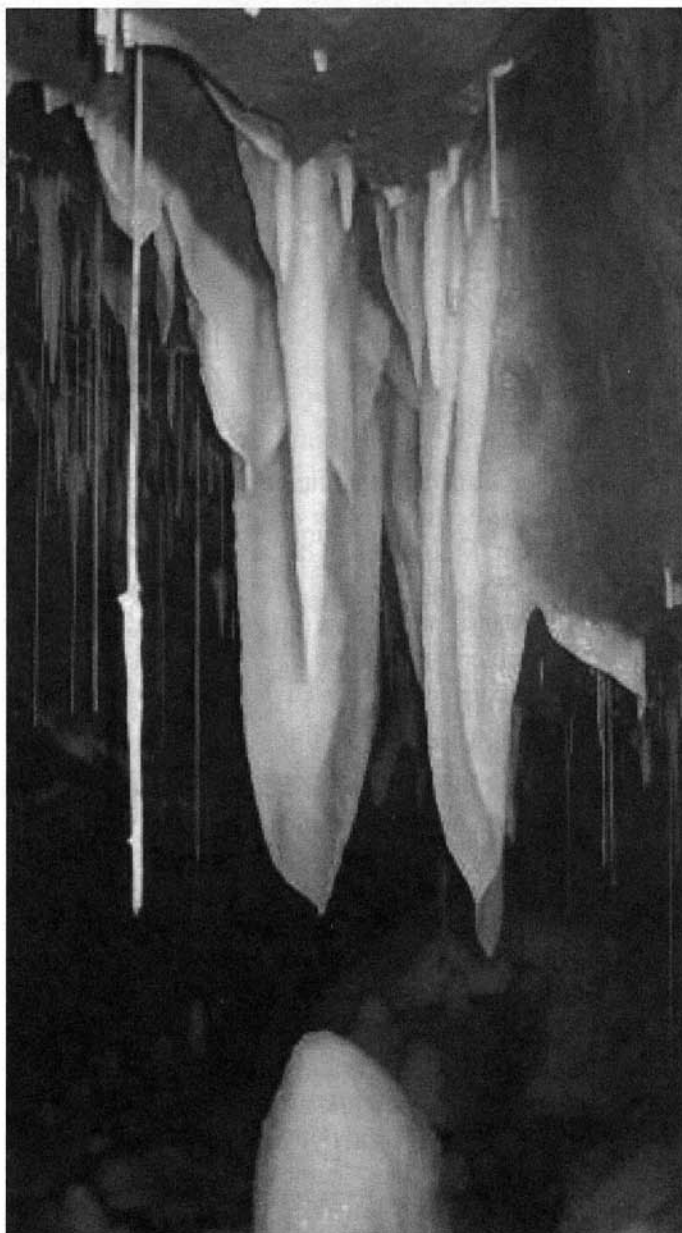
Soon it was 6pm and we were back at Camp 1 for a rest and bite to eat. Pete had warned us that the way out is typically quicker than the way in, being assisted by gravity, so we kept stopping for breaks and to enjoy the pretties. I had been dreading the entry to the Mendipian Way and soon we were back there. After a pause to gather myself I was in: Pete had told me it was easier on the way out. Knowing I had been through it already helped psychologically, so with much violence I just went for it. Having got through the tight bit I heard Pete and Mick commenting on my effort: I was making too much noise to hear them, and was certain the judges were not awarding me high marks for style. I heard the Belgian judge awarding "Null Point", but what did I care: I was through. As a side note I noticed when I got home that my oversuit had acquired a few new tears, which I attribute to this little struggle.

We got back to the chamber above the ladder down to the sump a little after 8pm, with the sump due to open at 9.10pm. We found this chamber wet and cold so we back tracked to a less draftier, drier chamber to wait. The game of I spy fizzled out when I guessed Pete's thing starting with 'M': with mud everywhere this had not been too tough. Nobody was prepared to sing, so Mick suggested a joke. My paltry offering on that front shut down that avenue of entertainment so we were back to silence. Around 9.30pm we decided to check out the level in the sump, which was well down (only shoulder height) and soon with a couple of gasps we were out the other side, back to the gloopy, gelatinous mud.

As we caught our breaths before the tight bedding that had given me trouble on the way in Pete and Mick commented on the fact that I was covered from head to toe with mud: they weren't exactly spotless, but their faces weren't completely plastered as mine was. At least the mud covering helped me get through the tight bit. Soon Mick was telling me that Pete was at the entrance and before I knew it I was watching Mick negotiate the bedding at the entrance. Seeing him do this feet first I asked him why he had done it that way.

His response that "it seemed the best way to do it" persuaded me to follow suit. I found that the 4ft drop on the other side was indeed easier than doing it head first. Maybe I should just accept that I'm not a talented caver. Hey ho.

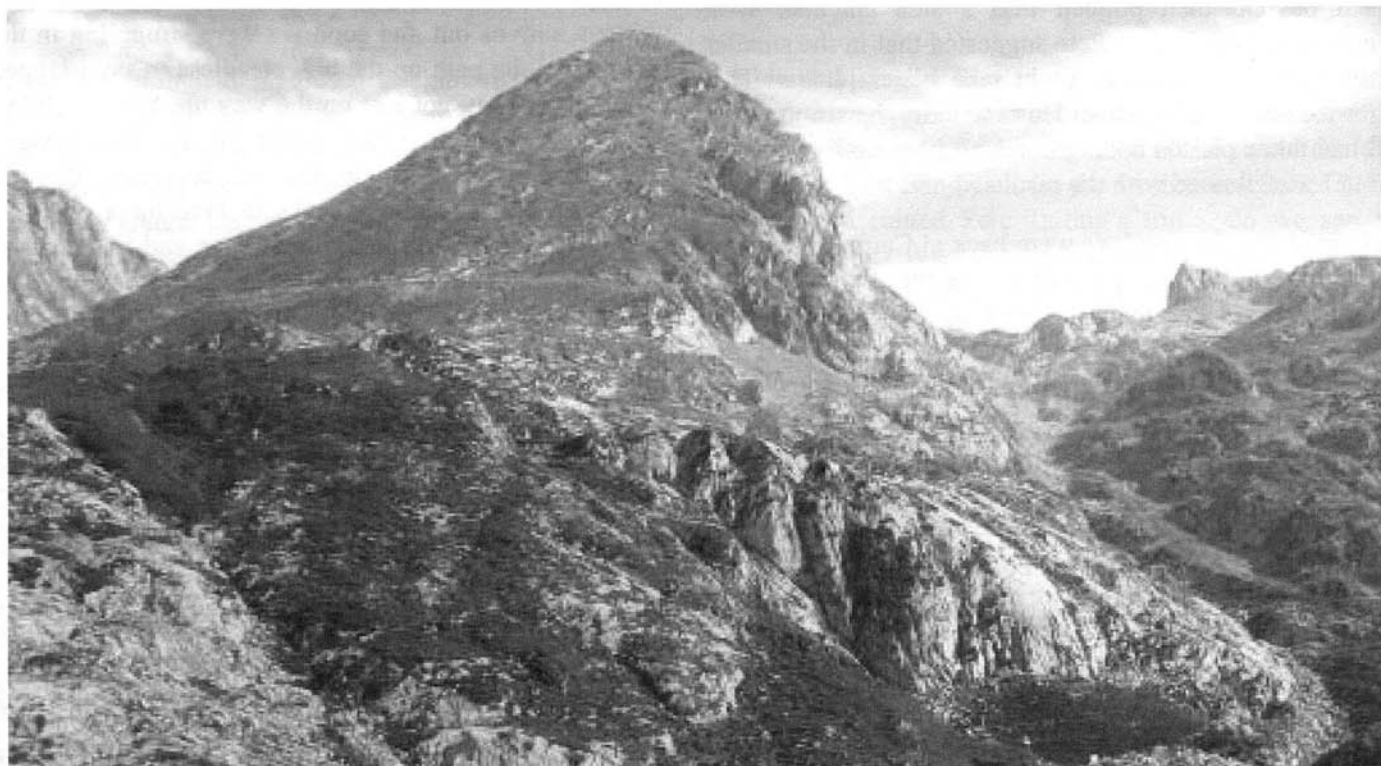
10.30pm saw us out and soon we were struggling in the dark to find the path up the hill. Needless to say I lagged behind and nearly got lost on the way up. While I didn't particularly enjoy the climb up the hill I'm hard pushed to decide which was worse: the hill, or getting through work on Monday. Many thanks to Pete for a cracking trip into a spectacular and unique cave and to Pete and Mick for tolerating me trailing behind for the day. Thanks also to Paul Meredith for organising the trip.



Some of the pretties in Otter Hole, photo Peter Devlin

Picos, Eastern Massif 2009

By Phil Walker



Mancondiu, photo Phil Walker

The Picos de Europa is a range of mountains 20km inland from the northern coast of Spain, forming part of the Cantabrian Mountains. It consists of three main areas, the Central, Eastern and Western Massifs. It was the Eastern Massif that drew the attention of Lancaster University Speleological Society (LUSS) in the early 1970s and subsequently started an invasion of cavers every summer.

The early years were spent pushing the Cueva del Agua (also referred to as Cueva del Nacimiento) system; a wonderful resurgence system, located at the foot of the mountain along the Urdon Gorge. Over the years this was pushed to around the 11km mark but after several years the cave was abandoned as the major routes sumped and no continuation could be found. LUSS turned their attention to the Andara region further up the mountain range and sought caves that would drop into the Agua system and create a record-breaking 1500m through trip. They eventually found a number of deep caves around this 'top camp' area. Sara, Tere, Flowerpot and the -1169m deep Sima 56 (at the time the deepest in Spain) were all pushed to respectable depths.

Many years were spent pushing the top camp systems

but the way through remained elusive. In 1986 and 1987 SWCC also ventured out to the area with a diving trip into Agua and pushed an intimidating climb, 'The Teeth of Satan', at the back end of the system (see SWCC special newsletter, 'Agua '86 and '87'). Interest in the area began to dwindle; the old LUSS members went on to bigger and better things. However a few stuck around and would tell tales to prospective new members back in Lancaster. I was one such new member joining LUSS in 1995 and at the time expeditions were still being run, although on a much smaller basis. By now they had shifted their attention to the 'Middle Camp' area, around the Sierra del a Corta, the theory being the quickest way to find the through trip was from the middle, then work down towards Agua and up toward Sima 56.

Three expeditions in 1994, 1995 and 1996 were concentrated on the Cheese Cave (Cueva del Quesos and previously called Cave of the Dug-out entrance, Cueva de Entre Cuetos). This was a drafting cave, used for maturing the local Cabrales cheese, that had been pushed through some tortuous squeezes, down some pitches and was now at a constriction that required hammering.

The final trip in 1996 was rather disappointing; the area had recently become a national park and park rangers were everywhere stopping us doing anything and constantly moving the camp along. However, once back in the UK, I didn't forget the grand tales or the potential of the area and the constriction in the Cheese Cave just seemed to require a bit more mechanical persuasion than a lump hammer.

In 2005 I convinced a couple more SWCC members, Rhys Williams and Alan Braybrooke, to take a break from some Cantabria caving and come on a quick diversion to the Picos. Unfortunately, we got the seasonal timings slightly wrong and the snow had not yet melted, this made exploration very hard, but it was still an exciting area to visit and the exploration bug was still there (see SWCC newsletter 125). In 2009 I finally convinced a big enough group to come out to Spain on the promise of passing an easy constriction and finding new cave. Following a few drop outs from SWCC members, the group was made up of myself and members of my other club, the South Bristol Speleological Society (SBSS).

As we only had a week in the field our objectives were kept fairly small:

- 1 Push the Cheese Cave, by capping the constriction and exploring any discovery from there;
- 2 Push A12, found in 2005 by SWCC; and
- 3 Locate and if possible explore some old LUSS leads on the Sierra del a Corta.

Day 1 (Thursday 10th September) Sotres

After what can only be described as possibly the worst cabaret singer in the world, followed by the worst pub quiz ever, the 24-hour Portsmouth to Santander ferry transported Mike, Arwel, myself and all the equipment into Spain. The usual talk of 'caverns measureless to man' had started well before the beer started flowing, but I spent most of the crossing worrying whether I could remember where the cave was after 13 years and whether the 'howling draft' and 'booming echo' was a figment of my imagination.

The weather was really pleasant on arrival and we had a nice leisurely (albeit noisy) drive up to the Picos in Mike's white transit. I had hoped to drop in and see ex-SWCC member Jim Thompson while passing through Arenas de Cabrales, but thanks to the wonders of a well-known social media site discovered he was actually in France!

We arrived at the bunkhouse in Sotres and I set about trying to sort out accommodation, in a very similar vein to the 2005 trip (see SWCC newsletter 125). Namely my inability to speak coherent Spanish and the owners' inability to speak English. Luckily, a pre-trip phone call from a Spanish speaker had paved the way for us and we were expected.

Shortly after arriving, the second team of Bob, Lisa, 'Bucket' Dave and Conor also turned up at the bunkhouse. They had flown from Bristol to Biarritz and then driven down across the Pyrennes. As it was still late afternoon I was keen to go and locate the Cheese Cave and perhaps take some rope to the entrance ready for the next day. The drive to the 'Crossroads' is only about 5 minutes from Sotres. Previously this was no more than a dirt turning circle marking the point where the tracks diverged, one way going to Tresviso and one to Beges via the White House (Caseton de Andara) an old miners hut, now a refugio. However, nowadays it's a tarmac car park with numerous warning signs about the dangers of mountains, caves and bears. We parked up and armed with some directions jotted down from memory by an ex-LUSS member, we set off up the track. I was pretty sure that a more direct route was possibly to the cave, but following the longer directions seemed more prudent as I had spent a very cold night in 1996 lost in the same mountains, after losing the track, in fog, only 100m from the camp.

It only took about 30 minutes to find the cave and get an accurate GPS location for it. Once found we then took the direct route back to the van, which proved to be far easier than the initial route. It was starting to get late but Bob and Arwel and I decided to take the rope and rigging gear over to the cave entrance ready for the next day, and hopefully avoid the joys of having to move it all over in the expected sunshine.

Day 2 (Friday 11th September) Cheese Cave

A rather pathetic breakfast of toast and jam was not enough to dampen spirits and a true South Bristolian late start saw the rigging team of Bob and Arwel and myself at the cave entrance for 12pm. It now suddenly dawned on me that I wasn't quite sure of the way through the cave, I just remembered some squeezes and then pitches, how difficult could it be?

It actually proved easier than I thought, the simple rule was to follow the most miserable and constricted passage. The first main obstacle was the rather grandiose named 'Constriction of Doom'. The

constriction entails lying on your side and then wriggling like a worm for about 3 metres, not too difficult in the end, but as we were carrying a good few tackle bags between us, I had to turn round beyond the crawl and go back into it as Arwel passed bags to a prostrate Bob, lying at an acute right angle, who passed them onto me, before I dragged them back into a small chamber.

A rather dangerous looking chamber full of loose rock follows the constriction and this then leads to the 'Corkscrew'. This is a contorted crawl that requires you to lie either face down or on your back and squeeze down and then under a low arch. Again this did not seem as difficult or as intimidating as I remembered from years back and we passed through this with minimal fuss.

Finally we arrived at the first pitch. Previously a lot of the cave had been rigged with a fair proportion of natural belays. However, as we had some new spits and the existing placed ones are of dubious quality, Bob placed a new one at the pitch head. As this was going on, Arwel returned to the constriction of doom to try and enlarge it as we had some concerns that a few of the others might not be able to make it through.

Once the bolt was placed, I took over the rigging and rigged down the first two pitches, which can be rigged as one. A short climb down leads to the main 33m pitch. The first part of the pitch is in rather fractured rock and has always needed to be rigged with a rope protector over the edge, due to the lack of suitable placements. A rebelay about 20ft down lessens the worry factor for descending cavers, but it still remains a rather daunting pitch.

The pitch itself is a huge aven, which continues a considerable distance above the pitch head (a lesser



Phil Walker on the first pitch, photo Bob Clay

objective of climbing this was never achieved). In addition there is a large unexplored passage entering the aven about 40ft up above the ledge leading to the next pitch. The remaining three pitches were rigged without much problem, despite not doing up the maillon on one section of a y-hang, which could have been quite embarrassing. Where possible, Bob followed behind with a few well-placed spits to back up the more 'alpine' style rigging.

The final pitch lands in 'The Waiting Room', a small sandy chamber that serves as a nice resting point before the crawls leading to the 'digging' face. The tight crawl begins at the far end of the chamber, similar to the constriction at the start of the cave and then a flat out section emerges into another just as tight fossil stream way. It is here the draught becomes more noticeable and finally the keyhole-shaped restriction is encountered. This was the limit of the exploration in 1996.

I was quite relieved upon arriving at the constriction that the draught was as strong as I remembered, however, the booming echo was not so booming! By this time it was 6pm and the three of us had not had any lunch. Luckily, we knew the second team were bringing the drill and our lunch with them, so with this in mind we started heading out to meet them. We bumped into Bucket and Mike quite quickly, they had the drill, but no-one seemed to want to own up to having the lunch! We continued out and met up with Lisa at the top of the big pitch, who revealed what the others had been hiding, lunch was at the entrance!

The exit was pretty swift and the 'Constriction of Doom' was noticeably less constricted. It later transpired Mike had been practising his capping. Later in the evening back at the bunkhouse, Mike and Bucket reported that they had capped the keyhole constriction and got through to the new pitch head. Great news, and this meant we could get on with hopefully rigging and pushing down the next pitch. Everything from here on was new ground!

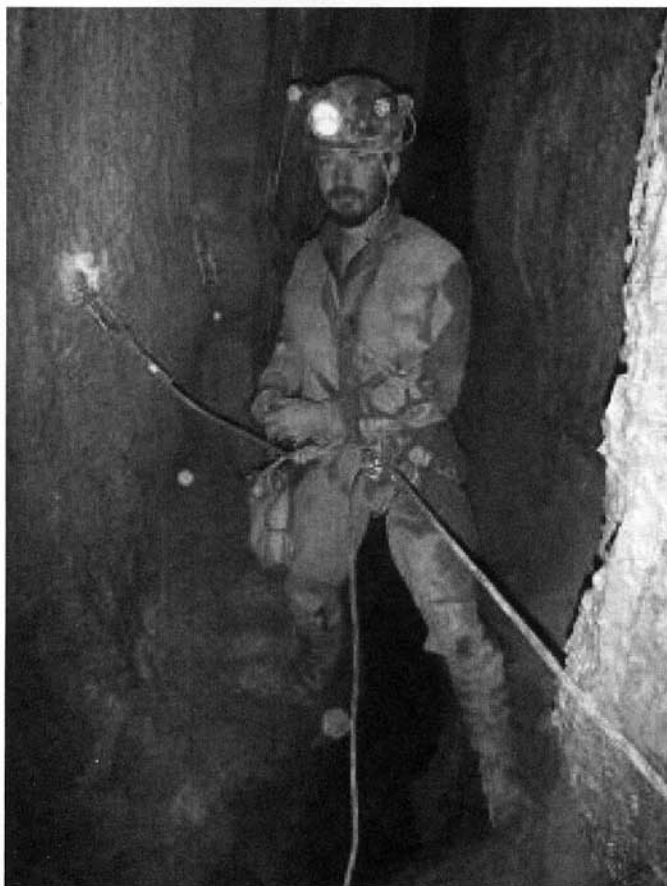
Day 3 (Saturday 12th September) Cheese Cave

Bob, Arwel and I woke up early, quickly packed and arrived at the 'Crossroads' ready for the next trip. We quickly got down to the 'Waiting Room' and learning from our lesson the previous day, ate some lunch. Not the greatest lunch I've ever had but cheese and bread seems to be a staple round this area of the Picos.

We re-rigged the 6th pitch to free up a longer rope and attacked the new pitch. Bob took the honours and

rigged down the new 7m pitch. The pitch head itself is rather constricted and requires you to squeeze over the top of the pitch and drop onto your descender. All being well you drop into enough space to actually operate the descender or spend a few minutes thrashing around until you force yourself back up and are able to try again.

The pitch landed on a platform that turned off to the right to reveal a rather large void and some further pitches. There was a lot of loose rock and calcite round the pitch head, so a well-placed kick saw this to the bottom. At this point it was discovered that the wrong sized drill bit had been brought for the spits, so we had to revert to hand drilling again. Due to the nature of the rock this was quite problematic, but three spits were placed and Bob descended down the next pitch of 8m. We were all getting suitably cold by now so a quick retreat was the order of the day.



Bob Clay on the eighth pitch, photo Arwel Roberts

Day 4 (Sunday 13th September) Cheese Cave

The plan today was for Arwel, Bob and myself to continue pushing the cave with Mike and Bucket surveying the new extensions before catching us up. The 9th pitch of 10m was quickly dropped by Arwel using some climbing techniques, while Bob tried to

make the pitch head safer with some spits. I dropped down the pitch and caught up with Arwel. The pitch lands at the bottom of the previously noted void. This is a chamber approx. 50m high, with evidence of a lot of water having flowed through the area at some point. The 'passage' continues in what seems to be a water worn tube forced through the mud and pebbles. One well-placed cough looked like it would bring the whole thing down on us. It was such a traumatic area that, following one members call of nature, the area was christened 'Poodunnit'. At the end of this passage there is a short drop down into an immature stream way, and a trickle of water disappears off down a rather tight tube.

As I had my nice new shiny bolting hammer, it seemed a waste not to have a go trying to widen the stream way, until more powerful means of widening the gap appeared. Arwel returned to the pitch in order to try and traverse round a ledge at the top of the pitch head. Shortly Mike arrived and with the aid of a nice well-placed cap I was able to get round the first corner and stick my head round the next. It continued! A short drop led to a continuation of the stream way. We decided that we would set off early the next day, and try and cap our way round this next corner, we set a time of 2pm and then we would start to de-rig and exit. In the meantime Arwel had successfully traversed around the ledge and explored a platform leading to a descending tube. As the area was quite well decorated and seemed to be leading to the same area of the lower stream way it was left untouched.

Day 5 (Monday 14th September) Cheese Cave

Mike and I quickly descended to the bottom once more. One well-placed cap took the corner off the constriction in the stream way and Mike forced himself onwards into the next bit of stream way. It continued but gradually got smaller. By now the draught had all but disappeared so the decision was made to start the de-rig and exit the cave.

We quickly got all the bags and drill from the lower three pitches into the crawl from the 'Waiting Room'. Just as it was getting to be rather laborious Arwel and Bob turned up and dragged the bags out to the 'Waiting Room'. The cave was quickly de-rigged, aided by Bob's new spits that greatly helped on some of the more awkward pitches. All ropes, bags and equipment were dragged out and the Cheese Cave finished with for 2009. Four days of eight-hour trips had resulted in some new cave and some tired but happy cavers.

Expedition Members

Phil Walker (SWCC, SBSS), Bob Clay (SBSS), Arwel Roberts (SBSS), Mike Broad (SBSS), Dave 'Bucket' Cundy (SBSS), Lisa Gunton (SBSS), Conor O'Neill (SBSS)

Thanks to: SWCC for loan of drill, Derek Cousins (ex-LUSS) for directions, rigging guide and general memory recall and Shilan Patel for Spanish translation.

Further Reading

"Expeditions to Tresviso and the Picos De Europa in Northern Spain 1974 – 1977". LUSS, 1977.

"Tresviso 79 – An Expedition to the Picos De Europa, Northern Spain". LUSS, 1979.

"Tresviso 1980 - An Expedition to the Picos De Europa Northern Spain". LUSS, 1980.

"Aqua '86 and '87. Two Expeditions to the Picos De Europa Northern Spain". SWCC, 1987.

"LUSS 4 Vol 2 No 1". LUSS, 1987.

"Picos 95: Sistema Sara". Joel Corrigan, Neil Weymouth, Dominic Wade, Julian Carter and Pat Hall, SWCC Newsletter No 116.

"Grandes Cuevas y Simas De Espana". Carlos Puch, 1998.

"An Impromptu Trip to Spain – Easter 2005". Rhys Williams, SWCC Newsletter No 125.

Picos, Eastern Massif 2010

By Phil Walker

Following on from the 2009 trip, a return trip to the Andara region of the Picos de Europa was arranged for September 2010. A small group was recruited, two SWCC members, two South Bristol Speleological Society (SBSS) and four ex-Lancaster University Speleological Society (LUSS) members made up the team, with a couple of Spanish friends joining us for the last weekend.

A year spent reading old journals and talking to ex LUSS and SWCC members had turned up some interesting leads to pursue and with a few of the original explorers of the area in tow, it was a perfect opportunity to get to know the area in more depth and set things up for future trips.

Following the publicised rescues of OUCC from the Western Massif in 2009, permission for caving in the area proved problematic at first, but following a few email conversations with members of the Agrupacion Deportiva KAMI group of Madrid, it was arranged to cave under their name, on the basis that we remained in certain zones and reported on all our findings on our return to the UK.

2010 Expedition Aims

The primary aims of the expedition were as follows:

1 Locate and examine current limit of exploration in Torca Seprtrin, Pico del Moro area.

2 Locate and examine current limit of exploration in T207, Pico del Moro area.

3 Locate and examine current limit of exploration in T69, Sierra del a Corta.

4 Locate and examine current limit of exploration in Sima Bromista, Valdediezma.

Time permitting; the secondary objectives were to locate and catalogue sites in the Andara region, for future reference and publication.

Report

The following provides a summary of the findings on the trip; a fuller report has been produced for AD KAMI and will be available via the SWCC library.

T507

T507 was an unexpected find and produced a good day's exploration for the group. Initially Derek and I had been looking for 'Sima Bromista', one of the intended objectives, on the Valdediezma. A likely looking shake hole was found at the end of the second day and contained three promising holes. T504, found

by Duncan the previous day, T507 and T508, which was possibly 'Bromista'.

T507 lies at the top end of the shake hole, quite close to the ridge of the Valdediezma. An obvious muddy slope leads down to a 2m climb that lands on further mud and leaves. The entrance shaft was rigged by myself down 5m to an impressive cross rift. Following the obvious way over a boulder leads to the top of a chamber, with a slope down to a pile of rubble. I descended the slope with some care, as it drops away in a few places before landing on a dubious platform made up of fallen slabs. Peering over the lip of one such boulder showed a further 5m slope disappearing off out of sight. Rocks rolled off and rattled away for a good 8 seconds. It seemed the chamber was merely the top of an enormous rift. By now time was short so I exited and told Derek of the find.

The next day Derek, Duncan and I returned to the same shake hole to examine the leads further. T508 turned out to be a rather difficult cave with a tight shaft preventing much progress. There was a definite draft but some major capping work would be required, or someone very thin.

Back at T507, with time running short once more, a few spits were placed in ready for the next day's work. Initially the intention was to go straight over the lip of the platform and down the slope, but with further investigation this looked like it could be quite dangerous. The loose slabs were in the most obvious hand hold places for anyone exiting the pitch. An eyehole to the left was selected as the most obvious way down. Although also largely on loose rock, the roof was solid and could provide some safe rigging points.

The following day Bob, Mike and Duncan returned to T507. Unfortunately no progress was made while the loose platform was unnecessarily kicked down the shaft in a futile attempt to make the pitch safer. On returning the following day, not only was the pitch now 5m bigger, as the previous free climb now dropped straight over the shaft, but the debris kicked down was discovered to be only about 10m further down, overhanging the main pitch. So the day was spent rigging further down, but the rigging brought the rope and caver underneath a large section of freshly created hanging death.

A group discussion the same night went with a decision to not worry about the danger and get on with it. The next day Mike and Bob progressed a bit further down the shaft, entering an obvious narrowing of the pitch,

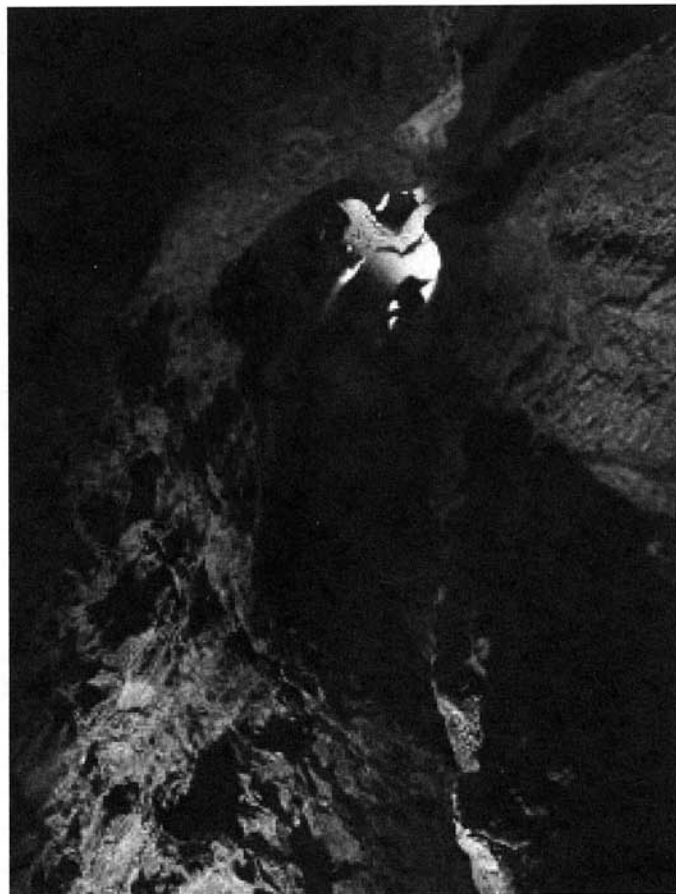
with rocks still falling a considerable way down; luckily we had brought the 140m rope, but the shaft remained un-bottomed.

The next day, Bob finally reached the bottom and hit a boulder choke; no way on! The cave was de-rigged, but un-surveyed. The cave is approximately 110m deep and lies in a promising area on the Valdediezma. Despite no way on this time, the cave was encouraging as a lot of the leads on the Valdediezma choke very quickly and this one shows the potential of what may be in the area and the area sits above the furthest reaches of Cueva del Agua, so may hold the key to a middle entrance between the resurgence and the deeper caves on Andara.

T190 - Torca Septrin

While looking through old LUSS log books I came across numerous leads that showed promise. The LUSS explorers in the 80's had been concentrated on the deep systems, seeking new records and many of the other leads had never been re-visited. Septrin was one such lead.

The final 1981 description reads: "A small trickle runs away at the bottom of the shaft into a rift which rapidly becomes phreatic, and a pool is reached at stream level.



The final pitch in Torca Septrin, photo Dave Checkley

Unfortunately it was too tight to get into the pool, to see if the cave continues, without extensive hammering. Above the pool the rift finishes. An inconclusive end to a fine pothole”.

This was one I thought would be good to revisit. The first problem was finding it. Derek and I set about looking around the Pico del Moro area, armed with maps, compass and GPS's. It took a few hours to work out that the old LUSS references (based on 30 year old maps) were quite inaccurate. Back in the UK before the trip I had converted them to a more usable reference, but this still proved to be quite far out. It transpired that mountains do in fact move, 600m north to be precise.

After a good 8 hours on the mountain we still hadn't found Seprin and we were heading home when I stumbled upon an obvious shaft full of snow. There were no markings but it matched the description. The snow slopes from the surface were now a pitch to a smaller snow slope, thank global warming! We logged it and made a note of the area just as the mist descended. The following day Mike descended as far as the snow plug and stuck his head in the next chamber and confirmed that it was a cave....

Dave, Colin and Howard had arrived by now, so Seprin was a perfect opportunity to set them to work. After showing them to the entrance Dave and Colin went off into the cave. Later that night they confirmed that it was Seprin. However, they had been thwarted by a rather tight section, not too far past the first pitch.

The next day the tight section was capped and Dave and Colin continued down to the furthest point in the cave. They came back and felt that the cave was promising and well worth carrying on with exploration. The next day they capped the furthest rift and gained approx. 20m of hard won cave. The following day, along with Mike and Alberto, they progressed even further down some awkward climbs to a tight rift taking water.

The final trip was undertaken by Bob, Alberto and me. The plan was to get to the bottom, place a few caps and then de-rig; simple.

A misty, wet day dampened our enthusiasm somewhat but we managed to find the cave again and set off down. Like most of the caves in this part of the Picos the rock is generally bad and at best it's downright scary. The first few pitches were passed without too much problem. The tight section that held up exploration a few days before was indeed tight but manageable, going back up might be worse. Next were the larger pitches, 25m and 35m. Halfway down is a

rebelay that gives a great hang over the final pitch, however, it places your entire body no more than two inches from huge loose flakes of rock. It's incredibly daunting and unnerving; the slightest movement that brushes against the rock would send it all down the shaft, slicing the rope and anyone below. I think it must have been the longest time I have ever taken at a rebelay.

Finally at the bottom it was noticeable how cold the cave was, much more than the Cheese Cave. We all set off into the next extensions, lots of thrutching to begin with and then a rather tight squeeze over a boulder. Bob had plenty of fun and nearly had to turn back, but finally got through. The next section was a small chamber that pops out of the start of the climbs. We placed a throughbolt and a ladder for ease of climbing and then set off down the climbs. At the bottom here was the limit of exploration, an obvious rift half full of water. I set about with the capping equipment and started to make good progress on the right hand wall (the left was too hard). Using two caps was proving very effective until one did not break the rock and the slide hammer was broken. About 30 minutes were spent trying to get it out, while Bob got cold and Alberto tried to crawl through the tight section anyway. Eventually, I got the slide hammer out. We still had time for a few more. I set about drilling another hole when suddenly, there was a loud explosion, rocks sprayed my face and I went deaf. The drill had gone into another hole, with an unexploded cap. I thought I had blown my face off; fortunately I ended up with only a small pathetic cut on my chin.

Must be more careful next time, I thought and then proceeded to get the slide hammer stuck again. 45 minutes spent this time and it would not budge. We now had to make a decision; should we leave it and de-rig, and risk Dave's wrath at leaving his slide hammer behind, or leave rigged and run the wrath of Dave, Colin and Howard for having to come back in. In the end we decided on somewhere in between. We removed all the stuff that would not be required and de-rigged the last rope from its rebelay, so it could be pulled up if they decided to de-rig (in the end the came back in and retrieved the slide hammer).

The cave is now approx. -140m deep. It's an interesting cave, with a few situations to make you stop and think. The final pitch is superb and there is still a ongoing lead. One we will defiantly return to next year as it has a depth potential of around 700m at least, easily accessible, an obvious water presence, and is presumably hydrological connected to the resurgences at the foot of the mountain.

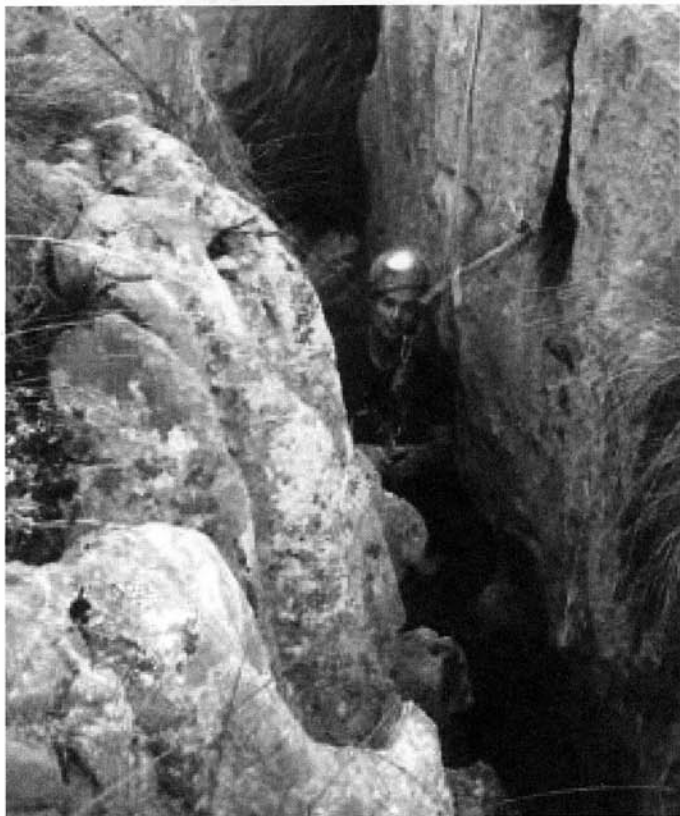
T69

T69 was a lead I was particular keen to go back to. An impressive draft issues from a small hole, located in the side of an impressive shake hole lying at the northerly end of the Sierra del a Corta. Looking at maps and various surveys it is believed to lie only around 100m from some notable features in Agua. The LUSS 4 journal describes T69 as: "7m pitch to squeeze and 3m climb into small chamber. A rift leads off, this draughts strongly but is too tight".

This year the rift was enlarged by digging out the floor, descending for around 3m to a false floor in the rift. A subsequent crawl for 4m leads to a 6 inch slot, where rocks rattle a long way down (20m very tight, then 20m opening up). It is still an interesting lead and well worth a re-visit, although it was felt to be both too dangerous and too much work to continue pushing. However, a good bash at the false floor may provide some reward.

T509

T509 was found near the Sierra de la Corta, on the East slope of la Gobia. Although it has no obvious markings of previous exploration, it was a rather obvious rift with a large shaft. I initially descended the shaft with the limit of exploration and was slightly encouraged by the



The entrance to T509, photo Derek Cousins

presence of a big calcite formation and a continuation of the shaft. The cave was revisited by Mike, Colin and Dave towards the end of the trip but unfortunately found not to extend much further. At the base of the pitch, which was 40m, the cave continues on a gentle slope before reaching a 10m pitch down to a rubble floor. The sloping passage continues until a tight rift is encountered, barring further progress.

Conclusion

In the short amount of time available for the expedition some interesting and promising leads were revisited and further progress made.

- Torca Seprin was extended for around another -30m depth, down a series of climbs, and a draft is still evident at the current limit of exploration. The depth of the cave is now around -140m.

- T207 was finally re-discovered on the Pico del Moro, but it transpired there are actually two different locations and descriptions for the cave, with one description suggesting a good lead. This needs clarifying and possibly revisiting.

- Although we were unable to relocate Sima Bromista, the Valdediezma area turned up some good leads and T507 reached a respectable depth of around -110m

- A number of leads on the Sierra del a Corta were revisited and minor progress was made. T69 remains a good lead, with a strong draft still present. The whole area in general is definitely worth concentrated effort looking for possible ways into the top end of Cueva del Agua.

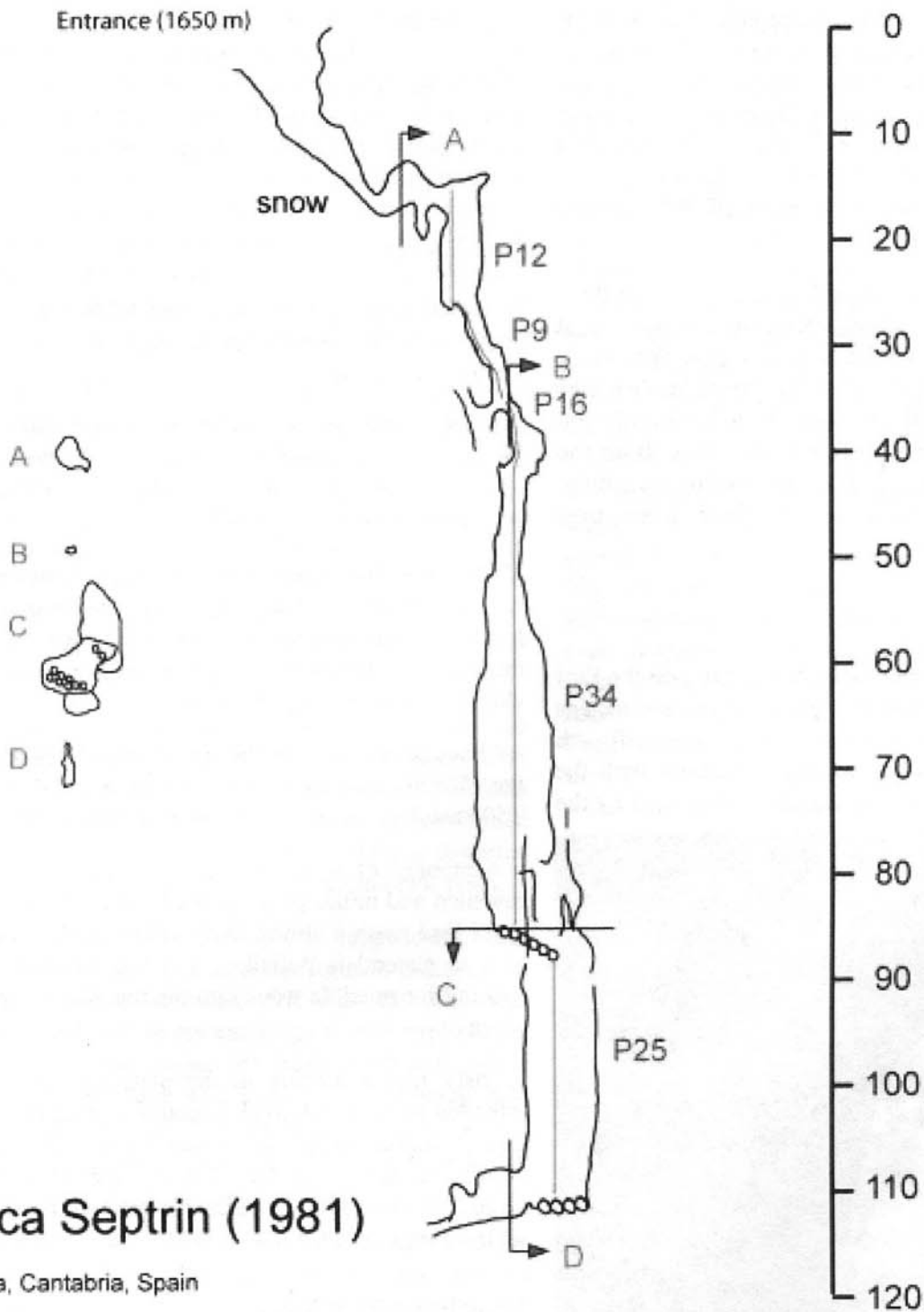
A 2011 trip is already in the planning stages. It is intended to be a 2-3 week expedition with the primary aim of bolting up the unclimbed avens at the back end of Cueva del Agua (see SWCC special newsletter, 'Agua '86 and '87'). In addition work will be continued on the Sierra del a Corta and Valdediezma areas.

Expedition Members:

Phil Walker (SWCC), Duncan Hornby (SWCC), Bob Clay (SBSS), Mike Broad (SBSS), Derek Cousins (SLUGS), Colin Boothroyd (SLUGS), Howard Jones (SLUGS), Dave Checkley (SLUGS), Alberto Ortega and Manola.

Thanks to Agrupacion Deportiva KAMI (Madrid).

Depth (m)



Torca Septrin (1981)

Andara, Cantabria, Spain

WGS84 UTM 0360100 4786650

Altitude 1650m

Depth -112m (1981)

Surveyed to BCRA Grade 4.
by LUSS (1981).

Torca Septrin (sketch 2010 extension)

Andara, Cantabria, Spain

WGS84 UTM 0380100 4786650

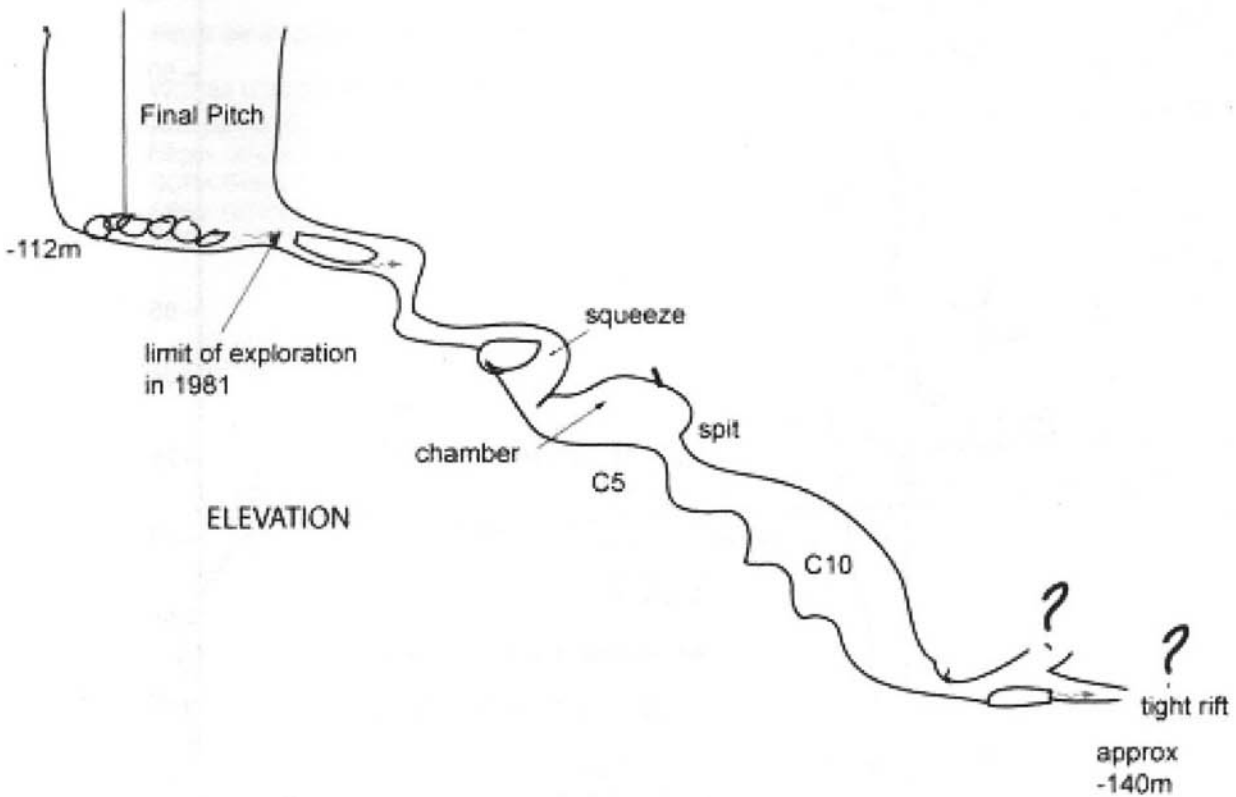
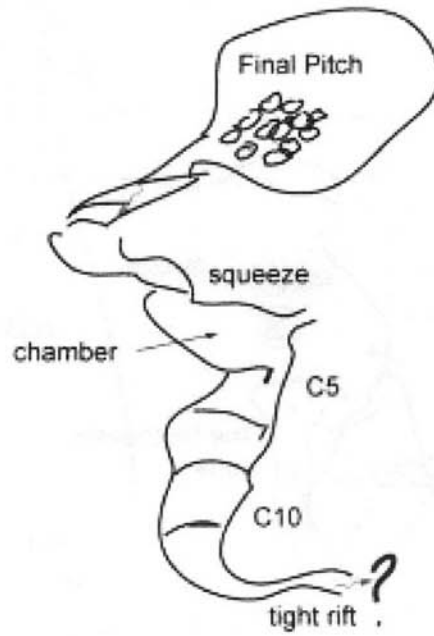
Altitude 1650m

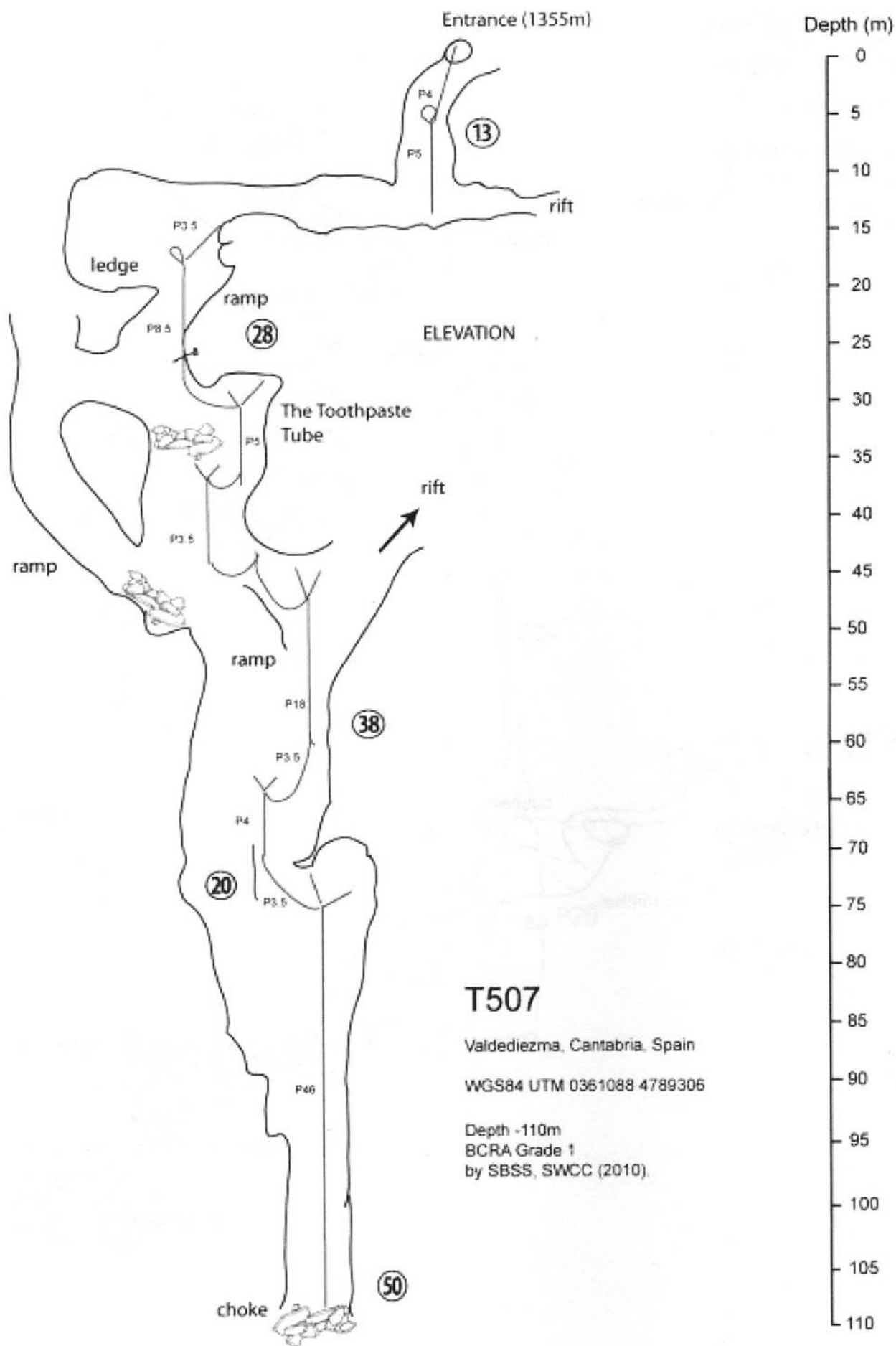
Depth -140m (approx. including extension)

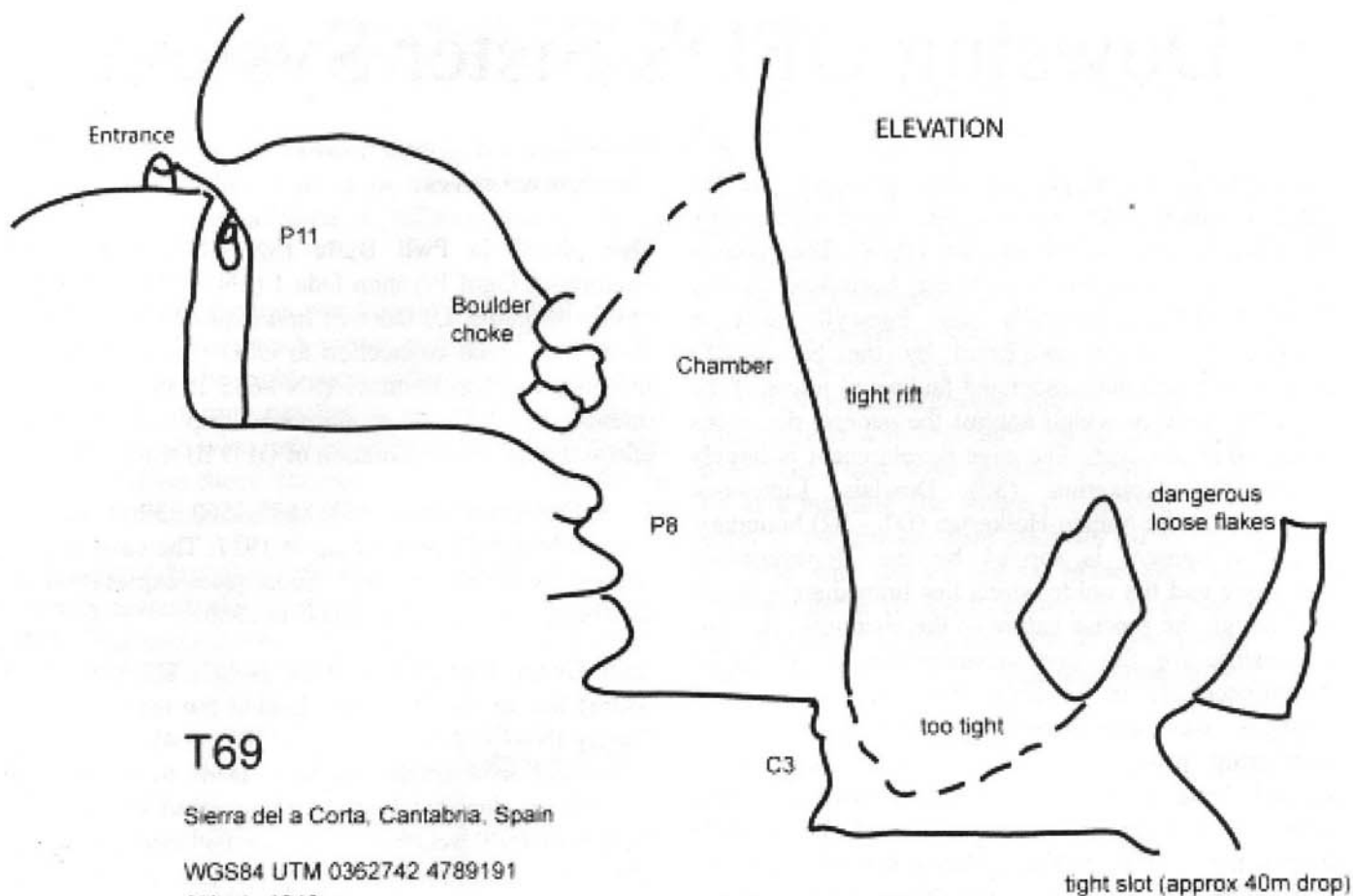
BCRA Grade 1A

SBSS (2010).

PLAN







T69

Sierra del a Corta, Cantabria, Spain

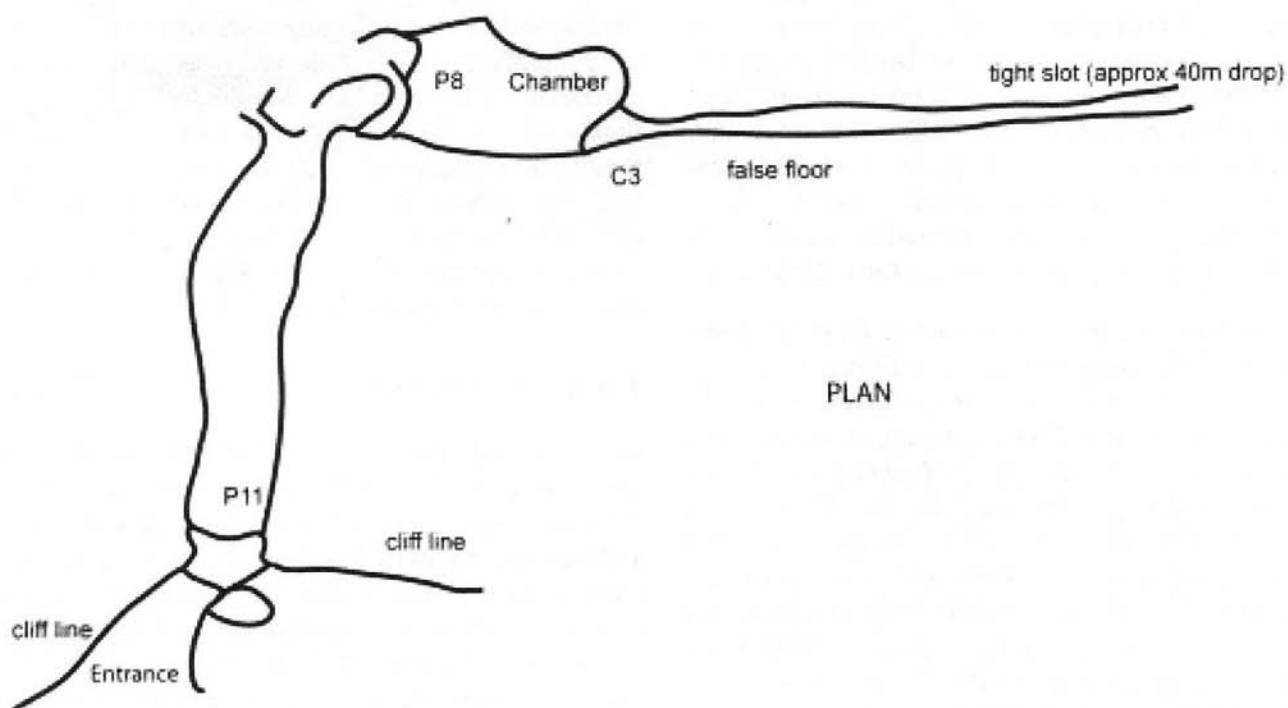
WGS84 UTM 0362742 4789191

Altitude 1248m

Depth -25(approx)

BCRA Grade 1

SBSS (2010).



Dowsing OFD's Sister System

By John Wilcock

The geology, geomorphology and hydrology of the Ogof Ffynnon Ddu System has been extensively described by Smart & Christopher (1989). The geology in the Penwyllt area has in particular been described by Lowe (1989). Structurally the Penwyllt area is complex, but it is dominated by the NE – SW compression belt and associated faults and joints of the Tawe Disturbance which control the general directions of the OFD passages. The cave development is largely within the Holkerian (S2) Dowlais Limestone Formation at the Asbian-Holkerian (D1 – S2) boundary. The development is topped by the Honeycombed Sandstone and the oolite which lies immediately below it, although the precise nature of the chemical reactions responsible for the cave development is yet to be investigated. It is possible that the inception of passages was accelerated by acids produced by weathering processes. Collapse dolines are closely aligned above the major underground passages of OFD I, but the more easterly passages of OFD II and OFD III penetrate a considerable distance beneath the Basal Grit cover with no associated collapse features at the surface. The capture of the Byfre from its former course down Nant Byfre into the cave at Pwll Byfre has been attributed to glacial ponding in the Devensian Glaciation. But the present stream is far too small to have eroded the immense passages of OFD, so the capture must only have restored a previous sink. OFD was probably formed in the last two million years (Smart & Christopher, 1989). The Asbian and Brigantian limestones exposed in Brickworks Quarry (SN 856 154) close to Cwm Dwr contain small caves that may have connected with OFD before truncation by surface erosion; indeed, large areas of OFD may have been removed by glaciation. This possibility partially led to the surface exploration which is the subject of this paper, at the request of Allan Richardson.

The east wall of Smith's Armoury in OFD III shows evidence of shattering and calcite infilling, suggesting the presence of a major fault probably responsible for the grit outlier close to Pwll Byfre known as the Silica Pit or Sand Hills. The success of further excavation at Chas Jay's Old Dig in the area, the influent stream of which exhibits no backing up under any flow conditions, and its dye test to the pool rising in Craig y Nos Country Park (as well as to OFD I), also prompted further investigation. The possibility of an OFD Sister System, running parallel to OFD between Chas Jay's Old Dig and Craig y Nos/OFD I was therefore raised.

The known caves

Dye placed in Pwll Byfre (SN 8745 1660 488m) resurges at Ogof Ffynnon Ddu I (SN 8480 1530 204m) within 48 hours. OFD I was first explored by SWCC in 1946. The dived connection to OFD II was discovered in 1966, and Top Entrance (SN 8635 1588 1060m) was opened in 1967. This shortened trip durations and allowed intensive exploration of OFD III from 1967.

Cwm Dwr Quarry Cave (SN 8575 1560 339m) was first entered by the Dragon Group in 1937. The cave was re-opened by SWCC in 1957. Subsequent exploration led to it being connected to OFD II in 1966.

Twll Gwynt Oer ("Cold Wind Hole", SN 8587 1595 382m) lies in the dry valley behind the main Penwyllt Quarry (SWCC Newsletter 93 (1981), 3-4). The capped 10m shaft in a small shakehole leads to a miniature streamway, dug by Brian Jopling (SWCC 1979/80). Upstream (NE) reaches a boulder collapse after 30m. Downstream (SW) the passage enters a constricted sump after 30m. This was dived and found to turn back NE, but became too tight. Dye introduced into Twll Gwynt Oer appeared in Cwm Dwr 2 and the Cwm Dwr streamway via the upstream choke.

Chas Jay's Old Dig (SN 8772 1650 503m) lies on the Cnwr Estate, near the Silica Quarries and the tramroad. This is a major dig in a large shakehole with influent stream, and the latest digging campaign was by SWCC in 2006/2007. The conclusion was that this is a promising site (SWCC Newsletter 126, 19-22); floodwaters refilled the dig as fast as it could be excavated, and a shuttered shaft has been put in place to hold the collapses back. Optical brightener introduced into the stream on 3rd September 2006 by Tony Donovan appeared after 48 hours at OFD I and also at the pool rising opposite Craig y Nos Castle.

The dowsing exercise

Dowsing work was carried out on 19th April 2009 at the instigation of Allan Richardson, and the results are shown on Figure 1. The dowsing trace commences with a closed end around Chas Jay's Old Dig, passes to the north of Pwll Byfre, crosses the Nant Byfre valley and then runs north of the tramroad and generally parallel to it. Veering to the west the valley containing Twll Gwynt Oer is reached, and the trace reaches the edge of the

quarry. On the west side of the quarry the trace reacts again, so the postulated course across the quarry is shown dotted.

The trace crosses the railway line in a cutting to the north of the station. This is in the reputed area of a collapse which swallowed a railway wagon during construction of the line.

Proceeding SW through two large depressions the trace then divides. One branch passes near the obvious blind cave arch on the right hand side of the road up to Penwylt, then runs parallel to the known passage of OFD I to reach what may be an independent resurgence. The cave diver Steve Thomas found a small chamber in the OFD I resurgence that had a small feeder stream.

The second branch of the dowsing trace leads almost directly towards the rising pool in Craig y Nos Country Park. The section where the slope is too precipitous to follow is shown dotted.

Conclusion

The pros and cons of dowsing will not be reiterated here: there has been enough of a discussion in the letters column of *Caves and Caving*, and a dowsing class was held at the 1992 Cavers' Fair in the Forest of Dean. My own paper "On the possible scientific justification of dowsing for the detection of caves" at the BCRA Conference in September 1992 was attended by a large audience; during the following practical class held in Bradford City Centre, novice dowzers were able to follow an underground stream, flowing in a brick-lined culvert with absolutely no surface indications, for over 1km - they were astounded when the party ended up at a building site where the surface stream and its entry to the culvert were plain for all to see. A similar exercise was carried out in Manchester City Centre during another BCRA Conference. A further paper was also presented at Hidden Earth in Leek. Numerous new caves have been found by the technique, as well as new

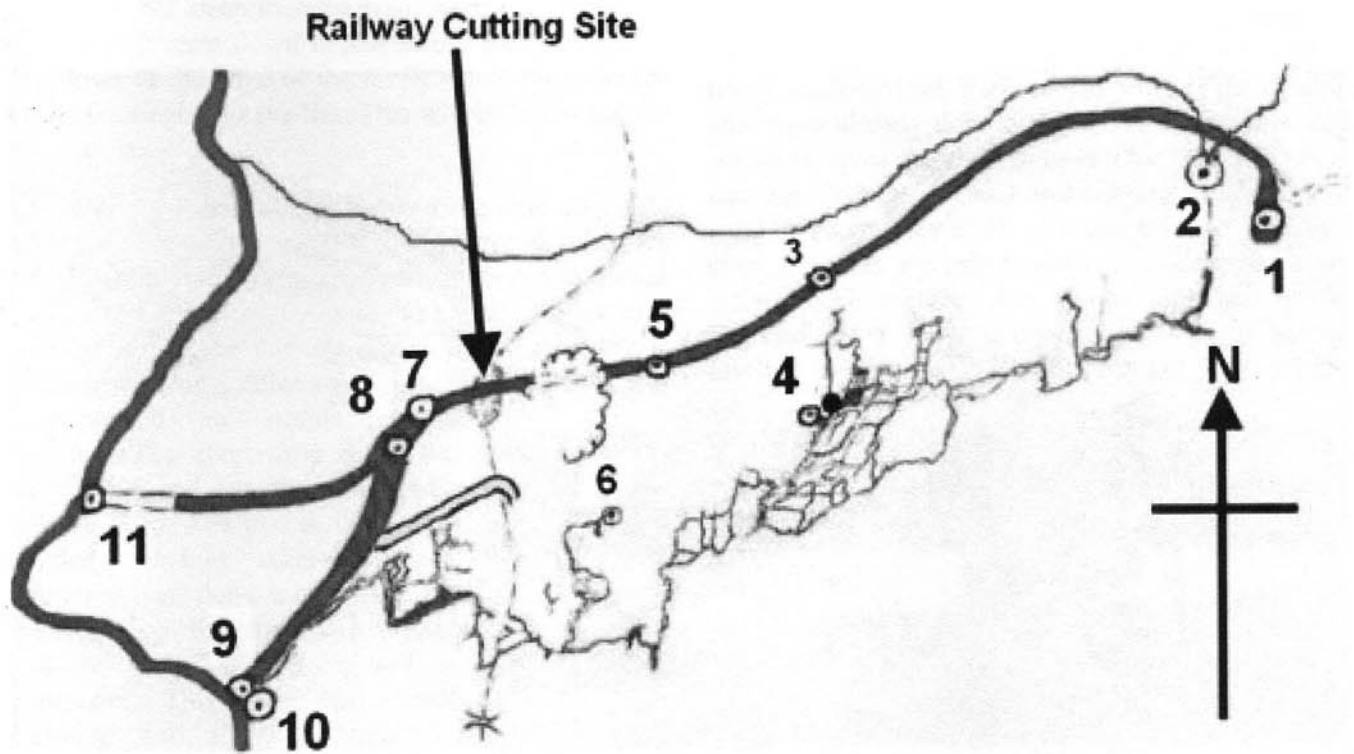


Figure 1

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1. Chas Jay's Old Dig | 7. Large depression (SN 853 159) |
| 2. Pwll Byfre | 8. Large depression (SN 852 158) |
| 3. Shakehole near tramroad | 9. Small rising near OFD I resurgence |
| 4. OFD Top Entrance | 10. OFD I resurgence |
| 5. Twll Gwynt Oer | 11. Pool rising in Craig y Nos Country Park (SN 843 157) |
| 6. Cwm Dwr Quarry Cave | |

passages for known caves. Prime examples are Clay Holes in the Mendips, where new passage was dug out in one day by Tusker Morrison after dowsing, and Ogof Draenen which was detected by dowsing four years before it was entered.

A general theory of the mechanism of dowsing, which will permit scientists to incorporate it into scientific knowledge, is still lacking, but meanwhile it seems that many, perhaps a majority of cavers are willing to sit on the fence, and to have dowsing judged by its accuracy and practical value in the location of new caves, rather than by theories and opinions. The most likely explanation is that a vortex effect in flowing water creates magnetic and electric fields which are detectable by sensitive dowsers. However, it is also possible to detect large dry caves, which may be explained by a difference in magnetic susceptibilities for solid rock and an air void, thereby concentrating the

magnetic field lines of the earth's magnetic field, the change in strength of field being detected by dowsers.

All of the above results are naturally hypotheses that are entitled to stand until disproved. My technique is to publish and be damned. However, my dowsing work has had several successes proved by later exploration by cavers.

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Lowe, D.J. 1989, "The geology of the Carboniferous Limestone of South Wales", in Ford, T.D. (Ed.) 1989, Limestones and Caves of Wales, Cambridge University Press, 3 - 19

Smart, P.L. & N.S.J. Christopher 1989, "Ogof Ffynnon Ddu", in Ford, T.D. (Ed.) 1989, Limestones and Caves of Wales, Cambridge University Press, 177 - 189



Beginning the descent to Castleguard cave from the moraine, photo Jules Carter

Castleguard Cave

The Donkey's Tale

By Jules Carter

Part 1: The 2009 trip

The phone goes. "Hello Martin, how's things? Haven't seen you in ages. What you been up to?"

"Just back from Canada on a recce trip to Castleguard Cave. Got this great sump I want to dive...." was the reply....

One year later, during Easter 2009, I find myself on the 'Big Bend' on the Rockies Highway. It's early morning and a bunch of Brits and several Canadians are busy fettling skis and packing adapted kiddies' sledges with a mixture of stuff such as food, caving kit and of course Martin's diving gear! Ahead of us is 20km of ski touring up the Sakatachewen Glacier, then up a short but steep moraine wall. After which there is a gradual descent down to and across the Castleguard Meadows to the edge of the forest where the entrance of the Castleguard cave lies. This will be our home for the next week.

All kitted up I drag my sledge over the road edge pile of frozen snow and onto the field beyond. Skis are then clipped into boots, rucksack donned and sledge clipped to the sack's tow loops. The first tentative tugs forward are made and it's soon clear that today is going to be tough. After a few hundred meters the first challenge is a simple stream crossing. The short drop down the side bank and up the other side quickly introduces you to the fun of runaway sledges taking you in directions you don't want to go. It's then through forestry for a steady pull up a track for around a kilometre. This gets the heart pumping and the body properly warmed up. A descent down then follows to gain the valley bottom where great fun is had by the non-skiers as sledges and skis cause numerous crashes.

Once on the open valley bottom it's steady sledge slogging to the base of the glacier. Mad Phil has long left us and is in the distance. The terrain is awesome and I settle into the steady

ski tour rhythm, the sledge pulling along behind. The glacier is a kilometre or more beyond its position on the map, another victim of a changing environment. Fortunately it's a safe glacier to travel on with generally little crevasse risk. Just as well since with sledges and laden packs roping up would not be much of an option as rescuing a crevasse fall would be nigh on impossible. We spend a few kilometres travelling on the glacier. Each of us tucked into our own worlds as we continue the ski tour trudge. The scenery continues to be just magnificent as we are surrounded by big mountains and hanging glaciers and this more than counters the physical slog.

The moraine wall is roughly just beyond halfway. We've only got to gain around 150m of height but it's a steep slog. It is possible to ski tour up it but it requires some serious step turns to negotiate. On the slope are the tracks made by Phil, Richard and some of the Canadians who have already done this journey a few days earlier. However snow conditions have changed. The weather has significantly warmed and conditions are now very spring like. A couple of us attempt to ski tour up the slope but soon get mired down. The snow has a heavy slab on the surface, this sloughs off leaving loose unconsolidated snow underneath which the ski skins just won't grip. Somehow the skis are removed and it



Alan Braybrooke setting off, photo Jules Carter



A pesky pine marten, photo Jules Carter

Martin and I decide that some more co-ordinated tactics are required and set up a rope system to drag the laden sledges up the steepest section. Eventually we are all up the moraine slopes, complete with sledges. A quick breather and it's back onto the trail.

Technically it is downhill for the next 7km, although this turns into an undulating trail with little downhill skiing advantage to be had. After a few more hours of slogging we hit the edge of the forest line, below which is the entrance to Castleguard. This short section proves quite tough as you try to ski down a slope through trees whilst towing a sledge. Frequently the sledge slides into the 'holes' that form in the snow around trees and many of us end up floundering in a heap in the deep snow. After this the cave entrance is a welcome sight!

The entrance to Castleguard is pretty large. A wide entrance with standing room. On one side is the stream, currently frozen solid, while most of the entrance floor is a fairly flat area of bedrock and gravel. I grab a flattish spot and start to make it home. Al Braybrooke is my 'stove buddy' for the trip and he sorts a spot next to me. The first priority is to get some hot brews going, then sort the sleep pit before starting to sort and fettle kit. The cave is soon alive with the load purr of various petrol stoves and of the ragtag army of cavers chatting and eating. Martin is busy checking what kit is already at the dive site and busy compiling the rest of his dive kit mountain. Arctic quality drysuit and clothing, harness, kilos of lead, two oxygen cylinders for the rebreather, soda lime, the rebreather itself (built by Martin), two 12 litre nitrox cylinders and valves, lots of lights, line and line reel, and numerous other bits and pieces. Getting this lot from the UK to the cave has been a challenge on its own!

Day 2 dawns. Strange animal noises in the night turn out to be caused by a pair of pine martens who would be entertaining us over the week. With the morning

becomes a brutal slog up and across the slope. Eventually a few of us battle to where the slope eases off. Myself,

Al and

comes the stirring of the bowels and the need to emerge from the warmth of a four plus season down bag. At least the morning crap spot offers fine views of the Watchman Peak opposite, after which it's the 'shit wrap' routine of packing one's still steaming poo into a plastic bag. (A stipulation of the National Park is that all poo has to be carried back out). It's then melt snow and ice for breakfast and a brew, followed by getting into cave kit for the day's kit carry to the sump. Somehow Martin keeps a record of what kit is where, which is aided by Rich, Gareth and Mad Phil who are all cave divers as well. Although it's darn cold, which makes getting any form of clothing on and off efficient, the fact is it has become unseasonably warm for the time of year. Snow and ice is melting around the entrance, and although yet unknown to us, so are the ice crawls in the entrance series to the cave.

The mix of Brits and Canadians quietly get organised into various groups with at least someone in the party who knows the way! The sump is actually known as 'Boon's Sump' found in a series of passages known as 'Boons Blunder'. Mike Boon was one of the early explorers. On one of these early exploration trips he missed the main way on at a fork in the passages, hence the 'blunder'. The sump lies about a mile from the entrance. To get there involves negotiating an 8m pitch down to gain the 'ice crawls'. In summer these are canal passages requiring wading, but in winter they completely freeze up. Depending on the ice build up they can vary from being flat out crawls which may need the ice chipping out in places, to roomy crawls. A visit in the summer is discouraged since the cave ends under the Columbia ice-shelf and unpredictable floods from ice melt can seal the cave for weeks at an end. Once beyond the ice crawls the passage widens out. A few short sections are walking height but for the most part this section of the cave is all crawling. 'Boons Blunder' is soon met marked by a discreet cairn to provide a landmark in similar looking passageways. Progress continues as a crawl, with the odd rock pile to negotiate. A few junctions are met and some care is needed to find the easier of the two ways to the sump. This has a flat out section which then leads to more hand and knees crawling and the sump.

So back to the entrance, and the vision of us shivering our knackers off whilst packing kit and food. Soon parties are heading off into the cave and eventually it's our turn, armed with various tackle bags and one of the 12 litre cylinders. At the pitch it's impressive to see rock formations replaced with ice formations. The base of the pitch is full of large rounded cobbles which are a testament to the force of the flood waters that push up

this pitch in the summer months! We then hit the start of the ice crawls. It's pretty amazing to be caving on solid ice as you attempt to develop a mechanism to propel yourself forward up what is effectively a gentle ice slope. But hold on, what's this? I'm getting wet! That wasn't part of the game plan! The last thing you want when camping out in an environment where temperatures can hit -20C is wet kit. However the warm daytime temperatures are starting to defrost the ice crawls with sections starting to gain the texture of 'slush puppies' iced drinks. Only three or four days previously the crawls had been completely frozen. This is not good news and is going to add to the misery quotient of the trip! Martin is soon getting some decent jibes from people quoting "you won't get wet getting to the sump!" However the misery of the first kit carry is just starting. The Castleguard effect is about to kick in. Dragging tackle bags is proving a nightmare – the cave just keeps snagging everything. The rock also has an excellent 'sand paper' action and kit starts to just get eaten away. The cave destroys tackle bags, knees and oversuits. Martin had advised to bring good knee pads so I bought some nice shiny warmtex kneepads. By the end of the week I was inserting extra foam behind the knee pads and borrowing additional sets where possible. So what Martin had meant was bring some serious industrial kneepads....

So on we go, cursing and mickey taking as we persevere with dragging our various bloated tackle bags and dive cylinder. The flat out section before the final section of passage to the sump proves superb misery value and we can feel the kit being worn away as we drag, kick and curse. The last section isn't much better with a good covering of rocks and limestone slabs that catches bags, straps and bodies. Just when we start to wonder why Martin wants to come all the way to Canada, drag dive kit across a glacier and then a mile through a cave, the sump appears....

Finally we can properly stand up. Ahead of us is the sump, clear and green, begging for exploration. We soon set about dumping the kit and then watching Martin, assisted by other diving types, begin to sort and check kit. Once happy all is ok we begin the crawl back to the entrance. The ice crawls are more slushy than when we went in indicating another warm day outside and we arrive back at basecamp far wetter than we want to be. It's quickly into dry clothes and then firing up the trusty MSR stoves. Soon the cave resounds with the purr of several multifuel stoves as people sort brews and food, fettle kit and chat. Temperatures soon drop and the wet kit starts to freeze. I soon learn that if you want to keep the cave

clothes from freezing solid you have to put them into a drybag and sleep with them. That way you can get them on again in the morning! The worst thing for me though were to be the boots I had brought to cave in. Each morning these would be frozen solid and I'd have to put them over the stove to thaw them enough to put them on. After that I'd have to stomp around to maintain feeling in the toes whilst my feet defrosted the rest of the boot! Each day the crawls got slushier and we would get wetter and wetter, although on the final couple of days temperatures did drop again and the ice crawls began to refreeze a bit, although one section remained a very cold wade.

Dive day arrives. Martin seems pretty calm and collected. A big group of Brits and Canadians gather at the sump awaiting the momentous occasion when Martin starts the actual dive. But first he needs to get ready. Helped by the other divers in the crew Martin carefully kits up donning layer after layer of kit, meticulously checking everything as it's added to the kit pile that is Martin. It's then time and Martin enters the sump pool, carries out some final checks, takes the dive



Martin Groves all kitted up, photo Jules Carter

line and descends. His descent is quiet due to the rebreather – no exhaust bubbles to break the surface. We watch his silhouette as he descends the clear green waters eventually moving out of sight as he swims through an underwater arch.

The first dive proved to be a success with some 250m of line laid in the upstream direction. The sump appears static during the winter with no detectable flow hence visibility was pretty poor on the return back to base. However the water temperature was warmer than expected – a balmy 5C – a definite improvement on the expected 2C. After a rest day it was time to prepare for the second dive. This saw Martin push the sump another 250m, with the depth gradually rising from around -18m depth at the base of the sump pool to -6m where Martin had left exploration. At this point Martin decided to finish the diving. Gas reserves meant that to push on at the current end would be unwise, and a way downstream had not looked obvious. It was time to dekit and begin the exodus of gear back out of the cave and to civilisation. The carry out further trashed tackle bags, oversuits and knees. The ice crawls were now definite 'slush' crawls which left you frozen and wet but we were happy. A significant discovery had been achieved through Martin's focused planning and



Near Boon's Junction, photo Jules Carter

training, and through a bunch of misfit British and Canadian cavers willing to lug his kit to the sump!

Between the dive kit carries and dives we also got some exploration of the rest of Castleguard in. Phil and Gareth went to find one of the iceplugs and did a 13 hour trip to the end of the cave though unfortunately didn't find an iceplug. Myself and Al did a trip to camp one to take some photos. Trips to camp one and beyond are pretty arduous and would certainly be a major effort with over laden tackle bags but the cave is definitely more interesting once out of the entrance area galleries where you can stop stooping. A few of us also had a day ski touring to explore the surrounding flanks of Castleguard mountain. Alas the weather was pretty poor but I had fun watching Al and Rick trying to ski back down on cross country tour skis whilst I was on alpine touring skis. I certainly enjoyed fresh tracks in the powder...

After a week at the cave it was time to begin the trudge out. That morning a large mixed group of locals and us Brits began the trudge up to the moraine all dragging various forms of over laden modified sledges. The last couple of days had seen temperatures start to drop again and fresh snow fall. Our journey back lacked tracks to follow and higher up we ended up in cloud with poor visibility. I ended up doing a lot of the trail breaking as I had the beefier ski set on and I probably didn't pick up the optimum path but we did arrive almost bang on the point we needed to descend back down the moraine. We had hoped to sort a rope haul to lower the sledges but most people wandered off to do their own thing so in the end I skied down with the sledge at an angle across the steep slope managing a wide turn close to the bottom. For some of the others there was a bit more carnage.... The ski off the snout of the glacier proved disappointing. I was expecting a nice gradual ski off but the snow seemed sticky and I couldn't get any real speed. From the base of the glacier it was a flat tour



Martin Groves after his second dive in which he succeeded in laying 500m of line, photo Jules Carter

back to the path through the wooded section close to where we had left the cars. The snow much thinner than when we had come up the valley thus in places we had to carefully pick our route around moraine rock piles.

At the cars some celebratory bottles appeared before loading into the cars and heading back to civilisation. On the way we stopped at a fine bar in Lake Louise. How they let us in I don't know – we stank - but they let us in and we drank some beers and ate some food. A superb end to a superb trip. I was then dropped back at the hotel in Banff where my family were staying and I still had three day's skiing to enjoy.... if my body could take it.



Skidoos on the glacier, photo Jules Carter

Part 2: The 2010 trip back to Castleguard

There was no question about not returning, depending on cash and holiday time of course. My family were happy to return to Banff for a ski trip and I was more than happy to return to the wilderness of the Rockies.

Martin as usual prepared hard for the trip but as the dates for departure loomed disaster almost struck. Martin and others were booked onto a BA flight, and BA were in the middle of their various strikes. It wasn't looking good....

Somehow all came right at the last minute. Martin had to dash off to the dive shop as soon as he had landed to get the dive tanks and then get driven by one of the Canadian crew to the 'big bend' to meet more of the Canadian team who were travelling to the cave a couple of days before us.

The rest of the team gathered at a hostel close to the 'big bend' and basically located close to nowhere in particular. Again a mix of us Brits, with Gareth and me from last year's trip joined by some young lads, Chris and Peachy, along with fellow SWCC stalwart Ben Stevens. However Ben had picked up one of those bugs that allows you to vomit and crap yourself at the same time. At the hostel he was recovering but definitely not in 20km ski tour shape with loads of kit. The other problem was how contagious was this bug....

An early start, and again to the 'big bend' to meet more

of the Canadian team. Greg the Parks Canada warden who grants the permission for such trips, was also joining us this year. Martin must have impressed him last year as he had arranged for two skidoos from the Park to take our kit to the base of the moraine which made the trip in a bit easier.

The moraine provided the usual entertainment in terms of getting ourselves and the kit up, but we got a rope haul going again. After some decent graft we had the sledge mountain to the top of the moraine. The group then started the steady trek down to the 'meadows' and then to the cave. Weather for us was good and the 'Watchman' peak beckoned us ever forward. However our Canadian friends who had gone in a couple of days before us had a much crappier time with poor weather and low visibility but managed to find the cave on good old map and compass work.

Snow conditions though were very different to last year. A very warm period during February had given way to the usual colder conditions but had left a very unstable layer in the snowpack. Around us was plenty of evidence for this with slab avalanches on even easy graded slopes. A ski tour over Castleguard Mountain was not going to be a wise option during this year's trip. The final descent through the trees to the cave entrance once again proved entertaining, and several of us had a degree of humour failure when caught in the deep snow and 'tree holes' by wayward sledges!

The entrance was a welcome sight and soon stoves were purring away to prepare welcome brews. Ben looked



Martin in the ice crawls, photo Jules Carter

well out of it but had somehow dragged his carcass and gear the 20km to the cave despite his very recent bug. Conditions were also noticeably different in the cave. The ice formations were far less than compared to last year's trip, and the ice crawl was wide open with no flat out section, but most importantly the ice was still frozen solid.

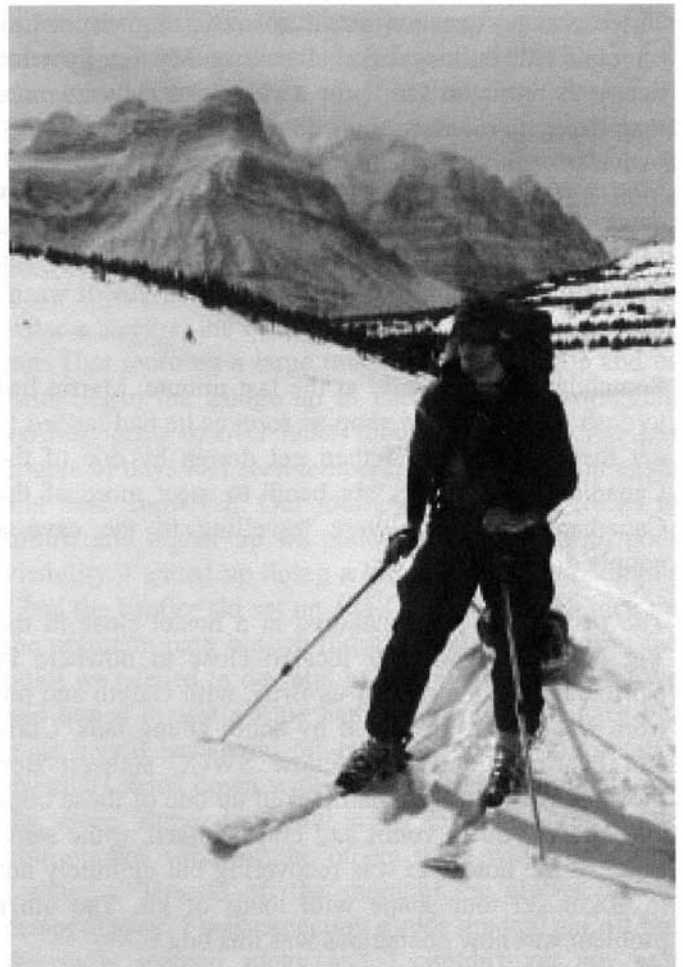
We were soon sorted into our pits, and all gear fettled ready for the next day's carry to the sump. However in the night came a dark omen as Chris ended up throwing his guts up. Ben's bug was still around – who would be next? However the gear haul to the sump the next day proved to be an efficient mass carry, with me and Martin using the steady pace as an opportunity to get some photos that attempted to capture the feel of this part of the cave i.e. crawly cave that twated your knees....

With all kit at the sump initial preparations were again carried out in preparation for the fist dive. A good crowd gathered for this occasion, waiting to see the diver disappear into the clear green waters of the sump. Once the green glow of his lights had finally disappeared most then returned to base or headed into other parts of the cave. A few of us remained to await Martin's return. After a couple of hours the glow of a returning diver's lights appeared and soon a spaced Martin was at the surface. The stove was cranked on to get a brew going and a chilled but exultant diver was gradually de-kitted and brought out of the sump. After close to 900m of diving Martin had emerged in a 'Subway' style passage disappearing into the hill. However de-kitting was going to be problematic, which combined with some dive kit problems, saw Martin make the decision to return to base, surveying the new passage as he returned.

We had a rest day after the success of this dive in which

a group of us went to explore the valley bottom, whilst others did trips into the cave. The next day saw just myself and Martin return to the sump. The plan was to see if a route 'downstream' could be found using the open circuit kit. A 45 minute dive revealed no passage in the downstream direction. Kit was then packed in preparation for the carry out with the two of us carrying out what we could between us. The rest of the de-kit went like clockwork – me and Chris even had a bit of a race out to see who could drag a 12 litre cylinder the fastest! There was still some spare time to kill. Some of us headed out early and spent a night in a snow-hole on the way back, while others spent another day in the cave to look at a potential dig site which apparently has promise. Others were going to stay deeper in the cave at camp one but the vomiting bug came a-visiting again....

So Castleguard 2 had been found. A return is now on the cards. This time it will need two divers so more kit to drag in. Roll on 2012 – I'm getting addicted to the misery!



Ben Stevens with the The Watchman behind, photo Jules Carter

Belize 2006-2010

By Phil Walker

Since 2001 members of SWCC have been undertaking small scale expeditions to the Toledo District of Belize, Central America.

The following article provides a brief overview of the last three expeditions, undertaken in 2006, 2008 and 2010.

Belize Overview

Belize is a relatively low-lying country, about 280km long and 110km wide, with a coastline of small cayes and the second largest coral reef in the world. Lying on the Caribbean coast of Central America, it has Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the south and west.

In the centre of the country lies a granite massif, Victoria peak being the highest point at 1120m, formed before the surrounding Cretaceous limestone, then being responsible for the surrounding uplift, which has formed the Mayan Mountains where the main cave development is located. This mass of limestone along with the large rainfall, which chiefly occurs during the wet season, allows for a huge potential of cave development. Unlike the Yucatan peninsula that has received attention in recent years from cave diving expeditions; the landscape leaves a lot of potential for dry cave development.

The caves of Central America have played an integral part in Ancient Maya culture, seen as an entrance into the underworld and often the scene of ceremonies, burials and alleged sacrifice. For this reason many of the dry caves in the Belize area contain numerous artefacts and archaeological evidence so exploration is heavily controlled by the Belize Institute of Archaeology (IA).

Area of Exploration

The SWCC trips have been centred largely on the Rio Grande and Rio Colombia areas, within the Toledo district. A number of large caves were known prior to the start of the expeditions from earlier US expeditions, but exploration was incomplete and the SWCC trips have concentrated on further exploring and documenting the caves.

The village of San Pedro Colombia, where we usual base ourselves, lies on the Rio Colombia and is about

an hour's walk south of the smaller San Miguel on the Rio Grande. These villages lie where the coastal plain meets the hills and the covering jungle. Both the rivers resurge from their underground journeys a short distance above the communities, with dry stream beds continuing above, through a huge area of limestone, allowing for significant potential development.

Belize 2006

Aims:

Discover and explore sites along the Rio Grande River

Travel to Esperanza Camp to explore cave systems at river sinks and reported cave sites

Revisit Roaring River in Tiger Cave and assess possibility of traversing the river

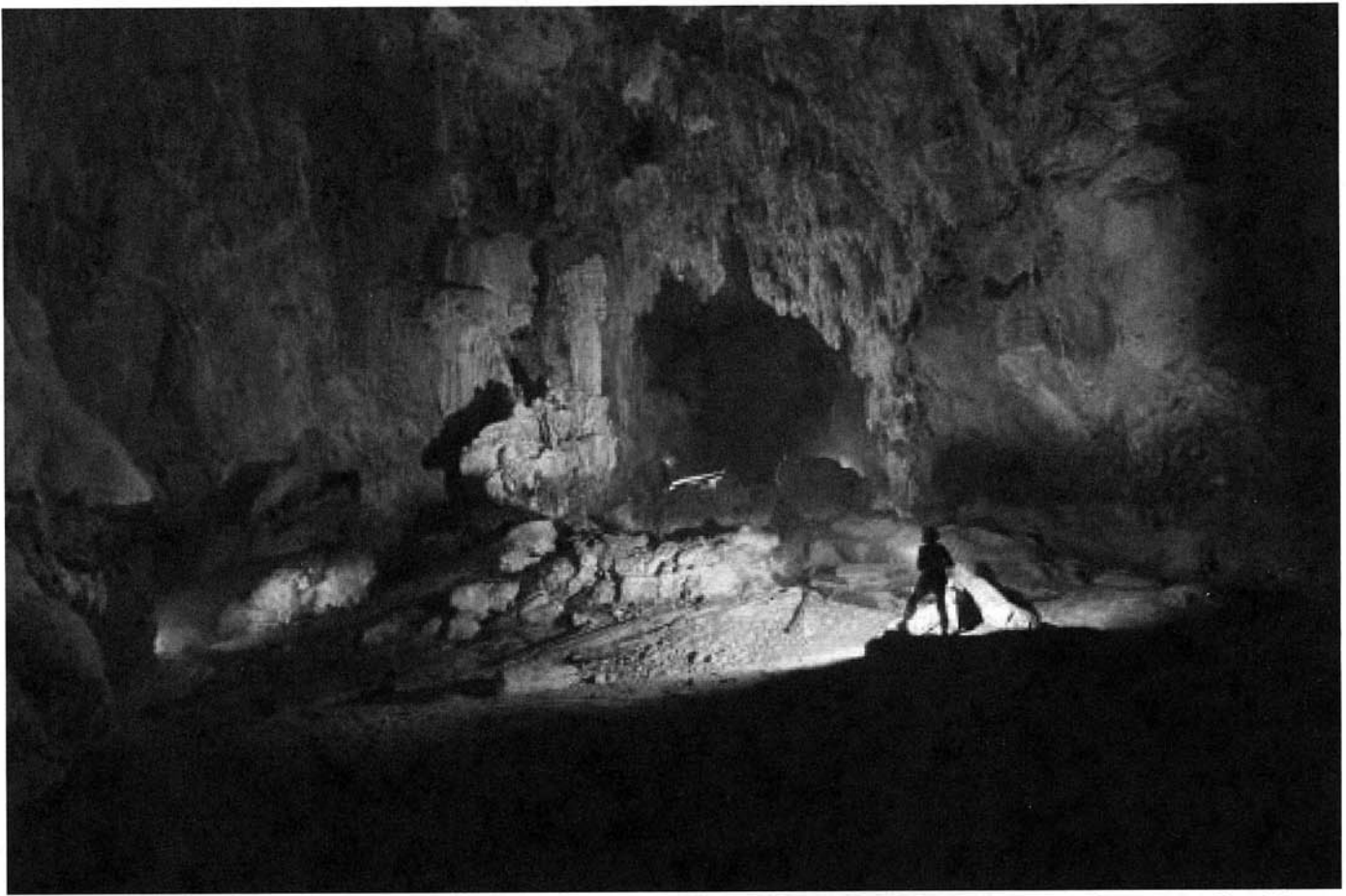
The 2006 expedition took place for three weeks from the 18th March to 7th April 2006 with seven members taking part. As in previous years, the trip was based at a local family hut (the 'Chocos') in San Pedro Colombia.

Tich Hulz (Tiger) Cave

Tiger Cave lies about an hour and a half's walk from San Miguel, first entered by Phil and Alan in 2001; nearly 1km was surveyed before a length of static line was found on a climb, beyond this point the cave continued until a static upstream sump was found. On return to the UK that year, the original US explorers were tracked down and an old survey and some leads were provided.

The main lead was the 'Roaring River' a dangerous white water underground river that had never been crossed. In 2006 we had hoped to be able to bolt along and keep out of the main flow. However, following a chance conversation with a cafe owner it transpired that it was now possible to drive to the cave entrance due to the construction of a hydroelectric scheme.

A visit to the cave could now be undertaken by a two minute walk from the car, without the need for a hot and sweaty walk with rucksacks. The dam was still under construction but the plans for the scheme were to dam the water above the cave, diverting it from its underground course and through the turbine.



Pueblo Creek Cave, photo Brendan Marris

We decided to save the effort involved in exploring the river until it was a dry walk!

Champon

Champon was an area we had heard about a few times before. A place that the local hunters knew quite well and they had described huge caves and large rivers. After some investigation we concluded that the main cave was on the obvious dry river bed of the Rio Grande and barring any attacks by wild animals and marijuana growers we would not need the help of guides to find it.

The whole team went on a couple of trips to Champon. The cave lies about two hour's walk up the dry river bed. A fairly easy walk, but not much to see apart from rocks, shed snake skin and the occasional jaguar prints, although Rhys still maintains it was nothing more dangerous than a large Alsatian.

The cave itself is a massive resurgence (dry in 2006), with a large passage gradually lowering to a large pool with a swim under a low arch. From here the cave continues with a lot of swimming interspersed with large passage. Eventually the cave lowers to an upper and lower stream sump. The total length of the cave is

around 600m.

Although a fairly obvious and accessible cave, we have been unable to find any reference to the cave or prior exploration. It is possible it is a cave referred to in the 1980's as the 'Rio Grande Source Cave', but this was never explored beyond the first pool, so the name of Champon (which is actually the surrounding area) is currently used.

Esperanza

Esperanza is the name of an old army camp deep in the jungle where the main Central River sinks before re-appearing further down in the caves along the Rio Grande (although this has never been scientifically proved). Plans were made in 2006 to attempt to reach the area, with the help of local guides, and determine the potential and feasibility of exploration in this area.

Bad weather kept delaying the start of this trip but eventually Alan, Gary and Rhys disappeared off into the jungle with a lot of caving kit and didn't reappear for a couple of days.

Difficult terrain and route finding along with a lack of water nearly led to disaster. Eventually the trip was

aborted (only a few kilometers from the goal) with the hastily dumping of kit and luckily the stumbling across a smaller cave that contained some water. To quote Alan, "I didn't want anyone to find my body with an empty water canister, but a full SRT kit and a pile of rope"

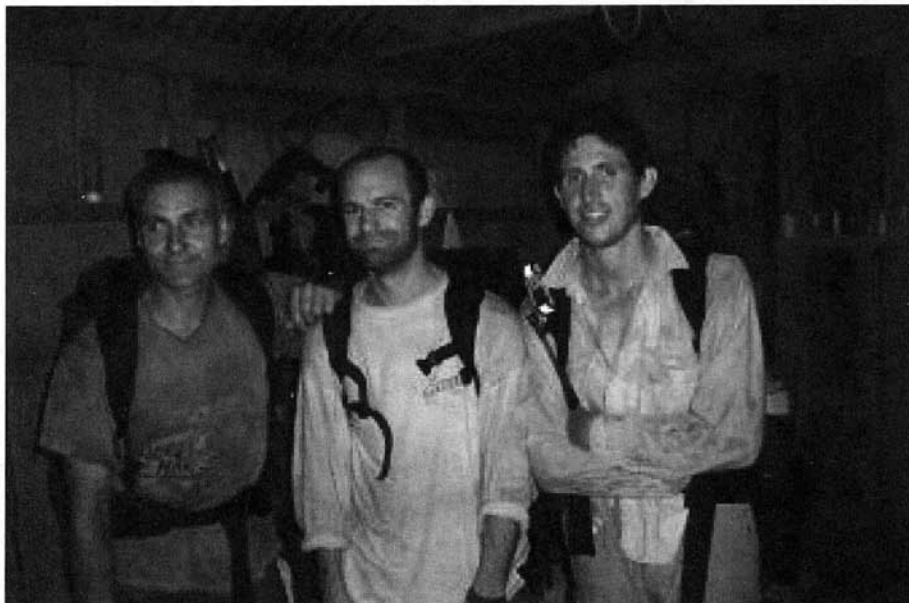
Pueblo Creek Cave

On our arrival in Belize, a visit to the IA department had revealed that some caves had been discovered by a volunteer Trekforce team close to the area were staying at and the IA wanted us to investigate and report back. Alan and Phil visited the Trekforce team and on a rather bizarre day, where a new 'National Park' opening ceremony was being performed, Alan had to substitute for the High Commissioner of Belize, and provide a rousing speech to the amassed locals.

Trekforce provided a number of good leads, some that proved later to be already explored, but one in particular was further along the track at a place called Pueblo Viejo, close to the Guatemalan border.

The following day Phil, Alan, Toby and Rhys, aided by a local village guide, walked down a dry river bed, to a gaping sink, simply called Pueblo Creek Cave. A brief exploration for around 200m led to a small pitch down and a gaping black void beyond.

Over the next couple of days the cave was explored by all members of the team. The majority of the cave entails a lot of swimming, initially in some rather stagnant pools (with dubious content) and later some slow moving canals. Eventually, a 10m high blockage



Gary, Rhys and Alan after the 2006 Esperanza trip, photo Toby Dryden

made entirely of jammed logs, ended progress. A sobering location given the amount of water that must have brought the logs into the system.

The length of the cave at the time was over 1km with an obvious continuation beyond the log jam.

2006 Conclusion

The highlight of the trip was Pueblo Creek Cave. Just as other options were dwindling, the discovery of this cave gave a renewed enthusiasm for exploration in the area and showed the huge potential and scale of caves that were waiting in the jungle.

Although the Esperanza trip was unsuccessful, it did provide some insight into the logistics of exploration at remoter locations.

Finally, with the construction of the hydroelectric plant at Tiger Cave, there was the future possibility of adding some significant length to the cave.

On returning to the UK, all of these objectives were the main driving forces for a return.

2008

Aims:

To continue the exploration of the Pueblo Creek cave found in 2006

To get a team to the remote Esperanza camp, to attempt to follow the course of the Central River/Rio Grande

To explore Roaring River within Tiger cave

The 2008 expedition took place over 5 weeks between February and March 2008 with ten members taking part. The trip was based once more at the Choco family huts in San Pedro Colombia.

Esperanza

A return to Esperanza was the first objective to be tackled. Phil, Alan and Gary set off bright and early, led by two guides, for a planned three day trek and explore. Ten minutes after getting out of the truck, it

started raining and rained constantly for three days, until there was not a part of our bodies that was not soaked. Steep, treacherous hills had to be traversed before we arrived at Esperanza at lunchtime on day two.

Following the river down, the hoped for cave didn't materialise, with the river simply disappearing into the riverbed and bank. A large amount of water could be heard beneath a mass of logs, but it would take days to excavate.

Further caves around the area were investigated but with time and energy running short a hasty retreat was sought, back to the comfort of the village hut.

Pueblo Creek Cave

Exploration of Pueblo Creek was undertaken by all members of the trip over the last few weeks of the expedition. The log jam that had halted progress in 2006 was no longer present and further exploration revealed a huge chamber, christened Lobster Chamber, after an incumbent resident.

The chamber can take up to 20 minutes to route find across and to traverse large car sized boulders. An even

prettier side chamber called the Crystal Maze was discovered just to the side of the main chamber, with large coral heads of calcite, huge stalagmite statues, interspersed with fine mud formations.

Exploration continued down a large stream passage until once more time dictated the end of exploration for another year. This time round over 2km of new cave had been found, taking the total length to around 3.5km.

Cumbres and Lagonita

Nicky, Rich, Brendan, Russ and Andy undertook a second exploratory trip into the jungle, looking at some leads discovered on the early Esperanza trip and to take a closer look at the large Cumbres sinkhole that the first trip had only passed through.

Cumbres itself, although impressive, held no cave development of any significance. Other caves in the vicinity, such as Gibnut Skull Cave were explored, although it later transpired this was previously explored in the 1980's albeit under a different name.

Lagonita, the lifesaver in 2006, was also revisited. Approximately 200m into the cave was a small drip



Lobster Chamber, Pueblo Creek, photo Brendan Marris

pool, just beyond which there was a climb and a short pitch, dropping onto a steeply sloping mud bank into deep water stretching ahead out of sight. Without any proper caving equipment no further exploration was undertaken, but it remained a promising site.

Tiger Cave

In 2008 the newly constructed hydro plant was fully operational, so there was the possibility to see if the altered water course had affected the previously impassable Roaring River section of the cave.

The water had indeed dropped and progress could easily be made in the stream. Upstream led to a climb and then a sump after approximately 100m. Downstream a few long swims led to a split in the passageway. In the upstream passage a large net was spotted high up the wall - evidence of the large amount of water that used to flow down this passage; taking the left hand reached a small cascade, where exploration was halted for the day. In total 350m of new stream passage was surveyed.

The following day another 100m was added before a rather difficult climb was reached and left for a future expedition.

2008 Conclusion

Finally Esperanza Camp was reached. It is an area of massive karst features and there are still leads in the area. Exploration in this area remains limited due to its remote nature.

Significant finds were made in the Pueblo Creek Cave, with another 2km of passage and the discovery of the massive Lobster Chamber. This cave continues, the team having to turn back from huge open walking passage.

Tiger Cave, with a significant amount of its water diverted into a Hydro Electric scheme, had the Roaring River explored which revealed several hundred metres of exciting new river cave.

2010

Aims:

Continue exploration of Pueblo Creek Cave, Pueblo Viejo with the goal of trying to connect to the known Ochochpec cave in the Aguacate Indian Reservation.

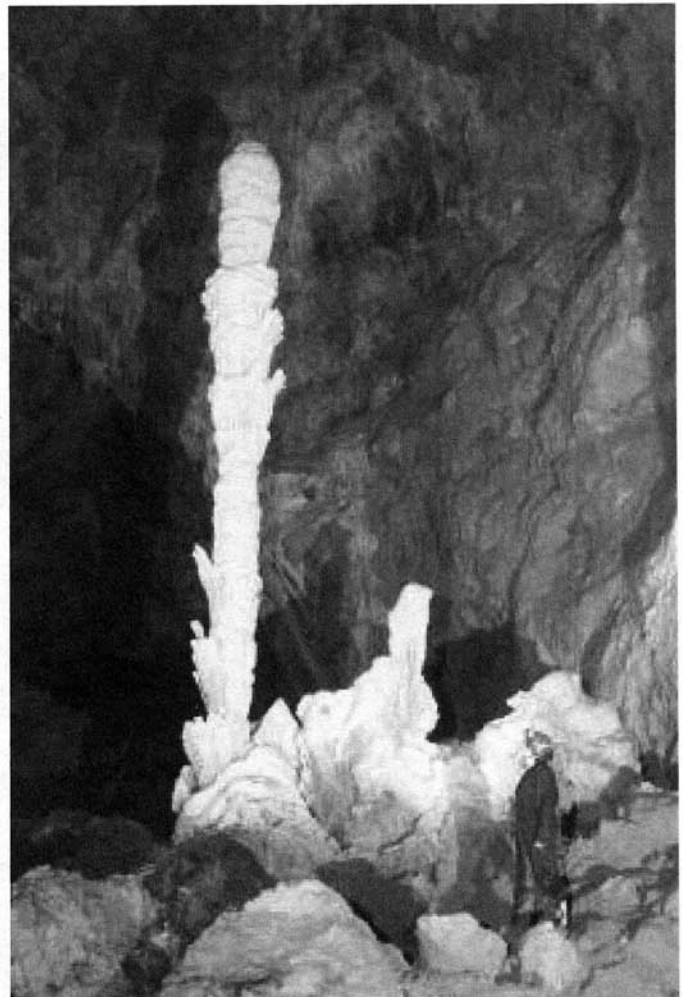
Complete exploration of Tiger Cave, San Miguel, where further exploration has been enabled by the newly created Hydro plant which has lowered water levels within the cave.

Complete exploration of Lagonita Cave, Rio Grande reservation.

The 2010 expedition took place over three weeks between March and April, 2010 with nine members taking part. In a break from tradition the trip was based from Sun creek Lodge, a holiday/tourist adventure place, run by a local contact.

Pueblo Creek Cave and Ochochpec:

After the previous expedition research had revealed that some previously known caves, south of the Pueblo Viejo area, bore remarkable similarities to the explored passages in Pueblo Creek. In particular, a cave called Ochochpec (House of Stone in the local dialect) on the other side of the mountain range was quite possibly the resurgence for Pueblo Creek.



The Pagoda, Pueblo Creek, photo Brendan Marris

Pueblo Creek was tackled first and the original limit of exploration from 2008 was quickly passed. Another 300m was found by Rich, Russ, Claire and Nicky, ending in a huge dark sump pool. A large bypass, with impressive formations, was connected back to the main cave. No obvious way round the sump could be found.

An inlet further back in the cave was also explored by Phil, Alan and Maxine for around 750m through some smaller stream passage before one way lowered to a small clear sump and the other to a larger but muddier sump.

A number of days were spent exploring the area around the village of Aguacate, looking for the possible resurgence cave to Pueblo Creek. Eventually, Ochochpec was re-discovered and explored by Phil, Alan and Max for around 2km to a large dark sump pool, approx. 20x30m across, an almost identical looking sump to the one found at the end of Pueblo Creek. Again, no bypass could be found, but a line survey out was used to plot the caves and it was found that only 380m separated the two caves.

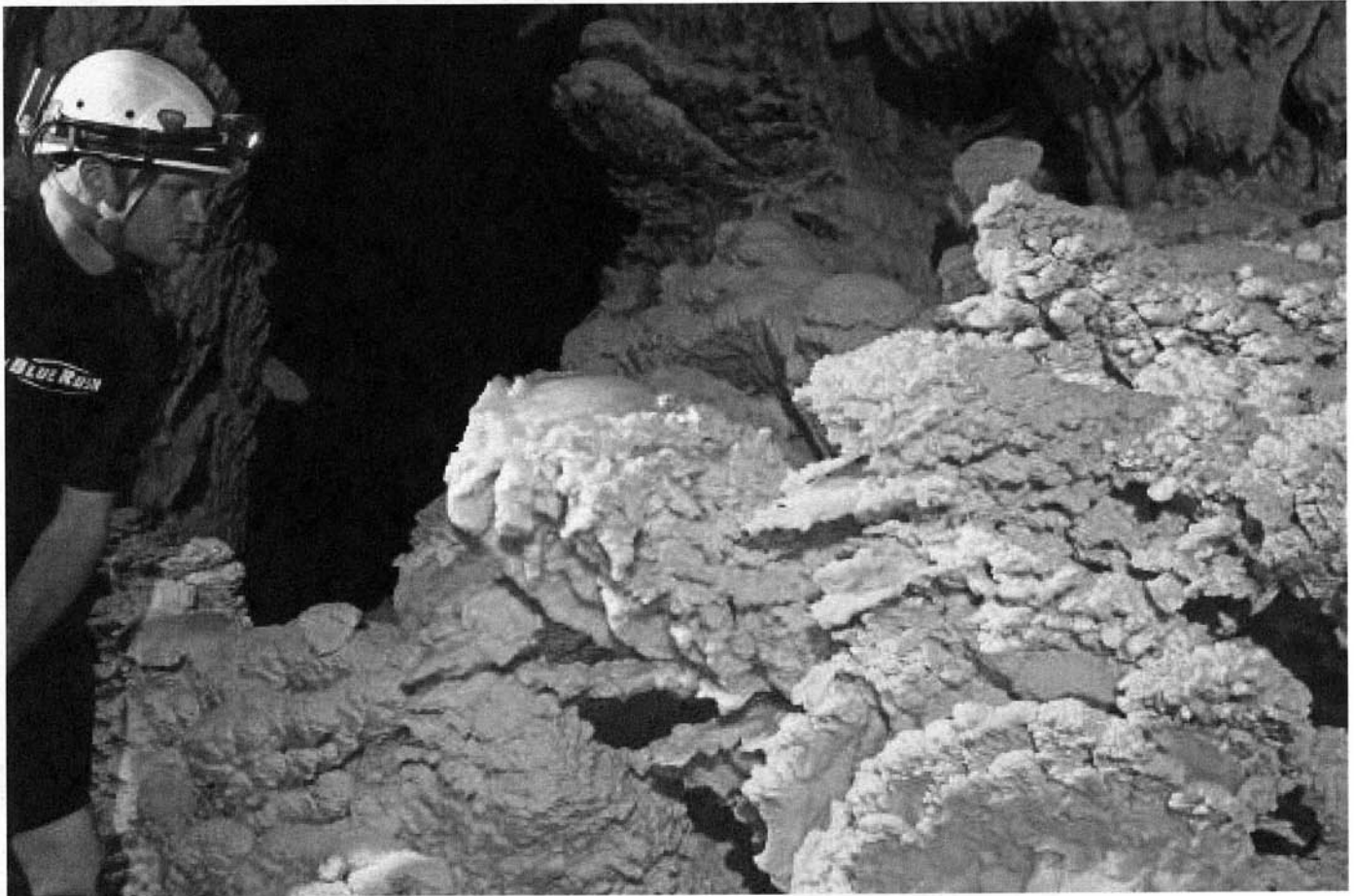
Tiger Cave

Once again exploration of Tiger Cave was undertaken. Following up a couple of leads led to some unexpected large gains in the system. Firstly, a conversation with the Hydro plant owner revealed a large sink a bit further upstream. This was quickly explored and found to drop into the upper end of the Roaring River. A sporting through trip had been discovered! However, due to high water levels the trip remains incomplete.

In addition a vague reference to a pitch, from the original US explorers, was followed up and a new section of cave, and what appears to be a parallel stream way was discovered. This section (The Roaring Pit) provided 600m of new cave and three possible sumps to dive. A dry lead was also left unexplored, with the sound of bats in the distance and encouraging sign of more cave.

Lagonita and Ramon's Cave:

Finally a team returned to Lagonita, further up the Rio Grande and completed exploration. A further 700m of cave was explored to a large chamber.



The Crystal Maze, Pueblo Creek, photo Brendan Marris

On the return from Lagonita, another cave, close to Champon (found in 2006) was explored. This cave (Ramon's Cave, after the local guide) was explored through a stream way to passage heading off into the distance.

2010 Conclusion

Pueblo Creek Cave was pushed to a satisfactory conclusion and all indicators suggest that this connects, albeit probably underwater, to the Ochochpec system. This makes a combined system of over 7km long, which makes it the second longest cave in the Toledo district after the Ok'eb Ha – Blue Creek system.



Suncreek Lodge, photo Brendan Marris

Tiger Cave was further explored, including the discovery of a second entrance and what appears to be a second stream way. In total it was pushed to over 5km in length, making Tiger Cave the third longest cave in the area.

A total of 3.4 km of new cave was surveyed and explored and an extra 3 km of existing cave resurveyed with the intention of improving and republishing previous data.

The Future

As with every other year, the end of the 2010 expedition saw the usual announcements from everyone that they never intend to go back to Belize. It's too hot, too many bugs....

However, as another cold winter lingers in the UK, talk turns to a possible return. The Pueblo Creek – Ochochpec system and Tiger Cave are probably as fully explored as they ever will be, without resorting to cave diving. One possible dry lead remains in Pueblo and there is the ongoing passage in Ramon's Cave, but neither are enough to base a full scale expedition around.

The Bladen area, nearer the centre of the Mayan Mountains is a possible location for a future trip. This would most likely be based at a remote jungle camp for the duration of the trip, meaning that increased logistics and support would be required, including an official requirement for an archaeologist presence to satisfy the increased permission hurdles. A trip of this nature is

not likely to happen until after 2013.

2012 may see a smaller scale trip to the Rio Grande Area, with a couple of cave divers in tow, to tie up the numerous undived sumps that should connect up a large system that would rival the nearby Blue Creek cave system for size.

Expedition Members:

2006 - Alan Braybrooke, Toby Dryden, Gary Evans, Dominic Hyland, Phil Walker, Rhys Williams and Dave Wiltshire.

2008 - Nicky Bayley, Alan Braybrooke, Russ Brooks (BPC), Paul Craddy, Toby Dryden, Gary Evans, Rich Hudson (BPC), Andy Lewington (GCC), Brendan Marris and Phil Walker.

2010 - Nicky Bayley, Maxine Bateman, Alan Braybrooke, Russ Brooks (BPC), Toby Dryden, Rich Hudson (BPC), Brendan Marris, Clair Sansom and Phil Walker.

Sponsors:

2006 trip sponsored by Lyon Equipment and Sports Council of Wales

2008 trip sponsored by Sports Council of Wales

2010 trip sponsored by Lyon Equipment, Sports Council of Wales, Ghar Parau, Bisun, Viper Lights and SWCC

Double Poached Eggs

A Joint Effort

By Martin Hoff and Claire Vivian

Sunday, February 6th 2011

Martin: At a quarter past three it was just another trip, but by quarter to four it had turned into a story. Such is the curse of interestingness when it coincides with caving trips. I'd caved with Claire a couple of times before, enough to know what she was capable of, which is why I was perfectly happy to trade a little of my rigging and SRT practice and a quick exercise in vertical photography for sharing the fruits of both.

Having had a successful trip to the Swamp Creek pitch a couple of weeks previously, which had been accompanied by vast amounts of spray at the bottom, finding water levels were even higher meant that an alternative option sounded like a great idea. Dragging a full bag of rope, SRT kit and camera kit through the crawl to Timo's Table it felt a slightly less great idea, but that's the way it goes.

Claire: It was a perfectly normal, by this I mean rainy, day. The plan was simple: Martin Hoff and I would do some SRT practice at the Crevasse for a couple of hours. I was excited to be doing more SRT with my brand new, too shiny, kit that I had received for Christmas, and had not been to the bottom of the Crevasse before. There were no problems on the trip in and the SRT session went well. We had a brief look around the bottom of the Crevasse and then Martin pointed out the ladder pitch and the way on to OFD III and took some photographs. So far, everything was happening as expected; I was carrying the SRT kits and a few small bits and pieces and Martin had the rope and his camera equipment.

Martin: After rigging, descending, re-ascending, photographing, re-descending and de-rigging The Crevasse, I'd learned enough to know that I need to do more pictures there, and Claire had added a little familiarity with the Pantin to her experience. It was time to go home, taking in a couple of brief side passage diversions to clarify a couple of route-finding points.

Dropping back down to the Poached Egg climb from the ledge opposite always makes me concentrate, but where I have the leg reach to sit and slide onto the landing rock, Claire opted for the more dynamic

straight leap. I moved across the climb and turned to watch Claire as she moved up to join me.

Claire: It was only when we reached Poached Egg climb for the second time that day that things went drastically wrong. Martin crossed first. No problems there. Then it was my turn.

Tightening the tackle sack straps across her shoulders, she reached for the back of the triangular rock on the ledge, the one that's served as a handhold for generations of cavers.

This was the first time I had climbed whilst wearing a tackle sack and I remember standing at the side of the climb tightening the straps of my bag to try and keep the weight in close to my back, so it would not unbalance me - although this may have been my undoing, I could have tightened the straps too much thus reducing the mobility of my shoulders. Then I set off. Hold poached egg with left hand, left foot immediately below this, right foot on central foothold, right arm around small central rock. Transfer weight. Left arm to central rock. Then everything is hazy. My foot must have slipped. I remember feeling my left forearm sliding over the top of the rock I was trying to hold on to and, in a flash of a second, knowing that there was nothing I could do. I was falling.

Martin: And then she leaned backwards, her hands stretched out towards a rock she hadn't quite grasped, as she fell, bouncing on her back a couple of times and coming to a halt on the floor with a corner of the rock she'd landed upon sticking into her side.

Claire: I've heard people say that when you fall, you feel like you are flying through the air for a long time. For me, the ground came all too soon. I landed on my back, which took my breath away, and then bounced over on to another boulder, hitting it with my lower right side this time. I got to my feet immediately, embarrassed at having fallen. By this time, Martin was on his way over towards me, telling me not to move.

Martin: As often happens in circumstances like this, the resulting huge shot of adrenaline delivered with a side helping of shock had her attempting to stand up

immediately, despite the instruction to stay down and not move.

Claire: I sat down. I had not hit my head, but I was still confused. How did I get down here? I stood up again. Martin told me to check I could move freely and took my bag. He was concerned and asked how I was feeling. I did not feel bad at all. I was able to move my arms and legs without difficulty and I did not think anything felt broken, so I set off and climbed Poached Egg again – properly this time. Looking down and watching Martin climb up, I still did not feel any real pain. My right side was throbbing a little and beginning to feel hot, but I thought this was just the bruising starting to come out. Once again Martin asked if I was alright to continue heading out. I confirmed I was, and we started to walk – Martin carrying both bags this time.

Martin: Re-assessing, there was no obvious major damage and with her moving reasonably freely, I took the second tackle sack off her and across the climb and we moved off towards Top Entrance. And now the crawl behind Timo's Table seemed even less a great idea.

Claire: As time went on I could tell that all was not well. My side was getting sorer and sorer by the moment and when I bent or stretched there was a stabbing pain there. The crawl behind Timo's Table was uncomfortable. But the pain kept getting worse, it seemed to increase with every step and it was even beginning to get painful to breathe. I couldn't think about where I was going and was simply relying on Martin to tell me which way to walk; I was using all my energy to focus on how I was moving and ensuring I did not fall again. But I wanted to keep on going; I did not want to sit down and stop. That did nothing to ease the pain and I did not think it would help; it would just take longer to reach Top Entrance. Martin made it clear I should go at my own pace and not worry about how slow that might be.

Martin: Perhaps that crawl was the point where the adrenaline started tailing off, as Claire started stiffening up a little, and the noises of discomfort came a little more frequently. Despite the huge amount of water coming down the Arête waterfall, we considered our options and figured that going that way on the security of a lifeline was still a better bet than the longer route down into Salubrious and back up through the Corkscrew, which would involve more twisting, reaching and stretching.

Claire: When we reached lower Arête, there was a choice; the quicker climb up to mid-layer Arête and down via the muddy climb above the Corkscrew or to continue at the same level along to Salubrious streamway and up through the Corkscrew. By this time, it hurt to raise my right arm. I knew climbing up Arête would not be easy but, as Martin pointed out, it would ultimately be faster and present fewer difficulties than the other route. So he roped it for me and I climbed up slowly. The next obstacle was the climb down at the end of the passage. Martin roped this for me too and I climbed down.

Martin: Even with the injury, whatever its precise nature, becoming a little more troublesome, Claire was able to keep moving while I dealt with the lifeline and the two tackle sacks and we reached the climb immediately above the Corkscrew just as another group emerged from below it. At least now we had company if we needed something to happen quickly.

Claire: There was constant aching now, interrupted by a sharp pain when I bent down or moved my right arm. We met a Nottingham University Caving Club group coming up through the Corkscrew. I remember asking them how their trip had been and where they had gone; anything to distract myself for a few moments. Then I just remember starting to walk out with the NUCC cavers around me, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other and climbing over boulders, nothing more.

Martin: Hijacking their trip, gently "inviting" one of them to take one of the tackle sacks off me for a bit, we continued towards the entrance where I reclaimed the second bag.

Claire: I had my head down and was only thinking about what was immediately in front of me, nothing else seemed to matter. The number of boulders to climb over in the Brickyard seemed to have increased dramatically, and they all seemed to be much bigger than I remembered. I have no idea where the other caving group went, but suddenly it was just the two of us walking together again.

Martin: Emerging into the blowing drizzle, we slowly made our way back down to the cottage by the more even terrain of the cutting route, as the sort of slide and dump onto one's arse that I frequently do in those conditions wouldn't do much good for someone with some sort of rib injury, as it was becoming clearer was probably the case.

Claire: When we got out through the gate, the weather was still unpleasant and the wind had increased making the walk back to SWCC rather wet. Talking was beginning to get difficult now too as I found myself taking small breaths to try and stop it hurting so much, but this was making me feel slightly dizzy. Getting back to the club, I found that I felt more comfortable when I sat down and leaned forward.

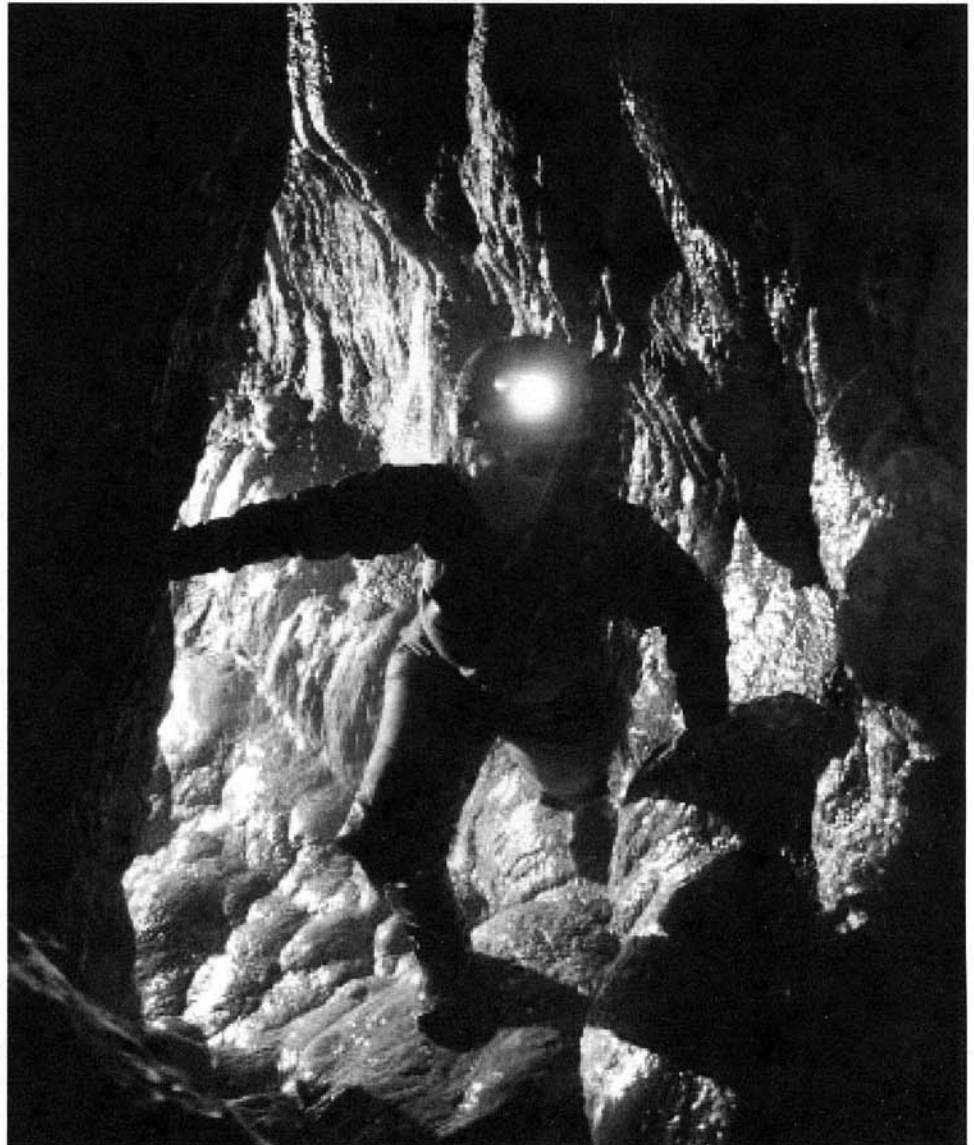
Everyone bustled around me getting my kit together and helping me get ready to go to A&E. After several hours, an ECG and numerous x-rays the doctor found that I had two hairline fractures on my ribs and a slightly damaged kidney. Yet, not a single bruise . . . no outward sign of a fall whatsoever! I am especially grateful to Martin for his help throughout, to Kate and Toby for their help back at SWCC and also to Marge and Brian Jopling who drove me to hospital.

Martin: It's for Claire to fill in the details of what followed, but as a piece of self-rescue the exit from the cave was pretty much textbook. All I had to do was take care of the gear and the lifelining, and keep an eye out for Claire's condition changing any more drastically. She can speak for herself, but from my perspective it helped to keep discussing our options and have a very mobile casualty involved in the decision-making process; somewhere buried in that situation is the difference between having some limited measure of control over an already difficult scenario and someone being merely a non-participatory victim of whatever somebody else does next to help them.

This certainly made the whole exit from the cave easier for me, and while it's not always going to be the case in a more dramatic, serious injury scenario, there's something to be said for encouraging a

capable and mobile caver to carry on at their natural pace on the day and get on with heading outwards if you are reasonably comfortable that further damage isn't immediately likely to result from doing so.

As we were back at the cottage around an hour after the fall, which compares very favourably with the likely wait of at least another couple of hours before having enough people gathered to do anything useful before even considering the probably medical deterioration and onset of chilling involved in the waiting time, Claire set a great example by quietly getting on with self-evacuation with a minimum of fuss – in so doing she prevented herself from suffering any more seriously from other secondary effects beyond the injury she sustained in falling, and more importantly her efforts prevented me having to work especially hard to get her out of the cave, which is an approach I'll always approve of!



Claire Vivian on the day of the trip, photo Martin Hoff



Published by South Wales Caving Club, 1-10 Powell Street,
Penwyllt, Pen-y-Cae, Swansea SA9 1GQ