

THE WESSEX CAVE CLUB JOURNAL

VOLUME 21 (NUMBER 233) MARCH 1992

Officers and Committee	116
Club Notes	117
Caving Notes	117
News from the colonies	118
Club Diary 1992	119
Speleological Reconnaissance in Eastern Crete	120
Notes for contributors	126
Wessex Challenge 1992	126
The other end of Swildon's	127

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Opinions expressed in the Journal are not necessarily those of the Editor
or of the Wessex Cave Club as a whole unless expressly stated as being so.

Officers and Committee of the Wessex Cave Club. 1991-1992

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Club Notes

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Older members of the Club will be saddened to hear of the recent deaths of Ken Pearce and of Bob Leakey.

Change of address:

New 'phone number for Keith Sanderson: 05242 51662

Hilary O' Byrne and Sue Bonar are now contactable at:
20 Lilyfield Road, Rozelle, New South Wales 2039, AUSTRALIA

Committee News

A highly productive and successful hut working weekend was held in January. Not only was the passage behind the Kitchen plastered, the drive levelled, the hedge laid, a carpark light fitted, the powerwasher and the changing room re-wired and the upstairs dormitory lagged, but we also all survived a communal Rands chilli! Many thanks to all those who turned up, particularly to Ian Timney and his Merry Men, who got plastered in more than one way!

Caving Notes

There are changes in the arrangements for payment of the goodwill fee for visiting **Swildon's Hole**. The fee has risen to 50p, and please note that you should now pay at Holmfield Cottage, (opposite the stile to the Swildon's path.

Also, the fee for **Eastwater Cavern** has risen to 50p. Payment to Dot and Ivor Gibbons at Eastwater Farm as before.

The NCA's bolting programme, to replace damaged and dangerous 8mm anchors is continuing. The new hanger is manufactured by Welsh climbing equipment manufacturer DMM, and rejoices in the name ECO-Hanger. Basically it consists of a length of stainless steel rod bent into a 'P' shape about 6ins along the straight axis. This is fixed into the rock with a specially developed epoxy resin manufactured by the Swiss firm Hilti.

Persons placing the anchors on behalf of the NCA are receiving special training in how to do the job properly. Unfortunately, a number of other people have taken it upon themselves to fit the anchors at some sites (most notably the pitch in Kingsdale Master Cave) and have not done the job properly, although this may be due to tampering by a third party. Users of the Eco hanger should make sure that none of the following are apparent in the anchors before they use them:

- wear of the hanger resulting in a reduction in thickness of the steel bar to under 6mm;
- Surface of the resin breaking away from the rock;
- Fracture of the rock within 20cm of the hanger;
- Looseness of the hanger in the rock.

The NCA will be preparing a register of bolts they have placed to ensure that they are maintained in a safe condition.

Following the recent discoveries in Carno Adit, a new access arrangement has been brought into force. The cave is now gated and access is controlled by Brynmawr Caving Club. Keys are held by eight members of the Club, which also says that visiting cavers will be free to explore provided they inform BCC of any discoveries they make, and complete the log book. Trips can be organised by telephoning any of the eight keyholders - further details from Andy Summerskill.

Thefts from cavers' vehicles are spreading. A report in the Western Mail of mid-March reported that £800 worth of climbing equipment was stolen from a car parked at Llangattock. Following, as it does, the theft and arson attack on a car in Derbyshire late last year, it is apparent that this problem, familiar

to Mendip cavers already, cannot be ignored elsewhere.

Another report from Wales tells of an unauthorised dig at Rockrose Hole (Gower) which has resulted in substantial damage to an SSSI which is also an important archaeological site and due to be scheduled as an ancient monument. Anyone wishing to dig caves on the Gower would be well advised to contact Mel Davies (0792 390945) to check the situation before proceeding.

A collapse in Little Neath River Cave has been reported: opposite the route to Genesis Gallery: take care.

There is a threat to close the Dinas Silica Mines, because they are considered dangerous. Hopefully provision will be made to maintain access for cave divers.

The Derbyshire Caving Association have recently been notified of complaints to the National Rivers Authority over the use of dye in water tracing experiments following three separate incidents of rivers turning green. Cavers are reminded that the use of dye is illegal without prior permission from the NRA, that fluorescein is a known carcinogen, and that the NRA have powers to prosecute anyone they catch causing a pollution problem, including cavers!

News from the colonies

G'day!

The Speleo Sisters are doing it downunder!

The Antipodean division of the Wessex was joined by the Blunder brothers (Leg and Max) from the Upper Pitts branch for a busy month of caving and other activities in NSW and Tasmania (a proper job report will be produced by Leg I 'spec [how about it Leg - Ed])

We have some caving trips lined up to keep us active for the rest of our summer (if we can bear going caving when it's a glorious 35° outside), and welcome any of to join us on the following trips with SUSS [Sydney University Speleological Society].

15-16 Feb: Timor, NSW - A tourist trip led by Ian (Bruce) Cooper (who helped push Wigmore's). A tad long drive of 6 hrs each way to the 'New England' cave area

21 Feb: Party!! at Chris Norton's Place. BBQ provided, BYO tucker & grog.

23 Feb: Canyoning at Wollemi Li Long - Abseil in, and float on a lilo through this canyon in the Blue Mountains. No wetsuit required - it is too HOT!

29 Feb - 1 March:
Wombeyan, NSW, Southern Highlands cave area. Permit pending (PS leap year this year - Nigel, will you marry us!) [presumably both or neither - Ed]

14 - 15 March:

Tarakuanna, NSW - Stay in a mountain hideaway - permit pending.

16-20 April:

Waitomo, New Zealand - a mega Easter SRT trip. Only \$410 return airfares for us (about £160) but about £2000 for you!

We are disappointed at the caving scene over here, the trips all seem to be for exploration or digging - none for FUN! The club doesn't really have a base like the clubhouse or the Hunter's in the Mendips, so there aren't many get-togethers, and trips must be planned well in advance in order to book the shared caving hut and get a permit.

SUSS is also very involved in cave politics, with two lawyers on the committee, and they have just been involved in successful actions against mining companies encroaching into caves.

I am alarmed at the latest news from the Committee that the Australian Spelo. Fed. (ASF) will be working on a form of caver accreditation (ie exam/licence process). Apparently two state governments were going to introduce separate schemes of licences for cavers, each involving a \$40 - \$50 application fee. The ASF felt it was better to offer to set-up a national scheme, of their devising, rather than leave it up to government departments.

We miss our Mendip family and wish we could join you in the Hunter's for a pint. We will go to the beach instead, and have a stubby with our other Antipodean Division member, Nick Hawkes.

Love from the Speleo Sisters,

Sue Bonar and Hilary O'Byrne.
February 1992

Club Diary 1992

2 May- 4 May	Bank Holiday Yorkshire meet	Camp at the Hill Inn, Chapel Le Dale
16 May	MRO Rescue Practice	Meet at the Belfrey, 9.30am
23 May - 25 May	Bank Holiday Yorkshire meet	Camp at the Hill Inn, Chapel Le Dale
6 June 7 June	Yorkshire booking	Bar Pot Grange Rigg/Christmas Pot
20 June 21 June	Wessex Challenge Committee meeting	10.00am Upper Pitts
27 June 28 June	National Association of Mining History Organisations Field Meet	Ironbridge, Shropshire
4 July 5 July	Yorkshire booking	Penyghent Pot Little Hull Pot
10 July	1992 Caver's Fair	Royal Forest of Dean College, Cinderford
11 July		
2 August	Committee meeting	10.00am Upper Pitts
23 August to	RESCON 92 International Cave Rescue Conference	South Wales Cave Club, Penwyllt
30 August		
12 September 13 September	BCRA Conference	University of Bradford
19 September 20 September	Yorkshire booking	Birks Fell Pot Gavel Pot
20 September	Committee meeting	10.00 am Upper Pitts
10 October 11 October	Yorkshire booking	Gingling Hole Magnetometer Pot
17 October	AGM and Annual dinner	
7 November 8 November	Yorkshire booking	Lancaster Hole/Link Pot Long Kin East/Rift Pot
5 December	Yorkshire booking	Juniper Gulf
30 December 31 December	Yorkshire booking	Notts Pot Lost Johns Cavern

Please contact Keith Sanderson (address at the front of the Journal) if you wish to attend any of the Yorkshire bookings.

Novice instruction is available on all Club trips: please contact Andy Summerskill (address at the front of the Journal) for details.

Speleological Reconnaissance in Eastern Crete

Part two

Geoff Newton

EXPEDITION DIARY

Thursday 26th September

A 6.45am departure from Gatwick. We arrived at the apartment in Stalis in the early afternoon local time (2hrs ahead of UK). The rest of the day was spent locally, touring the car hire establishments, eating, drinking, and wandering around the resort.

Friday 27th September

By the time the Thomsons rep. had given her "Welcome Party" it was too late to make much of the day without a car. So it became a beach day. We collected the car in the evening.

Saturday 28th September

Prospecting the Nísimos Plateau, (fig. 3) This lies on the SW slopes of Mount Sâlena at an altitude of ca. 1000m with an area of ca. 1 sq.km. The map showed a variety of depressions in the hills surrounding the plateau, including one which appeared to be fed by a number of seasonal streams. In fact the "streams" were found to be a series of relatively small depressions flooded with gravel and soil. There were no recognisable stream beds. The most promising area was in fact a series of rocky gullies draining into the NW corner of Nísimos. One

of these drained into a rift cave found by JS and NG. This, Dead Dogs Pot, had a constricted entrance leading directly to a more or less free hanging 40m SRT pitch. The walls were mostly covered in

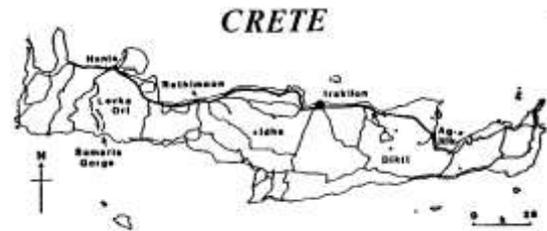


Fig 1 - Map of Crete

flowstone. There was no draught to remove the stench of the two decomposing canines at the foot of the rift. There was no way on at the bottom of the rift. Although it takes drainage from the gully the rift was probably formed by solution in earlier times, (survey, no.1)

The other caves found were insignificant.

Sunday 29th September

Prospecting the Souvlí and Kalvíia areas of Selena, (fig. 4) Whilst en route to the area it was found that recent widening of the road between Mesa Lassíthi and Mesa Potami had broken into a cave. (fig. 5 & survey 2) This was surveyed to a length of 20m. Roadworks Cave was blocked by a mixture of rubble from the roadworks and old school exercise books and walnuts! It might be easily extended by digging.

We managed to drive most of the way onto Souvlí. The map here showed the summit plateau at 1300m to be a real moonscape with many large closed depressions. It was hoped that these would be drained by shafts or potholes. The depressions proved to cover most of the summit plateau which resembled a sort of dry cockpit country. Unfortunately the large depressions were themselves filled with minor depressions flooded with gravel. Each of these minor depressions was then too small to give rise to an open cave entrance. The landscape was also well weathered and the rocks thinly bedded discouraging open

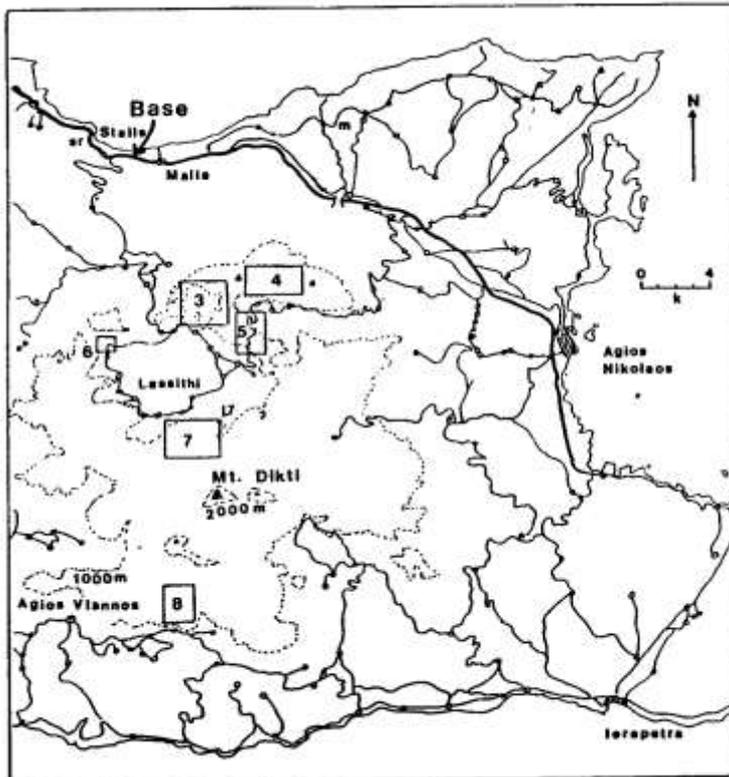


Fig. 2 - Eastern central Crete showing location of following maps

entrances to the caves which probably exist below. This conclusion buried my hopes of finding an area with many caves, some of them long and deep.

On the summit area only two small caves were found, (survey no. 3) However we noticed that widening of the mountain track on the way up had broken into a complex of draughting impenetrable rifts. These indicate that there is probably a lot of cave system to explore under the Selena Ori if you have the time to dig or blast into it. There are other "moonscape" areas in the Selena Ori, notably to the east of Makhaira and under the NW slopes about 3km east of Krasi. These were not prospected in 1991 on the assumption that they would be like Souvli.

Monday 30th September

The first part of the day was spent looking at swallow holes and dry watercourses in the Eastern side of the Lassithi Plain. All were thoroughly choked. Then we walked up the gorge which drains the Katharo Plateau. The swallow hole where it met the Lassithi Plain was completely choked. We covered about 3/4 of the gorge before we were stopped by a deep (sump?) pool and a rock face both of which spanned the width of the gorge. The rock face was a dry, notched waterfall topped by a huge spherical boulder. No caves were found, only a few overhangs, rock shelters and solution pockets.

Finally we made the usual obligatory visit to the Dhikteon Cave at Psychro. This phreatic remnant is very spacious and well decorated but is also rather grubby from the passage of generations of tourists. As a known archeological site and a very heavily visited cave, this is not the place to attempt extensions by digging.

Tuesday 1st October

The morning slipped away from us, shopping and searching for a bank, etc. Instead of driving up to the plateau we went East to Milatos Cave, (fig. 2) This is a well known cave situated in the side of a gorge near the coast. Its several entrances gain a complex of crawls and chambers in major bedding planes, which generally trend downwards. One of the entrance chambers houses a memorial chapel. This is a common feature of caves in Crete. Some of the less frequented passages were occupied by a group of 6-10 bats. These were larger than the British variety and flew around a lot when we entered their domain.

Whilst grovelling in one of the more obscure crawls JS found what he claims are human bones and an artifact in the shape of a thick broken hemisphere, perhaps the remains of a lamp or cup. These were obviously very old. These items were left in place and he reversed leaving the way on unexplored. The cave is full of degraded old calcite formations and is extensive enough to merit a visit if you are in the vicinity.

From the path to the cave it was possible to see what appeared to be many cave entrances in the bottom of the gorge and in the cliffs opposite. We prospected the gorge fairly thoroughly. Most of the caves proved to be only phreatic pockets, relics of a

formerly extensive system of which Milatos Cave is the only significant remnant. None of the others went back any distance although a crawl at the back of one of the rock shelters near the floor of the gorge might be extended by digging.

Wednesday 2nd October

GN went down with severe gastritis during the night and being somewhat dehydrated and weak spent the day at the apartment. The others investigated large cave entrances seen from the Stalis - Mohos road (fig. 2). These were situated in the east side of a ridge going down to Stalis. They proved to be only rock shelters. The lowest of the entrances seen from the road was missed and remains for the future.

Thursday 3rd October

GN still unfit. MR went down with a similar complaint as the others drove up to Lassithi to look at the NW corner of the plain. The swallow holes seen here looked particularly impressive and the adjacent hills appeared more promising as the terrain was rockier and the limestone more thickly bedded. Later NG was taken ill and the group retreated while there was still somebody fit to drive. The doctor was called in to NG. JS was the last to succumb to the illness, going down in the night.

Friday 4th October

With the benefit of the doctors prescription and the benefit of GN's experience the others recovered relatively quickly. Nevertheless it was a subdued party who had a short tourist trip to Knossos in the afternoon. This day also saw the end of summer as the rains came.

Saturday 5th October

A return was made to the NW of Lassithi. (fig. 6) The major swallow hole area yielded one cave, a tortuous flood prone affair 20m in length, mostly flat out crawling, with one chamber. It ended in a watery low airspace crawl which needed digging. There was a modest draught here. Because of the prevalence of rain and thunderstorms on the day, the survey was carried out to a lower grade than might otherwise have been the case, (survey no. 4). The cave would be worth revisiting in more settled weather. Five other caves were found in the area, all very short.

A number of attempts were made to find drivable tracks up into the hills on the west side of the plain. We managed to ignore the only significant one (with a tiny signpost to Katofigi). During our wanderings we came across a farmer with his van stuck in a muddy field. This was duly pushed back on the track with the aid of a priest and an old woman already on the scene. In return we were rewarded with freshly picked grapes.

On our way back we paid a quick visit to the Kronos Cave near Tzerminado. This is another famous archeological site. The cave is very small with little potential for extension and although well decorated it has become very shop soiled. Not recommended.



Fig. 3

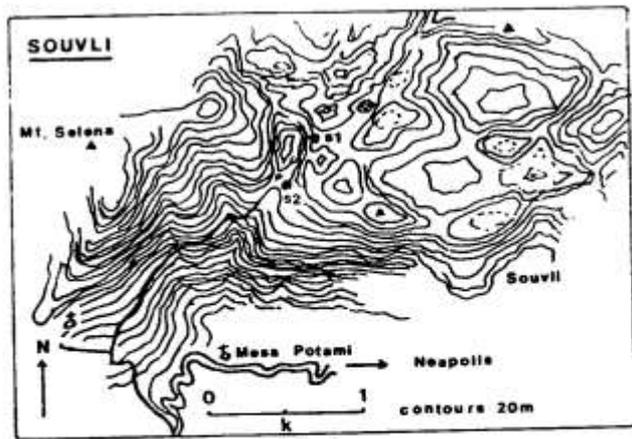


Fig. 4

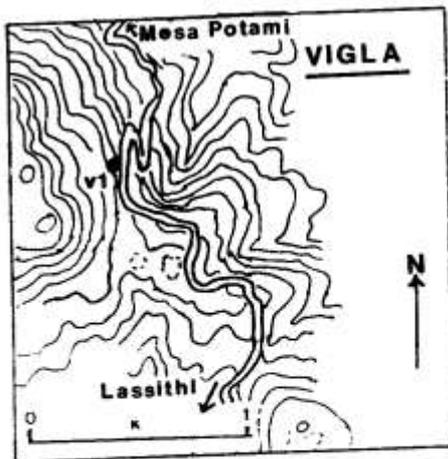


Fig. 5

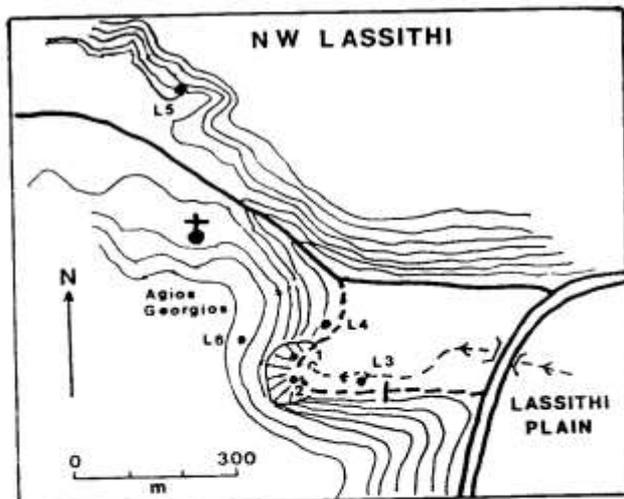


Fig. 6

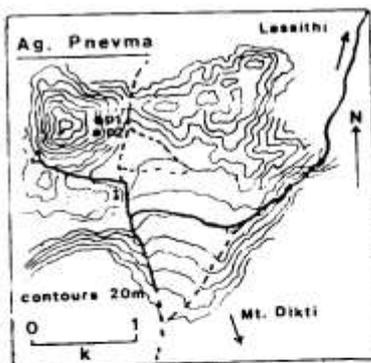


Fig. 7

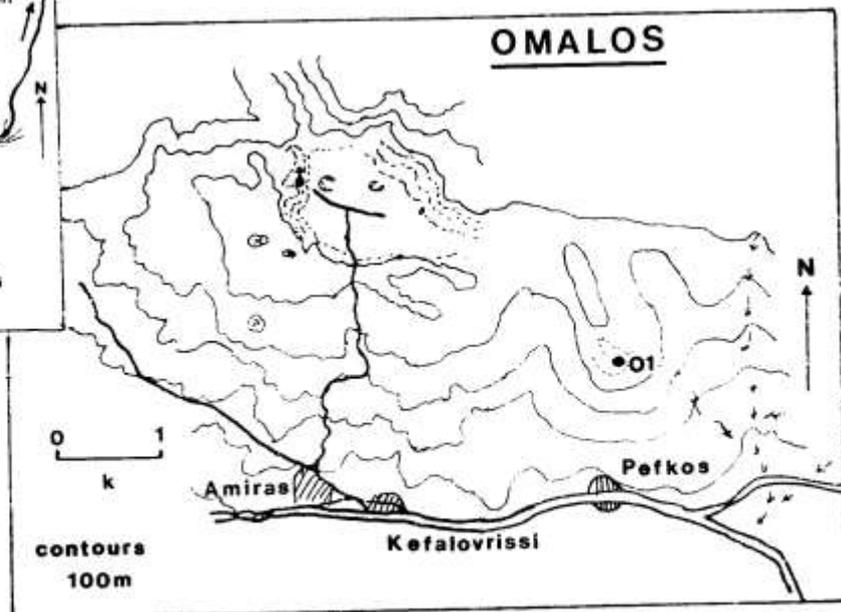
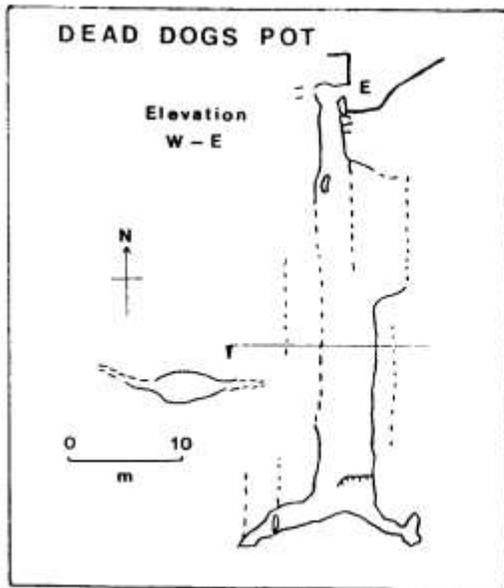
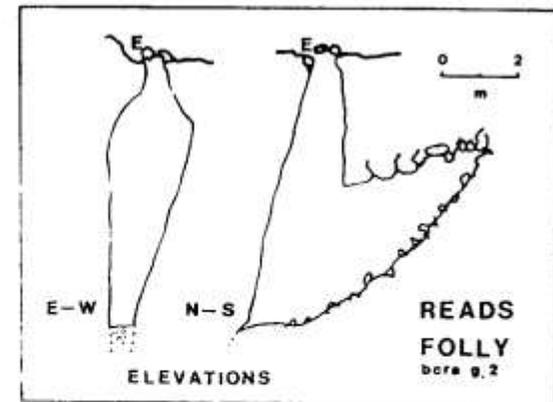
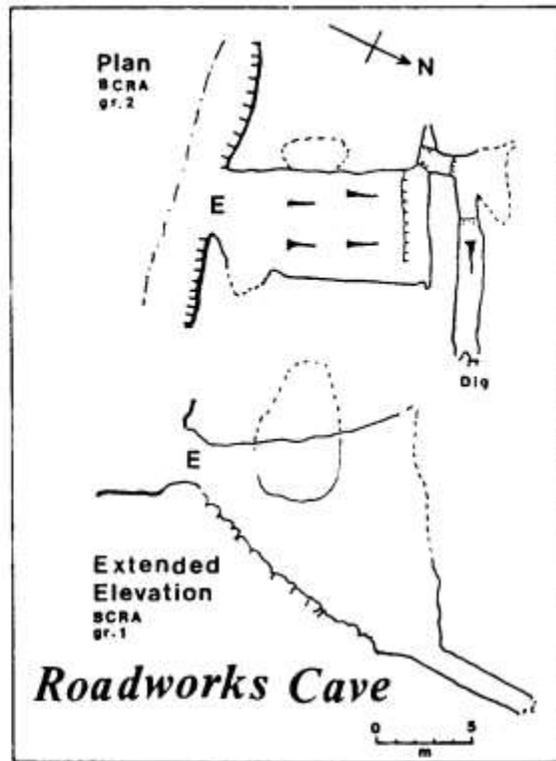


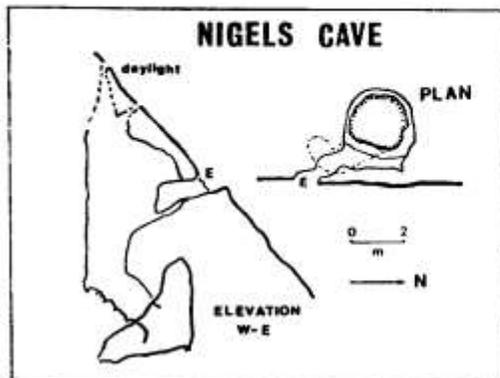
Fig. 8



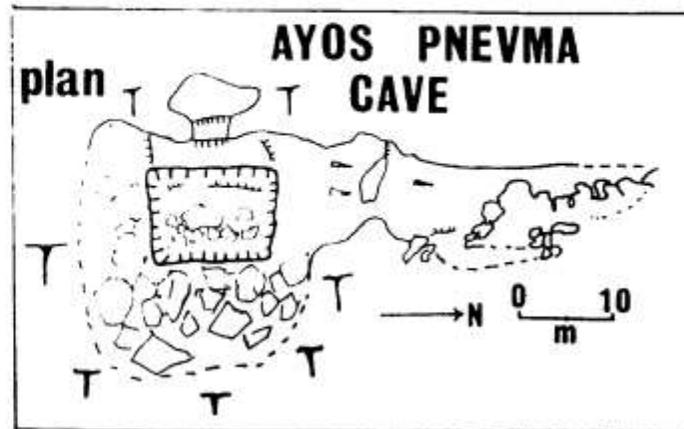
Sur. 1



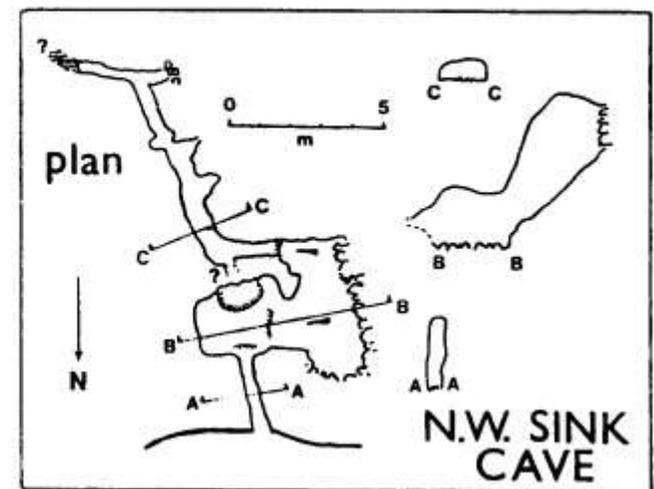
Sur. 3



Sur. 7



Sur. 6



Sur. 4

Sunday 6th October

NG, GN and MR up at 4.20 am to take an excursion to the Samaria Gorge (see fig. 1). This is a very impressive sight and well worth a visit, despite the hype. It is almost compulsory for tourists visiting Crete so it is not a place to escape the crowds. The excursion involves a boat trip along the coast for 20km between Hora Sfakion and Agia Roumeli. An incredible number of cave entrances were visible in the cliffs and the hillsides above the coast, not to mention some in the walls of the gorge itself. Presumably these have been explored if not recorded. Looking at them could be quite a pleasant pastime.

JS spent the day prospecting and rallying to the NW of the mountains surrounding Lassithi. He gained an interesting insight into the geology of the area but found no significant caves.

Monday 7th October

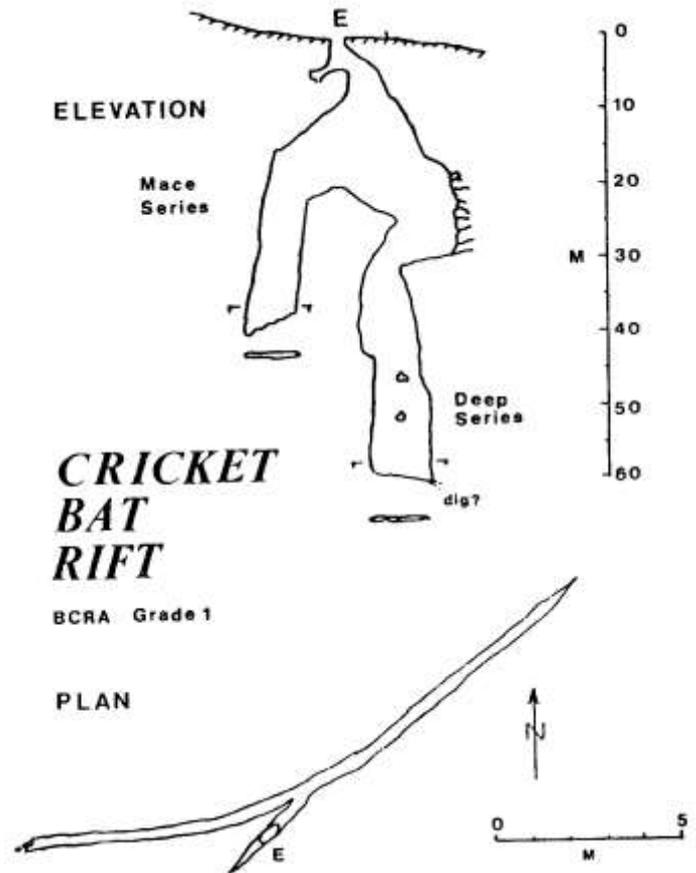
The objective was Omalos. (fig. 8). This was not the famous plateau in the Levka Ori but a much smaller closed drainage basin high on the south side of the Dikti range in the vicinity of Agios Viannos. There is probably a driveable track to it. However the combination of a delayed start, a long drive to the area, and insufficient study of the map meant that we failed to find one. The attempt to walk in was thwarted by cliffs and forestry plantations and it became obvious that if we persisted dusk would close in about the time we arrived at Omalos.

At this point we stopped and attempted to make the best of the situation by looking for cave entrances where we were.

We were on a rocky ridge to the SE of Omalos. There was a shallow valley running along the top of the ridge. MR found a small entrance to a fine rift cave. This was free climbable to a ledge of cobbles at -25m. Here were two ways on and more committing climbing led to two separate bottoms to the cave at -40m and -60m. The rift was very warm and the walls were covered in inactive flowstone with a few formations. The cave had an oppressive almost sulphurous smell despite the absence of the usual dead goat or other carcasses. There were cave crickets and bats in the rift so it was named Cricket Bat Rift, (survey no. 5). The rift was presumed to have been formed by solution along a joint. It was a most entertaining climb and the longest find of the expedition so maybe the navigational cock-ups were fortuitous. Unfortunately we will have to get to Omalos to find out what we missed.

Tuesday 8th October

To the south side of the Lassithi Plain. An area around a high summer pasture on the N side of Mount Dikti was the main objective, (fig. 7). The track to the area on the map was only a footpath. However the locals sitting in the cafe in Avrakondes were able,



with the aid of sign language and German, to direct us further east in the plain to where a valley came down from the pasture. Here a good track enabled us to drive up to the old church of Agios Pnâvma.

However we were delayed by the investigation of a swallow hole on the plain close to our route. A little digging enabled us insert MR into about 5m of draughting and echoing passage. The way on required the moving of many massive blocks. This was obviously a long term project. A little hammering was necessary to extract MR.

The area around Agios Pnâvma is only inhabited in the summer and these days I suspect that many locals prefer to drive up and down in the day. There is about 1.3sq km of relatively flat land here at an altitude of about 1300m. Agios Pnâvma is a good starting point for the walk up Mount Dikti. The mountain looks quite impressive from this side.

Between the high pastures and the Lassithi Plain lies a stony ridge. A large collapse feature was visible on this ridge as we drove up. The ridge was therefore prospected thoroughly. The large feature was obviously the remnant of a once important cave (survey no.6). It was unfortunately mostly collapsed. A cairn testified that we were not the first visitors. There were some stalactite formations.

A number of other caves, all very short, were found in the above ridge, (survey no. 7).

Wednesday 9th October

A final doss day by the pool and beach, before our departure early on Thursday.

CONCLUSIONS

We found little cave but had a good time prospecting. It is apparent that the relative lack of published information on the caves of Eastern Crete is because they are difficult to find. (with the exception of the short spacious fragments of interest to archeologists only.)

Whilst deep and seasonally active caves must exist under the mountains in the area it appears that open entrances to them will be rare. Prolonged digging at the swallow holes on the Lassithi Plain could well enter major stream caves. However this is an activity more appropriate to future generations of Cretan cavers. We regret not reaching the "Dikti" Omalos Plateau. Any swallow holes here will have a greater depth potential than those on the Lassithi Plain and are arguably less likely to be choked with debris.

I had hoped that the numerous depressions on the flanks and summit plateau of the Selena Ori would yield many shaft entrances. If this had been the case the expedition would have hit the jackpot. However the areas of this type prospected were a great disappointment, with the depressions blocked by gravel. In theory the larger depressions had a sufficiently large catchment area to cause caves to form. In practice the large depressions were themselves filled with many small depressions too insignificant to give rise to open caves.

What about a return to Eastern Crete? With the benefit of our experience in 1991 I am sure we

could improve on our success rate in terms of cave found. In particular we would concentrate on the craggier areas of the mountains where the limestone was more thickly bedded. Serious digging could also find new caves but I think most of us go on expeditions to escape from that activity. Whilst a larger haul of rift caves and phreatic remnants should be achievable, the discovery of a major active system with considerable length and/or depth will require a lot of time and hard work or an incredible amount of luck. But on the other hand Crete is a nice place in which to look for caves

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We applied for no grants on behalf of the expedition feeling that the administrative bodies might regard it as a thinly disguised holiday. In view of our modest haul of new caves this was probably a wise decision in the long term. We did however obtain a good discount on the SRT rope from Hill and Dale.

We would like to express our appreciation of the tolerance of the Cretan people. We spent a lot of time driving over obscure agricultural tracks which led nowhere but someones fields, vine terraces or goat herds. The locals either ignored us or responded with a friendly wave and often volunteered route finding information without being asked. In a similar situation many UK farmers would have set their dogs on us or waved shotguns at us. An attempt to speak a few words of Greek can also have a benefit out of all proportion to the effort involved.

Concluded

APPENDIX : CAVE REGISTER

The expedition also visited known caves in the vicinity of Stalis, Milatos, and the famous Dikteon and Kronos caves. The approximate locations of these are identified by sr, m, d, and k, on the fig. 2 area map.

Caves are claimed as new finds if entry was gained by digging, squeezing, or ropework and climbing. The expedition total of new cave was 170m. It is also possible that some of the other caves listed have not been previously recorded although they have undoubtedly been explored by local people. Some of these more obvious and accessible caves may have local names. However none of these caves are significant enough to justify the effort of finding out any existing names, and we apologise for any offence our provisional names may cause.

NISIMOS

N1 FIRST POT
C 4455 2320, A 940m, L-, D -4m,
Free climbable shaft. Bottom is reasonable
digging prospect

N2 DEAD DOGS POT
C 4420 2415, A 950m, L-, D -41m, new
Vertical rift. 50m SRT rope or equivalent
needed

VIGLA

VI ROADWORKS CAVE
C 4750 2225, A 1000m, L 22m, D -4m
Roadside entrance. Walking passage
descends to diggable choke.

SELENA (SOUVLI)

S1 READS FOLLY
C 4840 2490, A 1300m, L 8m, D -7m
Rift cavity, once mud filled. 15m SRT rope
or equivalent needed, new

S2 GOATHERDS CELLAR
C 4810 2415, A 1280m, L 4m, D -2m Climb
down to small man modified chamber.

LASSITHI

LI PUTREFACTION CAVE
C 3940 2090, A 850m?, L 4m, D - Small
cave with goat carcasses.

- L2 UNAMED CAVE
C 3940 2080 , A 850m? , L 4m , D - Short cave.
- L3 NORTH WEST SINK CAVE
C 3953 2085 . A 845m? , L 22m , D -3m, new
Flood prone tortuous cave with draughting leads.
- L4 SUNLOUNGE CAVE
C 3950 2100, A 860m? , L 8m , D ? Obvious cave above goat pens.
- L5 FROG HOLE
C 3897 2180 , A 880m? , L 8m , D -4m, new
Squeeze into chamber with blind shaft in floor.
- L6 MIKES RIFT
C 3925 2090 , A 890m? , L -, D -6m , new Rift under tree. 10m SRT rope or equivalent required.

- L7 SOUTH SINK
C 4665 1715 , A 870m? , L 5m? , D -2m , new
Promising stream sink dig needs removal of large boulders.
- OMALOS
- O1 CRICKET BAT RIFT
C 4415 0605 , A 1350m , L 75m , D -60m , new
Solution rift with ledge at -25m leading to separate bottoms at -60m and -40m. Free climbable with care by experienced persons.
- DIKTI (AGIA PNEVMA)
- P1 AGIA PNEVMA CAVE
C 4415 1580 , A 1350m , L 60m , D -10m
Partially collapsed remnant of major cave passage.
- P2 NTOFI S CAVF
C 4415 1570 , A 1350m , L 10m , D -10m new
Short steeply descending cave.

Notes for contributors

If you have any article, letter, comment, news, photograph, or anything else which you would like to see published in the Journal, please do not hesitate to send it in. Preferably, text should be typed on one side of the paper only, with wide margins and double spaces between the lines, but I'd rather have it scrawled on the back of a cigarette packet than not get it at all.

The main requirement for photographs is that they should not have too much contrast as otherwise they are unrecognizable when printed. Prints in black and white or colour are acceptable, but bear in mind that they will come out as black and white prints when they appear, so if the colour is an important feature the effect may be lost in printing. Please make sure that your prints or transparencies are clearly labelled, and send the appropriate captions for each figure on a separate sheet.

For those who have access to a word-processor, I may be able to accept contributions on floppy disc. Please give me a ring so that we can discuss whether or not your software is compatible with mine - at present I can handle contributions in Apple Macintosh format and all formats of MS- DOS IBM disc.

Line drawings, sketch maps and diagrams are all welcome. They should be supplied in the size at which they are to be printed. Make sure that lettering is large and bold.

If you copy drawings or photo's, or quote, from another publication, please make sure you inform me before publication so that I can make arrangements regarding copyright.

Authors may obtain a laser-printed copy of their article for the production of further offprints by contacting me, although I may have to make a small charge for this service.

NJW

**The 1992 Challenge will be held on
20 June.**

The theme:

**PIRATES
WANTED:**

**Wenches, Cabin Boys, Squires,
Preventive Men, Smugglers and a witch
doctor (poor struggling wretch)**

**Bring your tin of W.D. and H.O. Wills
and don't forget your piss pot.**

Further details from Nick Williams

WESSEX CHALLENGE

The other end of Swildon's

An interview with Oliver Wells

Part two

In the last Journal, Oliver described how he was introduced to cave diving, and some of the subsequent explorations in Wookey Hole. On 10 December 1955 he returned to Wookey with John Buxton and Bob Davies.

JS: What was the feeling about solo diving, going off into the yonder by yourself?

OW: It was OK to dive on your own if you were on the end of a rope that was paid out from dry land and if you didn't go past an underwater "obstacle" of any kind (such as a sharp corner or tight place). There was a code of sharp pulls on the line to indicate more rope, less rope, or stand still. If you laid your line from a reel then you were supposed to have another diver with you.

Graham Balcombe did quite a bit of solo diving laying his line out from a reel in Keld Head in 1944 and 1945 because he was the only diver there.

You will have to ask Bob Davies what his thoughts were on that matter, but as far as I can remember, when he went off on his own and discovered Thirteen, well, nobody approved of that at all.

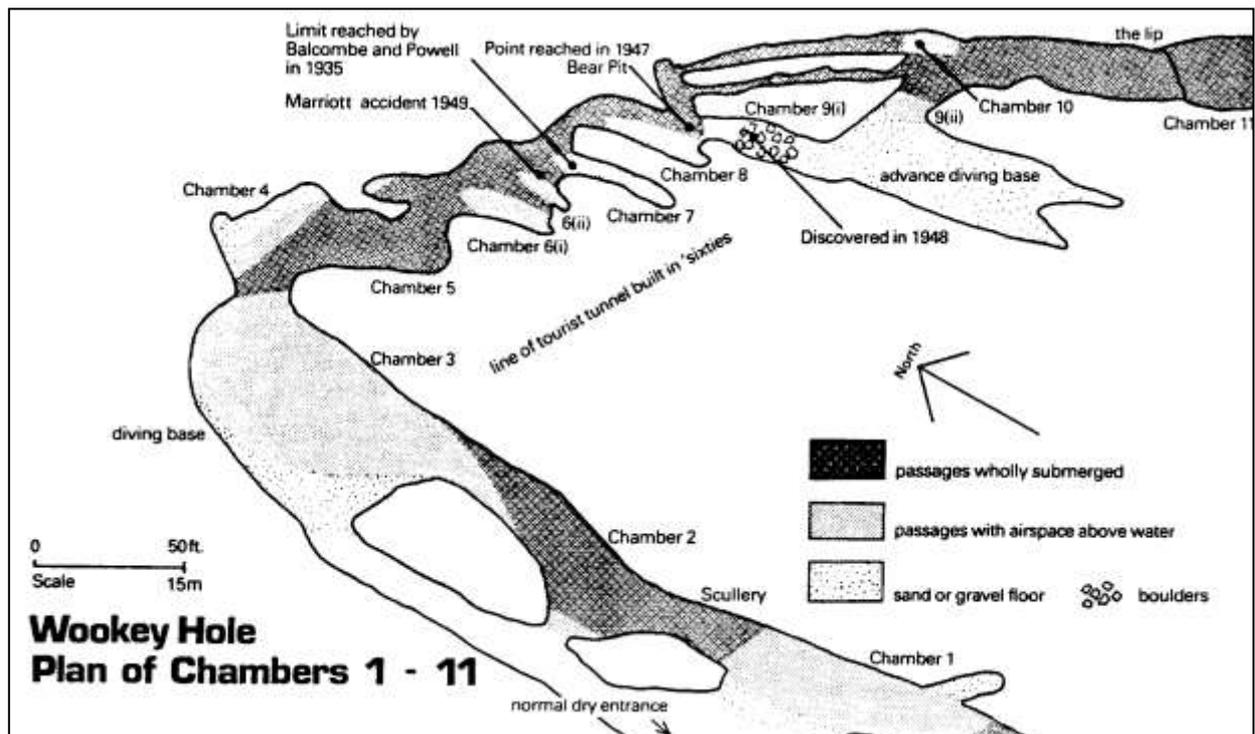
JS: Before the fact, or...?

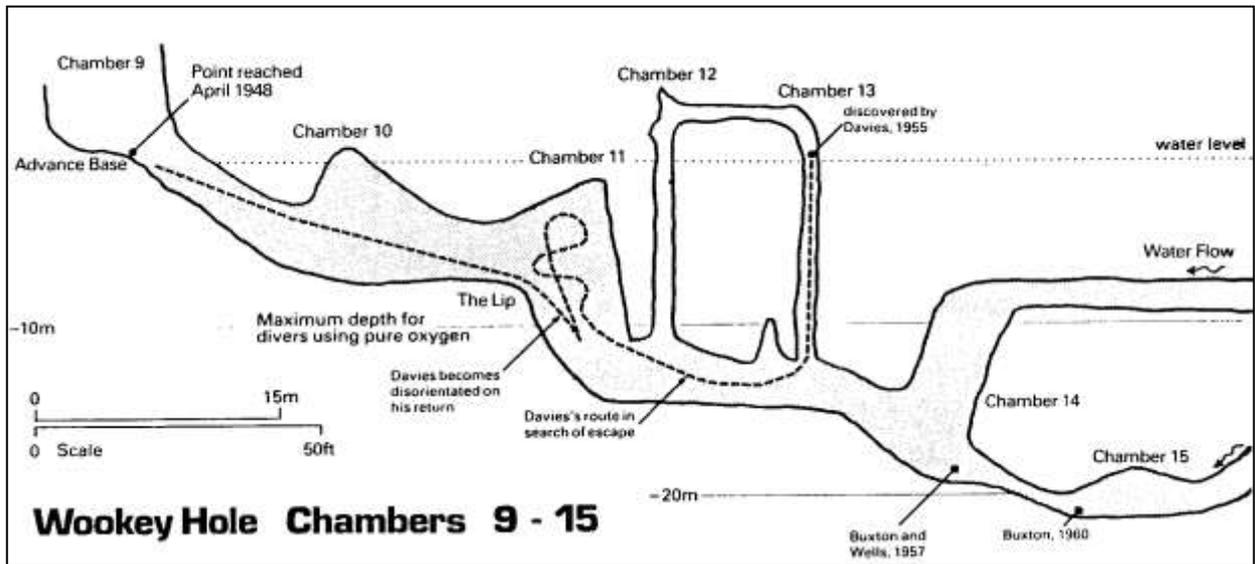
OW: Certainly after the fact. Bob's discovery of Thirteen is of course well-known. His swim upstream looking for air after he had lost contact with us, and his subsequent escape swim out again while short of air must surely rank as one of the most astonishing exploits by any cave diver ever. Bob had his aqualung and he wanted to swim down to the bottom of Eleven and take a quick look around. He was going to lay a line and come back. We were going to go with him as far as the edge of Eleven.

JS: That's where the bottom drops off?

OW: Yes, from Nine to Eleven is a gentle walk and then the sandy floor of the passage drops away as if you are at the edge of the Continental Shelf. Bob swam ahead of us to show us the way. John Buxton was the absolute model of dignity as he walked along, leaning forward slightly, laying the line from the AFLO which he held in his right hand. We had been told it, was 200 feet to the edge, but it turned out to be much less than that.

Suddenly I saw that John was jumping up and down like a Scottish dancer - he was holding his light above his head and dancing because he didn't want his momentum to carry him over the edge. Equally abruptly, I became aware that there was not a great deal of anything under me either (this is not a good





thing to happen if you are a walking diver). Way, way below us we could see Bob Davies spinning his light around. In fact the change in slope was not as great as it appeared at first sight, and neither of us was in any real danger of going into the dreaded "free-fall".

JS: So he was already off and going.

OW: Bob didn't realise that he had gone over the edge, and was surprised to find himself at a depth of about 50 feet at the bottom of Eleven. He was back with us in a moment to fix his line. But there was a delay at that point, and I could see he was trying to get his line reel organised. His reel was in darkness at the back of his AFLO, so I pointed my light at it so that he could see what he was doing. He was trying to untie the end of the line while the visibility steadily got worse, slowly at first, and then suddenly it was zero (and I mean ZERO). For a time, my main function was to act as an object against which other objects bumped from time to time.

So I just stood still, under the impression that all was well and that Bob was away and exploring. John materialised out of the mud and tried to speak to me but I couldn't understand what he was saying. Nobody had mentioned the possibility that Bob might get lost in the muddy water, and my brain refused to admit even the possibility that such a thing might have occurred. It is probably true to say that I was confused by the unexpected turn of events. So we returned briefly to Nine to see if he was there before going back to Eleven. By that time there was no sign of Bob anywhere.

JS: How long was it before you realised that Bob was in trouble?

OW: John realised what had happened as soon as he saw that Bob was not back in Nine. We were wearing full facemasks and it was quite a business to take them off. So John couldn't just

remove his mouthpiece and talk to me when we were back in Nine — he sort of grunted and vanished back towards Eleven faster than I had ever seen him move before. I couldn't understand why he was getting so agitated.

It was a perfect example of confusion between divers. Nowadays, divers operate solo, and this sort of thing is much less likely to happen (Bob was way ahead of his time in being in favour of cave divers operating on their own).

JS: So you went back to Nine again?

OW: Well eventually, we did (but as noted above, we did go back there earlier in the confusion when Bob vanished). We stayed in Nine for a while and Bob didn't reappear, so after a couple of hours, we went back to Three. We debated whether to go back to Eleven to start a search but we didn't. We didn't even have the intelligence to leave a line with a light on it in Eleven.

Dan Hasell was in charge of things in Three, and when we arrived he called out other divers. Graham Balcombe, for example, was hard at work getting his stuff together (this was in the early hours of the morning) when Bob reappeared. Most of us were in the cave owner Gerard Hodgkinson's house by then, and were greatly surprised when someone came in to say that Bob was back in Three. For a moment I refused to believe that this was so. He had come all the way out of the cave on his own.

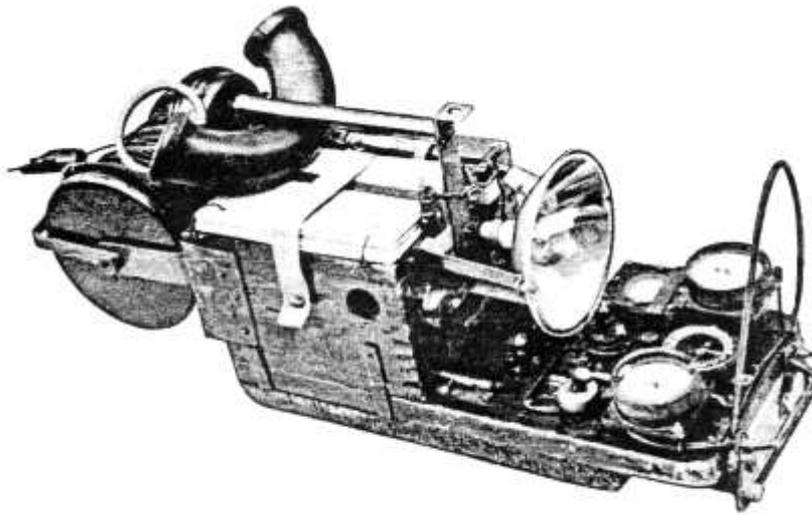
JS: What happened to Bob?

OW: Well first of all, he had lost contact with the line in the confusion in Eleven. He had wound the wire around his arm, but was distracted when the battery box on his AFLO opened unexpectedly, and with one thing and another, he lost the wire. He swam in circles under conditions of zero visibility, until his first cylinder ran out. He equalised his cylinders, and kept on

swimming. When he ran out of air the second time, he became alarmed and, finding himself in clear water, swam upstream looking for air. He found air in the Thirteenth Chamber and also that he could climb up a short cliff to reach a horizontal place where he could sit and (as he put it) "ponder upon the verities."

Of course he was very lucky. Robert Harper visited Thirteen 25 years later and wrote: "Finding Thirteen took two trips...underwater there is a tight blind rift right next to it."

But to return to Bob's story, it turned out than he had more air in his cylinders than he had expected (33 atm). When his tanks were full, they had 120. So he waited there for three hours for the water to clear and then set out (laying a line this time) on his spectacular escape swim that took him into at least one blind alley but which fortunately ended in Nine.



Bob Davies' AFLO (Graham Balcombe)

JS: Did the mud get ahead of him?

OW: He told us that when he reemerged from a blind alley in Eleven, the mud was ahead of him but there was a layer of clear water a few inches deep just under the flat rock roof.

JS: How much air did he have when he got back?

OW: Three atmospheres, according to the pressure gauge (his breathing had become "difficult" when he was still about 10 feet down.

JS: Three atmospheres ... it must have been an exciting experience. Did he do much diving after that?

OW: He went to Philadelphia after that, and has been there ever since.

JS: Where else did you dive besides Wookey?

OW: About half our dives were at Wookey and the rest were elsewhere. Some of the water that emerges at Wookey Hole comes from Swildon's Hole in the Mendip Hills up above. There was an emotional connection between the two as well as an actual physical connection. Bob Davies dived in Swildon's also (that is when I met him). And finally I did some downstream diving in Swildon's, I got through two sumps there. That was under conditions of zero visibility.

JS: Was diving in Swildon's more difficult than at Wookey?

OW: In Swildon's you are diving downstream over a sand and mud floor so the visibility is essentially zero. However the tunnels are not large and you can feel your way through (the problem in the later sumps is that they are too tight). When finding Six I was greatly helped by a solutional groove in the roof that was just the right size for running a finger along (I had no idea what lay on either side). The trip to the dive site involved low crawls and squeezes and took several hours

JS: Where else besides Swildon's and Wookey?

OW: We dived in Yorkshire a couple of times. Our main success in Yorkshire was in Threaplunds Cave where we got through a sump that was about 65 feet long into a big stream passage that ended in another sump (June 23, 1956). Here, I was about to abandon the dive in totally muddy water, when I just happened to notice that the top of my mask was in air (it was an upstream dive but I had just gone through a small opening and the mud has risen). We also dived in South Wales, in Derbyshire and in Somerset.

JS: How many people were required for a typical diving operation, to get the gear to the dive site?

OW: When I got through Sump Four in Swildon's Hole we had something like 20 or 30 people. We were using our usual Wookey equipment, which had evolved under conditions where the carry-in was easy (in fact you can walk to the dive site in Wookey along the tourist paths wearing the apparatus). But in Swildon's, things are different.

So for the discovery of Six I made a lightweight oxygen respirator. We managed very well with about half a dozen people. The later divers managed to streamline operations even further.

The record achievement for a party without sherpas occurred on one of Graham Balcombe's blasting trips to Sump One in Swildon's Hole in 1934, when he had packaged sixty pounds of equipment. His friends helped him with it to the top of the Forty Foot Pot but by then their enthusiasm was exhausted. They lowered it all to him below, and then left him all on his own to carry it along the streamway — which took him eight and a half hours with thirteen journeys at every point. Jack Sheppard joined him the next day and they did some blasting, but without making very much progress. So the brilliant successes that they later achieved in this cave were very well earned, as you might say.

JS: You mentioned the AFLO device. What is this?

OW: It was a diver's light with depth gauge and so forth fixed onto it. Graham Balcombe was a great enthusiast for acronyms, and AFLO was short for AFLOLAUN: Apparatus For Laying Out Lines And Underwater Navigation.

JS: I've seen your AFLO and it seemed to have more than a light and depth gauge.

OW: It had a notepad on the top. My AFLO had an electronic signalling device and a sound-powered telephone for use from dry land. (This was especially useful during my discovery of Swildon's Five and Six.) We were mainly walking divers and the light which we carried was fairly bright (36 watts). The AFLO had a motorcycle battery in it, an independent lighting system with a dry battery, a watch, a space for tools and so on. My AFLO also carried a waterproof light fixed across the front with rubber straps (three lighting systems in all).

JS: What kind of bum time did you get?

OW: About an hour from the main light, and several hours from the others.

JS: Was this homemade?

OW: Yes. In John Buxton's AFLO for example, there was a plank of wood with a motorcycle battery in a box about half way along. The main light was in front of that with two depth gauges close to it so that he could read them using the main light. The line reel was at the back. The carrying handle was over the battery box and was fairly long. He held this at the point of balance.

In muddy water it can be useful to have a fairly long AFLO because you can then jab with it to find out what's where. For a walking diver it worked very well. Underwater they didn't weigh very much, but our supporters expressed opinions about their weight out of water from time to time. On my Swildon's Six dive I left the AFLO at home and used a very much lighter outfit altogether.

To be continued

I am grateful to Martyn Farr for permission to reproduce the diagrams of Wookey, and to Graham Balcombe for permission to reproduce the photograph of an AFLO - NJW