

Mendip Caving Group

A person wearing a helmet and dark clothing is standing on a rocky ledge in a cave, looking up at a massive, textured rock wall illuminated by warm, reddish-orange light.

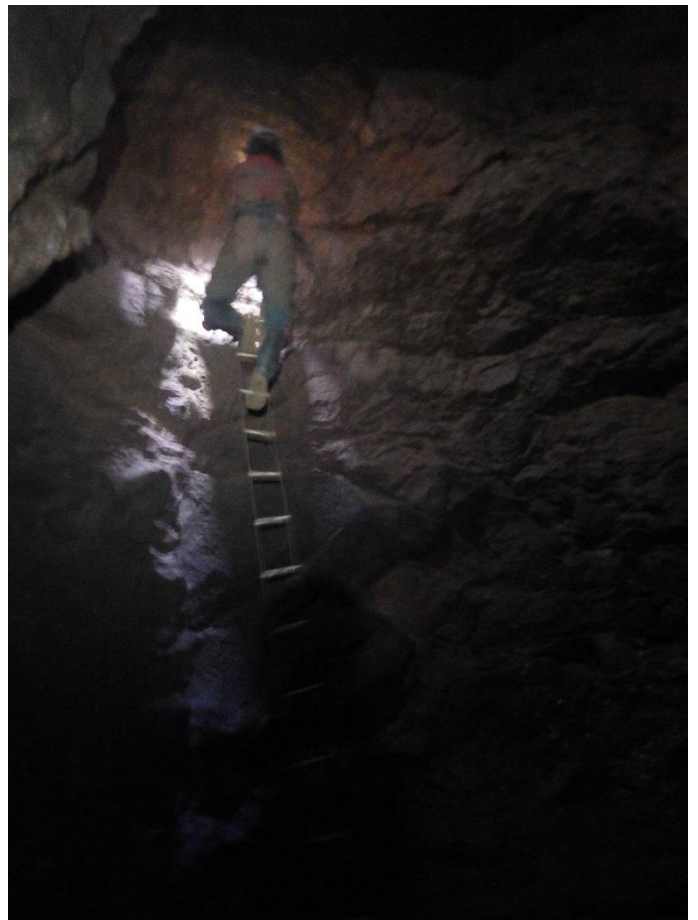
Journal 386 March 2021



Tav and Vince in The Land of Hope and Glory – Mark Burkey



Léonie, Mike M, James and Estelle – Dave Walker



Ladder into the Roof of Wookey 24 - Mike Moxon

Mendip Caving Group Journal 386

March 2021

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Opinions expressed in this journal are not necessarily those of the club or any of its officers.

Photographs by article authors unless otherwise stated.

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Hut Bookings

The Cottage is currently open for essential maintenance only.

Access

Balch Cave, Fairy Cave and Hillier's Cave to open 1st April 2021. (Covid permitting!)

Journal 387

The Deadline for submissions to the next journal is 23rd June 2021.

Membership News: Farewell to

Tim Case	Julian O'Hara
Alistair Macallan	Paul Ketcher
Mary Kolar	

Front Cover photo

Land of Hope and Glory
 Wookey Hole
 Mark Burkey

Back Cover Photo

Aven des Pèbres
 Ardèche (2016)
 Clive Westlake

Editorial

Welcome to the 386th Journal of the Mendip Caving Group.

I hope you enjoyed Journal 385. Thank you very much to all those of you who contributed articles and photo. After all it is really you who write the journal. All I do is try and make it pretty. Whatever your particular interest is in caving, I am sure the Group would like to hear about it. So, please keep sending your articles and photos. There are less articles this time although some are highly researched. May I ask that all articles be submitted in Word with photos submitted separately as this makes it easier to edit. Can I also ask that full names can be supplied for all in the party and that photos have the name of the photographer, the location and the name of the cave.

Access to caves in Cheddar Gorge

After the last CSCC meeting we received notification from Longleat that all the caves on their property at Cheddar were closed and that access was denied for the time being. Notification was issued to the caving community in general and to the digging teams active in Spider Hole and Goughs, as well as the CDG and the administration for Reservoir Hole access.

The reason given for the closure was that the CSCC had not entered into the formal access agreement which Longleat had requested in 2017. Longleat were of the opinion that everything had been agreed and that they had been waiting for over a year for the signed agreement to be returned. There is clearly considerable confusion as to the exact position, in that we believed we were waiting for feedback on a revised draft that we had sent to them. The person initially dealing with the matter at Longleat moved on some time ago and they are investigating further and reviewing their position, however irrespective of this, access will not be reinstated until an agreement has been finalised. Longleat have clearly stated that they would like to see access for cavers, but it has to be on their terms.

We are in continual contact with Longleat and are working toward resolving this matter as soon as possible, however Longleat have said they have done nothing since notifying us of the closure as most of the staff in their Estates Department are furloughed. Normally they have ten people in the department but are currently operating with only two, and they cannot guarantee being able to make any progress until things get back to normal. In the meantime, they have said the they would like their own locks fitted to the gated caves and this is being discussed with them'

I would like to thank Butch (Alan Butcher) for all the work he did previously trying to sort this out and to him and Linda Wilson for providing me with all the information they have available.

Having spoken to them I don't hold out much hope of even starting discussions until the new year. Despite hopes and indications to the contrary following an initial meeting, they haven't even started to look at it and I have the terrible feeling that we might be starting from scratch. Butch spent 18 months in negotiations with them previously and they thought everything had been agreed and all they were waiting for was a signature on the agreement and it to be returned. I have not been able to make any sense of it and can only assume there was a breakdown in communication on our part. Unfortunately for us I am now having to deal with completely different people, and they want to review everything, notwithstanding they have clearly stated they would like to see an agreement in place. I think they definitely blame us for not finalising things in May 19 when Butch and Les Williams were dealing with it on our behalf. To give you an idea of the problems we are up against the Estates Manager has no understanding of caving and mentioned three times in a meeting we had about the problems they were having to deal with resulting from an Emu attacking a child and this is irrespective of signs, fences, parental control, insurances etc don't ask!!!!

Longleat will be keeping a presence in the Gorge for maintenance purposes, but this is all. Approaches should not be made to Longleat or any of their representatives as permission to visit any of the caves will be denied.

Graham Price

Conservation and Access Officer, Council of Southern Caving Clubs

A Personal Potted History of Prusiking – Nick Thorne

With figures by Richard Thorne

Historically, when it came to caving kit, it was a question of making your own, such as ladders, or simply pinching gear from other sports or activities, mining and climbing being the obvious sources. And it was the climbing world that first used abseiling to get off a cliff when one had had enough. As a schoolboy back in the 70s, a climbing friend took me to Split Rock Quarry just outside Wells and introduced me to the delights of abseiling. It was certainly fun but its applicability to caving seemed limited as there was no obvious or easy way to get back up the rope... or so I thought.

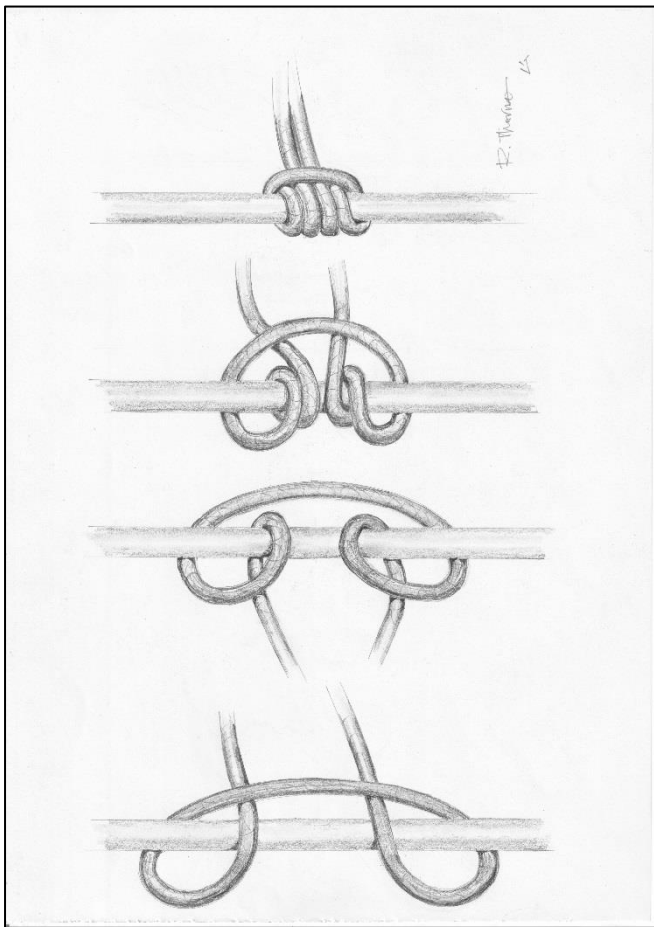


Figure 1 How it all began – the Prusik Knot

A bit of research turned up a book by the American, Robert Thrun, imaginatively entitled, 'Prusiking'.¹ Apparently, an Alpinist by the name of Dr. Karl Prusik had pioneered a self-help method to extract climbers who'd fallen down a crevasse. Single-handedly hauling people up on a rope only works in films. (And please note the spelling of the bloke's name. One 's', not two. It's a particular soapbox of mine.) He invented a knot that could attach a sling to the standing rope lowered

down to the beleaguered climber that could then be pushed up the rope but would grip under tension. (See Figure 1.) With at least two such slings, one attached to a sit harness and one to a foot loop, one could make progress up the rope.

Suitably armed with a borrowed climbing rope and sit harness, and a few lengths of upmarket bootlace, I went back to Split Rock and taught myself to prusik. I used a set up called a Texas High Kick, (see Figure 2), all on knots. Slow and laborious doesn't begin to cover it.



Figure 2 The Texas High Kick on knots

Turning over the pages of the then prusiking bible, I graduated to semi-mechanical 'knots' such as the Bachmann knot. (See Figure 3.) Still slow and laborious.

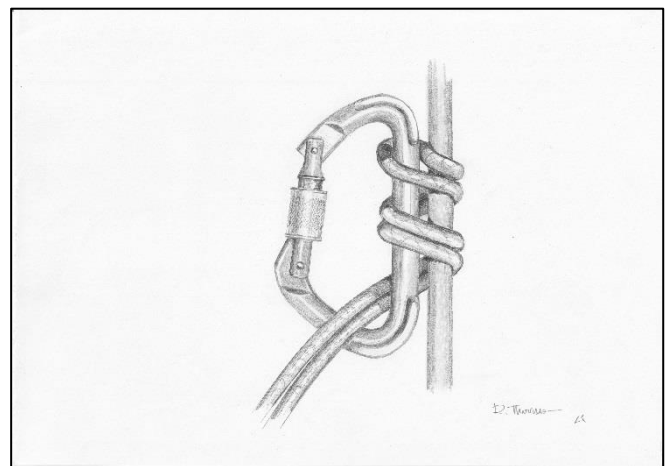


Figure 3 The Bachmann Knot

Mechanical ascenders had to be the way forward. At the time, gear and techniques applicable to caving seemed to be split between two pioneering regions, the Americans and the French.

¹ Thrun, R. 1973. Prusiking. (NSS, Huntsville Alabama.)

On this side of the Atlantic, Swiss made Jumar ascenders were familiar in the climbing world, but were expensive, and the cast body caused some concerns amongst the caving community considering taking this new-fangled Single Rope Technique (SRT) underground. The French caver, Ferdinand Petzl, made a mechanical ascender with a wrought alloy body. Unlike a similar device made by Clog, Petzl incorporated a safety catch rather than using the attaching krab to prevent accidental unclipping from the rope. This was followed by a handled jammer to compete with the Jumar. I invested in a couple of these along with a Whillans sit harness and made tentative forays into the likes of Manor Farm.

Traditionalists still criticised the slow ascent of prusiking, claiming it was quicker to climb a ladder. They had a point. The French actually started prusiking as early as the late 1950s using a method vaguely similar to the Texas one but with the foot loop ascender as the upper one. Such SRT usage was not particularly common but gained ascendancy - pardon the pun - when documented in 1973 by Jean-Claude Dobrilla and Georges Marbach. With no apparent irony, they called it the Frog system². In contrast to the French, the Americans favoured short step rope walking methods of prusiking. The National Speleological Society (NSS) even had a 'Vertical Section' and they produced a monthly magazine, 'Nylon Highway'. I say magazine, but at the time, for a couple of dollars a month, I was airmailed this Xeroxed pamphlet full of the latest innovations involving Americans going up and down ropes.

Ropewalking seemed to be the way to go. A couple of my caving friends bought themselves some ascenders made by Gibbs. It was a fast system alright. The Americans would hold prusik races at the NSS conventions, and invariably Gibbs ropewalking came out tops, Bill Stone being the first man to break the 30 second barrier for a 100' climb. But it had its drawbacks in real world caving. The cams were not sprung and needed a practised flick to get them to bite the rope, something some overcame with a strategically placed elastic band. When passing an obstacle, the ascender had to be removed from the rope. The early models had the body and the pin tied together but these weren't permanently attached to the cam, and so it was possible, mid manoeuvre, to drop bits. One of my caving mates was a mere 150' up the entrance of

Death's Head when a vital part plummeted to the bottom. I learnt a few new obscenities that day.

A similar ropewalking system, but using handled jammers instead, was developed by another American, Dick Mitchell. See Figure 4. This was the way I went. It involved a roller box mounted on a chest harness. There were two independent rollers in the box, one for the foot loops and one for the standing rope. Initial roller boxes were fiddly things with wing nuts to fasten them. It wasn't long though before a luxury model with swinging cheeks became available, the Neil Box³, and the system started to work really well, enough even to take the world speed record back from the Gibbs users.

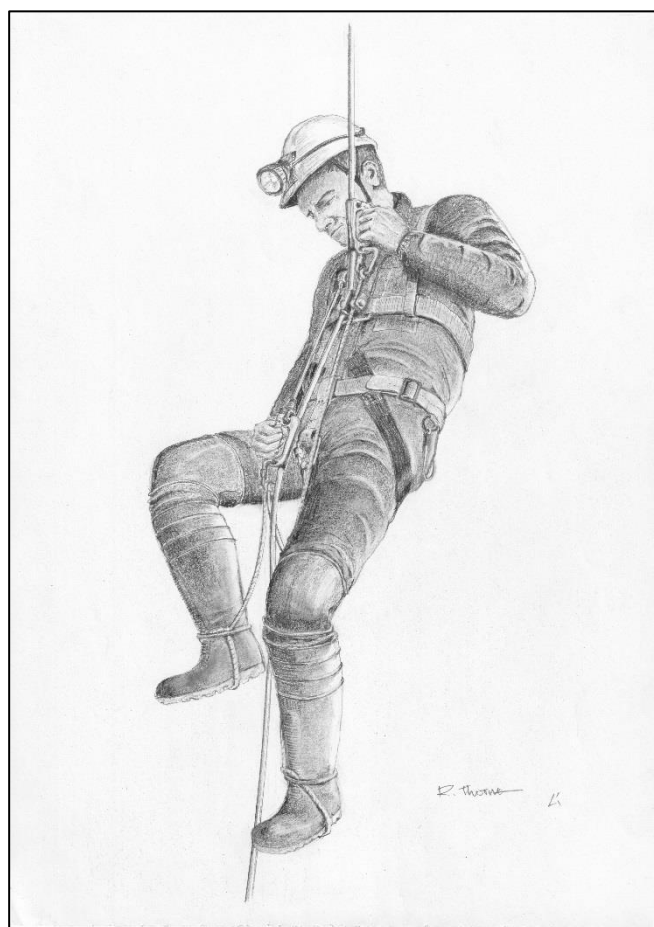


Figure 4 The world beating Mitchell System

The 1977 International Speleological Congress (ICS) was held in Sheffield, and there I was able to chat to the likes of the Australian SRT pioneer and author of 'Single Rope Techniques', Neil Montgomery,⁴ Wil Howie, inventor of many things SRT related, including the 'Howie strap' – a kind of alternative chest harness, Mike Cowlshaw with his 'Alternative Prusiking

² Dobrilla, J-C, Marbach, G. 1973. Techniques de la Spéléologie Alpine. (Speleo Projects.)

³ Cowlshaw, M. 1978 The Neil Chest Box. Descent 39 p37

⁴ Montgomery, N. 1977 Single Rope Techniques. (The Sydney Speleological Society)

System⁵, and Bob Thrun, who kindly signed my copy of his book.

I also met Kirk McGregor, the then holder of the world prusiking speed record and inventor of the floating cam. This was essentially a piece of elastic shock chord that was attached between the lower ascender and the climber's shoulder. As the foot was lifted, the elastic contracted, and the ascender lifted. Both hands could then be used to drive up the top ascender. The same technique could be applied to the Gibbs ropewalking set up too. Back in the day, I gave a more extended treatment to this subject in *Descent*.⁶ Suitably kitted, the deeper pots in Yorkshire could be knocked off with quite small teams, and compared to ladders, with a lot less effort. Rift Pot, Stream Passage, Flood Entrance, Rowten could all be done with small teams and a couple of tackle bags of rope. Gaping Ghyll main shaft was no longer a slog. Three of us did Black Shiver one afternoon and were out in plenty of time for the pub. Juniper became a regular favourite. SRT could really shrink pots.

Still problems persisted though. Tackling pitch heads was often a struggle particularly with anything mounted on the chest. I recall a friction belay around a tree overhanging the entrance shaft to Jingling. Absolutely bombproof, but a complete pig to get on and off the rope! In the days before cow's tails, some of us did use a safety cord complete with an additional jammer on the end to protect such manoeuvres, but it was the bulky roller box that stopped me getting through the squeeze at the top of Vulcan in Nick Pot. Some lateral thinker later suggested moving the roller box to the waist band of the sit harness, to give the so called Gossett system. It solved one problem for sure, and was perhaps better on broken, short pitches, but on free hangs I did find it a bit top heavy.

Ropes changed too. The hawser laid climbing ropes of the 70s had a tendency to twist and kink after an abseil, and quickly made way to kernmantle constructions. SRT required static ropes rather than elastic properties, so cavers raided the yachting shops for ropes by Marlow and the Super Braidline brand from Bridon. Pitch rigging for SRT at the time used more or less the same belays as ladders, although it was possible to use routes less favoured by Team Ladders, e.g. instead of the delights of Lower Long Churn, the bottom of Alum Pot could be reached more easily on ropes by doing the main shaft 'direttissima' as we say in Draycott.

Prusiking under waterfalls was not fun either – no 'tight line' from above – and rope abrasion was a big concern. Sundry scraps of carpet, bits of canvas fastened with Velcro and tied on with old bootlaces and split hose pipes were used for protection. A friend of mine had a narrow escape in Dale Head ascending the big pitch. Second man up, the sheath of the Super Braidline they were using cut through on a previously unseen flake of rock near the pitch head. The sheath, with the caver still attached, slid all the way to the bottom, his fall only arrested when the sheath bunched up against the knot tied at the bottom. It was then impossible to change to abseil as the bunched up rope wouldn't go through the descender. He was left with no choice but to prusik up remaining the core strands of the rope, and all in the full knowledge that somewhere above there was a razor sharp flake of rock doing its worst. A nervous prusik? Not half.^{7,8}

Such incidents led a group of us to invest in the only bespoke SRT rope we could find at the time. Imported from the USA, I loved the marketing strap line: 'If your life hangs by a thread, make sure it's Bluewater.' This 11mm rope had an extremely dense weave, making it very low stretch and very resistant to abrasion – a fabulously reassuring piece of kit. Handling? It was like trying to tie knots in a steel hawser! For expeditions, we sourced a cheaper alternative from Europe, Interalp, which was almost as good. Almost. Eventually, a choice of bespoke SRT ropes that we see today from the likes of Edelrid and Mammut became more widely available.

Over time, pitch rigging started to change too. Rope protection became passé, certainly in Europe. To avoid potential rub points and waterfalls, bolting was used. A traverse out from the pitch head, often quite exposed compared to the corresponding ladder belay, led to airy pitch heads, and subsequently, a series of re-belays and deviations whenever the rope came anywhere near the rock. One could now repeat one's favourite caves from a new perspective – largely it seemed, from the roof. This necessitated new knots too, and we were introduced to the delights of the now commonplace Alpine Butterfly and Bowline-on-the-Bight. One had to become really well practised in abseiling and prusiking past bolts and deviations.

And all this meant a change in prusiking set ups. Ropewalking and chest ascenders were built for speed, not the intricacies of tight pitch heads, re-belays and

⁵ Cowlshaw, M. 1977 APS: Another Prusiking System. *Descent* 36. p39-42

⁶ Thorne, N. 1979 The Floating Cam. *Descent* 42. P27- 31

⁷ Griffiths, G. 1976 Letter to the Editor. *Descent* 33. p48-49

⁸ Reckert, N. 1977 Letter to the Editor. *Descent* 35. p 51

the like often encountered in the UK. Not all pitches are like the entrance to Long Kin West or the alternative final in Juniper. To avoid much of the faff, the slow but sure versatility of the system used on the continent became preeminent. Prusiking meant the Frog system.

And that's pretty much the accepted norm nowadays. Although the Americans understandably still favour ropewalking for 'big pits', this side of the Atlantic little else is ever taught, it seems. A chest ascender from Petzl, the Croll, removable from the standing rope without unclipping from the neck cord, complimented the system nicely. Cow's tails provided protection at re-belays and changeovers. Andy Sparrow's 'Caving Manual'⁹ gives a good overview of the method as it stands today. SRT had come of age. Some things

survive the progress of technology though. I have been known to take with me on SRT trips... a toothbrush. Yep, and for cleaning one's teeth too. Seriously, there have been occasions on some exceptionally muddy pitches where the ascenders started to slip, and dental hygiene came to the rescue.

Although pretty well universal, I think systems like the Frog one will likely still evolve. I favour two independent foot loops rather than one big one that most seem to use. And chicken loops to keep at least one of the loops on seems a good idea to me. Finally, for those with a single foot loop, I have heard talk of adding an ankle ascender to the Frog set up to spread the work load and speed things up. Could work... Full circle, eh?

J'Rat Digging Award 2020 - Joan C Goddard

Because of Covid-19 restrictions, this year there was no traditional Digging Award evening at the Hunters' but the results were presented in a short video produced by the judges and others and included a summary of each of the featured caves – a good idea which made it more personal and interesting than an email announcement.

1. Many people will know by now that the Award was won by Grampian Speleological Society who discovered 740m of passage at Ashery Pot (Uamh na h-Aiserigh), a new cave identified last year in the Durness Limestone near Applecross but explored this year. This is their fourth win in twelve years! Photos show it has some excellent walking-size streamway and stunning formations.

2. Runner up this year is Wookey Hole where 420m of new passage has been explored and surveyed by "Various Diggers" (and divers). It's a long story - which will have been published in Descent 277 before you read this - so just a brief resume here. After the tourist tunnel from Chamber 9 to Chamber 20 was constructed in 2015, the possibility of engineering a dry connection to Wookey 24 became the next challenge. From Wookey 20, a steeply descending, draughting passage ended in a sumped muddy bedding plane (named Sump 23¾ as it was so close to Sump 24!) and it was thought a better survey and access upwards from Wookey 24 was more likely to succeed. The sump was later pushed towards Wookey 24 where, in July 2020, divers working upwards entered an extension

which was surveyed to lie less than 10m from the passage leading to Sump 23¾. So near, yet so far. . . . In 2017 attention had focussed on a terminal choke in Wookey 20 but it was a daunting prospect. Work continued through 2017-2020 until Covid Lockdown1 stopped play for a while. In Aug/Sept a dig at the end of Wookey 20 draughted strongly and on 15th September over 300m of impressive passage was entered, including a very large rift chamber which they named 'Land of Hope and Glory' as it was Battle of Britain Day. Then, on 29th October, a dry connection to Wookey 24 was finally achieved. Congratulations to all!

3. In third place is Stock Hill Mine Cave which is dug by the Cainhillites and has been extended by 250m this year – adding to the 638m discovered in 2019. It was first dug in 1991 by the BEC who cleared out a mine shaft which quickly led to natural cave. - according to his logbook entry J'Rat pronounced it "A Winner!". The dig was reinvestigated in 2016 and is now worked by an inter-club group which includes Mike Moxon. It contains a large chamber and a steeply inclined streamway which is being followed.

4. MCG came a little way behind, in fourth place, with 50m of new passage in Pearl Mine to add to the 293m which earned us second place in 2017. (Was it really that long ago?) The video showed photos of calcite formations and a sandstone sharpening stone in the chamber below the new bit (Biff Frith's Big Rift) as well as Tom Chapman bolt climbing it to a miners' hauling platform.

⁹ Sparrow, A. 2010. The Complete Caving Manual. (The Crowood Press.)

GB Cavern – James Wilfred Harrison

Mark Edwards, James Major and David Vidal 8/12/2020

We'd originally planned for a group of 6 but Miranda and Dave Lossi couldn't make it. We had also planned to go to Ladder Dig and Great Chamber but no spreaders in the kit store meant a change of plan. So, Devil's Elbow and a round trip was settled on. We went over in separate cars to keep distanced. On arrival James and Wilf commented that we hoped Mark had the key - he arrived asking "has anyone got the key?" and very sportingly volunteered to go back and get it. (My mistake, thanks Mark!). Although it was only 3C on Mendip with no wind it was not too cold to wait. When he returned an advance party of James and Wilf went ahead to open the gate. Good progress to the metal ladder at the junction to the Devil's Elbow route and at the top we stopped to look at the superb helictites, these might be some of the best on Mendip and well worth a deviation even if you're not doing the Devil's Elbow route.

Progress through Devil's Elbow was straightforward with a quick stop before the fixed rope to check we were ok on Italian Hitch tying. Since the rope is already

there, you don't need the handling which is mentioned in MU for this pitch. There were a few sections with an inch or two of water to crawl through, but it was all easily passable. A routine abseil (probably only about 3m) took us to the streamway and then it was a quick descent into the Gorge. More straightforward progress took us over the bridge into White Passage where we took a break and spent time admiring the formations - well worth a stop here at a point where it's more usual to just pass straight through. Then on to the Balcony via the Loop route and via the Oxbow to the bottom of Main Chamber. We climbed back out up the stream and waterfall - water levels are very low at the moment. We met a lone Wessex caver and stopped for a short chat and then headed out via the short route to the exit. A wind had come up by the time we exited so it was pretty chilly changing at the cars.

A great trip - just over 2 hours with some nice long stops to look at the scenery on the way. Thanks everyone! Sorry no photos as I took my fully charged camera, but it had no memory card in it....

Home Close Hole – Mike Moxon

28th April 2018 (from logbook 17)

Finally, been down to Sump 10 in Wigmore - it starts off with the Tea Shed and cage at the top of the 12m Engine Shaft, constructed of 3m wide piping, with a fixed ladder. The short horizontal crawls remind me of bigger versions of Battery Swallet, with conveyor belt to aid hauling, separated by three more pitches, adding up to another 20m of in situ ladders and a few climbing staples. This brings you down to Anniversary Rift, which is where Tony Audsley and crew are currently digging (normally can't go beyond this point due to fumes - not that many of the team hold out much hope for this, but the caving gets a lot harder after this). Survey down to the big pitch (digging log not been updated for 3 years): <http://www.thelog.org.uk/survey27DEC15.html>

Roz Simmonds and I were with Duncan Price and Max Fisher who were heading down to climb an aven in Wigmore, so we crawled onwards to the 23m pitch where we required SRT kit and abseiled into this truly impressive chamber. This only remains large for a short time (there is a dig in the opposite direction, but it's not currently being pursued), reducing to walking passage, then flat out crawling, next down a climb into a small streamway, left takes you to another dig, whilst right

reduces to crawling again (like the Canal in UFS, but still in conglomerate, kneepads definitely required - at least your suit gets one of several cleans!) The last crawl can be avoided by a wallow through liquid mud into Mud Hall, but it will be flooded if it's been wet.

Now you are in the far end of Young Bloods Inlet, which starts part way through sump 7 in Wigmore Swallet, and is a very impressive 15m high by 3-4m wide section of passage - a red version of Swildon's' streamway. Before reaching the main streamway, an electron ladder climb gives access to the Generation Game, a slick mud passage that bypasses sumps 8 and 9 (this was explored from the far end originally and has some nice mud formations), with another electron ladder dropping you at the end of a clear sump 9. More stomping passage, with a larger stream now, continues to where the others were climbing, but we carried on down some cascades and through a boulder choke to the "very wet" Slime Rift, shortly followed by what was the end when MU5 went to print, in another boulder choke. There are now two routes through this to a climb down to the end for non-divers.

Time to head back. Roz and I just made it back to the Hunters' before they closed after lunch. Duncan and Max hadn't expected to get back in time, but only just missed it having run out of bolts 5m or so short of the top. Fortunately, there are kit cleaning tubs on site. The current end in sump 11 is still headed towards Chewton Mendip, but must turn at some point, as the water has been traced to Cheddar (dive bottles are stashed in the

boulder choke before 10). Home Close was Tony Jarrett's last dig, having been opened up by JCB only a few days before he passed away. Photos of the ladder down to sump 9 and sump 9, Roz and Duncan in Wigmore and mud towers with bits of calcite on top are from today. Sketch surveys can be found in Wessex Journals 332 and 333, which can be downloaded from their website.

Sandford Hill Update - Mike Moxon

Following on from Ed's report on the re-opening of Pearl Mine and Tom's follow up in previous Newsletters (see refs), here's what's been going on for last couple of years. Regular diggers include Ed Waters, Mike Richardson, Martin Cross, Brian Snell, Keith Knight, Bill Chadwick, Tom Harrison, Graham Price and myself. Also featuring Shaft 120, Fern Mine, Sandford Levy and 2 new holes.

Firstly, back to 2016 when we SRT'ed Shaft 120 (the 4th hole in Saville Row, to east of Pearl Mine, was never 120ft deep - it's thought that the Sidcot School boys assumed their ladder rungs were 12 inches apart, when they were actually 9"! So, it's about 80ft deep, same as Pearl). Anyway, I discovered it wasn't actually blocked, as had been reported by others, and you could still get past the wedged tree trunk into lower passages. Tom mentioned previously that we'd had a go at hauling this in 2018, even moving the A frame across from Pearl, but the collapse in the lower shaft there necessitated the return of the frame to its previous position, where it has remained ever since. Another project we ought to get back to, although the shaft is so narrow that there's nowhere to hide whilst skips are being dragged out...

On the day of the J'Rat Digging Awards in late November 2017 (just after Ed's write up), the entrance of Pearl collapsed, blocking off all of our discoveries (we had found as much extra passage as had previously been known). We cleared this and fitted a pipe in December, even SRTing down - it's much easier on a ladder! In January 2018 we added a lid and finished filling in around the pipe (it was like walking on sphagnum moss for a while). August 2018 and the lower section of the shaft decided it had also had enough, as reported by Mick Norton, Martin Peck and Bill Chadwick in the newsgroup - suddenly the shaft continued below the 50ft level with a nicely ginged section, that had just been cleared when Tom reported in early 2019. All the Mine is accessible again, although you still can't get directly from Lower East to Lower West (you have to go back up through the Pension Pot).

Due to the latter collapse in Pearl it wasn't until August 2019, when not enough diggers turned up for Pearl, that we returned to Fern Mine, putting a new A frame over it (this being one of the options Ed had suggested at the end of his article, as it appears to be directly above a side shaft in the Levy that he and Buddy were digging from below, but has since collapsed. Tom also mentioned that we had obliterated the boulder covering it somewhat earlier - the other option being the opening up of the top of Hancock's Shaft in Sandford Levy, which was discounted when we realised quite how much cement would be required to secure the miners' ginging [dry stone walling going up 80ft, with disintegrated twigs in support] - there is now a sign at the bottom of the shaft suggesting it's not a sensible ascent, unless you want a premature burial). We do still need to investigate below the apparent winch attachment points left by miners in Upper and Lower East Passages.

Digging in Fern was generally confined to members' weekends until the start of Lockdown, when it ceased. We resumed in summer 2020, trying to get 2 trips a month in compensation, and we started to scaffold the shaft in July (this was helped by the fact that Mendip Outdoor Pursuits opened their campsite up to the public during the summer - it's normally just private groups - and they left tables and BBQs, one of each of which made their way up to the dig). We've particularly enjoyed black pudding and apple sausages (thanks Ed and once in your absence Tom) most times since, before retiring to the Crown in Churchill for Bath Gem (obvs). Martin Cross worked on improvements to the hauling skips throughout this period, producing better versions each time.

In August the fencing that had previously been moved from Pearl to Fern was finally erected (and there was an MCG tourist trip down Pearl - 8th Aug 2020 trip report in logbook 17) and Martin added some of the ex-fence posts to the soft ground in his haul route (keeping up his role as Eeyore). Near the end of the month Mike R. took Julie and Eva down Pearl (22nd Aug report in logbook) and by the start of September

Martin's elbow had ballooned and Graham couldn't dig, so the team was somewhat depleted, but Nicky came along to haul, and Dan made the tea. The following weekend Ed attached a platform to the bottom of the extended fixed ladder (courtesy of Biff's yard) and some safety bolts in the one solid wall, as we no longer trusted the floor. A lot of material came from the natural alcove to the north where there were two badger skeletons.

During this period we used up most of our scaffolding, Biff's heavy duty grill and the scaff joints provided by a contact on UK Caving, whilst Graham cemented in yet more hanging death, and Martin did a sterling job of doing the majority of skip hauling and carrying heavy loads from the cars (the "donkey" work - including mixing the sand and cement, as Graham had trained him well in consistency, as well as bringing the catering box). Tom Conolly from Mendip Outdoor Pursuits joined us as a valued chef (and odd jobs man/entertainer). At the end of October Fern went from 20 to 50ft deep (although ending less than 30ft the same day as falling rocks from the alcove blocked the shaft). Unfortunately, we were tiered out at start of November, with North Somerset going into Tier 3 and a padlock was put onto the entrance grills to prevent anyone else accidentally discovering the ongoing shaft (it wouldn't have been good for them).

Meanwhile, after finding a lot of new passage in Wookey, where Tom Chapman had bolted up the high rift (see my other report), he joined me to finally climb past the candle soot marks and stemple pockets (where T'Owd Man had wedged wood across the passage to stand on) to the miners' hauling platform in the roof of Biff Frith's Big Rift (BFBR - west end of Pearl). A somewhat nasty soft band of rock preceded the squeeze through into the rift above, where 150ft of new rift passage continues above the Big Rift (see sketch survey), ending with a draught, dead moths and live spiders. We left the rope in situ (etrier is useful on lower bolt) and there are calcite and mud formations, pick marks and ochre to be seen. I named this Biff Frith's Mid Rift (BFMR) about which his wife Julie commented "that is wonderful, how great to hear that today".

In mid-November 2020 Dan Thorne of Gagendor CC and I hauled the pokey stick out of the entrance of Pearl, it had an impressive ginger beard of growth (and rescued Julie's abandoned water bottle). We also moved the scaff bar from BFBR up into BFMR and used it to bridge the traverse (ideally this still needs bolts for

a safety line) that we had tiptoed across on the first visit - Tom had also climbed up into the first ascending passage, to a dead end with pick marks, where the rope ends. We then started to dig the apparent surface shaft at the end and discovered a 2m cross rift heading north. At the end of the month I had another poke at the shaft with Leonie, but it wasn't until the start of December that Dan T. and I caused an avalanche that continued whilst we ran away (we had also abseiled off the scaff bar to discover another 100ft of passage below the traverse, with a short alcove in left hand wall, ending in a backfilled pit and a hole going up that had been filled from above and beyond the known passage).

A return with Dan T. the following week showed the avalanche had completely filled the end of the passage, so we cleared the slump to show an igloo like dome of presumed capping stones (6ft high by 3ft wide and 6ft long), but more surface earth that is likely to collapse if we attempt to dig it. In between these trips we also visited Sandford Levy, for a less muddy change of scene, and removed the aluminium hangers from Second Crossroads (as they were going furry), along with a couple of steel krabs and one maillon that were being cut through on the SRT lines at First Crossroads. We also took a builders' ladder into the right hand passage at First Crossroads and added the iron drill-drive bar (that had been used to bridge entrance at Pearl, then Fern) to top pipe and secured a rope around them which is tucked in at the limit of (most people's) reach.

Being bored and close to the hill, at the start of November Tom Conolly and I opened up 2 more holes on the rift that is just downhill from Ellis' Wonder (a fenced 7m shaft, that was reported originally to be 13m deep, between Saville Row and the ski slope). They look very like the top of Pearl, although no haul grooves yet, but there is a lot of calcite either side and lumps of ochre in fill. These have now been fenced and the eastern one (named Lockdown Hole) has the old signboards over it, with digging kit underneath, whilst the western is open (Spelobe Hole), neither are more than a few feet deep. In December I also visited most of the other holes mentioned in my Miner Tour article with Chris Barrington - we found 6 Newts still at the bottom of King Mine's entrance shaft, which have been there for a number of years now (there could have been more amongst the leaf litter, as that's not the highest number I've seen, but you do need to be careful not to stand on them).

References (most recent first):

In the Mid Rift by Mike Moxon in Descent (277) Dec 2020/Jan 2021 p.14

Pearls of Wisdom by Tom Harrison in MCG News 384 Digging Round-up, Mar 2019

Pearl Mine Revisited by Ed Waters in MCG News 382 with survey, Nov 2017

Sandford Hill (A Brief History of Pearl Mine; starting to dig it and Radio-locating Hancock's Shaft) by Tom Harrison in MCG News 380 with surveys, Sep 2016

Sandford Levy: Further Progress (Hancock's Shaft and TH Chamber) by Ed Waters in MCG News 379, Feb 2016

A Mine Ignored and Underappreciated: A Significant Discovery in Sandford Levy by Ed Waters in MCG News 378, Sep 2015

A Tour of the Miner (sic) Sites of Sandford Hill by Mike Moxon in MCG News 375, Oct 2014

Further references can be found in the above cited articles.

Wookey – Looky – See - Mike Moxon

In November 2017 I joined the Hallowe'en diggers on their regular Thursday evening as they started on "Another Emotional Journey". I enjoyed the banter so much that I returned the following week (although not for the Saturday morning sessions as well). On my 3rd trip, Vince reported:

"Happily digging away, a hole appeared in the floor, open space, a draught. Jon had a look, Tav came to have a look, interesting. Unfortunately, we had re-connected to a dig at the bottom of the 'lower' series that contains Nick's pit prop, another leg to the 'round trip'. This outcome was not unexpected. That said, the dig was never finished and, the fissure/rift still need to be followed. As ever, there is plenty of stuff to keep us occupied for a long time yet!"

Digging got very sloppy during December to February, whilst I did another 7 trips (the others generally doing double that, including Saturdays), before Vince decided to take another look-see at Wookey on Thursdays from mid Feb 2018:

"Good to have a project in mind and make a return to the quest in Wookey 20. Duncan and Max Fisher, on a diving trip into 24, have followed a dry rift passage for c.10m to a constriction, beyond, the rift appears to continue. They plan to return with caving kit and pursue the rift further.

On the way-up through Wookey 20, it was noticeable that there was plenty of water after the recent wet weather. We were not surprised to find that the 'sand dig' was occupied by a deep pool of water. We collected the tools and equipment required for the mission and made our way to the descending rift that leads to Sump twenty-three and three-quarters, passing a group from Cheddar Caving Group for a second time.

A short drop down the rift, we arrived at the site of interest, a small alcove we had previously backfilled while widening the rift to the sump, we had commented at the time that, "we will probably be digging this all-out in a couple of years", and so we are. We made a small dimple in the spoil stash but, all too soon, it was time to vacate the cave. We shall return."

Next week, Vince noted: "Mike M and myself dropped further down the route to Sump 23.75 to have a quick look at another potential lead, where a faint air current could be felt. This will be left on the back-burner for the while. We returned, up the climbs, to re-join the rest of the team clearing the alcove. Beyond the alcove is a narrow 'draughting' rift, it is this we are trying to regain access to."

The first week in March we missed due to snow, then carried on with clearing the spoil. Mid-March and Leonie came for a look as well, visiting the Sand Dig with Vince (which was still flooded), before they returned to help the rest of us. The following 3 weeks over Easter I spent kayaking / skiing in Scotland (2) and caving in Yorkshire (1). Photo of Sand Dig in 2018.



Mike M, Duncan, Nick and Tav, – Vince Simmonds

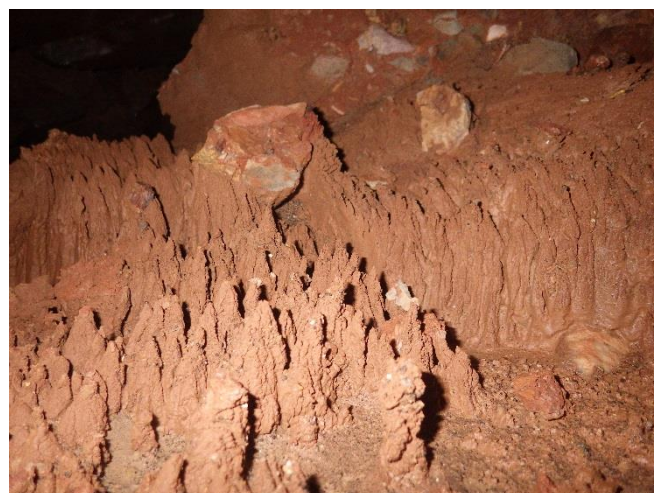
Mid-April and Claire Cohen and Ray Deasy joined us for a session, so Vince and Nick went to check on Sand Dig, which was now dry but had slumped, so they started to tidy up and we all headed there the following Thursday. Digging down in the silt continued through the summer, with a quick visit for me to see Wookey 19 one evening in May with Tav and Jon, until mid-October 2018 when the dig flooded again, although it had drained away by the next week. Earlier Nick had started digging sideways into an alcove on the right and after Alex had cleared the slop in the bottom (too much complaining from the bucket emptiers), Vince continued in the drier material, through some impressive stratification.

It kept raining through November, but the dig was still dry until the end of the month, when slumping and a large slab in the roof put us off – the slab being disposed of in December and used for walling / stepping stones in the silt during January. I was around during February but had a detached retina at the end of the month, so missed several sessions until returning at the start of April 2019. The large slab had been on top of the silt, so removal gave us some closer stacking space and the option of digging immediately up through the alcove or further to the right – we proceeded with both, when numbers allowed.

June saw the wall at the end undercutting, but also a few sessions missed due to key holders not being available and one week a school prom! July I mostly spent sea kayaking in Greenland. The Belgians joined me and Vince at start of August and the new dumping space came into use from then. I re-pulled an old hamstring injury in September, so was out again for a while, returning mid-October, when the cave was in flood, so we had a look around the Show cave section. At the start of December, no other diggers were available, so check out Tanya's write up in our online logbook. The dig was on and off over this period due to water levels until we were able to tidy up in January 2020 and could see space over the mud again by the end of the month (in between we also returned to Hallowe'en, see last paragraph).

The next week we were into a new chamber 15m long by 7m high (Colston Hall, with plenty of stacking space!), which was photographed and surveyed at the start of February, the top end of this had a rift that probably connects back to Wookey 20 before the Sand Dig, whilst under the back wall is an impassable link to the right hand dig in the alcove (that was subsequently backfilled from below). We protected the small mud towers near the lower end of the chamber and commenced digging down in the floor there, until mid-

March, when a pandemic got in the way (There were even a few Zoom meetings during April).



Mud in Colston Hall

Digging started up again at end of May, with the others going on Tuesdays as well as Thursdays during the summer, to try to make up lost ground (Jon and I mostly continued at Cutler's on Tuesdays), with the pit bottoming out at the start of August 2020. We tried various other small holes on either side of the chamber (the one on the left later flooding as it channelled the water running along that wall) and the first on the right being too narrow. However, nearer the pit was a draughting undercut which by the end of the month provided a standing space and a boulder blockage beyond... This dig didn't require a full team, so some returned to breaking rock at the lower spoil heap above 23 and $\frac{3}{4}$, into September (even after the next paragraph).

Mid-September and the breakthrough came at the end of a Tuesday session, so I was at Cutler's, but got to see the 300m+ of the mightily impressive Land of Hope and Glory on the Thursday. It was surveyed over the next couple of evenings by Duncan and Tav, and Mark Burkey was invited for a photo day at the end of the month. Start of October and Max Fisher and Tom Chapman bolt climbed the walls in the main rift to 25m of continuation in the roof and to a too narrow tube that looked like it was descending back to the floor of the rift at the top end of passage. The rest of the team dug a mud choked pot at the bottom of the first rift that the breakthrough had reached, but it flooded the following week (the notorious Swildon's in flood weekend, this dig also pinched out soon afterwards) – Sand Dig being waist deep on the Tuesday (it had been over 3m during the weekend), but we soldiered through for a tourist trip that included Leonie, Estelle Sandford, James Begley and Dave Walker.

More Photos inside front cover.

So the following week we were clearing silt from Sand Dig again (one of the spoil heaps had collapsed) and it was dumped on the original pile, whilst Vince was at 23 and ¾ talking to the divers on the other side of the constriction (see Duncan's Dry to 24 write up for more details on their end of the exploration and the Wookey book for prior to that). Two weeks later and we got through into Beginner's Luck in Wookey 24, reaching Sting Corner in the main streamway (where Nick swam across to the camp) and a strenuous return trip - unfortunately Tav and Jon were not able to join us that evening and coronavirus interfered with visits again. Tav, Roz and Tom Chapman did finally get to see 24 on the 23rd December, with higher water levels necessitating the rigging of a ladder up into, and back down from, the roof tube bypassing Sting Corner, so most of us got to see the other end of the passages - and at the moment that's where we rest.

Usual suspects – Vince Simmonds, Robin (Tav) Taviner, Nick Hawkes, Graham (Jake) Johnson, Jonathon Riley and Duncan Price with regular interference by Roz Simmonds, Alex Gee, Matt Tuck and Paul (Brockers) Brock.

REFS (all include surveys and photos):

Frost and Ice at Hallowe'en by Vince Simmonds in Descent (265) Dec 2018/Jan 2019 p.42-43

Land of Hope and Glory by Vince Simmonds in Descent (277) Dec 2020/Jan 2021 p.26-29

Land of Hope and Glory by Duncan Price in Chelsea SS News (62) 7-9 Sep 2020 p.68-71, front and back cover pics

Wookey Hole: Dry to 24 by Duncan Price in Chelsea SS News (62) 10-12 Dec 2020 p.97-101

Wookey Hole: 75 Years of Cave Diving and Exploration by Jim Hanwell, Duncan Price and Richard Witcombe. Cave Diving Group book 2010

Thrupe Lane Swallet to Hobnail Hole – Mark Edwards

It was an overcast mild day in autumn with no rain forecast. Tim Ball and I met at Thrupe Lane for the Thrupe-Hobnail pull-through trip. There was a stream flowing of about 15cm depth, the entrance grill was guarded by a black bin liner and various planks which restrained an accumulation of leaf litter and sticks which I cleared. We then took a short ladder into Hobnail Hole to rig the pitch for our return.

Hobnail Hole is quite vertical in nature, with knarley jagged chert encrusted walls, with the odd crinoid protruding like some sort of freeze framed geology lesson. Shortly the character changes to yellow sculpted and fluted aragonite and the pitch above King Cobble Hall is reached. We rig the ladder and return. Apart from a few drips its dry - that is about to change!

When Tim rigged Thrupe entrance, there was about 3 or 4 cms of water flowing over the edge. This transformed into a cascading spray which obscured visibility to just below my waist as I abseiled down. At the bottom I was slower than I would have liked getting off the rope as the deluge pounded down on my head.

Meanwhile, in Hallowe'en there was "An Unexpected Development" on 4th August 2018 at the end of "Another Emotional Journey", with an impressive rift of shattered calcite found, that I got to see on the 8th (50m of new passage), with a possible dig at the lower end (that eventually choked out in solid calcite). Trips to this section are avoided in the winter, so mud doesn't get dragged through onto the formations. Further digging has been in the opposite direction from the entrance, in either the Cold, Gnarly North, which ends in a narrow calcited rift, or the Soft South (depending on numbers and commitment – the North involving a long series of hauls and crawling through a large puddle). This has mostly been on Saturdays (so without me), although we did a few sessions in October / November 2019, whilst flooded out of Wookey.

Then off down the narrow rifty resounding Ferret Run, adrenalin rising, this was quite sporting! We rigged the pull-through rope at the top of Perseverance Pot while I sat in relative dryness and watched the tumbling water follow our rope down the narrow rifty 20 m drop. We discussed communication. Tim had a whistle he would blow when he reached the bottom and he promptly disappeared, I faintly heard "rope free", and the rope was slack, so I followed. It was wet and I couldn't see much. I stopped at the perch just above the bottom, which is the best point to pull the rope, feeling at this point like a very bedraggled bell ringer, there was quite a bit of resistance. I took the end of the rope and went through Cowsh Crawl to escape the water, then bagged the rope as Tim followed easing its progress.

Quick visit to Marble Stream Way with Bladder emptying into Atlas Pot, then back to Butts chamber and Hobnail Hole. King Cobble Hall is quickly reached, and the ladder was climbed with care, there is a little squeeze at the pitch head by the in situ tat and rope. Exit, a fine trip! 1.5 hours

Cottage Improvements – Jason Kirby

This is an update on work done at the hut over the last couple of weeks so I'll start with what will probably make the biggest difference.

Double glazed windows and new back doors are in and it has made a significant difference to the look and feel of the cottage. Temperatures outside are -2°C and inside is very comfortable and warm. The whole of the cottage is now double glazed. Many of the old windows and doors that had not already been replaced were rotten beyond repair. A local company from Cheddar was used to install the windows (zero maintenance uPVC) and doors.



New Window in the lounge

The stove has been upgraded with a new lining of fire bricks and a new flue to boot. This has done two things, the fire itself holds heat better and it burns more efficiently so less wood used. It draws better due to the improved air flow thanks to the flue and down pipe that are now installed and should most definitely be a bit safer too. The new windows include vents to ensure an adequate air supply for the stove.

My next job was a preventative measure to deal with mould growing on the outer wall of the Lounge. After thoroughly sanding and preparing the wall, a sealing paint was applied to prevent any return of mould. The

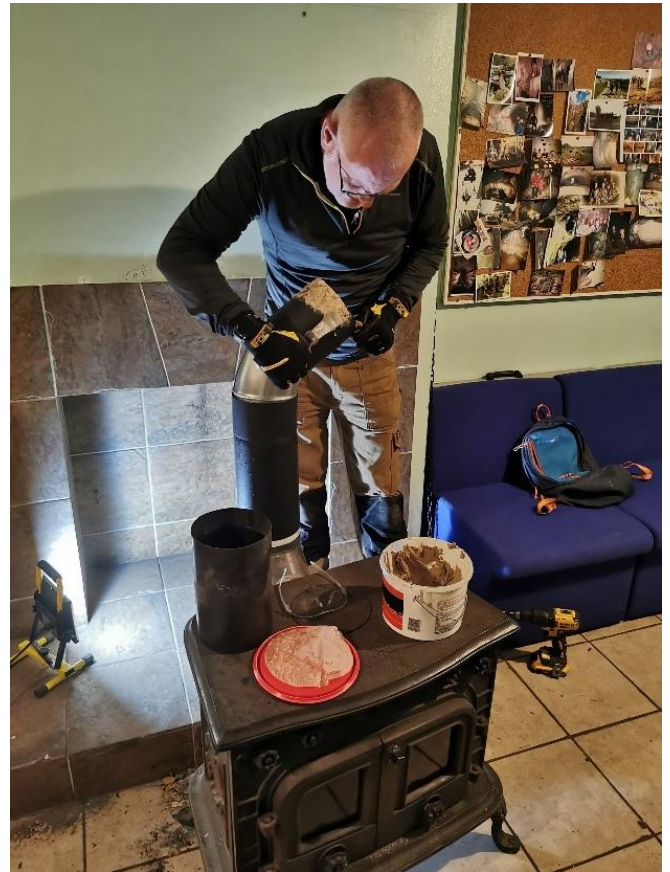


Photo Mark Edwards

mould was probably due to the way we had the lounge arranged with seats lined up against the outside wall and wet wood in crates under them. Once that treatment was done, it made sense to fill and sand ready for painting. As I had a full tub of white paint, we made the decision to paint the lounge ceiling and walls white to get us started. Some colour can be applied later when the membership has decided on a suitable shade. When members are able to return, they can help with the redecoration of the upstairs.

We have moved the kit room outside in to the new shed. The tackle store section of the new shed has been lined with steel mesh and boarded over for security. The access system is being extended so you can still swipe in to get kit out and back again. This is good for Covid security, as tackle can be accessed without going into the main building.

A thing I'm not so sure has been a success is the covering the drainage channel drain out the back. Bill had an idea last year to use some old scrap to make a cover and although this was a good use of scrap, it's not aesthetically pleasing so I'll put that down as work in progress.

As it is such a long time since we have been able to hold a working weekend, there have been lots of jobs that

needed to be done to prevent any damage to our hut such as gutters and drain clearances and clearing leaves off the drive. I have attended to them all!

We plan to do a big tidy up outside and then work on converting the old tackle store to a shower and toilet. Russ and I will hopefully make a start on that soon.

It has been nice to get on and sort stuff out. It demonstrates the committee's vision for a better future at MCG for all members to enjoy.

All this has been possible thanks to help from Mark Edwards and James Wilf and my inability to do nothing sat at home. So, thanks to MCG for giving me the opportunity to do something productive.

The Ardèche and Gard 2016 - Richard M Carey

Andrea Carey, Jude and Adrian Vanderplank, Mark Le Poidevin and Clive Westlake

All photos Clive Westlake

We took the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to Le Havre spending the night in a cabin on board to arrive at 8.30am the next day. It was a long drive of over 500 miles to our campsite at Camping La Goule near Vagnas in Ardèche Méridionale but the promise of an abundance of formations was too good to miss.

We started off with La Grotte Estevan. A short 6m entrance pitch, some sporting crawls leading to La Grotte Babette complete with spectacular helictites and stal. Our next visit was to a show cave La Grotte de la Cocalière again with copious formations.

The next day we were joined by Rich Marlow and Mark Le Poidevin and we went to Aven des Pèbres. Rigging was awkward with toboggan runs but the final pitch was vertical entering a large chamber with huge columns (see back page). The air quality was not very good especially at the deepest point.

The next day we went to Grotte de Sanhilac. This was mostly crawling but had some nice gypsum flowers. Our visit to Event de Peyrejal nearly turned into a disaster. When we opened the lid there was a draught blowing out of the cave so we thought we would be ok. However, we had misunderstood the rigging topo and the rope was too short for the 2nd pitch. We re-rigged the entrance shaft and arrived at the top of the 3rd pitch. Looking up I noticed that there was a rub point and decided to ascend to resolve the situation. This is when we realised that the air leaving the cave didn't exactly have much oxygen in it as I became breathless just putting my Pantin(g) on. I'm not entirely sure how long it took to ascend the 10m, but I felt like a fish out of water as I just couldn't get enough air. I called to Rich to return and he had the same difficulties, probably worse as he had been exposed longer. The strange thing was, it was ok until you tried to do anything.

The next day we went to Aven de Noël and when we arrived to collect the key, we were warned about the CO2 levels (we already knew!). I rigged the entrance

90m pitch which although narrow at the top bells out into a fine chamber. The plan was to take photographs, but my inner canary hadn't really recovered from the day before and sounded the alarm before we got to the prettier bit. Once out of the chamber I felt fine.

A rest day was decided, and we went to Caverne de Pont D'Arc, a show cave replica of Grotte Chauvet. The attention to detail, (down to intricate crystalline gour pools) was fantastic and unless you looked up in the ceiling, where the scaffolding was you would not have known it wasn't real.



Helictite - Grotte de la Toussaint

Our next trip was a visit to La Grotte de la Toussaint. This is a leader cave as the formations are super spectacular, although our guides Manu and Cecile pretty much left us to our own devices as they were also taking photos. We also went to Grotte de Chasserou with two short pitches to the main chamber with magnificent columns. Our final visit was Aven D'Ornac, another show cave but also with spectacular formations. The Ardèche is full of caves with spectacular formations and are mostly dry. The only concern was the air quality. Maybe July wasn't the best time to visit. (More photos inside back cover)

Stoke Lane Slocker – Nicky Pearce

Christopher Pearce, Mike Kousiounis (Kushy) and Gareth Farrow 20/8/20

We first walked to the entrance to see what the stream level was, Christopher removed some of the debris which quickly lowered the level though didn't make the entrance look any appealing. We changed and then returned to the usual chat to passers-by of what we were doing while their dogs pee into the stream. Having a moment to psyche ourselves we dived into the best bit of the cave, a slide of smooth rocks into the entrance, quickly followed by a series of hands and knees/flat out crawls in water. Generally, the route is straight forward though not necessarily following the stream and one crucial turning is marked by a cairn of rock which Gareth wanted to knock over until it was pointed out that he may need it later.

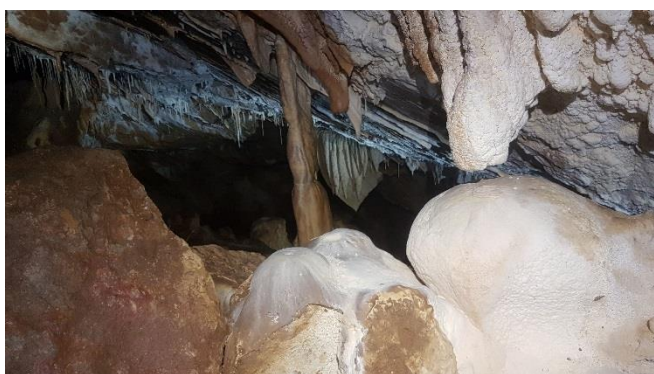


Photo Gareth Farrow

Now I admit I was concerned about this cave and while for many it is the sump, for me it was the Nutmeg Grater squeeze. Even though I know someone who messed up the sump coming back and went instead in to a 30ft slot (underwater), fortunately at that time there was an air gap and turn around space. At the time he returned to his fellow cavers, who were expecting to write his epitaph. On this occasion, I watched Gareth tackle the squeeze initially on his side and as the rock drew in, he turned upwards and after a few moments wriggle was through. Leaving it to me, now faced by a seemingly shrinking space is not my favourite idea, so I dived in making many noises, the trick to the squeeze as you think it gets too small is to turn and bend upwards towards the hidden space. It also helps if you breathe out- thankyou Mike. My dear son then shoots through commenting that he was exhausted watching me go through with dramatic agreement from the others and a suitable glare from me. Quickly followed by a duck which was also a trifle snug resulting in my face being mostly covered in water, as typically the limited space was at the bottom of the duck. I can

understand why for many the sump is the worst bit, as the entrance passage is small, coffin like and the sump actually bends left. We were advised to put our feet through, and we were off. The cave instantly changes character from a new small raw stream passage to a much older, smooth larger passage with initially mostly hands and knees crawl though soon develops into walking passage. I found the first of the pretty chambers where there was plenty of pretties, I especially like the chrysanthemum star bursts and the peach bloom on the flow stone. We then explored a passage which Christopher felt was the way on. After a loud grumble from me that I had enough of squeezes we returned to the main passage, the party climbed a dodgy handline/boulder chock to a pretty chamber, I know it was pretty as Gareth stopped to take several pictures.

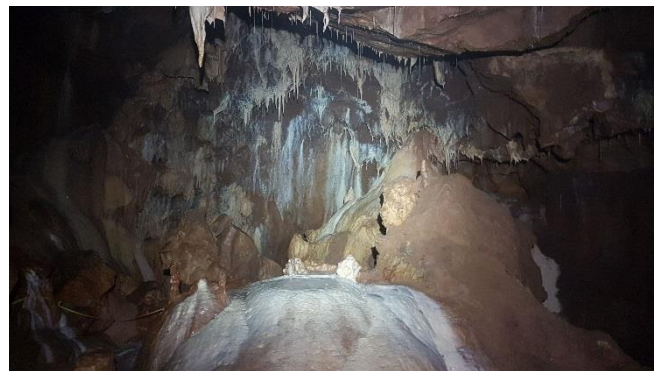


Photo Gareth Farrow

On the return we soon returned to the sump. Mike leading, followed by Gareth and then me. I felt very calm and soon realised the sump leads you slightly to the left, while the lead rope pulls you to bend at right angles to the right. I popped up to see Mike filling the limited the space (checking we were coming through and not trying to go into the shelf, though Christopher thought about it). Back through the duck and fortunately this way round gravity helped me in the squeeze, back along the passage. Unsurprisingly Gareth tried to climb over the cairn of rocks and go the wrong way, quickly corrected, we left. When I got to the entrance I was greeted by a mischievous Gareth and Mike who has blocked the entry of water to the cave. Once I was free, they let the blockage go to allow a rushing of water through and a grumble soon resulted from a wet Christopher below. An eventful trip?

COOPER'S HOLE – Joan C Goddard

Just before Christmas 2020 Mike Moxon posted that he had found a copy of the Time Team's book "The Ultimate Time Team Companion" which contained a two-page piece on their 1999 dig at Cooper's Hole. Mike asked on MCG google groups "*so who was our team?*". Here's what I have found out.

Based on entries in newsletters, journals and Logbooks 1, 2 and 3 the 'team' seems to have included anyone who was around and wanted to help. The identities of individuals were not always recorded, especially guest groups such as scouts. My best estimate is that 16 members and prospective members dug in Cooper's Hole only once, 28 dug between 2 and 9 times and 10 dug between 10 and 24 times. (Malcolm Cotter, Arthur Cox, Jack Green and David Mitchell top the list, with Robbie Charnock, Paul Dye, Pete Goddard, Simon Knight, Don Searle and Richard Woollacott also featuring regularly).

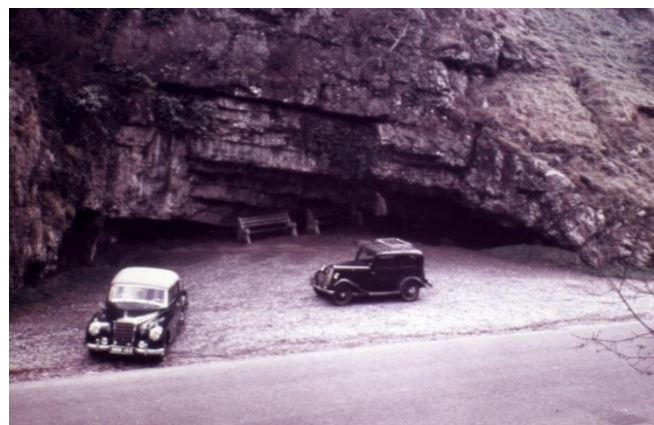
In 1959 MCG had 26 paid-up members and about a dozen more who were showing interest in joining.

Brief History: There is little doubt that a fair-sized cavern in Cheddar Gorge could be entered during the Middle Ages. The descriptions of "Cheder Hole" in "Historia Anglorum" by Henry of Huntingdon, 1125-1130, and in Chapter 24 'Marvels of England' by John Hooker, in "Description of Britaine, 1568", by Holinshed, refer to a substantial cave. No cave currently found in Cheddar Gorge fits the descriptions given but H. E. Balch in "Mendip – Cheddar, its Gorge and Caves", 1947, suggested that Cooper's Hole could be the remains of the entrance.

In 1931-32 R. F. Parry supervised an excavation in the entrance chamber for the Marquis of Bath. According to H. E. Balch the excavated sediments suggested that when lead working was carried on at Charterhouse and open-hearth smelting was in operation, from time-to-time great floods swept down the Gorge, bringing down sand, slime and charcoal that nearly blocked the cave. Balch recorded that before the roads were tarred, rainwater which had picked up limestone dust from quarries in the Gorge, flowed into Cooper's and reappeared at the spring-head with the characteristic white colour. This he held to be proof that it is the route to the hidden river . . .

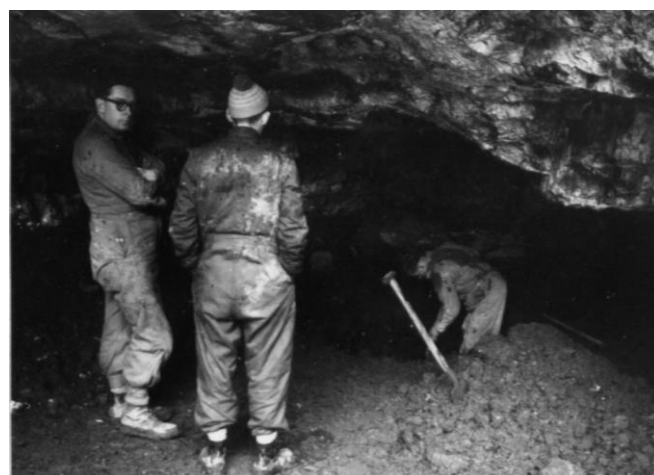
MCG's involvement: On 8th March 1959 Richard Woollacott, MCG's Hon. Secretary, was given permission by the Marquess of Bath for MCG to dig Cooper's Hole. Excavation started the following weekend when Richard, Malcolm Cotter, Brian Cheney,

Margaret Openshaw and Martin Adams dug a SSW trending trench 6ft x 2ft x 4ft (1.8x0.6x1.2m) deep. The first filling to come out was tin cans and broken bottles. Then a 3in layer of fine sand followed by earth. At the bottom was clay. A fortnight later, at Easter Weekend, digging was continued in earnest. The trial trench had partially collapsed so it was decided to dig a ramp angled at some 20 degrees to the road level.



8/3/1959 Meeting between Marquess of Bath and Richard Woollacott (R Woollacott Collection)

The clay, earth, tins and broken glass were brought out on a sledge which Tony Crawford had constructed. This was pulled up in two ways, either by having several people pulling on a rope attached to the sledge or by having the rope through a pulley fixed to the entrance wall and attached to the front of Tony's van which was then driven forward. The trench progressed quickly, and we were soon below ground level. About ten feet (3m) from the surface the soil was very fine and gritty.



14/3/1959 1st Weekend – Brian Cheney, Martin Adams and Richard Woollacott (M Cotter Collection)

Below the layer of gritty earth was a thick layer of brown tenacious clay in which were numerous small

pellets of black carbon presumably from the Charterhouse lead mines. In this clay we found bones, pottery and what we first thought were limestone axe heads but subsequently found were only natural stone chips. The bones were examined by Professor Sutcliffe of the Natural History Museum who identified them as modern! We had much better luck with the pottery. This was taken to the British Museum where it was identified as Iron Age B from about 1 AD. It consisted of several small pieces of black earthenware which had at one time formed the base, sides and rim of several pots. The pieces of rim were decorated with whirls and circles. All the pottery has been donated to Gough's Museum. The logbook entry mentions an axe-head and a fireplace, but neither were mentioned in Robbie Charnock's 1960 article.



Pete Goddard, Don Searle and unknown
(R Charnock Collection)

In the late spring and early summer 1959 we had a great deal of rain and were obliged to bail out two or three feet (0.6-0.9m) of water before we could carry on digging. On one occasion we went to Cheddar Fire Station to enquire about a pump, but they could not help; apparently unless they had first put the water there, they could not pump it out. However, they suggested Maunders the Builders who lent us a high-speed sludge pump which emptied the dig in record time. On other occasions we used large biscuit tins which we found; the water being poured discretely down the Gorge to the annoyance of the car park attendant.

In May we came to a rock wall in front of us and so we progressed along this wall where, at regular intervals, we found small curtains of calcite which had formed on the roof and wall. Soon we came to a calcite floor which reduced our head height to four feet (1.2m). The tunnel continued forward in a layer of tenacious clay, the roof and floor remaining very nearly parallel to each other.

At the onset the Marquess had said that we could dump our 'spoils' in the entrance to Cooper's and this

we did, but by the end of May the whole of the entrance was practically full. We had also obtained permission from the National Trust to dump clay *etc.*, on the other side of the Gorge but at Whitsuntide the Marquess inspected our progress at Cooper's and said that as the entrance now looked rather unsightly, he would arrange for the removal of the clay and would make the level of the entrance the same as our trench. This operation was carried out in July and immediately we started to fill the entrance in with more debris.

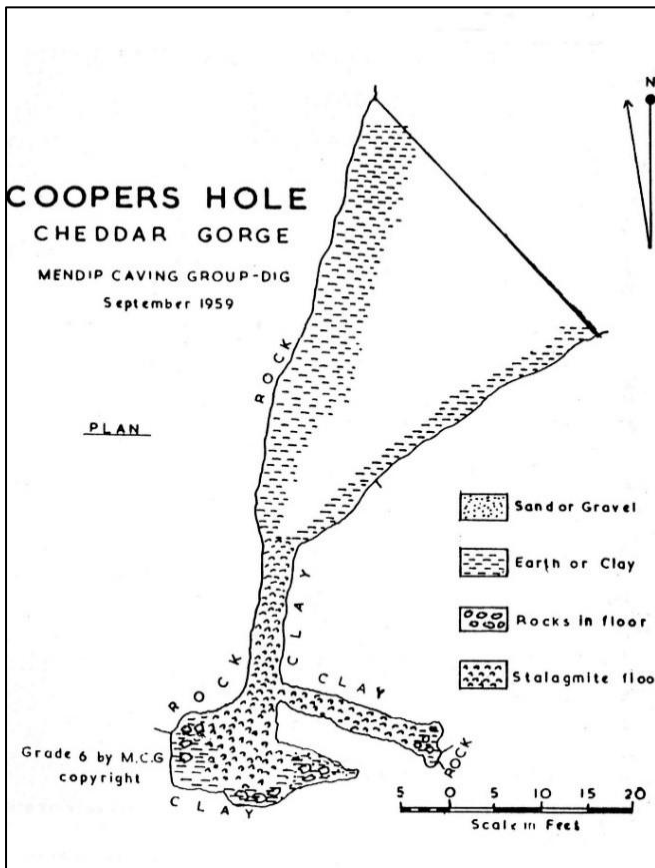
When we had been on the calcite floor for some time, we found that the roof was sloping at a much steeper angle than the floor and the working height which had been comfortable was now reduced to little more than eighteen inches (0.45m), so we decided to withdraw a little and dig a new tunnel at right angles to the original one. The new tunnel had a rock roof, calcite floor and mud walls and was some two feet wide and four feet high (0.6x1.2m). We realised, however, that this side tunnel would reach the far wall of the cave, so we abandoned it and turned our attention once more to the main original tunnel.



Bob Knott? and Malcolm Cotter
(R Charnock Collection)

Work resumed in the main tunnel in September 1959. We had dug out 95ft (29m) and had reached a depth of 26½ft (8m). The calcite floor here was very soft and crumbly and quickly came away with the pick. It was not very thick either and soon the floor revealed more mud and clay. As the roof was so near, before any forward progress could be made, we had to dig down and again we reverted to our original practice of having a trench six feet (1.8m) deep (if one is going to be buried better do it properly!). By December this new trench had been dug about 5 ft (1.5m) and the roof seemed at last to be levelling out, but water was always a problem. *(Around this time the Group also began digging at Pinetree Pot, and a team led by Mike Rennie commenced a survey of Longwood-August, so the labour force was split. Mike was a skilled cave surveyor*

and was responsible for most of the early MCG cave surveys - JCG).



During 1960 digging at Cooper's continued at a slower pace. Logbook entries recorded participants but not much detail about the dig, except that water at the dig face was always mentioned. (*Ubley Hill Pot was discovered in 1960 and permission was gained to dig Blackmoor Swallet - JCG.*)

Interest in the site recovered in April 1961 and Chris Reynolds visited Cooper's Hole in June to try to discover the age and nature of some bones found at the far end of the dug passage. He surveyed the sediments at the far end of the dug passage, the uppermost layers agreeing with R. F. Parry's 1930-31 excavation. The bones which were found at a depth of c.1-4 ft were sent to the British Museum (Natural History) and were mostly horse with two bird, one rodent and one fox bone, but unfortunately were not dateable. The passage was then widened to allow rails (brought from Browne's Hole) to be installed.

In 1962 the removal of spoil and the building of the car park retaining wall by Cheddar Caves, together with flooding in our dig passage, gave Don Searle the opportunity to investigate the left-hand wall and a little digging suggested there could be an air-space. At Easter, flooding prevented Malcolm and Don from digging in the main passage, so they concentrated on Don's site (New Dig). Within a very short time a tight

upward squeeze between roof and earth floor led into quite a high, clean rift. They were surprised to discover man-made steps leading upwards and cut into stalagmite. They hoped they would find something major, but unfortunately, they were stopped by a too-tight bedding plane.



19/1/1962 Construction of car park retaining wall and removal of MCG spoil by Cheddar Caves.
(M Cotter Collection)

Work continued at both sites in Cooper's. In the main dig much debris was removed, more railway track was laid, and a truck brought from Browne's Hole where it had been used by Dave Mitchell and Alan Cowley's group. On August Bank Holiday 1962 (6th August), after Malcolm Cotter had fired a further shot, it was possible to enter the bedding plane to the left of the general direction of the dig. Malcolm squeezed through and came out into a passage over a 6ft (1.8m) drop. The roof rose to about 30ft (9m), the walls were draped with a soft red 'dry' stal and at the bottom of the chamber was a mud pool on the surface of which were some small animal bones; one of the skeletons was identified by Prof. E. K. Tratman of UBSS as arctic fox. Several mud slopes near the bottom of the chamber seemed to have claw marks on which were thought may have been made by the trapped animals in a desperate attempt to escape. There was no indication as to how they could have entered but the claw marks prove that there must at have been a way into the chamber in the past, possibly through the bedding plane. On several of the walls there were black circles – some being filled in and others not – which Dave Mitchell said were the remains of dead flies.

Lord Bath and the Press visited the cave on 18th August when Lord Bath managed to pass the letter-box into the muddy chambers. The constriction was named 'Thynne Squeeze', Thynne being the family name of

Lord Bath. The Daily Telegraph included an article and photo of Don Searle with Lord Bath.

At about this time the old dig to the right-hand side of the entrance was finally abandoned due to almost permanent flooding.

On 18th September Prof. Tratman visited with three others. The bones from Cooper's Hole, or what was left of them, were removed and handed to Mr Robertson, Manager of Cheddar Caves. An inspection of the cliff face was made to try and find an entrance which the animals might have used. The next day a possible entrance was checked out but was a false trail.

Some digging continued in Cooper's Hole (*but Logbook entries were brief, and I found it difficult to work out which part of the cave was being dug – JCG*). The November 1962 Newsletter records that Mike Rennie surveyed the cave with the assistance of Ted Gabb.

March 1963 saw the New Dig blocked by surface collapse just beyond the squeeze and a bypass (the Mitchell-Cowley Bypass) was being dug. Work progressed steadily, and more rail track was laid along the line of the rift with the tunnel leading from the foot of the stalagmite staircase being extended horizontally. This enabled large quantities of spoil to be removed via the rails and a tub which Dave Mitchell had constructed. In June 1963 Dave took over the organisation of the dig. In July Chris Reynolds returned to examine the deposits at the entrance to the left-hand passage; they showed a complicated structure and contained charcoal and several bones.

In Mid-July Dave Mitchell and Paul Dye met up with a troop of 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards at Priddy where they were staying for the week. They formed two groups; each being taken on a tour of Burrington caves in exchange for a day of digging in Cooper's Hole! 116 tubs of spoil were removed, cutting back the top of the face to alleviate the risk of slumping, although no forward progress was made. Dave and Paul were the primary diggers during the rest of 1963 although others 'did their bit'. Only three Cooper's trips were logged in 1964 & 1965 partly because the Group was busy constructing the wooden cottage in Fry's yard after being evicted from their Cottage in Nether Wood.

In May 1966 the entrance chamber was almost completely flooded. Some bones were revealed in the rift in the highest part of Staircase Passage and appeared to have been gnawed. These were later identified as recent.

The next significant visits to the cave were by Chris Reynolds and Arthur Cox during August Bank Holiday

1966. On Saturday 28th the water level in the original passage was very low (about 4ft (1.2m)). Digging was carried out at a point half way between this passage and the entrance to the new section (*New Dig presumably – JCG*), where a previously dug small trench had silted up with road-washings, the water having drained away along a 3-4in (7-10cm) diameter hole against the roof. It appears that when the whole entrance chamber had been under water for many months, this area had suddenly unblocked during a period of rapid drainage – as evidenced by the number of bottles, tins and gravel forced into the tubular hole, the scouring of gravel from the rail track and the (comparative) cleanness of New Dig. On Monday the water was to within 2ft (0.6m) of the rails (*presumably the rails leading to the staircase – JCG*) and a new hole had opened immediately in front of the wall at the left side, which drained a large quantity of surface water.

Arthur continued working at Cooper's Hole with the assistance of a couple of London scout groups who had come for some caving. In January 1967 he noticed that the rear car park was parting company with the cliff face next to the retaining wall behind a concrete bench. In March 'Bench Dig' was underway and there is a short description in Newsletter No. 60. (September 1967), but it was short-lived, and the last entry was June 1968. (*In May 1967 Arthur Cox and Northolt Rover Scouts had discovered human bones in Bone Hole, which proved to be much more interesting than Cooper's - JCG*).

In Logbook No. 2 the last Cooper's Hole entry was a week after the Great Storm of July 10th/11th 1968. The flood water seems to have found a way through at both Bench dig and on the left of the entrance. The steps at the end of the car park retaining wall were filled to the top with boulders and the door nearly buried.

This seems to be a good place to stop, the storm being a significant date. No further Cooper's reports appear in Logbook 2 – and the only mention of Cooper's Hole in Logbook 3 is when Willie Stanton mentioned to Malcom Cotter that MCG had not dug Cooper's Hole of late. When Malcom asked if he was interested in it - he gave a firm NO!

Later work by the BEC: Fiona Lewis (Fi) wrote in Belfry Bulletin No 388/389 that following a report of a bang let off in Gough's being heard near Thynne Squeeze exploratory visits took place in May and June 1980. The choked aven just before Thynne Squeeze was climbed and a small hole revealed a ledge, some 20ft (6m) above floor level, where digging exposed a boulder which required blasting, "after which a quick prod with the crow bar caused it to rain boulders for as long as 5-

10 minutes at a time. This is still happening today and what used to be a gentle sloping climb up to Thynne Squeeze is now a scramble up about 50 tons of loose scree deposited from the raining aven which is now about 60' high and heading we hope both for the surface and back into the hill towards Gough's." At this point in time they decided to remove the scree slope before they were in danger of losing the entrance. They estimated that at the present rate of progress, what took about 10 hours in total to fall would take about a year to clear

Chris Smart wrote that on the 19th October 1980 news reached the Belfry that a top entrance had opened about 20-25m vertically above the old bottom entrance. A group were soon at Cooper's Hole car park

and climbed up the footpath towards the reported location of the top entrance – where they found the footpath had disappeared leaving an overhanging, circular hole of about 4m diameter and 20 or so metres deep. They were lucky in having a digging rope and felling axe with them, and with only a minimum of effort managed to enlarge the hole to about 7m x 4m and succeeded in losing a large tree down the shaft. For obvious safety reasons this upper entrance to Cooper's has been surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. The edges of the hole are reported to be very unsafe.

(It is not known if any further work has taken place here or in the cave – JCG)

References

MCG Logbooks 1, 2 and 3

MCG News-sheets (as listed on MCRA)

MCG Journal (2)1963. Cooper's Hole. Robbie Charnock

MCG Journal (3)1967. The Deposits of Cooper's Hole, Cheddar. Chris F. Reynolds

MCG Journal (4)1967. Cheder Hole, Chris F. Reynolds

Who was Aveline, Anyway? Richard Witcombe, 2008

Mendip – Cheddar its Gorge and Caves. H. E. Balch, 1947

BEC Belfry Bulletin (34)1980 (388/389). Cooper's Hole (Cheddar Gorge). Fiona Lewis

BEC Belfry Bulletin (34)1980 (391/392). Cooper's Hole, Cheddar. Chris M. Smart

VALE Ian McKechnie – Roy Kempston

I am the bearer of very sad news as I have just heard from Ian's wife Penny that Ian McKechnie died just before midnight yesterday in hospital. (8/2/2021)



Ian with Penny at the 50th Anniversary Dinner
Photo Martin Rowe

As I'm sure most of you are aware, he had Parkinson's disease for many years, and more recently had been going downhill both physically and mentally and was taken to hospital about 2 weeks ago after a series of falls. The family have said that they are pleased that he is at peace.

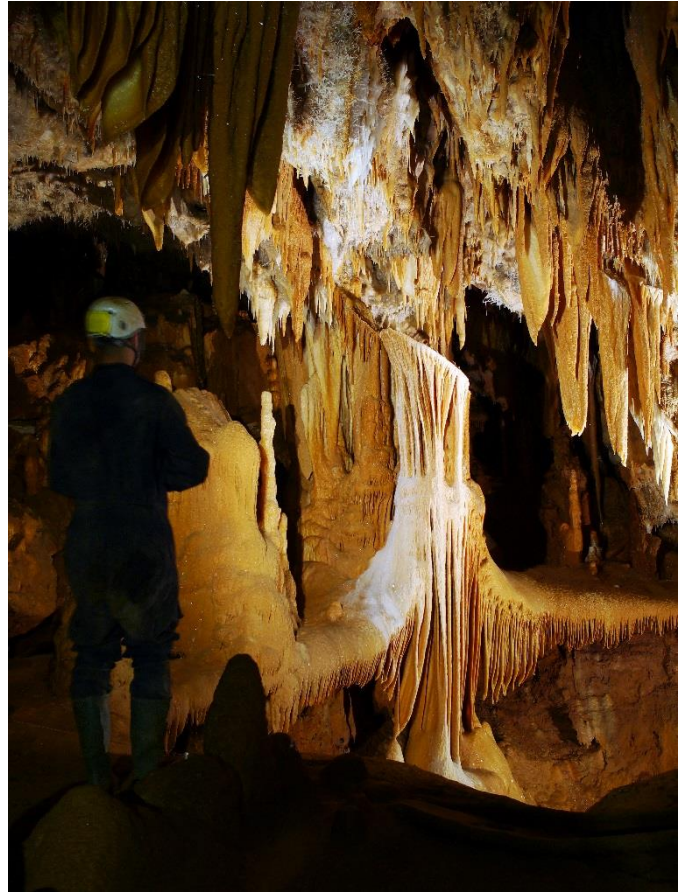
I met him in the early 1980's and became great friends with our caving and climbing outings, including many close shaves. My families were also very close with both of our first children only a few months apart.

He was a great stalwart in the MCG, producing newsletters for many years and introducing the club to the internet with a site that he set up, and many of you may remember the model of the old cottage that he produced more recently for one of the AGM weekends.

I'm sure that he will be greatly missed by all of those who knew him, as I do.



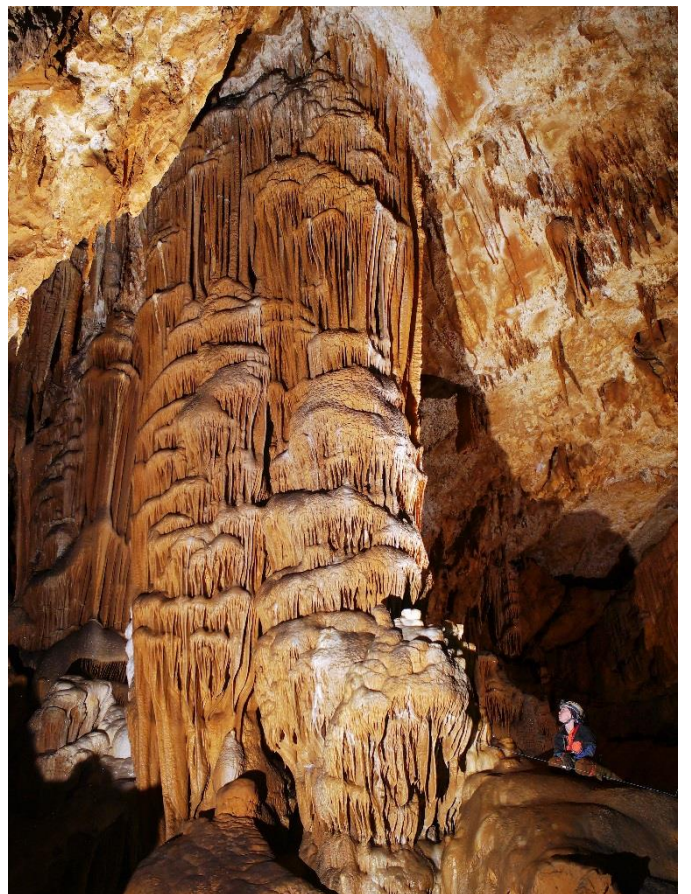
Grotte Estevan



Grotte de la Toussaint



Final pitch Aven Noël



Grotte de Chasserou

