

Wessex Cave Club



Journal 327



Wessex Cave Club Journal

Volume 33: January 2013



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Editorial

Welcome to Journal 327. We start 2013 a little drier than the end of 2012. Our Club continues to be actively caving – as can be seen in numerous trip reports and write ups. There has also been a huge amount of hard graft put in to various projects - you know who you are!

In this issue there are a few larger articles of cave exploration. These continue a series of articles detailing the exploration. To balance out all the foreign exploration trips, there is also an article on the history and current work in Read's Cavern.

As mentioned in the last Journal I need members to provide ideas, photos, stories and trip write ups. This is our journal – and it needs your input. I can not produce our journal without your help. As you can see in this issue, a half page and a photo is fine. So, don't be shy put pen (or keyboard) to paper and share your caving.

On a personal level, once again, thank you for the comments I have received about Journal 326. I have tried to accommodate as many suggestions as possible.

Happy Caving.

Pete

Cover

James Cobbett in The Ailigandi River Cave

Photo : Roger Day



Back Cover

Fossils in the rock, Splash Pot, Read's Cavern.

Photo: Ali Moody



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Diary

- Apr 6th Yorkshire permits for Stream Passage Pot / Bar Pot
Apr 7th Yorkshire permits for Flood Entrance Pot / Dihedral
Apr 13th Second Saturday Trip (Sidcot Swallet)
Apr 14th Second Saturday Trip (Off Mendip - OFD)
May 11th Second Saturday Trip (Brown's Folly Mine)
May 11th Yorkshire permits for Lancaster Hole / Wretched Rabbit
May 12th Yorkshire permits for Pool Sink / Cow Pot
May 12th Committee meeting
June 8th Second Saturday Trip (Read's Cavern)

Hut Bookings

- Apr 5th Essex Lorry drivers (20)
Apr 8th ATC (20)
Apr 19th RDCC (5)
Apr 21st MCRA Library booking

RECENT ADDITIONS TO THE LIBRARY

As at 21st February 2013

- BCA N/L 16 (Jan 2013)
BCRA 'Cave and Karst Science' 39, 3 (Dec 2012)
Cave Diving Group N/L 186 (Jan 2013) (*Reservoir Hole*)
Chelsea S.S. N/L 55, 1,2 (Jan/Feb 2013)
Craven Pothole Club 'Record' 109 (Jan 2013)
Descent 230 (Feb/Mar 2013)
MCG 'News' 369 (Dec 2012)
MNRC N/L 136 (Winter 2013)
N.S.S. 'News' 70, 12 (Dec 2012) 71, 1, 2 (Jan, Feb 2013)
Plymouth Caving Group N/L 154 (May 2012)
Speleological Union of Ireland 'Underground' 84 (Winter 2013)
Union Belge de Speleologie 'Speleo-Info' 1 (Jan/Feb/Mar 2013)
Wittenburg Univ. S.S. (USA) 'Pholeos' 31, 1, 2 (Sept 2012)
(*Incl. survey of Rock House Cave*)
White Rose Pothole Club N/L 31, 4 (Dec 2012)
GRPS (Belgium) Le Chantoir de Rostène (incl. survey)

Cave Hunting in the Darien Jungle, Panama, 2011 - 13

(James S. Cobbett)

The search for The Witch Doctor's Cave and the discovery and exploration of The Ailigandi River Cave, in Kuna Yala, in an area of the Darien jungle not previously thought to contain any limestone.



Though a number of caves had been explored elsewhere in Panama (See above and "Caves & Caving in Panama", by James S. Cobbett, Wessex Cave Club Journal, September 2009), it had previously been thought that the north Darien region, where the Kuna Yala Indian "Comarca" is located, featured only igneous rocks, with a thin covering of recent sediments.

A chance meeting with staff of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institution, in 2008, suggested that something more interesting might lie beneath the surface. A group of Smithsonian geologists had visited the village of Ailigandi, on an island in Kuna Yala, where they had been told of a cave up the Ailigandi River, which has a second entrance by the sea. However, in order to ward off evil spirits, they would first have to endure a ritual purification process, which involved inhaling smoke from burning cocoa leaves. As time was pressing, and Ailigandi is far from home, the Smithsonian geologists did not follow this up.

I first visited the Ailigandi area (top right, above) in 2005, when we sailed Flying Scud back from Colombia to Panama, passing through San Blas on the way.

The San Blas Islands, off the Caribbean coast of Darien, are arguably the World's most beautiful and unspoilt cruising ground, and we have been back most years since. The Kuna Indians mainly live in over-crowded islands, like Ailigandi, near to the mainland, which they visit every morning in their dugout canoes to tend their crops. A few families also live on the idyllic islands further offshore, where they cultivate coconuts, which, until recently, were used as

money. As a regular visitor to the area, and a caver, what else could I do but check out this lead?



However, by 2011 when I got a posse together, including Roger Day, Pat & Pauline Cronin, Dig Hastilow, Marilyn Cobbett and myself, we had been told of another cave near Ustupu, another island a little beyond Ailigandi, and this was to be our first port of call – literally. It takes us almost a week to get down here from the marina on the Caribbean end of the Panama Canal.

Here, our local contact was to be a traditional healer, "botanico" in Spanish, or "Witch Doctor" in English.

We eventually found the Witch Doctor's grass hut, filled with over a dozen small and mainly naked children, and maybe four of their mothers.

Using Marilyn as a translator, we established that he was expecting us, and that there was a big cave in the hills on the mainland. As "The Witch Doctor's Cave" is a site sacred to the Kunas, we first had to get permission from the Sahila, the local Chief. Later in the day, accompanied by the Witch Doctor and the Witch Doctor's Assistant, we visited the Sahila in his hammock in the Congreso Hut. He told us that he would have to discuss this at that evening's congress and only then would he make his decision.

The next morning, we went to pick up the Witch Doctor first thing, as he had told us that all would be well – but it was not, and we would have to meet the Sahila again later in the day, before permission would be given. This meeting did not take place till gone noon, by which time we were getting concerned about the time.

The Sahila explained that the mountain, and the cave, were sacred sites for the Kuna, considered to be the source of all life, as shown by the presence of turtle bones so far from the sea (maybe left by pre-historic cave dwellers?). He was concerned that if the site were to be disturbed, then an "epidemic or some other disaster" might engulf the Kunas. Also there are precious stones, silver and other treasures in the cave, not to mention the small matter of a "very large devil", which flies out at seven every evening emitting a distinctive whistling noise! Money changed hands, and we got our permission, but as it was already afternoon we queried whether it was now too late to make the visit. Both the Sahila and the Witch Doctor insisted that there was plenty of time left, so we went back to Flying Scud to get our kit.

At two, Roger, Pat, Dig and myself set off in my inflatable, following the Witch Doctor in his dugout canoe, but without his Assistant, who had not been seen since learning that we were to go to the cave. Instead, his trainee, aka the "Witch Doctor's Apprentice", was with him, complete with an antique and dangerous-looking rifle, but with little enthusiasm for the whole enterprise.

Up the river, past the Kuna cemetery, we left the boats at the start of an obvious track, which follows the main water supply pipe for the town. As we got higher, the track got worse and, in places, we had to by-pass recent land-slips where the track had been destroyed. We were still far from the cave by five, and the devil flies at seven, by which time it would be long dark. The Witch Doctor was looking scared, and, in spite of his gun, his Apprentice's teeth were rattling so badly that he could not even speak!

This left us with no real choice but to turn back, at which point the Witch Doctor's Apprentice turned and ran. The rest of us made a more orderly retreat. Part way down, the Witch Doctor picked up what looked like a piece of black wood from the ground and gave it to Dig, with the comment "Kuna Viagra, three days!", accompanied by a

gesture "for all the World like a baby's arm raised in anger", as they say in the classics. (Curiously, Dig has not responded to my enquiries as to how this worked out. Maybe he got stuck, unable to turn around, in a well-lit phone box, when he found he had lost the number required to summon medical assistance?).

We eventually found the Witch Doctor's Apprentice waiting for us, in the near-dark, by the boats. He redeemed himself somewhat by showing some small, limestone karst caves near the river, before we made our way back to Ustupu and Flying Scud, arriving by torch-light in the dark.

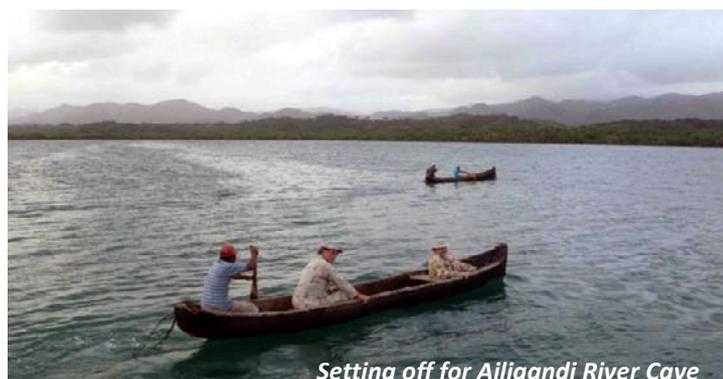
The general consensus, especially that of "management", was that we had had enough fun for now, and to leave any return to the Witch Doctor's cave to another time.

In 2012, Roger and Rita Day, Marilyn and I returned to Ustupu and contacted the new Sahila, via a Kuna friend, without involving the Witch Doctor. The new Sahila said that visits to this cave, now reported to contain diamonds, gold and all manner of treasure, were specifically prohibited by Kuna law, and that we never should have been given permission to visit in 2011.

Though, rather like Heaven and Hell, everyone seems to know about this cave, no one can be found who has been there, descriptions are hardly credible, and there are no photographs. I doubt if any of these places really exist, and do not plan to spend more time looking.

On the way back from Ustupu in 2012, we stopped off at Ailigandi, where we met Christopher Lucas, a Kuna who had on his cell phone some very dark photos of a nearby cave and who offered to find us a guide for a visit. The Ailigandi Sahila, considering possible commercial tourism, was happy for us to visit. However, time was then pressing, so the "Ailigandi River Cave" was put on the programme for 2013.

In January 2013, Roger Day, Marilyn and Andrew Cobbett and I returned to Ailigandi, where Christopher was waiting for us. He introduced us to the new Sahila, his uncle, who was very happy for us to visit the cave or caves, as two significant caves, one with a second entrance near the sea, were now reported to lie nearby.



Setting off for Ailigandi River Cave

The next morning Christopher collected us from Flying Scud, with two guides and two dugout canoes. After paddling almost one hour up the Ailigandi River, we left the canoes and then followed a wide track along the route of the water supply pipe - most significant Kuna settlements have one of these. After walking a further half hour, all along the flood plain of the river, we turned left into an insignificant track, then across the river, to arrive at the base of a limestone outcrop. Things were looking up!

Having crossed the outcrop (maybe 60 feet high) we followed, to the right, a track along the jungle floor along the base of the outcrop for a further ten minutes, to some obvious entrances in the escarpment, maybe thirty feet above the jungle floor. (GPS Location 09° 13.320' North, 78° 03.601' West.)

Much to the amazement of the Kunas, who had not even considered that we might do such a thing, Roger and I donned our helmets and lights, and went in.

Ailigandi River Cave has perhaps as many as eight entrances, leading into linked walking-sized passages, some as much as twelve feet wide and twenty feet high. These are all very dry, long-abandoned passages, with lots of stal and lots of bats. All possible onward and downward extensions are choked with bat shit, including one twelve foot deep shaft which I descended on electron ladder.



From the lack of tracks in the bat shit, or other signs, it seems unlikely that anyone had explored here before. There were no signs of human, or animal, habitation – apart from bats and insects. The furthest one can get from the cliff face is maybe sixty feet, with perhaps as much as three hundred feet of passage in total.

Though Roger made many photographs, including those shown here (with his permission), we did not make a survey. Roger and I are both qualified for free bus passes, so felt justified in leaving such things to younger men, especially in the heat and humidity of the Darien jungle. Our objective was limited to seeing if there really were any caves here, no more than that.

We then spent a further two hours looking for “the other cave with two entrances”, which was thought to be nearby. Though we did search two small limestone outcrops (each say 900 feet long x 300 feet wide x 100 feet high), and saw a number of small (some likely passable) entrances in the cliffs above, we did not find the entrance that one of the guides, who is a hunter and knows the area well, was looking for.

We also saw two, likely passable, stream sinks, but, again, must cite the “Bus pass excuse” for not entering them.

We then retraced our steps in time to be drinking iced beer on Flying Scud by early afternoon.

The hunter also told us that, in addition to the nearby “cave with two entrances”, there are bigger limestone escarpments, with more cave entrances, deeper in the jungle, but that visiting these would involve spending several nights, likely camping in jungle hammocks. He will make a point of locating some of these for our next visit.



I am currently considering how best to make a return in 2014. Interested parties may email me on james@jamescobbett.com.

LONGWOOD VALLEY - New Year's Day 2013 (Nigel Graham)

Already knowing that the Longwood stream was flowing over the sinks and down into Cheddar Gorge, I visited the valley, as did many others, enjoying a day of glorious sunshine. (You remember – bright light from a big round thing in the sky.)



Longwood Valley. Photo: Nigel Graham

After slithery progress over to the head of the Nature Reserve, I managed to fail to identify the Longwood-August sink in these conditions.

Longwood Valley Sink – which I'd helped Rich Witcombe, Simon Meade-King, Tuska *et al* to dig many years ago - was full to the gate. The vegetation showed that the river had been a lot higher. Pete Hann subsequently told me the water had been six inches deep over the gate when he saw it. Now it was just lapping gently over a low part of the masonry, but clearly sinking.



Longwood Valley Sink. Photo: Ali Moody

A family walking up-valley passed me at the SWT land's very own "Watergate", with its bench incongruously in mid-stream. They seemed a little unsure but managed to negotiate the obstacle.

The water occupied the full width of the Black Rock Gate gateway but flowed off-road a short distance below the junction.

Pausing to sit on a river-bank boulder and munch a Mars Bar in the sunshine at the quarry on my return, I was joined by a family whose little girl sounded more like Grandma

with her "Oooh, I don't think I can get up", from the rocks she'd shared with her mother adjacent to me. "I know how she feels!" I said to Mum, who laughed and agreed.

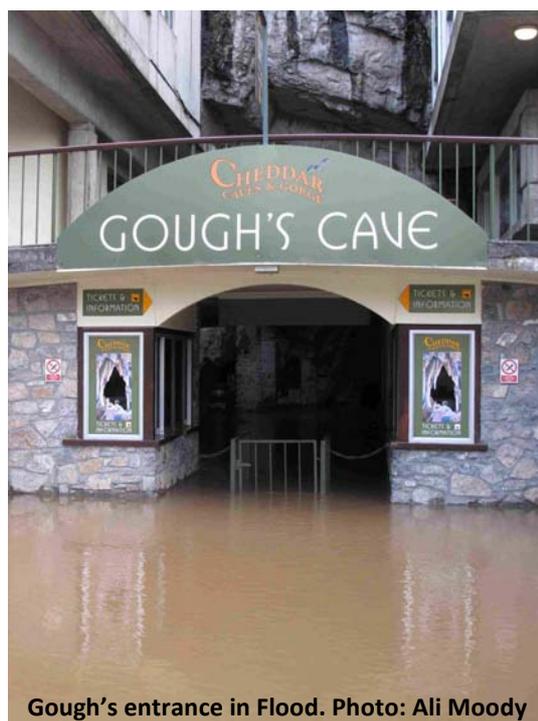
Closer inspection showed Longwood Valley Sink, a narrow rift in very cherty limestone, to be taking water through a hole between the gate surround and the roof of the cut-and-cover adit that slopes steeply down into the original shaft. Furgling with a stick disturbed silt that cleared immediately downwards but most of the water still flowed straight across the top.

I found the main Longwood sink by careful searching. It seemed to be taking all the water it could but I do not know if it has silted up or the outlet into the cave is constricted. It is so long since I was able to enter the cave that I have forgotten some details but vaguely recall falling water concealing the inlet itself.

These floods are unusual only in human terms. Cheddar Gorge and its tributaries are Pleistocene river valleys that hand their cold-climate land-drainage responsibilities to the caves, so continuing to develop them, in warm interglacials such as the present; but still occasionally take surface flows for old times' sake.

I learnt later that a few cavers had suggested "helping" in such situations by temporarily sending some of the stream down "our" entrance to Longwood-August. Even if the cave takes all that extra water, it would only flood Gough's Cave more severely, hence flood the road below the show-cave anyway.

Mother Nature has her own way at times. We can try to avoid the worst hazards and mitigate the effects on our activities; but must ensure that doing so does not have its own, unintended, results. Sometimes it's better to let be.



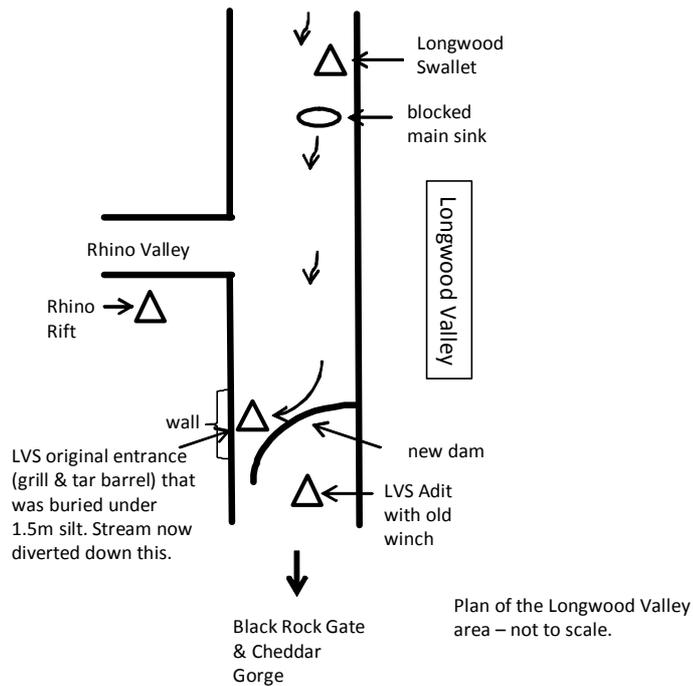
Gough's entrance in Flood. Photo: Ali Moody

Editor's note: further to Nigel's article, work was carried out by a small team to divert the water.

Cheddar Gorge shut! (Ali Moody)



Ali Moody in Cheddar Gorge. Photo: Pete Moody



Over the last few years the sinks for the Longwood Valley stream have silted up, causing the water to flow further down the valley and at times as far as Blackrock Gate, near the top end of Cheddar Gorge. The damage to the road resulted in it being closed to traffic (see photo above) from the end of November. This caused significant inconvenience to local residents and also adversely affected local businesses.

However, on Wednesday 13th February 2013, Chris Billingham (Somerset Wildlife Trust), Bob Corns (Natural England), Alison Moody, Rich Witcombe, Clive North and Stuart McManus dug out the original entrance to Longwood Valley Sink. This diverted the stream underground and off the B3135. By the following Friday the road was being repaired and it was finally reopened on 21st February after a closure of 88 days.



Ali Moody in diverted stream. Photo: Steve McManus



Clive North and Rich Witcombe dig out the original entrance to LVS. Photo: Ali Moody

CLUB NEWS

Tratman Award 2012 (*Chris Howes, for the judges*)

The Tratman Award is presented to the author of the best caving-related publication of the year, being judged by independent cavers who make their recommendations to the Ghar Parau Foundation, which funds the award. The judges for 2012 were Ric Halliwell, Chris Howes, Alan Jeffreys and Martin Mills, who also sought opinion from a wider readership and, with four judges available, where required were able to exclude themselves from discussing any title causing a conflict of interest.

A wide range of books and journals were considered, creating a shortlist that was whittled down to six for further discussion. These were:

Derek Hawkins' *Bath Stone Quarries*, a fine photographic record of this complex of mines, oft visited by cavers and mining enthusiasts alike.

The *Cave Radio & Electronics Group Journal*, in recognition of the long-running specialist nature of this publication (the current issue is no. 80), being maintained at a high standard and a credit to the production team.

Tim Allen for his series of articles on the Three Counties breakthrough published in *Descent* issues (224) and (225), bringing the accurate story to cavers in a complete and timely fashion.

Earth Colours by Marie Clarke, Neville Gregory and Alan Gray. Another fine hardback book from the Mendip Cave Registry and Archive stable, it is packed with information and photographs concerning ochre mining on Mendip.

Phil Hendy's series of caving features in the *Mendip Times*, a free local publication; these have placed caving in front of the public in a good light for the past five years.

Slovene Caves & Karst Pictures 1545–1914 by Trevor Shaw and Alenka Cuk, a softback book concentrating on the region's photographs and illustrations, many of which are accompanied by biographies.

To choose a winner proved incredibly difficult, in particular being a close call between *Earth Colours* and *Slovene Caves & Karst*. In the end, the judges came down in favour of *Slovene Caves & Karst*, given its sheer quality of research, readable content and fine presentation.

Congratulations therefore go to Trevor and Alenka; this is not the first collaboration we have seen from this pair, and we trust it will not be the last. All the shortlisted authors also receive our congratulations for their commendations and should note the prestige conferred: to attain a shortlisting is in itself an achievement. The award is a piece

of original artwork by Mark 'Gonzo' Lumley, which will be presented at the Hidden Earth 2013 conference.

Templeton (*Phil Hendy*)

The landowner, Richard Masters, has been very generous over the years to the Templeton diggers, but is concerned that others are visiting the site on non-dig nights.

We do not wish to fall out with Richard, so if anyone wishes to look at the dig, they are only welcome to do so when the diggers are present. We dig on Mondays and Wednesdays, from 7pm. These are the only nights when visits are permitted.

The continuing rainfall has conspired with dumper, generator and pump problems to make the North Pot (now around 235ft below the surface) difficult to dig, though slow progress is being made in soft mud and stones. This is a welcome change from just mud, which we had previously. Access to the decorated South Pot has been chemically enlarged, and Jim Young and Tuska have started installing steelwork to enable the boulder floor here to be excavated.

Manor Farm Swallet (*Phil Hendy*)

The landowner, Mr. Jefferies, is sometimes disturbed by cavers leaving the cave late at night – he has young children. He requests that cavers leave the cave by 22.00 hours (10pm in old money). If a later exit is required, he may be contacted on 01761 462366. Only when absolutely necessary, please. He has also seen cavers entering the cave without paying the goodwill fee. If this persists, he may consider locking the cave. I am sure no Wessex members are involved, but please take note.

2034 (*Phil Hendy*)

In 'only' 21 years the Club will be 100 years old and no doubt the Committee of the day will be commissioning a publication to relive the events and activities over the previous century. It is unlikely that several of our older members (I now count myself as one) will be there to sup from the celebratory barrel, so if any oldies would like to put down some of their reminiscences on paper, or even electronically (we're not all Luddites), the Committee will file them for use at the appropriate time.

Headquarters, clothing, tackle and attitudes have all changed over the years, and we now continually trip over the dreaded Elf'n'Safety dictates.

Digs, expeditions and ordinary caving trips, and the amusing, strenuous or terrifying incidents associated with them can all be recorded, and sent either to our Hon. Chairman or to me, the (dis)Hon. Librarian. I may even recall a few tales of my own (contemporaries beware, or at least write your own version of events).

Jim Rands – An Appreciation

(Nigel Graham)

“Coffee’s on!” Jim called down the shakehole.

“Cheers!” I called back from the pitch.

“Topless waitress service!” I won’t say by whom.

Amazing how smoothly I ascended the last thirty feet or so of Ruiz, with that encouragement.

We were leaving the Gouffre Berger after a slow but very enjoyable trip as far as The Canals, with an overnight stop at Camp One before setting out, and worked well as a team, often a pitch apart but always in voice contact.

Team-work and giving were in Jim Rand’s nature. One cold, wet day on Blåfjell, in central Norway, our three-man team were freezing our unmentionables off, surveying a stream cave. Jim set up his little tent so we could emerge at intervals to thaw out inside it, with the sandwiches and hot soup he prepared for us.

I think it was on the same trip that he proved he could take a joke too. Well, he was always an enthusiastic participant in the Wessex Challenge and had a fund of elastic anecdotes about others, including me...



Jim Rands. Photo: Ali Moody

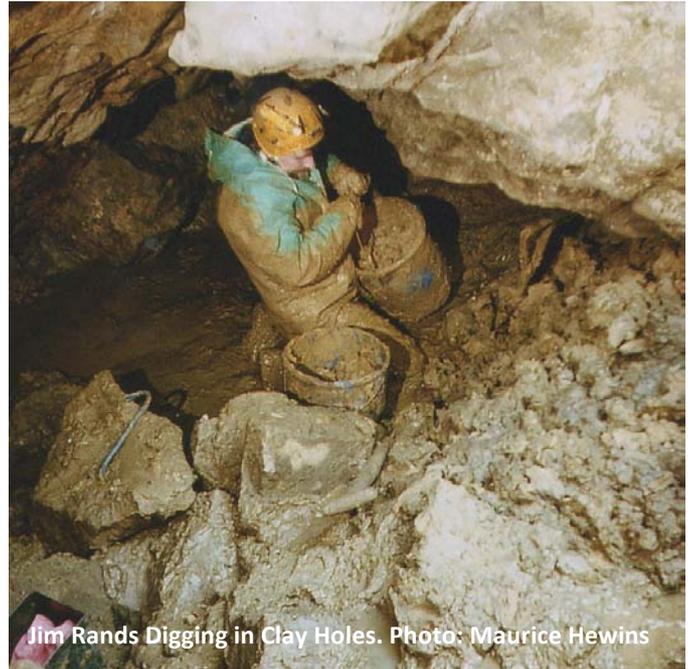
Jim had turned back to search for a digging jemmy lost on a prospecting walk. He returned downcast and empty-handed to be greeted with, “Well Jim, in all the years I’ve known you, that’s the first time you’ve failed to find a bar!” He liked a pint, did Jim.

The gift of the gab too, laced with his London accent – as when the commentator for the April Fool prank played by certain WCC members on the tourists, by supposedly panning for gold in the River Axe by the Wookey Hole car-park.

Or taking a bag of cave silt back for the women in the window factory where he was a manager, because, he had convinced them, it is extremely good for the complexion, but “Why pay a fortune for a mud-pack from a beauty shop?”

Jim had originally been a hotel chef, and gave his skills to helping cook for social events like the first Wessex

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Jim Rands Digging in Clay Holes. Photo: Maurice Hewins

Challenge, when he roasted two whole pigs in a specially-built barbeque in the Hut grounds.

He was determined, too. Living in NW London, lack of his own transport, before he built a trike, did not deter Jim from weekends on Mendip, even though it meant walking from the bus-stop at the Hillgrove turning.

Jim’s passing hit me hard. When one evening I spotted the name ‘Rands’ when looking up another in my address-book, I realised I had not seen or heard from the couple for a while, so rang. It was meant to be just a social call. Mhairi broke the news to me that he was in his last illness. Only hours later, early in the morning, she rang me – “He’s on a different path now.”

Later, she comforted me by saying I should not feel guilty about being in Norway over the time of his funeral, and that I must remember Jim in my own way. Mhairi added that she would offer felt-tip markers to mourners to leave farewells on his coffin. I asked her to write, “Well Jim, you got me through Sump One! - Nigel”. Mhairi had been on that trip too.

On the day of the funeral we were walking up Kappskardal to establish a hill camp prior to exploring the potentially major cave we had found in 2010. The path passes Memorial Cave, a short but rather impressive river oxbow cave we had found and named not long after Bob Drake’s untimely loss. Jim had been one of its explorers.

I crossed the river and stood looking down the entrance cascade for a little while, to remember a good caving, drinking and heavy-rock music loving friend in my own way, at a spot where once, he and I had remembered another friend.

A way I feel Jim would have appreciated.

Membership News

A warm welcome to new members Jennifer Cornwall, Rachel McMahon, Richard Lockwood and Connor Stuart Roe.

The index to Volume 31 and 32 (December 2009 to January 2010) is published on the Wessex web site.

There is a vacancy for a club leader for St. Cuthbert's Swallet. The committee intends to nominate a candidate at the next committee meeting, so if you are interested please email committee@wessex-cave-club.org To qualify, the leader must know the cave well and be approved by the BEC after demonstrating their suitability. Further details are available on the application form available from any committee member.

There are two "private" areas of the club internet forum which are only visible to registered club members. If you have difficulty getting to see these areas email webmaster@wessex-cave-club.org

Ann Marie Scammell (1950 – 2012)

It is with great sadness that we have to announce the death of Ann Marie Scammell. Ann was known to her friends as Golly. Golly passed away on the 31st December 2012, aged 62, after a year-long fight with cancer. Her husband, Bob, and family were by her side.

Golly joined the Wessex Cave Club in 1974, having previously been a member of the Bath Caving Group. In those early days she caved with Bob and dug at numerous sites including Hillgrove, Nine Barrows and at West Horrington. She was a regular explorer of the Bath Stone Mines and spent a great deal of time with Bob photographing the caves and mines they visited. She helped to organise the opening of Monkton Farley Ammunition Depot Museum to visitors. She was an Honorary Member of the Wessex Cave Club.

Golly enjoyed attending and helping at Wessex social events like the Wessex Challenge and was always first to help to prop up the kitchen sink with friends and a G&T after numerous annual dinners. She will be greatly missed by all who knew her.

(Barry & Marion Wilkinson)

Oliver Wells (1913 – 2013)

It is with great sadness we announce the death of Oliver Wells. Oliver passed away Wednesday 20th Feb 2013. Oliver was a very active member of WCC in the 1950's and dove at Wookey and Swildon's. He dove through sumps 4 and 5 in Swildon's and was also part of the crews that found Mayday Passage and Paradise Regained. *(James Wells)*

Chris Hawkes (1930 – 2013)

It is with great sadness we announce the recent death of Chris Hawkes.

Chris was born in July 1930. He joined the Wessex in 1955 and was Editor 1961-67, producing Club *Journals* (Volumes 7, 8 & 9). He was a very active archaeologist and did a lot to raise the profile of Wells Museum and the legacy of Balch. *(Don Thomson)*

A PASSING STAR OF THE 'FIFTIES ON OLIVER CRAIG WELLS 1931-2013

(Jim Hanwell)

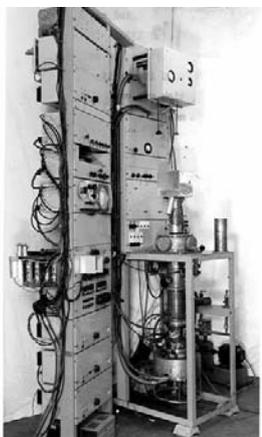
Oliver did most of his caving on Mendip whilst at Cambridge University, starting in 1951. He joined the Wessex Cave Club early in 1952 and became a qualified cave diver in 1954.

His training was supervised by Jack Thomson of the Derbyshire Section of the CDG, where he also met Bob Davies and John Buxton. After Bob's amazing escape from an exploratory overnight dive to the new Thirteenth Chamber in Wookey Hole Cave on 10/11 December 1955, Oliver was elected Chairman of the CDG when barely in his mid-20s.

This sudden rise to stardom over what was then perceived to be an elite few in the caving world was taken very seriously by Oliver. By inclination he was a specialist rather than a generalist, conscious of his new responsibilities and the debt owed to his predecessors who had pioneered British cave diving on Mendip, when he himself was just a child.

He grew up with science and cutting edge technology in his blood, and was very much influenced by the dreadful deprivations suffered during the Second World War, particularly in London, his home town. He became angry, for example, when some post-War cave divers likened Graham Balcombe's "command" of CDG at the time as akin to Hitler!

His grandfather, the famous H. G. Wells (who died in 1946), is still regarded as the "Father of Sci-fi", of course. Oliver on his own account helped to create the Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) in Professor Oakley's research team at Cambridge, and was principal author of *Scanning Electron Microscopy* (1974).



From Oliver Wells' PhD thesis



Oliver Wells. Photo: James Wells

Corporation, at Watson Research Center, in Yorktown, New York, in the USA, throughout his professional career. He arrived there late in 1959, being one of the many British scientists of the "Brain Drain" period at the time.

Since there was little scope for caving in New England, he became a part-time ski instructor at Hunter Mountain. With his wife Pamela, Oliver ensured that their three children, John, James and Julia, became proficient skiers. Visits back home, latterly, became annual and both stayed regularly at the Hunters' Lodge Inn, where they were updated with Mendip's caving news. He even did a few upstream dives in Wookey Hole Cave for old time's sake.

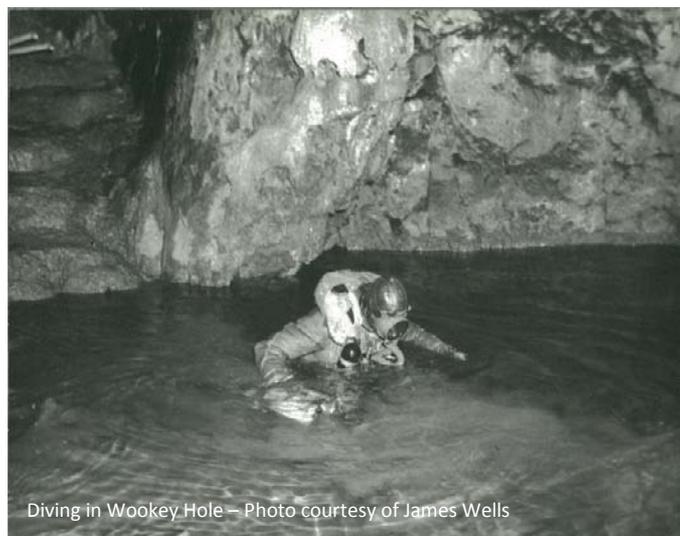
But Oliver was not a "collector" of caves, and remained content enough with his significant contributions to the downstream exploration of Swildon's Hole in the 1950s. He was in the party with Phil Davies that discovered the Mayday Passages in 1954, and with Dennis Kemp's Westminster Speleological Group diggers the following year when they first passed the "unpleasant" Mud Sump and discovered Paradise Regained.

I myself was "initiated" by Dennis on the next trip to PR on 26 March 1955, whilst Oliver went on to help survey the new finds. By mid-June 1956, they had reached the notorious Blue Pencil Passage, with the "sound of a stream" at the end! Len Dawes and his WSG diggers meanwhile set about widening the constricted passage with explosives supplied by Kemp. Despite coming from London to Mendip most weekends, it took a full year before the main Swildon's Four streamway was found and explored, both downstream and upstream; it was a triumphant moment in Mendip's caving history!

Oliver thus played a key part in launching the new age of electronic computers, working for the influential IBM

As he had taken part at the start of the “PR-Blue Pencil Saga”, and was Chairman of the CDG, Oliver was naturally invited to organise diving Sump IV and continue the main stream exploration of Swildon’s. The first major push took place in mid-September 1958, headed by Oliver and John Buxton. The details of this and subsequent operations until 17 January 1959 are recorded in Dave Irwin’s chapter in *Swildon’s Hole: 100 Years of Exploration* (Wessex Cave Club, 2007), pages 40-46. Suffice to say here, that all started well with the discovery of Swildon’s Five and Six, but ended tragically with the death of 23-year old John Wallington from hypothermia.

I myself helped to haul heavy diving gear in and out the cave on several trips, as a so-called “Tiger Sherpa”; an exhausting saga that ended as a Cave Rescuer recovering poor Wallington’s body.



Diving in Wookey Hole – Photo courtesy of James Wells

Oliver Wells.

We did quite a lot of caving together in the '50s, mostly in Swildon's and also in many other caves. I especially remember one trip on a wet day to the end of August Hole.



Oliver Wells in Tratanan
Photo: Don Thomson (Courtesy of MCRA)

His main interest in caving was Mendip, perhaps because far fewer people went abroad to cave in the 1950s. He showed little interest in caving politics.

He was one of the best cavers one could meet and a fine person to know, and we shall miss him. *(Donald Thomson).*

Oliver’s own recollections of these times can be read at the end of his reflective chapter entitled “Mixture Breathing...” in *Wookey Hole: 75 Years of Cave Diving & Exploration* (Cave Diving Group, 2010). Recalling his final year of caving on Mendip, he writes (page 130) that “The maxim ‘safety in numbers’ does not work well underground”, and ends his account by thanking his fellow cave divers and successors. Both hindsight do credit to Oliver.

It was good to see him and Pamela at the opening of our “Follow the Stream” Exhibition in Wells & Mendip Museum during September 2010, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of cave diving at Wookey Hole. We said our final goodbyes in Wells Market Place, after a lengthy hunt in the dark around all the city’s parks to find his hire car!

Like most passing stars that shoot westwards, Oliver shone as a bright light for a while. He also left a trail of valuable “dust” in the caving archives of his day.

(Jim Hanwell)



Oliver Wells (facing) and John Buxton, 1957.
Photo: Trevor Johnston

Lanzarote Lava Tube Caving: Act 2 (*Noel Cleave*)

Enter stage left (again), Carmen Smith, Chris Binding, Aubrey and Carol Newport, Noel and Rosemary Cleave, Rich Carey and Andrea Russe, all courtesy of Mr. Ryanair of Bristol, Lulsgate.

Wednesday, 28 November 2012 **Jameo de la Gente to Puerta Falsa.**

Rich revealed himself as a name-a dropping snob by talking of his lava-tube experiences in **Argentina and Korea** but, Andrea was a lava-tube virgin, as it were. **Gente to Falsa** is an ideal introduction to Lanzarote's version of the genre: "High, wide and handsome" would be an apt description.

We ambled through it in an hour or so, with Chris doing some filming en-route, but emerged into non-Lanzarote weather of intermittent drizzle. We retreated to Arietta for a splendid lunch in our favourite restaurant in the North of the island. Given the dire weather, we scrubbed our planned walk around Monte Corona in favour of a scenic drive, led by Chris.

The volcanic landscape is fascinatingly alien to our eyes. Wind and rain blew us back from the most vertiginous viewpoint above the Famara coast path.

That evening Noel and Rosemary hosted a quietly intimate dinner.

Thursday, 29 November 2012 Otherwise known as "Hangover Thursday". Someone must have spiked all 8 bottles of wine and the Caramel Vodka. For reasons not unconnected with this, we delayed starting out until 1100, not least to ensure a degree of breathalyser safety, but we enjoyed another stunningly scenic drive to **Cueva las Breñas**.

Cueva las Breñas is different. Its entrance is a small hole deliberately hidden under boulders, close to a main road. Then, inside, it continues as a small hole - for about 900 metres - almost every one of them either crawling or flat out. It is also somewhat geothermal. Being the only such cave on Lanzarote it should properly be considered as a collectors item, rather than one of the more golden threads in life's rich tapestry.

So, we got the tick and emerged soaked in sweat and suffering from dehydration; which ailment we treated in Yaiza at a cheap and excellent Tapas bar. Thus revived we went lava bashing across part of Timanfaya national park.

Walking there is seriously discouraged but there are a few permitted foot-paths and one of them leads across some outrageous lava to a short but brilliant little cave: "**Pico Partido**". The lava inside is glossy black, almost glassy, and has solidified like poured toffee. It was worth the walk, which was an experience in its own right, enhanced by a ferocious gale of wind.

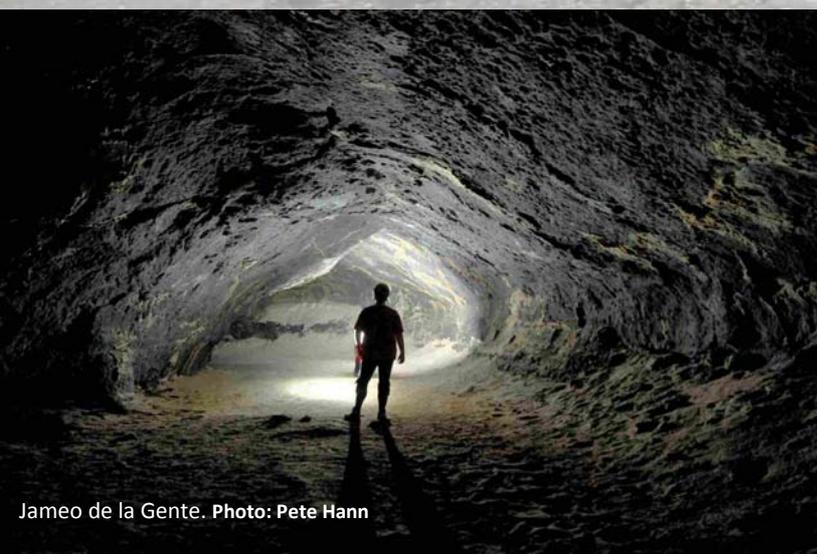
The evening saw our numbers swollen to 10 by the arrival of David and Judy and, back in our favourite tapas bar, since the meal was preceded and succeeded by drinks at No.21, aka the Cleave Crash Pad, Friday saw another **leisurely** start.....

Friday 30 November 2012 **Eventually** saw us investigating the entrance cage on **Cueva Los Lagos**. It was still under construction, complete with a mobile generator and workmen. The cage covers half the Jameo (so anyone could still fall in), then forms a vertical fencing. The entrance will eventually be via a sort of conning tower at the top. The vertical side would enable one to clamber down onto the jameo floor easily, and doubtless, in time, the bars will..... bend..... to allow entrance.

Our next activity was to visit the Monte Corona system show cave, **Cueva los Verdes**. It was seriously well worthwhile €8. It's big and well lit, but any UK **Elfansafety** inspector would have ten hissy fits. We simply enjoyed it.

Exhausted by our morning's caving we retreated to Arietta - again - to our seafront tapas nosherie for R & R. After some debate about the wisdom of making a clandestine exit from Cueva los Verdes we decided to behave ourselves and went in, and left, by **Puerta Falsa**. Since this has an easy clamber down, Rosemary came with us to read in shelter from the endless wind while we did the caving bit.

The down-flow entrance is enormous and rigged everywhere across the roof with stunning overhang climbing bolts and loops. **Puerta Falsa** is a bit of a curate's egg; good in parts but, after the huge entrance, settles into a succession of big passages and rock piles to be scrambled over. Chris did a fair amount of filming and photography. Finally we arrived at the "Show Cave" end, which is fenced across and actually several hundred metres from the actual show cave. Beyond the fence (which was already breached with a body-sized hole) was a Seismic research and recording unit: no less than a Portakabin suspended from the roof, plus much other scientific gubbins. We left it in peace and retreated.



History repeats etc. and all that... so dinner was en-masse at No. 21, organised by Carmen who produced locally supermarket sourced, new season, organic pre-cooked chickens, potatoes, salads and pizzas. No.21 was just about maxed out with 10 diners: Carmen had also organised extra tables and chairs for the living room, but failed to expand the floor area. Maybe if we put the double bed and the coffee table into the spare room.....

Saturday 01 December 2012

Only 23 shopping days to Christmas. Today's arrivals were Pete Hann with Sandy and Sarah, and Ed and Hayley (MCG). Since Rich and Chris are also MCG the Wessex element was being dangerously diluted, in fact it was only by invoking a Craven/Wessex sister club relationship that the Wessex maintained a tenuous majority. Politics apart, the arrivals disrupted the day somewhat so the only caving done was **Cueva Las Naturalista**, where Chris introduced David to lava tubes and David proved the accuracy of the equation: **Lava + Skin = Blood.**

The evening saw a mass dinner in our preferred Tapas restaurant. The Tapas are outstanding. Pete, Sandy and Sarah had been up since 0300 but hung in there for a good start to their holiday.

Sunday, 2 December 2012

Today saw a mob-handed assault on the up-flow tube from **Jameo de la Gente** to the top of the system, **Jameo de Prendes**. The MCG, in the form of Ed, provided a quality faff. Ed arrived at **Jameo de la Gente** minus his boots. No, really, minus his boots..... We set off without him and Pete got stuck into the multiple flash photography in the vast passages. This being his introduction to lava "Tubes" he had to do some mental recalibration.

When Ed and Hayley finally joined us we had three photographers simultaneously in action but it seemed to work well. The passages are so big that Pete had to use a radio unit to talk to Chris and Co in the distance.



Jameo de la Gente. Photo: Pete Hann

Noel and Rosemary did the circular walk from **El Golfo**, past **Covon** and **Cueva del Paso**. These caves are normally the limit of our walking in that direction. A few hundred metres beyond them an obvious cliff portal was matched by a classic Jameo a few metres inland (both illegally off the proper footpath). Then another hundred metres or so, yet another neat Jameo. These were unknown to Chris.

Incidentally, this was a glorious walk and El Golfo, though undoubtedly "Touristy" is charming and the seafront restaurant of choice inexpensive and excellent.

Carmen had rigged the exit climb for us and, while we were caving, Rosemary walked circuitously to Arietta (En route she had another look at the work in progress on the **los Lagos** entrance). Some elected to leave at the top, while others reversed to enjoy the cave twice but we eventually got our acts together at the Arietta beachfront restaurant for the nth such lunch. They must be doing something right!

After lunch (at 1610....) we went exploring. Ed had the GPS co-ords for a new cave, about which nothing was known, other than its name, "**Cueva Punta Prieta**". We drove

there. We (+ Mr. GPS) found it. A bitter gale accompanied the search. The cave offered shelter when we dropped down into the neat Jameo. This was its only positive offering. A few misleading metres of beautiful tube closed down into a hideous flat-out crawl over lava shards. Five metres of this and one could stand up... for another five metres.... and another but even sharper / shardier lava crawl. Only Carmen, Chris and Ed went for it. They were rewarded by scraped tummies and another 60 metres or so of low crawling ending in a lakelet sump.



Caldera Blanca. Photo: Paul Stillman

Monday 03 December 2012

The group split for the day with Noel, Rosemary, Rich and Andrea opting for a non-caving walk.

Caldera Blanca is reputedly the finest walk on the island but Noel chose to modify it adversely (ie. f*** it up completely) by misreading the maps and the directions. We

semi-circumnavigated the outside of the volcano until we found a slope just shallow enough to climb to reach the caldera rim (keyword there "Just").

The climb was fine underfoot but the exposure was something else again and neither Rosemary nor Rich were happy bunnies. The views from the caldera rim were stunning and so was the howling gale threatening to blow us off.

We retreated on the correct paths to regain some shelter and finally the car. We dealt with the thirst and hunger problem in a nearby tapas restaurant and did some vehicular sightseeing before rejoining the caving faction at our Molinos apartments.

Having emptied our 'fridge and taken nibbles across to Chez Carmen, we found that some gravitational force drew the assembled multitude back to No. 21 for pre-dinner drinks. By now we were "Regulars" at our tapas restaurant. We were also a serious mob because, with the welcome arrival of Paul and Ali, we numbered 15 (Noel & Rosemary, Chris & Carmen, Rich & Andrea, Aubrey & Carol, David & Judy, Pete + Sandy & Sarah, Paul & Ali).

As regulars we modified the tables and seating ourselves and the management treated us to a second bottle of Honey-Rum at the end of the meal. Luckily Noel and Rosemary were taking the shattered remnants of their livers back to the UK on Tuesday but it had been a hugely enjoyable and interesting week.

One Big Thank you to Chris.



Los Lagos. Photo: Chris Binding

Herault Caving: Perdreau Fourmi

(Christine Grosart)

Introduction

In the last Journal was the first part of our Herault caving adventures, where we pushed the sump in the Garrel.

This is the second part of our explorations; this time in Perdreau Fourmi.

Background

The local caving club, the CLPA headed up by Nathan Boinet, had previously supported us enthusiastically and it was an email from them that encouraged me to go back to the area and look at a cave called the *Perdreau-Fourmi*.

In 2011, a Wessex team of four divers, Joe Hesketh, Osama Gobara, Richard Walker and Christine Grosart, found the elusive way on underwater in the second sump and left the cave ongoing but well surveyed, as time on the trip ran out.

The cave has been dye tested and links with many other caves in the Buéges valley, but more importantly is very close to a cave called the Coudoulière. This cave is 100m deep and over 1,600m long and has been explored by French cave diver Patrick Bolagno from Marseille.

Herault 2012

2012 was a return to further push the cave. Osama and Joe sadly couldn't make it this year but they were very supportive of us heading back with some new team members from the Derbyshire Section CDG, to pick up where they had left the line reel.

The Team

As previously mentioned the 2012 team was Richard Walker and Christine Grosart, assisted by Jarvist Frost and Tim Webber (both members of our section of the Cave Diving Group back in the UK). We also had help from Andras and were ably assisted by the CLPA caving club.

Monday 3rd September 2012

In the evening, we set off for the Event de Perdreau-Fourmi, a cave our team had left ongoing, at 30m depth, in the second sump.

It was a remarkably easy carry this time up the river bed. Rich and I shifted gear through the boulder choke whilst listening to the delightful sound of "tap-tap-tapping" as Jarvist set to work putting some bolts in and he and Tim set up an elaborate but excellent cable car system for hauling larger cylinders.

The plan was to have a set-up dive to make the air-bell in between sumps more user friendly for big cylinders and for getting in and out of both sumps.

We made light work of it and all the gear and equipment for 4 divers was assembled at the top of the pitch by 6pm.

Rich and his stash. Photo: CLPA



Tuesday 4th September 2012

It was time to see what Oz and Joe had done with my line reel in the passage Rich and I found last year, and on Oz's advice, to check it really was still going before we threw a big team and trimix at it.

We were very lucky to have Jean Tarrit and Claudine from the CLPA come along to help us underground and they did a fantastic job of getting everything down to the sump's edge in under an hour.

Jarvist and Tim set off into the sump wearing equipment I am too young to have ever seen before but it seemed to



The Team. Photo: Christine Grosart

work as they crossed the sump, tidied the line so that it was tight and immaculate and they preserved the visibility well.

Rich and I were to follow about 30 minutes later to give them a chance to rig a ladder to make climbing out of sump 1 much easier and to place a few bolts for ropes and general helpful tatt.

They did a great job and Rich and I kitted up whilst Jean and Claudine went up the ropes to get warm and get lunch.

We crossed the sump easily and had the luxury of walking straight up the ladder fully kitted without breaking sweat and straight down into sump 2.

We dived to the end of the line, surveying last years new passage again as we went, and hit 30m depth and my line reel.

The line had been beautifully laid, previously, by Oz and Joe and the reel was well tied off at the end. I shone my cave-hunting torch down the ongoing passage and could see large cave ongoing for at least 20m.

Satisfied, we cleaned up and left, very much looking forward to the return trip on Friday, to allow the viz to settle after a couple of days.

D-Day – Friday 7th September 2012

I would be lying if I said I wasn't just a bit nervous or under pressure the night before this dive.

Our last attempt, in 2011, was thwarted by my failed attempt to pass the almost vertical rift in zero visibility. We now realised this was due to a very loose, sloppy polyprop line. We had made attempts to fix it, but ultimately, it needs to come out and a heavy line put in.

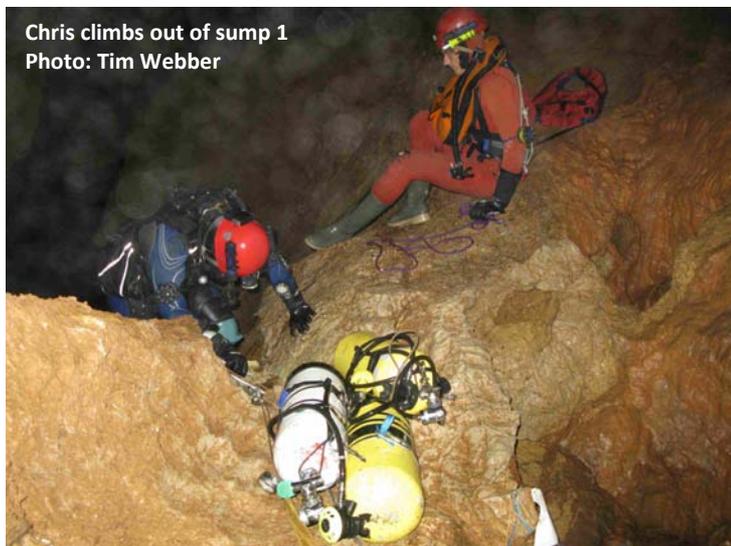
We had a quick breakfast and drove over to the parking spot to meet the French from the CLPA, who were keen, as ever, to help us.

After a lot of banter and greetings, Jean, Etienne and three others offering surface support, set off to the cave entrance and shifted the gear through the small boulder choke.

This consisted of a pair of 12s, a pair of 15s, two deco bottles of oxygen, and four 7 litre bottles for Jarvist and Tim, plus all sundry bits and bobs you need for diving, like masks, fins and regs etc.

We embarked on a mammoth lowering session which involved pulley cars and 'staged' people but it worked fantastically and all the gear was at the bottom of the pitch in not much more than an hour from leaving the surface.

Jarvist and Tim were to kit up first and cross sump 1, with the plan to shoot a bit of video and help us out of the water with our large cylinders. They also carried our oxygen deco bottles, which was very welcome.



Chris climbs out of sump 1

Photo: Tim Webber

Once they had set off, Rich and I got kitted up slowly and with help from Andras (Kuti), it wasn't the nightmare we envisaged.

We had a 12l and a 15l each of 18/45, as we were expecting the cave to go deeper, and wanted plenty of gas to allow for surveying at depth.

Rich and I dived to the air-bell where Jarvist and Tim did an excellent job of helping us un-kit and carefully pulled our big bottles up the slope, to get them ready for re-kitting in sump 2.

I got into the water first and, with a little help, managed to kit back up again in the narrow rift and float around a bit, trying to keep warm whilst Rich went through the same process.

We were handed our deco bottles and had agreed to get them to the other side of the 'annoying flop'. Sump 2 is a very short dive to another air-bell which is passable by belly flopping over a narrow rock bridge which gets in the way.

We passed our deco bottles over this and I found a good place at 6m to drop them, quite close to airspace. We set off with the intention of picking up my line reel from where Oz and Joe had left it last year.

The cave appeared to be going deeper, but on recent inspection, it may stay at -30m for a while at least.

We set off along the rift. The viz had cleared from our last dive a little but it was not perfect despite being given 2 days to settle.

We continued for a while and were both very surprised to meet an upwards line into airspace. Somehow we had overshot the junction which takes us to the 'new' line. Confused, we went back on ourselves and realised that, in our efforts to avoid the appalling floating polyprop line which had taken off into the roof of the rift, we had swum past the clothes pegs and other general tatt.



Empty line reel
Photo: Tim Webber

The Coudoulière is known to connect from dye tracing and that cave corkscrews considerably before settling on a path - and it goes deep. It currently lies at 1650m long and 100m depth.

We looked at the floor nervously waiting for it to engulf us into the depths - but it never did. It just started to pinch up and Rich was getting itchy feet in large 12 and 15 litre bottles. The reel emptied at just the right time.

We dived back in appalling visibility which was very patchy and were relieved to get back to our deco bottles at 6m with no deco incurred. We had spent 36 minutes in the sump with an average depth of about 20m.

Even more surprising was that the floating line had hidden itself so far up into the roof, it was quite an effort to pull it down and put it back into the downwards rift which was looking empty.

We made several attempts to fix it but ultimately, polyprop sucks and it will be coming out next time.

We continued on the correct path, having wasted only a few minutes. We very soon came across the 'new junction' and set off along Oz and Joe's line.

I surveyed the last leg whilst Rich untied the line reel that had sat quiet for a year and once I had underlined the numbers in my wetnotes, Rich turned to me, reel at the ready and smiled an 'Ok'?

I nodded and we set off along beautiful rift passage, horizontal and about 30m depth, dipping to 34m temporarily. The rock was sharp, pale, sculptured and pretty. The passage was 10m high and 2m wide at the widest part and the visibility ahead was at least 15m with a sparkling blue tint.

Rich made a lovely, tight line with good tie offs and I bimbled along behind, counting knots, recording the depth and the compass bearing. It was heading north and all I could think of was that poor geologist who was desperate for the cave to go in the opposite direction!

The thing is, it might yet as it has already done one weird corkscrew and we emptied the reel as the rift started to close down - a sign maybe that we should be looking elsewhere now for the continuation.

We climbed out and I was generously given something sugary by the resident diabetic. He'll live! (probably).

We had a shivery dive out. I went ahead and Rich followed, exiting the sump at a rate of knots even I found alarming! Clearly he wanted out!

We changed into warm fleecy caving undersuits - the posh element changed into fourth element underclothes!

We started packing up and getting gear ready for hauling and we were out of the cave, with our gear back at the car, by 6pm!!

Unbelievable! Many thanks to the gang for their help - Elaine, Duncan and Gerik turned up later in the evening to help on the surface as well.

The French cavers had asked us to take water samples from the second sump to confirm that the water was the same as other sites in the area.



Water testing
Photo: Christine Grosart

This job was handed to Jarvist and Tim and we carefully carried the water bottle out of the cave.

Once on the surface, the French began doing their science bit and confirmed that the water was the same as that in the nearby source and also others in the area, helping prove a connection between systems including the Garrel.

We retired to the campsite to shower and get tarted up for an evening meal in St Jean de Buéges - a timely place - but devoid of champagne :-)

Tenerife 2010 Part 3

(Ian Timney)

Previously in Journals 323 & 324, Parts 1 and 2 detailed the exploration of lava tubes on Tenerife. A 15 person team based at Los Silos spent two weeks caving. Now read on, for the final part of their expedition.

Thursday 24th

Just the five of us left now - Andy, Wendy, Les, Tommo and I. We started the day with breakfast at our favourite pavement café at *Garachico*. Then it was off to the visitor centre with the intention of going to *Cueva Del Viento's Las Breveritas* entrance, to have a look at the other side of the squeeze that defeated me on our all night trip. Alfredo was not there and hadn't left a key so, instead, we decided to visit a nearby ex-show cave, *Cueva De La Candelaria*.

The entrance is on a piece of waste ground at the edge of a housing development. The locals thought us mighty strange as we walked along the street in caving kit! At the end of the street we passed through a gate onto the waste land and found the rather overgrown entrance. Andy drew the short straw, so had to force his way down the steps and make a passage for the rest of us. It was something of a relief to get in as it was baking hot outside in the heat which was quite oppressive.

The cave consists of 679 metres of passage, about a third of which is up flow and two thirds down flow. The best feature is a very colourful lava fall about ten feet high, which we climbed then carried on to the natural end. We then headed off down flow to a very unnatural end in the form of raw sewerage. No one could be tempted to crawl through, so we returned to the visitor centre where we hijacked Alfredo and dragged him kicking and screaming to his brother in law's bar '*El Refugio*'.

No sooner than we had arrived and ordered our first beer, they locked the gates so we couldn't leave. They forced us to drink beer after beer after beer, accompanied by delicious olives and some weird kernel-like nutty things. What terrible people they are! I was eventually obliged to bring this spree to a close, as I was the driver and in danger once again of getting drunk. We arranged to



meet Alfredo and Drago there on our last night for a farewell meal. We returned to our villas to meet up with Wendy, then off to a very nice restaurant about a mile eastward along the coast road, called '*Mondial 82*'. Wendy was happy to drive so we could indulge ourselves right royally.

We received a very warm welcome at the restaurant and had some gorgeous food. I had fried Camembert followed by a perfect steak with Roquefort sauce. We had beer for our aperitif, wine with the meal and finished off in style with coffee and Brandy. Wendy drove us back to their villa where we had a couple more beers and a good old chat before retiring; a very nice day had been had by all.

Friday 25th

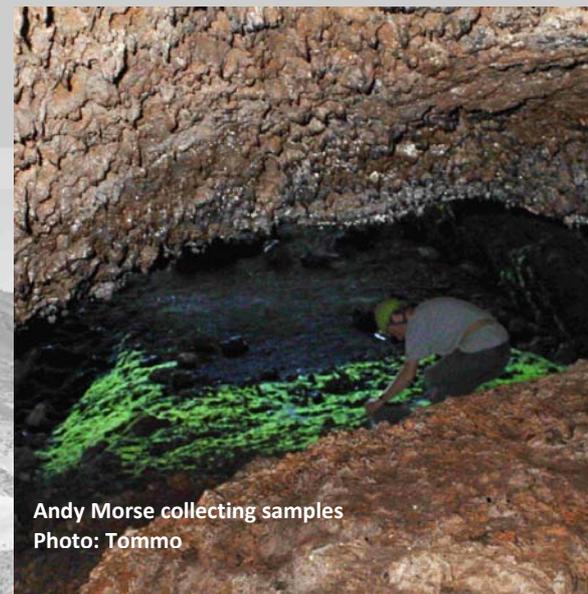
With only four days to go the nature of the expedition changed dramatically as Morse had blagged permits which gave us four days of

access to the forbidden areas of the *Cañadas* National Park.

If you are caught off the designated trekking paths without permits in the national park the fines start at 6,000 euros. The reason the fines are so high is that they are trying to preserve a pristine and spectacularly beautiful volcanic landscape, very similar to that on Planet Mars.

Andy is a space scientist who works for the Open University Planetary Sciences Department and the European Space Agency. He had applied for permission to take his small team of assistants and go in search of bacteria growing in the lava caves which could enhance our understanding of similar life forms that are expected to be found on Mars. His plan was brilliant, the presentation impeccable, his application and timing perfect; the authorities swallowed the lot hook line and sinker...

Of course, we did **actually** carry out said scientific research and Andy was able to collect some very interesting specimens for analysis.



Andy Morse collecting samples
Photo: Tommo

We had a big day ahead, so started out at 9am. We drove up to the hotel at the Rocks of Garcia for breakfast, then up to a car parking area at 2,200 metres altitude. This

was to be the starting point of our two kilometre trek up the volcano with all the ropes, rigging gear, SRT kits, cameras and plenty of water. Our objective was to find a vertical cave, *Sima de Vicky*, at 2,480 m.

totally volcanic, desert landscape.

The experience is not just physical it is very emotional too; it seeps into your mind and soul leaving you fulfilled and content.

have liked to have gone down myself, but once again I was suffering from the altitude, and struggling for breath. Anyway it got a bit tight down there and bloody cold as well.



This vertical system is 71m deep, consisting of 4 pitches; *P Vicky*, *P Estribo*, *P Dinamico*, and *P Garma*.

Vertical systems like *Sima De Vicky* are formed when magma rises under monstrous pressure. This causes the ground to dome up and split. There is potential for some of these cracks to go as deep as 500 meters but, as it has been virtually impossible to get permits to properly explore the area, *Sima de Vicky* remains the deepest. We spent several hours searching an area of about a square kilometre but failed to find the cave.

For some reason I alone was struggling for breath at this altitude; I had clearly not acclimatised as well as the others. We finally gave up our search and walked back down to the car. I soon found it easier to breathe as we lost a little altitude.

It is hard to describe the effect that being in a place like this has on your senses, as it is both hectic and tranquil at the same time. Your eyes are constantly being drawn from one inspiring vista to another. Your mind is sent reeling by the scale and enormity of this incredibly varied,

We all felt utterly privileged to be in this place, which is the nearest thing you can get to being on Planet Mars. Wow!

Saturday 26th - *Sima de Vicky*

Les and Morse went early to the visitor centre in Icod to meet Alfredo. We needed some more information about the whereabouts of this elusive cave.

Using Google Earth, Alfredo was able to point out exactly where the entrance was. We **had** been searching in the right place. In fact, we all walked right passed it several times. Les got the GPS co-ordinates and a promise from Alfredo to show us where it was on Sunday if we failed again!

Back to the villa, Tommo and I had bacon and cheese omelettes ready for breakfast. Afterwards we drove back up the mountain to our parking spot and retraced our steps. This time, straight to the cave.

Les and Andy disappeared into the depths, whilst Tommo and I continued to search the area for more caves, but to no avail. I would

They did find some strange formations down there which Andy took samples of; there was lots of it too. Our mission was accomplished, and with the lateness of the hour we headed back to the car, as we still had a good bit to do before the trip was over. We had two kilometres of sun baked desert to get through yet, carrying all the kit. Tired as we were we could still marvel at our surroundings and revel in our good fortune.

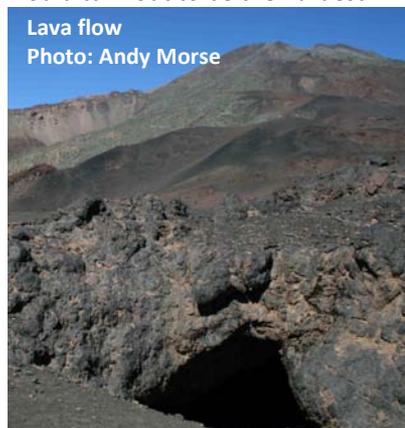


The hour really was getting late by the time we got back to the car and we realised we would not get back in time to meet Wendy and go for a meal. Andy phoned to say we would get something en-route at the very nice *Santiago del Teide*. Here we had a sumptuous three course dinner to round off the day - well not quite, as we repaired to Andy and Wendy's villa for more cold beers before bed.

Just how lucky can you get?

Sunday 27th

We had a bit of a late start today following a late night and two consecutive hard days on the mountain - little did I know today would turn out to be the hardest.



Lava flow
Photo: Andy Morse

After brunch, we drove back up the mountain to a new location and then started a gruelling two and a half kilometre trek; sometimes on nice easy pathways but mostly on pumice and volcanic ash that slipped away under your feet. I was unfortunately suffering from the altitude again - not as bad as the previous two days - but it still sapped my strength. It was also a very hot day for good measure.

The landscape was every bit as spectacular as any we had previously enjoyed, but very different. It had a kind of remoteness that I hadn't felt before; there was more vegetation here which probably denotes a more ancient landscape where the lava has had longer to decompose into more fertile soils. The lava flows were different here to those in the *Sima de Vicky* area, which were all "aa" lava; here it's mostly "Pahoe-hoe".

We spent a good few hours exploring this area, collecting samples and photographing everything we saw. There was such a variety of subject matter from the volcanoes themselves, to enormous chaotic lava flows, oceans of pumice and ash, plant and bacterial growths inside the caves and across the landscape, to wonderful panoramic views across the clouded bank to

neighbouring islands.

We know exactly what it's like to wander on the surface of Mars. We know we were there.

Well it was time to return to planet Earth - and reality - we were all pretty knackered by now and we still had a two and a half kilometre trek back down the mountain, so we shouldered our loads and set off. The thought of cold beer and another slap-up 3 course dinner in *Santiago del Teide* numbed the pain a little.

Luckily, a good meal and refreshments revived me, as I had the dubious pleasure of driving us back around hundreds of hair pin bends. Through the clouds. In the dark. Fortunately the steepest, tightest part of the route was below the clouds from *Erjos Del Tanque* to Los Silos. Here, the road is so steep and the bends are so tight that you cannot use the engine to slow your descent. You have to use the brakes all the way, with a very real risk of boiling the brake fluid. Fortunately, we didn't and lived to tell the tale.

Monday 28th

For Les, Tommo and I today was our last. We had had a fantastic fortnight and done lots of big boy's caving, so were happy to just go for

a bimble in *Entrada Los Breveritas* and view the other side of the bloody tight squeeze that I alone could not get through. Andy picked us up at noon and drove us to the pavement café in *Garachico* for brunch, then off to the cave.

We had another epic with one of Alfredo's gates, this time because the lock had been snapped shut with the hasp not located in the lock. Eventually, Les got the thing undone but could only draw the bolt with Andy's help. Andy had to yank the gate towards us while Les wriggled the bolt.

It was about a half kilometre from the gate to the squeeze, with lots of nasty crawling on some of the lumpiest lava ever. I was once again very grateful to Hayley for donating her knee pads to me. Tommo and I messed around with cameras, whilst Les and Andy set about widening the squeeze by shifting boulders.

After shifting dozens of rocks, Les managed to get underneath the offending boulder, and moved it a little further down flow. Although it remained very tight on me, I did manage to get through, and can now claim to have done the *Sobrado* to *Breveritas* through trip!

What a fine expedition this has been. Roll on next year!



Andy Morse in the tight bit
Photo: Les Williams

Searching for life on Mars (Andy Morse)

Pictures from space missions show that the surface of Mars is a dry desolate place, inhospitable for life (as we know it). However, there is evidence that Mars was once warmer and had oceans in which it is possible that life began. The search for evidence of life is a major objective of the Mars missions and at the Open University there are research projects looking at the conditions in which bacteria can survive.

Every time we visit Tenerife I am struck by how much the barren volcanic landscape of the Teide National Park looks like the terrain in the Viking Lander pictures. Other similarities are that they both consist of volcanic basaltic rocks and have a low humidity (in Tenerife this is because of the high altitude).

Also, the Teide park has been used as the testing ground for Bridget, the prototype European Mars Lander.



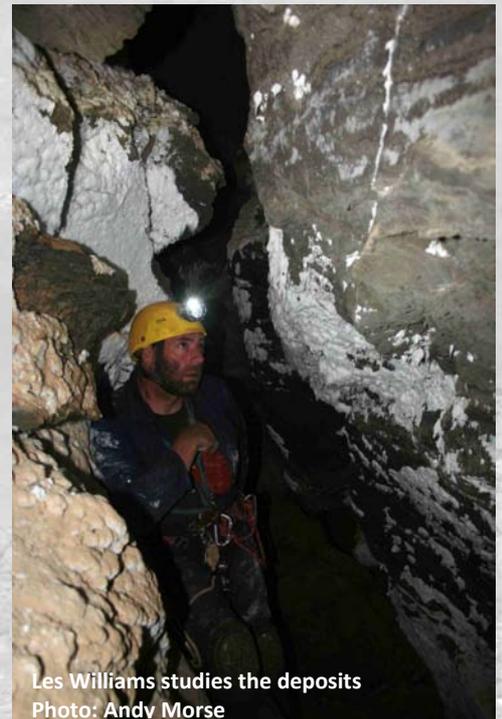
Caves on Mars may have preserved a record of life that became extinct as Mars became dryer. They form a micro climate where water might be liquid, have a stable temperature and they can shield microbes from ultraviolet radiation. This means that that potentially they contain the environment in which life could have survived and may even still be surviving.

I wrote to the park authorities proposing a preliminary study to look at the bacteria in the lava tube caves in Tenerife to make comparisons with what may have occurred or even be occurring on Mars. The aim was to see if it was possible to extract microbes that live in the rocks and compare them to those on the surface to see how they adapted.

Cuevas Negras is a shallow lava tube similar to the lava channels seen on Mars and *Sima Vicky* is a vertical 70m deep fracture which could give access to samples more easily than by drilling. As both caves are in the restricted zone of the park they are relatively free from human contamination. Once permission was obtained, all I needed were a few volunteers to help transport equipment, miles from any roads, to collect the samples.

Once back at the lab the rock samples were analysed. They did contain microbes and the DNA was successfully extracted for gene sequencing.

A white mineral growing on the walls of *Sima Vicky* was an



Les Williams studies the deposits
Photo: Andy Morse

unexpected discovery and I initially thought that it could have a bacterial origin.

Analysis by electron microscope and X-ray diffraction found it to be sodium bicarbonate (baking powder) – not organic. However, it is possible that it may be a microbial precipitate (bacteria pooh to you and me), so it is now being analysed by carbon isotope mass spectrometry which can determine whether or not it was formed by microbes.

The results were presented at the First International Planetary Caves Workshop in Carlsbad New Mexico last year. In addition the Teide National Park is being included as part of a database for Martian Analogue sites for future space missions.



Andy Morse in the tight bit
Photo: Les Williams

FROM THE LOGBOOK

Editor's note: Please record your trip in the logbook at Upper Pitts. This logbook is a record of the activity of members. A brief synopsis can then be made for the Journal. There has been a lot of work in Spider Hole and Read's Cavern - these log entries have been omitted due to more detailed articles. There has also been a lot of work done bailing the Mud Sump in Swildon's and re-taping in Reservoir Hole. (Thanks to Noel Cleave for transcribing logbook entries).

Tuesday January 1 2013 Swildon's Hole Rachel & Steven.

A cold unsure start for Rachel, but the pair of us soon got going, exploring every little nook and cranny!

Steve: "Remember, what you go up, you must come down".

Rachel: "I'll be all right"

Up the Mud Sump, fun climbing and then the belly sliding, unsure of the St. Pauls' squeezes, but they were done in style. Mudsump was very full, lots of water in the dig. Rachel interested in the bailing techniques at hand, and how much effort was going into it. First time coming out into a night sky.... not scared of the dark any more! (St. Paul's grotto is beautiful). 4 Hr. Trip; only scary part was coming down the 8' (for Rachel) as she had a little freak-out by the strong water flow: was calmly put right and told the moves by Steve. **Steve.**

Tuesday January 1 2013 Gough's Cave. Tina, Kevan, Jordan, Phil.

Trip to look at the flooded cave, with Phil Hendy as guide. Paddled through to the chimney.... well impressed! **Phil.**

Thursday January 3 2013 Swildon's Hole Cast of thousands..... Gary, Stephen N, Stephen M, Rachel, John Cooper, Emma. Sump 2 for Gary, 2 Stephens and Emma, and everyone came out different ways. **Emma.**

Friday January 4 2013 Swildon's Hole Emma Heron.

I hadn't really planned on a solo trip, but hadn't factored in the idea that all my friends might be working on a Friday afternoon! No matter, caving in Swildon's is caving with an old friend anyway. Having not been down there for quite a while it was lovely to feel that friendly familiarity with the place, the polished hand- and foot- holds, and every swirl and eddy of the streamway... and the sneaky handholds on various climbs. Wandered around the Mud Sump - blocked - then retraced steps onwards to Sump 1. Up from the Landing to the first of the Troubles - blocked, then back, using a boot-full of welly water for the Landing Slide. I knew that PVC suits had a use on Mendip. In and out I was enjoying myself so much that I decided to try my old nemesis - the climb up into Barne's Loop. I don't often return up there. After Brian Hansford told me on my first ever trip to rarely go up, to try and preserve what's left of its beauty, I listened. I hadn't been into Barne's Loop for years. Back up the 20. One of these days there'll be no stal left on the ladder-shaped flowstone gravel. Up the 8' drop below the old 40': must have been feeling strong today, as I usually do a big barn-door swing avoiding the water. Then out via the Long Dry..... except not... as I couldn't remember the way, so back to the Short Dry. Swildon's, me old bugger, it's good to see you again! **Emmsy.**

Tuesday January 8 2013 Eastwater Cavern John Cooper, John & Emma Gisborne.

Upper Traverse, Hallelujah Hole, Lower Traverse and out via the Canyon and Woggle Press. Good flow of water through the boulders. Fantastic trip.... especially for the larger chested! 1 hour. Phew! **John Gisborne.**

Wednesday January 9 2013 Swildon's (Mud Sump). John Cooper & Emma Gisborne.

Went and watched Mark and Bean bailing the dam. They didn't manage to empty it because John and Emma kept filling it up and eventually Mark and Bean gave up and went out. John and Emma then emptied it and left everything neat and tidy. **John.**

Saturday January 12 2013 Pierre's Pot Kevin, Merik, Claire.

Pushed the top of the climb in Turtle Chamber and laid line (somewhere between 10 and 15 metres) in the terminal sump (which is still open). **Kevin.**

Saturday January 12 2013 Eastwater Cavern ("2nd Saturday" trip). Tim Rose, NikNak, Rich & Andrea, Wayne.

Entrance way rather damp. Pre-rigged Dolphin Pot and Pitch, then pull-through abseil down Twin Verticals. After some faffing around, found the big bolt at the top of the 2nd Vertical, which was ideal for the pull-through. All down Muddy Oxbow and then up the 13 Pots. Some encouragement needed at the "Bold Step" but all across and up safely. Tim and I took a detour to Hard Rain Aven and met up with the rest at the Dolphin Pitch. All out via the Canyon and Woggle Press. The entrance was even damper on the way out! **Wayne.**

Sunday January 14 2013 Eastwater Cavern (Again... 2nd trip this weekend) Kevin, Claire, Merik, Matt Wadler, Wayne.

Upper Traverse to Baker's Chimney by-pass, then down Canyon to 2nd Rift Chamber. Climbed up above entry point and then immediately into a tight vertical chimney. At the top turned downhill to first Unlucky Strike Chamber. 30' free-climb down into chamber with 40' high curtain and grotto with straws and helictites. Followed down dig tube to 30' ladder pitch into 2nd

Chamber with more impressive curtains and crystal pools. Quick look at sump and all out via Woggle Press. Top Trip and nice to see formations in Eastwater. **Wayne.**

Saturday January 19 2013 Wookey Hole Mike Thomas.

Solo dive from 3 to String Corner Inlet in Wookey 22. Flow high and visibility around 4 - 5 Metres. Dive lines need some TLC and other mends. In via Deep Route and out via Shallow. Thanks to Claire for babysitting me while I was diving. **Mike.**

Thursday February 7 2013 Swildon's Hole. JP Bressen. Christine Grosart.

My first trip into Swildons. Guided by Christine. What a fantastic experience. I would love to come back and do some video. **JP.**

Saturday February 9 2013 ("2nd Saturday" Trip) Manor Farm. Darren Chapman, Jude VdeP, Pete Hillier, Gerik Roden, Aiden Harrison, Ben Curtis, Wayne Starsmore, Beth Berryman.

Entrance rigged with ladder, life-line and SRT. All down safely to Curtain Chamber. Beth, Jude and Ben took by-pass and the rest free-climbed the waterfall. Streamway very smelly after Albert's Eye. Air fresher in NHASA Gallery. Jude and Ben headed out, the rest struck out for the 2009/2010 extensions. Beth had a moment with a loose boulder and decided that it was an omen.... and returned to NHASA. Pushed on through mud, boulders and "Artistic" scaffolding. Pete pushed down muddy tube but everyone else had enthusiasm failure except for Darren who was "Very disappointed" to have to turn back. Returned to NHASA and made way out. Took opportunity to wash mud off in streamway. Darren failed to levitate up September Rift, so used brute force the magic words, F***. S***, B*****. Streamway floor very loose between entrance and September Rift. I caused a bit of a collapse and had a bit of a moment "Boulder Surfing". All kit thoroughly cleaned back at UP. **Anon**

Saturday February 9 2013 Pridhamsleigh Cavern Naomi Sharp, Claire Cohen, John Volathen, Duncan Price.

CC, JV and DP dived the lake in excellent vis. DP surfaced in Prid 2, while the others searched the bottom. Max depth, 36 metres. Naomi carried his gear for Duncan. **Claire.**

Tuesday February 12 2013 Reservoir Hole Pete Buckley, Nick Chipchase, John Cooper, Nigel Cox and Ali Moody.

A working trip preparing the cave for the "Tourist" season, starting on 1st April. Nick and Nigel added a bracing bar to the platform on the pitch dropping into "Frozen Deep". Pete, John and Ali redid tapes in Grand Gallery, Topless Aven and Resurrection. 4 ½ hours. **John.**

Monday February 25 2013 Charterhouse Mark Helmore, Tony Seddon.

Pleasant evening trip to Portal Pool, plus sump. Low water but clearly has been wetter recently. Perfectly charming, will be good to see more come the summer. **Mark.**

Sunday March 3 2013 Burrington Naomi and Duncan.

Pierre's Pot Had a quick look at the rift to see if DP would fit, and decided that he would not.

Sidcot Swallet After braving the man-eating spiders near the entrance, we had a good look around. Decided against going down the Lobster Pot without a hand-line, but will be back.

Goatchurch Down to the Drainpipe, but not through it, and out again.

Quite a few bats in each hole. A pleasant day out. **Naomi**

Upper Flood Swallet . Various trips Dec 2012 and Jan 2013. West Passage – Neverlands Bypass Dig. Ben Cooper (MCG), Andrew Atkinson (UBSS), John Cooper, Ali Moody and Pete Buckley.

The 'A' team got the call from MCG to assist in their bypass project. Conditions in Upper Flood were very wet and cold. Upper Flood is a relentless undertaking - the endless entrance series, the Lavatory Trap (that flake in the roof needs taking off!), the physically demanding boulder ruckle (OK, the 13 squeezes are now sensible size but it's still hard work with a large heavy Peli case), the streamway – cold and wet! Two hours hard graft to get to the dig face and a further 2 cold hours in cramped, wet, muddy conditions, digging, drilling and laying a charge. Then a final, knackered, 2 hours logging out.

2nd February 2013. Cleared spoil and finally made the **BREAKTHROUGH!** Into the mid section of Neverlands, a fabulous passage - large and very well decorated. We went very carefully 'cos we were so muddy. Exit made after suitable photos.

As ever with Upper Flood, came out knackered and with a sore body. This time it was worth it though! – another project completed. **Pete**



Ben Cooper – Breakthrough point into Neverlands Feb 2013 Photo: Ali Moody

Read's Cavern (*Ali Moody*)

Although known to modern day cavers for over 90 years there is still much to learn about Read's Cavern in terms of understanding the archaeological significance of this important site and also in the potential for undiscovered passages.

The Hunter's Brook stream that sinks at the entrance (161m OD) resurges at both Rickford (58m OD) and Langford (47m OD). The very strong draught that blows through the system cannot be fully explained by circulation.

Early History

This impressive site was originally referred to as Fox Holes after the inhabitants of the small holes in the cliff face. A sizeable seasonal stream sinks at the base of the cliff and in 1919 the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society (UBSS) started to investigate possible digs in the hope of finding a major cave system that would lead to the then assumed rising at Langford.

Under the leadership of Leo Palmer a dig was started at the dry east swallet and on 13 September, the entrance to a steeply descending jagged rift was uncovered. This was explored down to a small very unstable chamber with no way on and shouts from the surface, warning that a large propped boulder was slipping, resulted in a very speedy exit. While the others were exploring, Reginald Read had commenced digging a few metres away at the base of the cliff and revealed a small opening. Edgar Tratman, being one of the smaller members of the team, was given the dubious privilege of exploring a small rather unstable passage east, following the line of the cliff face. The right hand scree wall promptly collapsed and partly buried him. A few metres further on he found that he was lying on a boulder embedded in scree, with a black hole beneath. At this point the passage wall sloped up to the right and is where the present dry entrance was later dug open.

Digging in the floor uncovered the top of a very unstable scree slope and Tratman was life-lined down into a large decorated chamber. Exploring with a candle he realised that this ran parallel to the cliff face and also noted the entrances to the passages that were later to become known as Zed Alley and Crook's Passage.

The following Saturday the full team descended into Main Chamber and on this trip Bertie Crook explored the passage that now carries his name. Various items; including pottery, a small iron sickle, four bronze bands, decayed wood and charcoal were found scattered across the floor of the chamber. Also discovered was a human radius bone covered by a layer a stalagmite. The archaeological importance of the site was recognized immediately and a gridded survey started to record the position of items.

Over the next month the archaeological investigations continued and probably involved the surface collection of artefacts by candlelight. The finds were identified as Iron Age and the cave named Keltic Cavern. To the annoyance of the discoverers this proved unacceptable to the Ordnance Survey and it was changed to Read's Cavern.

The first part of the route to Zed Alley was explored including Pipe Chamber and its small Coffin Lane annex. Work stopped in October for the winter and the entrance to the cave filled in. At this time two different landowners were involved, of which only one had given permission to dig. It was discovered that the existing entrance was neatly divided by the two properties and the following Easter the present dry entrance was excavated and the cave gated to fulfil the access agreement.

Archaeological investigations continued in the years 1920 to 1924 and a further season in 1929 excavated an ancient entrance in the vicinity of where the Water Rift provides the modern second entry point.

In 2009 a collapse in the floor of Main Chamber opened up a new crevice and exposed more possible archaeological deposits. The following year a new excavation was completed under the auspices of the UBSS and the preliminary results have led to a reinterpretation of the original findings.

These suggest that the cave had ritual significance, perhaps for the cleansing of objects and was not used for domestic or industrial purpose as originally thought. Also that the human remains recovered from the chamber had found their way into the swallet, subsequent to the entrance collapsing and had then been washed in by natural processes, rather than being the result of people trapped in the cave. There has been very little evidence of earlier history and although a few flints are thought to have been found during the 1920's excavations they were not recorded or considered significant.

In 2012, the author was fortunate to find a worked flint halfway down the slot in the floor of Junction Chamber that had obviously been washed to this position by the stream. The flint has since been identified as Mesolithic and between 8,000 to 10,000 years old, making it contemporary with the burials in Aveline's Hole.



The precise history of the exploration of the cave is difficult to unravel. The Grotto, Offshoot and Boulder Chamber plus the first part of Zed Alley are shown on the UBSS survey of 1920. By 1922 a bedding chamber type annex had been discovered off the Boulder Chamber and Zed Alley extended downwards through a boulder maze to a water-worn rift that took the combined flow of several inlets. This is probably Waterfall Chamber.

Much of the system is a huge complex disintegrating boulder ruckle lying directly below Main Chamber and routes through this are extremely difficult to describe in log reports. The water course in the cave changes depending on flow and boulders shift, opening and closing routes. The sharp fossiliferous nature of the Black Rock limestone in Read's often hides evidence of earlier explorers.

Below Main Chamber the cave is divided into two main descending limbs; the route to Zed Alley is towards the eastern end of the chamber, while to the west, in the other limb of the system, there have been three ways down to Junction Chamber. The original route that descended the Water Rift Series is now impassable and by 1968 an easier option was via a passage that leads from the Offshoot. This may have been the route used by Tratman, who notes after getting lost, while exiting from the Water Rift Series on a trip sometime between 1919 and 1925 that he found himself in the Offshoot. The safest option today is a route from the western corner of the Water Chamber, this is not shown on the 1968 survey and it is not known when it was first used.



Fossils in the rock, Zed Alley. Photo: Ali Moody

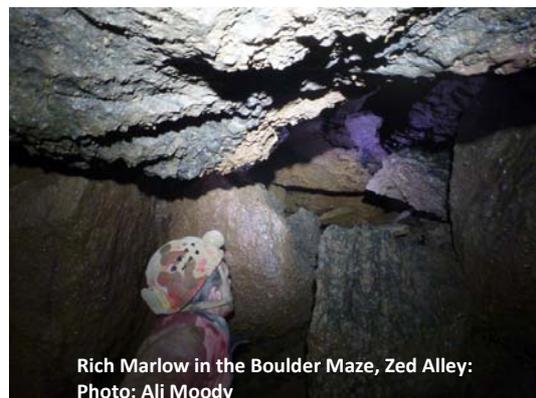
Although the nature of the cave made exploration difficult and, at times very dangerous, efforts to find new passages continued and over several trips between March and July 1937, Sidcot School Speleological Society (SSSS) extended Zed Alley down two drops, the first now known as Splash Pot. Below this point an extremely tight arch, Hells Teeth, gave access to a tunnel that was pushed to an impassable squeeze. The extensions were surveyed in 1946 by the UBSS who published an updated survey. From the terminal point, a T-shaped rift, the sound of a waterfall ahead was thought to be the continuation of the main water course.

The next major discovery was not made until 1947. On 23 November Peter Stewart and Pat Browne of the Mendip Nature Research Committee (MNRC) investigated a 2m deep vertical slot they named the T-Slot. This passage had been noted by Stewart on a previous trip and was clearly the limit of earlier exploration. The slot, in the floor of

Junction Chamber, was at that time much tighter and could only be passed by Browne. He pushed down through a highly dangerous boulder maze until solid rock was reached.

A week later the pair returned with three others and explored what became known as Browne-Stewart Series. Beyond a small aven, a boulder blockage at the end of a tube was cleared giving access to an unstable slope of boulder slabs and scree that descended steeply to a stream chamber. From here the stream route could only be followed for a short distance. A couple of "mud chambers" were also found.

William Stanton *et al* started a new survey that was published in 1968 and during the course of this work several squeezes had to be modified to "Stanton size". On a trip to the bottom of Browne-Stewart Series the voices of people, presumed to be in the final section of Zed Alley, were heard but unfortunately did not respond to the surveyors request for information. Hence the link between Browne-Stewart Series and Zed Alley was not proven although the survey indicated their very close proximity.



Rich Marlow in the Boulder Maze, Zed Alley: Photo: Ali Moody

Dye tests carried out by Drew, Newson and Smith in 1968 and Crabtree in 1977 showed that although the water resurges at Langford, 1km away the majority flows to Rickford, a distance of 2.3km.

Recent History

At the time, the important discovery of Browne-Stewart Series had little impact on the caving world. Although, nearly 700m in length Read's Cavern has never been very popular with mainstream cavers. This can partly be explained by the minimal number of solid passages, boulders that demand a healthy respect and some snug squeezes. The ease of getting lost in the boulder mazes has been the cause of several rescues, particularly from Zed Alley, where early explorers often ran out of light.

Few trips penetrate far beyond Main Chamber and the Boulder Chamber area and quotes such as those below do not encourage cavers to visit this rather neglected cave.

SSSS 1937: *"We returned soaked to the skin. Our trousers were torn to shreds and we were thoroughly scratched." "...we returned scratched, bleeding and swearing."*

Pat Browne 1949: *"... I found myself in the most dangerous system that I hope I shall ever enter."*

Peter Stewart 1949: *"... a hectic few moments were enjoyed when a bank of scree began to avalanche in the best traditions of the London Escalators." "... there is a zone of highly unstable rock, each rock supporting three or four others and an objective contemplation of the scene round about brings on a violent dislike of movement!!"*

Willie Stanton 1968: *"They chose not to reply to our polite requests for information, followed in frustration by howls for rescue, but slowly faded away."* *"Some of the ruckles are a little breathtaking."*

Howard Kenny 1968: *"... and every time we moved hundreds of other things seemed to move as well, and when one stopped things went on moving for several seconds."* *"... too many of the boulders seemed to be in a state of unexplained levitation ..."*

Steve Milner 1984: *"I heard the collapse first and then Martin's screams. Mart became silent and the movement continued."* *"Dave never went caving again."*

John Cooper 2012: *"There are no solid walls in this chamber."*

In 1983 the LADS (Let's 'Ave a Drink Speleos), Mark Lumley, Steve Milner, Steve Emery, Jim Smart, Neil Scallan, Pat Cronin and Michael McDonald, a group of mixed club cavers recognized the potential that Read's offered and started work on the terminal stream choke at the bottom of Browne-Stewart Series.

Over the next six months several dig sites were investigated and their efforts were finally rewarded in July with a 12m long side passage that bypassed the terminal choke and gave access to a deep sump. Attempts at free-diving failed and on 23 July 1983 Liz Price using diving equipment reported that the vertical rift closed down to body-sized at a depth of 3m. During this period Mark had also explored about 30m of very unstable boulder ruckle, halfway down the cave that was named The Browne Stain.

In August the LADS turned their attention to an inwardly draughting tube below Junction Chamber that had also been noted by previous explorers and which was dug briefly on one of the 1968 survey trips. After about 6m, progress was severely constricted by a rock flake beyond which the passage could be seen to continue. After attacking the flake with a lump hammer and then stripping off most of his clothes, Scallan, the slimmest member of the LADS, managed to squeeze through. He returned 30 minutes later with news of a major extension. Milner then passed the squeeze and was able to confirm the significance of the discovery – Lads' Luck. The others had to wait until further enlargement could be undertaken on the following trip and over the next few weeks 112m of passage was surveyed.



Mark Lumley in Lads' Luck 1983, Photo: Steve Milner (Courtesy of MCRA)

closed the route down through Browne-Stewart Series and to Lads' Luck.

Mark Lumley had mentioned a very promising digging site in Lads' Luck and around 2003 was persuaded to take me and Simon Richards (Nik Nak) on a recce trip. The Hunter's Brook stream was in full spate making Junction Chamber a maelstrom of wind and water. Unable to recognise the route through the boulders below Junction Chamber he concluded that there had been further collapse and we wisely withdrew. It is very as frustrating being told of an excellent dig site and not able to get there!

In April 2008, "Keltic" Cavern was selected as part of an A-Z of Mendip caves, by a group of Wessex members, a project that occasionally required some creative thinking. After failing to find the route down through Zed Alley we continued to Junction Chamber, where 3 of us found an open but very loose route into Browne-Stewart Series and reached a cross tube in solid rock. From here we turned right to explore a short section of stream passage and it seemed likely that the unchecked option to the left was the route into Lads' Luck.

Route-finding in Read's is never easy and with a forthcoming new Mendip Underground in preparation it seemed an ideal time to attempt to get to know the cave and offer to write a new description. The core team (Pete Buckley, John Cooper, Ali Moody) were assisted by Andrew Atkinson and Rich Marlow. None of us were familiar with the cave and there had been reports that the squeeze into Zed Alley from Pipe Chamber had collapsed. After solving the first problem of finding Pipe Chamber, the squeeze was identified as an unlikely looking 20cm gap under a boulder that only the skinner members of the team fitted. The passages below Splash Pot were sharp and unvisited and I was forced to admit defeat at the silted up Hells Teeth arch.



John Cooper attempting the Lads' luck Squeeze feet first 2013, Photo: Ali Moody

On the other limb, the route from the Offshoot to Junction Chamber proved particularly elusive and resulted in a happy couple of hours going around in circles between the Offshoot and Boulder Chamber without any success. The key eventually proved to be a low wet crawl that we had all purposely ignored and beyond this point a silted up U-tube required re-excavation.

Attempts to penetrate the boulder maze below Junction Chamber were unsuccessful and it appeared to have moved again. The only possible route led down to a gap between two boulders of dubious stability, perched above a small drop. This feature was not familiar from my previous trip in 2008 and looked very committing and unfriendly.

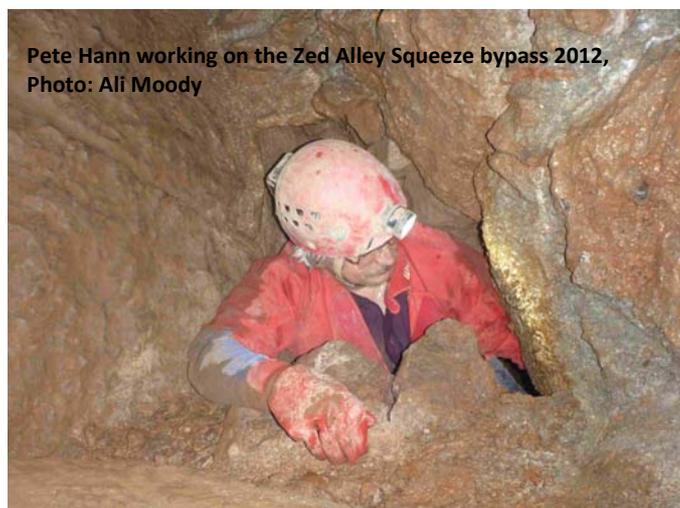
Under wet conditions the Browne-Stewart ruckle is a very scary place. The water washes out any cobbles and gravels supporting the boulders and the spray makes it very difficult to assess the danger of the situation.

Finally, when the cave was bone dry last September I plucked up sufficient courage to pass the squeeze and found a route down to the cross tube. A tight squeeze under a rock flake confirmed the left-hand branch as Lads' Luck, but I was surprised at the snugness of this point where any progress involved moving only a couple of centimetres at a time. The inwards blowing draught was impressive and clearly this section of cave warranted further investigation, but the route from Junction Chamber was too dangerous to be used.

The Rat's Project (Read's Assault Team)

The 1968 survey shows an intriguing dashed link between the bottom of the more stable Zed Alley route and the Browne-Stewart Series streamway. If a route could be forced through, it would also provide relatively safe access to Lads' Luck. Permission was gained and the first phase of the project was to sort out the Zed Alley Squeeze that the rest of the core team did not fit.

The advice of Pete Hann was sought and with his help a cemented supporting wall was built around the boulders in Pipe Chamber. Once completed, a large keystone in the floor was safely removed providing a much roomier bypass. Any purists can still use the original squeeze if desired.



A guideline was put through the Boulder Maze to prevent members of the digging team getting lost or going AWOL! Splash Pot is a nasty free-climb and a bolt was placed for a ladder.

The next phase of the project was to enlarge the Hells Teeth arch. This task involved lying flat-out in a puddle – an experience that we liked to share and in wet weather the water from Waterfall Chamber enters as an inlet on the far side of the arch. Mr Hann was decidedly unimpressed and after uttering endearments such as “*I hate you even more than usual*” developed a preference for the more salubrious conditions of Spider Hole. Andrew departed for 3 months abroad, but the core team was fortunate to be joined by John Gisborne.

The tunnel beyond Hells Teeth is a flat-out crawl, that we named the Windpipe because of the strong draught. After 8m the passage kinked to the left and continued as a very narrow T-shaped rift that was impassable for the next 5m. Work commenced on widening the rift and extra room was gained by removing the thick layer of mud from the ledges.



Spoil had to be transported back to the base of Splash Pot and the constricted awkward nature of the passages meant that this had to be done in two stages and also included the transfer from one digging boat to the smallest sized version that I have ever used! We are grateful for the assistance of Rich Carey, Emma Gisborne, Peter Glanvill, Rich Marlow and Andrea Russe.

Progress was steady and we were greatly encouraged by the roar of the stream ahead that could at times be heard from back at Splash Pot. The connection was finally made on 26 January 2013 but, with neither John Cooper nor John Gisborne able to make this trip, Pete Buckley, Rich Marlow and I only went as far as the Stream Chamber.

The following weekend the team was committed to the Upper Flood, Neverlands Link project for the MCG and a return trip was not possible until 9 February. John Gisborne selected to continue the work at Splash Pot. Our first aim was to explore downstream and find the LADS sump as it was hoped that this could be re-dived in the near future.

Water conditions were high and we were unable to reach the sump passage. Locating the route back up Browne-Stewart Series proved surprisingly demanding and an hour was spent

scratching around in a very unpleasant bouldery void that did not appear to be on the survey and must be the mud chambers found by the MNRC.

Whilst John Cooper worked on enlarging the connection squeeze, Pete, as a last resort, climbed up the unstable cascade in Stream Chamber and reported footprints. From here, by climbing up a near vertical loose boulder slope for another 10m, he found a tight tube that he gallantly suggested that I should check. This proved to be the key to connecting across to the passages that I recognised and we continued as far as the Lads' Luck tube to inspect the squeeze.

The following weekend John Cooper and I spent a couple of hours attempting to dig out the squeeze. After further enlargement on the next trip we were able to finally achieve our goal of visiting Lads' Luck.

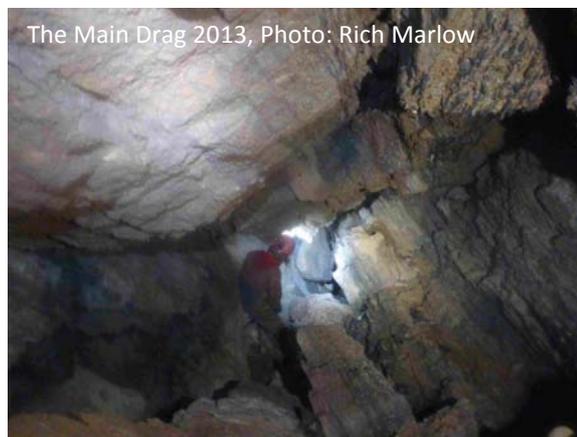
This impressive section of passage is very unlike the rest of Read's and well worth the effort. The dig, a narrow very draughty rift looks very promising ...

Further reading

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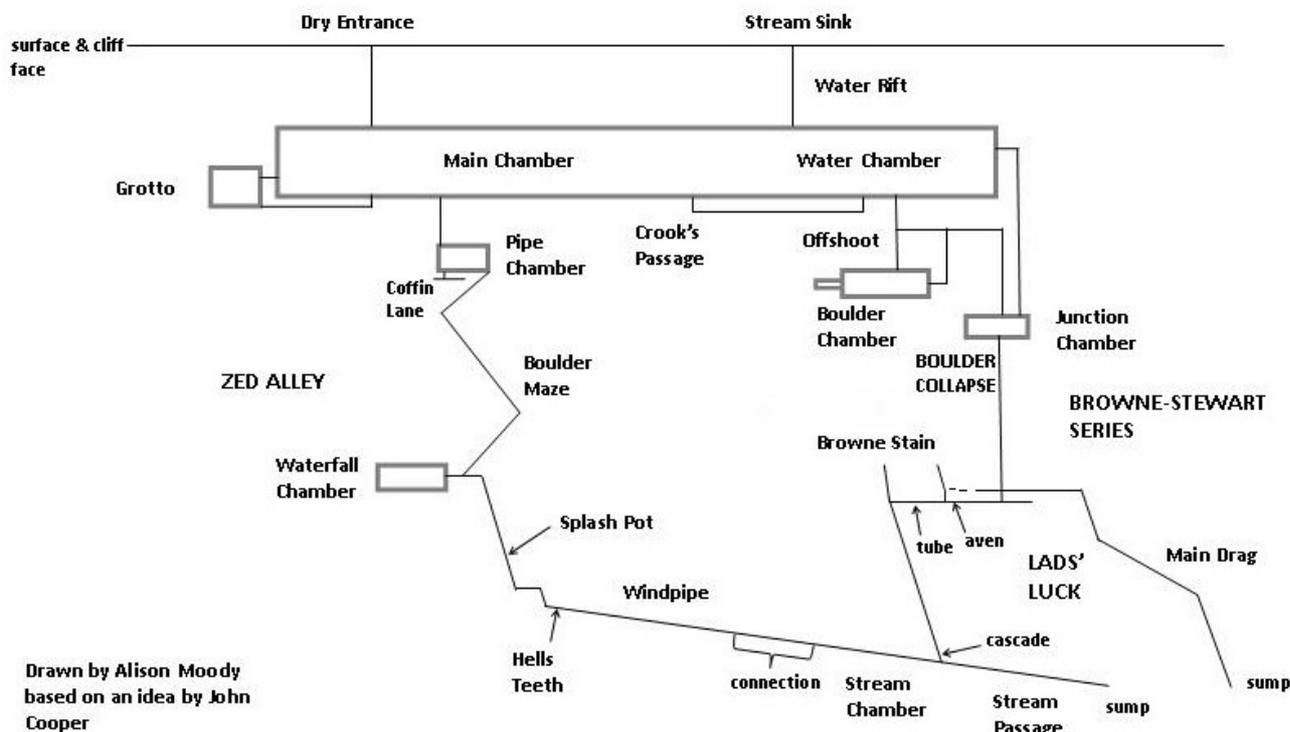


Ali Moody on the breakthrough day, by the cascade in Stream Chamber 2013, Photo: Pete Buckley



The Main Drag 2013, Photo: Rich Marlow

Read's Cavern – Schematic Diagram



The RATS (Pete Buckley, John Cooper, Ali Moody, John Gisborne) before a working trip January 2013, Photo: Emma Gisborne



Ali Moody at the connection point between Zed Alley and Browne-Stewart Series 2013, Photo: Pete Buckley



Rich Marlow in Zed Alley Squeeze 2013, Photo: Ali Moody



John Cooper having a bath in the Hunter's Brook post trip 2013, Photo: Ali Moody



