

Journal of the
Wessex Cave Club

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Panama '05

The Right Stuff - Beyond the Sumps
in the Seoubio. Part 2

The Caves of Ebbor Gorge

From Tuska's Reliquary

Officers

President

Donald Thomson

Vice Presidents

Dave Irwin

Sid Perou, Derek Ford

Chairman

David Morrison

Windrush

Upper Bristol Road

Clutton, BS39 5RH

01761 452437

Secretary

Les Williams

51 Churchill Road East, Wells

BA5 3HU.

01749 679839

Membership Sec

Jude Vanderplank

Holmwood Nurseries

Woodhill

Congresbury, BS49 3AF

01934 833320

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Hut Administration

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Journal Contact

Jonathan Williams

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Training Officer

Les Williams

Officers E-mail Addresses are available from our website

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Headquarters

Upper Pitts

Eastwater Lane

Priddy, Somerset. BA5 3AX

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From the Editor

I hope you like this packed edition of the journal. Its been a struggle to fit everything in, but I'm not complaining.

Following his election to the post of chairman Dave Morrison starts, in this issue, what I hope we become a regular feature of this years journals, his column Tuska's Reliquary.

This journal contains three first class articles with a bit of something for everyone. I was particularly taken by James Cobbet's piece on Panama. Certainly an area that is worth further investigation.

Thanks to some changes at the AGM committee corner is back! Thanks should go to outgoing officers Mark Helmore and Nik-Nak for their many years of hard work.

The next journal already looks like being another good one, including a report on the International Conference held earlier this year in Greece.

Have a good Christmas and New Year.

Jonathan

Committee Corner



Photo. Bob Scammell

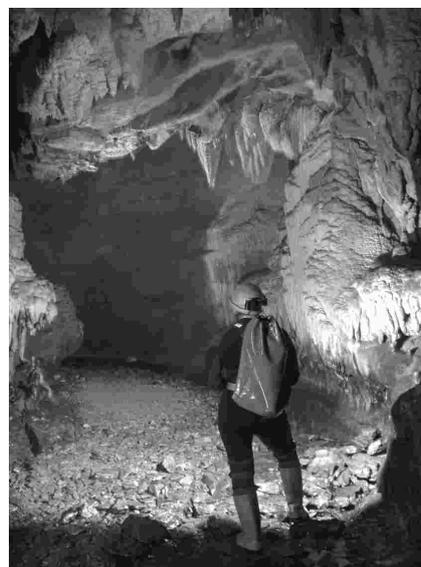
Famous for his digging exploits and his legendary Tuska Tours, Dave returns to the job of Chairman after several years absence.

With lots to issues to tackle in the coming months we wish him the best of luck.

Cover Picture

Kathy Williams
Saunt de la Pucelle, Lot.

Photo: R. Brooks



Hidden Earth '05

This year brought Hidden Earth to Mendip. The event was well attended by Wessex Members and our club stand put together by Christine Grossart won second prize in the club stand competition.

The prize was a trip to Clearwell caves show caves in the Forest of Dean. Full details of the trip are on the back page of this journal.

Les Williams and his technical team did a first class job again. Many thanks to all those who made the event such a great success.

AGM and Dinner

This years AGM was well attended and saw some interesting debate over the proposal for the club to adopt CASC status. The election for Chairman resulting in Dave Morrison being elected. He starts the first of a regular column at the back of this journal.

The dinner was held at the Wessex Hotel in Street. Our Guest of honour Leo Dickinson entertained diners with his tales of filming some of the world's greatest cave divers. Thanks to Pauline and Brian and Brenda Prewer for their hard work in organizing an enjoyable evening.

Obituary. John Hooper

Club members will remember John Hooper who has died recently at the age of 90.

He was a Wessex member from 1955 to 1977, although his main activities were with the Devon Speleological Society. He is best remembered for his pioneering work on bats.

John was also an early exponent of cine photography in caves, as well as being a fine photographer. We extend our sympathy to Alison and her family.

Maurice Hewins



Wessex Club Stand at Hidden Earth '05

Photo: Brian Prewer

When I went to live in Panama in 2001, I assumed that cave exploring, like drinking decent beer, was one of the things that I would have to do without, as there wasn't any. However, after a few months I was in contact with Keith Christenson (NSS), who had managed to assemble a group of cavers, and would-be cavers, as the Panama Caves Project (PCP). Even though none, apart from Keith, had any real caving experience, they had found and explored a number of caves in various parts of Panama. These caves usually featured large active stream passages, more than one entrance - most being through trips, shallow depths below the surface and zillions of bats. Most of the caves were rather short, and none had any descended ladder or rope pitches. Keith had been hampered by lack of competent back-up, and as a result I was able to extend some of these caves, one by laddering a 40 ft wet pitch, and a second by forcing a "too tight" - now doesn't that tell you something!

In addition to caves within day-trip range of Panama City, Keith, in 2002, had made a brief caving expedition to Bocas Del Toro, an archipelago of islands first discovered by Christopher Columbus, in the Caribbean near the border with Costa Rica. Though a popular tourist destination, this was the first time that any real caver had looked at Bocas, and Keith had made a number of discoveries on Isla Bastimentos, including Ol' Bank Underworld, at circa 1,150 metres, the longest surveyed cave in Panama. In another Bastimentos cave, Nibida, Keith had been defeated by a waterfall in one branch and a sump (duck?) in the other. Keith had also surveyed La Gruta, a 300 metre long, well-known, tourist cave in Isla Colon, a fifteen minute boat ride from Bastimentos.

Following a review of all Keith's data, and a recce in 2004, it appeared that there was much



Entering the Duck in Nibida

Photo: S. McManus

more cave to be found in Bocas, both within and adjacent to the caves explored by Keith, and, according to persistent local rumours, in the more remote parts of Isla Colon. Accordingly, I recruited a hard, Mendip-based, team consisting of Rob and Helen Harper (BEC) and Stuart "Mac" McManus (clubless), for a two week trip in late-February / early March 2005. Mac actually arrived in Panama a week earlier, to help sail Flying Scud, a 44 ft sailing boat that was to be our base for the fortnight, to Bocas from Portobello - but this is another story!

After Rob and Helen had de-jet-lagged in Panama City for a day, we joined the local caving group for a trip down Cueva Las Tres Cascadas ("Three Waterfalls Cave"), which, at 100 ft, is the deepest explored cave in Panama, and the only one with a real ladder pitch. Though Tres Cascadas is not exactly World Class, where else can you wake by the Pacific, and three hours later be exploring a cave by the Atlantic? The journey to the cave, including driving across the Panama Canal locks, and a short, but "Hard VS", jungle bash, is perhaps the best part of it!

The next day we took a one hour flight up to Bocas, accompanied also by Marilyn, my wife, followed by a five minute water taxi to join Flying Scud in the marina on Isla Colon. The caving was split between Isla Colon and Isla Bastimentos, to where we moved Flying Scud for the second week. The islands are close together and there is a lot of accommodation and many water taxis available, making one's own yacht something of a luxury.

On the first day we visited Gordon MacMillan, an expatriate Scot, who lives with his family in the middle of Isla Colon, adjacent to the tourist cave La Gruta. Gordon told us how there were entrances and shafts all over his land, and all over the centre of the island, and how he had cemented one gaping hole in his garden to make it safe! We then explored La Gruta, confirming that there were actually five river caves in the system, two upstream and three downstream of the main entrance. We then followed the river for circa one mile downstream of La Gruta, exploring one short and grotty cave. Subsequently, Rob and Helen surveyed the La Gruta down-stream caves, and Mac took some snaps. In this general area, we later found and explored two significant, albeit small (circa 80 and 100 metres), caves. However, there are a large number of flooded cave entrances and shafts (cenotes) in this area, which are close together and, almost certainly, linked. More thorough investigation could find more speleologically interesting things here too.

One of Gordon's workers, Roderick, told us that he could lead us to big caves one hours walk away, so the next day we called his bluff. Unfortunately the terrain featured numerous 45 degree mud slopes, which, in tropical temperature and humidity, makes for horrid hiking. However, we eventually arrived to find remnants of a large cave system, with numerous surface shafts and entrances giving access to fragments of a circa 10 metre diameter stream passage, now, alas, largely choked with mud and stal. The first three significant "remnants" explored were each a maximum of circa 60 metres long.

The fourth "remnant" led immediately into a large and commodious chamber, and thence into the base of a large shake-hole. Here we found a "metate", a stone used communally in ancient times for grinding corn, suggesting that the cave had been inhabited. Though there are many Afro-Caribbeans, there are now no descendants of the original inhabitants living in Bocas. Gordon showed us sites on surface where there had been villages, also marked by metates, and told us that the circa 35,000 aboriginal inhabitants had been killed by the pirate Henry Morgan. It appears that some had lived, in hiding, in caves. Perhaps there are more archeological relics to find here? From the back of the chamber a high vadose rift led off, with a small stream in the bottom. This cave, subsequently named Upper Caiman Cave, for the small fresh-water crocodile that we found there, was later surveyed to some 200 metres.

The stream emerging from Upper Caiman Cave then flowed through the circa 20 metre long Lower Caiman Cave, to join the Rio Mimitimbi, the main river flowing from the centre of Isla Colon north to the sea.

On the following trip to the Isla Colon caves, after surveying and taking snaps in La Gruta, we took a lift a mile up the road to view another cenote. The farmer, Samuel, who lives on the other side of the road, showed us another cave that passed right under the road, but one that we did not explore, due to the crocodiles - not that we actually saw any crocodiles, but we believed the story! Samuel said that he could show us an easy route to the lower part of the Rio Mimitimbi, which passed several tunnels on it's way to the sea. The following day we walked for an easy one hour to intersect the river. While Roderick, Rob and Helen went upstream, Samuel, Mac and I went down-stream, only thirty minutes to the sea. The Rio Mimitimbi flows through four river tunnels, each one big enough to drive a bus through, that is if busses could swim, but none more than fifty metres long. We explored two caves on the beach, one a large but short passage leading to a circa 15 metre diameter chamber, with a mud mound floor - an obvious fossil resurgence, the other a dry 15 metre long passage, choked with stal.

We then pressed on upstream to find ourselves, two hours later, at the exit of Lower Caiman Cave, passing on the way a resurgence from a five metre across pool by the river. A hundred metres upstream, an obvious inlet cave, noted on the previous trip, proved to be a circa 80 metre through trip, albeit dry in early March. A further hundred metres upstream from here, the Rio Mimitimbi emerged from a resurgence pool at the bottom of a huge boulder pile at the end of the valley. Though, most likely, a way can be found through, or around, the boulder pile to gain access to the main Rio Mimitimbi river cave that should lie beyond, by now we were out of time, so this was left for another expedition. We then met Roderick, Rob and Helen, who had been surveying the Caiman Caves, and headed back out - not arriving back at the road until after dark.

Though I have written about caves on Isla Colon first, we actually first went to see Oscar Powell, on Bastimentos, on our second day in Bocas. Oscar, who also runs Roots Restaurant, had first taken Keith Christenson to the Bastimentos caves, to enable Keith to explore. Oscar now offers guided "adventure tours" to tourists, including the entrance sections of Nibida. Oscar, and his brother Alvaro, were invaluable to us in 2005 also, with small motor launches to navigate the creeks, introductions to local land-owners and guiding us around an area that they know well. Both Oscar and Alvaro also came under-ground with us, and were able to upgrade their caving skills thereby.

The first day on Bastimentos, Oscar took us to Nibida, by way of a forty minute boat ride via Bahia Honda and then through a narrow creek amongst sloths and tropical birds. A fifteen minute walk then led to a large resurgence entrance. One hundred metres into Nibida led to a parting of the ways, with two streams coming in. To the left, a passage reminiscent of Swildons 1 terminated in a deep pool, with a five foot high waterfall. Keith had been unable to climb this, but we reckoned that for a hard Mendip-trained team - no problem. However, though the water-fall is only five feet high, the pool below is very deep, and the rock is rotten, and "comes off in your hand". After fooling about with climbers toys for half an hour, I agreed to hold my breath while Rob stood on my shoulders to reach the top of the waterfall, but I just kept going down without finding bottom! Tying a rope onto a tackle bag and throwing it along the passage beyond the waterfall did no good either.

Mac, Oscar and I then went outside to cut ourselves a bamboo may-pole from the jungle, while Rob and Helen went to check out the right hand inlet. Unfortunately, the twenty foot may-pole would not fit around the first bend in the passage, so out came the machete.



Climbing Wham Bamboo Water-Fall

Photo: S. McManus

Eighteen foot was too much for the second bend etc ... we eventually arrived at the pool below the water-fall with twelve feet left! However, twelve feet was just the right length to put across the pool onto the lip of the water-fall, enabling me to climb an electron ladder looped round the pole. I then pulled up the bamboo and wedged it more securely and hung off the ladder for Mac and Oscar to join me. The passage led off through several tree chokes, to another entrance some 150 metres further on. The stream entering here was later followed upstream and found to flow through another short cave, before finally emerging into the light.

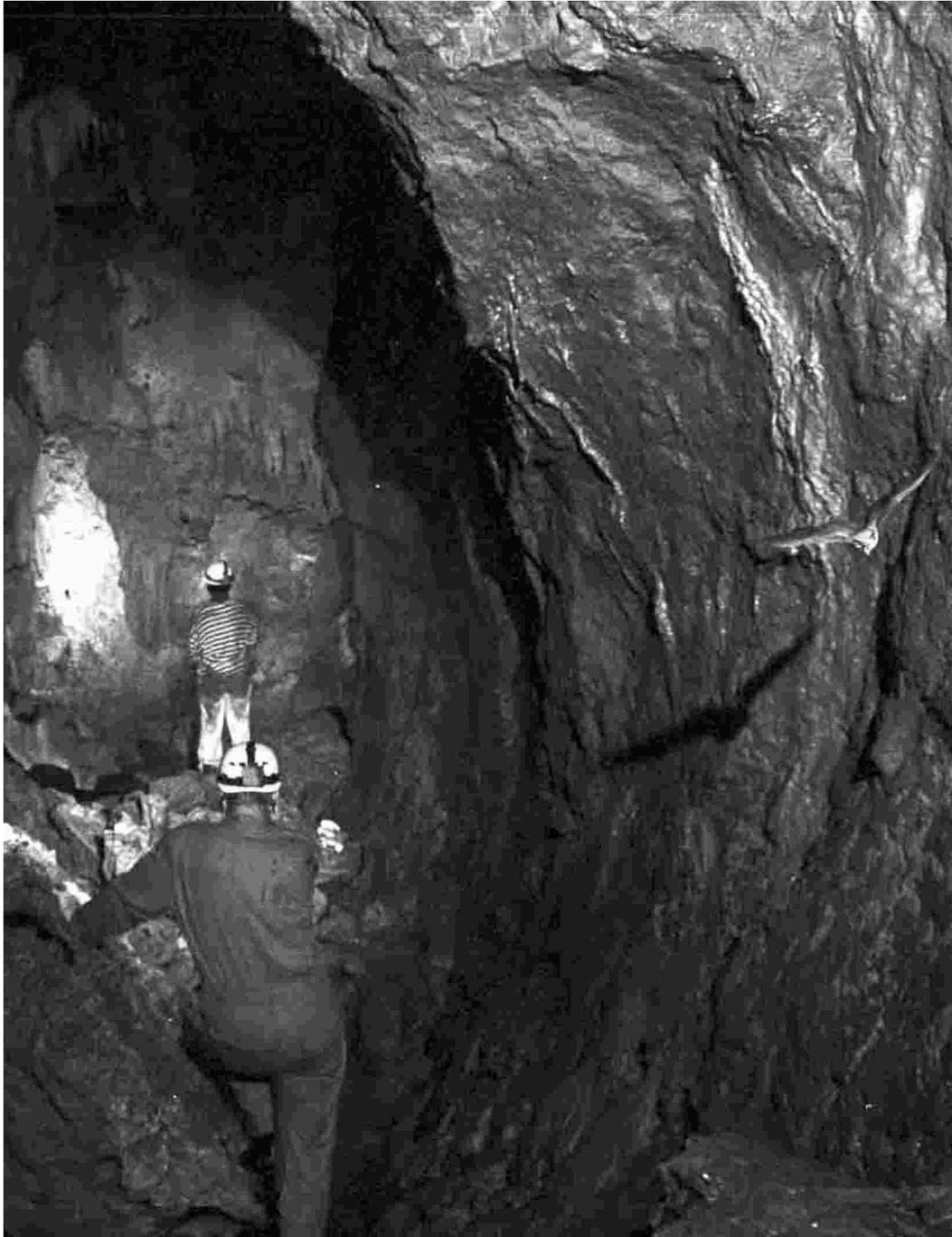
We then followed Rob and Helen up the right hand inlet, to realize, after a couple of hundred metres, that we were in new stuff, and that the sump (duck?), that had stopped Keith in 2002, had failed to intimidate cavers brought up on the "Double Troubles"! Beyond the duck, the roof rose to give access to over half a kilometer of stomping passage, with an active stream, with some sections big enough to be "chambers". As with most caves in Panama, this extension passed multiple sky-lights, eventually reaching a short section of open-air passage caused by a collapse. From here, 80 to 100 metres of stooping passage ended in a doline with multiple entrances, none of which has been pushed to a conclusion.

Several more days were spent in Nibida, mainly for Rob and Helen to make the survey, Mac to take some snaps, and me to pose. A number of leads were followed, adding perhaps fifty metres to the system, with one lead being judged "too grotty" - i.e. we had to crawl. A small cave upstream of the top entrance was also explored. When Rob later did the sums, these showed Nibida now to be the longest surveyed cave in Panama, at circa 1,400 metres.

We also looked at Cueva Villagra, pronounced "Viagra", named for Domingo Villagra, the local land-owner and hard man. Cueva Villagra resurges less than 100 metres from Nibida, at the foot of the same escarpment, but leads after some 200 metres of large stream passage to a truly intimidating duck, created by hanging stal formations. Though this duck is passable by someone with a large nose, it leads immediately to a, roomy but real, sump, again creat-

ed in part by hanging formations. Most likely a cave diver, or even a nutter with a face mask, could find a way through, and, thence to another significant cave beyond, and / or a link up with Ol' Bank Underworld, perhaps to restore it to it's former status as "Panama's Longest Cave".

We also took a general look along and above the escarpment from which Nibida and Villagra's resurge. However, even though little time was allowed for this, a number of shafts and other entrances were noted, but not explored as being too grotty. The exceptions were three larger entrances within a hundred metres of Nibida. The first, named Keyhole Cave for



the shape of it's entrance, proved to be a pretty, but short (40 metres?) through trip. The water resurging from Keyhole went into a large cave entrance, which could not be pushed due to shortage of time and ladder - this was the last half of the last after-noon. The third entrance, a resurgence at the base of the escarpment, is almost certainly the other end of this cave; giving a likely (40 metres?) through trip. The escarpment continues unexplored to the North East - there must be more resurgence caves here, and also more enterable sinks on the

Bats on the Wing in the Nibida Extensions

Photo: S. McManus

plateau above the escarpment.

In total, in ten days in the field, we found of the order of a mile (surveyed and unsurveyed) of previously unrecorded cave, in a country previously considered cave-free. A return trip is in planning for early 2006. Now, does anyone know where I can find a pint of Bass?

The Right Stuff

Beyond the Sumps in the Seoubio - Part 2

Michael Thomas with Andy Judd & Jon Beal

While Jon was diving and Laura was assisting the diver, Andy and I investigated the aforementioned inlet passage noted on the left before the sump. This turned out to be a large fossil passage with several branch passages. Andy soon located the trunk passage by forcing me to crawl over some very nice formations and pools and dropped back into a large rift passage with a stream. We followed this for some distance in large cave to a lake that we called Playboy's so starting a theme! The lake appears also to be a rising for a different stream, possibly the sump 6 stream as more water was flowing out of the lake than was flowing down into it. Approximately 500 meters of cave was explored from the junction to the rising lake. The cave was seen to continue, but both of us returned to assist Jon out of his dive then to return to the surface and take stock of what we had found. The trip out was a little tiring but the thought of what we had just done was enough to ignore the discomfort and plan a second pushing trip.

DATE: 4-5-2005

DIVERS: M B Thomas, J Beal

After a day of rest in which we managed to break one team member and poison another we returned to the cave. By we I mean Jon and I, Laura and Andy were recovering and planning on not going much further than the coffee shop! Top Tip. When you're organizing a trip don't let your team members rest until they get home. It's bad for them.

So Jon and I returned to the new extensions to start a survey. We started by surveying from Sump 5 to Sump 6. Next we worked on the inlet passages explored yesterday. Just under 1000 meters of cave was surveyed and we pushed on about 400 meters beyond the rising



Drawing up the Survey back at Camp

Photo:M. Thomas

lake, again in large rift passage, but it got narrower and muddier. Another small inlet on the left was explored on the way and we turned for home in a large fossil gallery full of very muddy but typically large French formations. The cave looked to be closing down and as we did not fancy crawling we called it a day and headed out. On the inward dive we both noted that the dive line needed a little bit of repositioning, especially as the visibility in all sumps apart from Sump 1 was getting poor, so on the way out some line work was done by both divers. On reaching the entrance chamber empty cylinders from the last two trips were pulled out for filling, deep joy!

DATE: 6-5-2005

DIVERS: M Thomas, A Judd, J Beal, L Trowbridge

The plan was to continue the exploration and survey of Seoubio 6. Jon and I departed from Seoubio 2 first, followed by Laura and Andy a short while later. Jon and I continued to the end gallery to continue surveying while Andy and Laura dropped a 4-meter pitch near the start of the rift passages leading to the end. Unfortunately the pitch was blind but a way on was seen a few meters up the wall from the ladder belay, but was not entered due to a lack of protection for the climb up, a bolting kit would be needed, a project for another day. After Andy and Laura had finished their small exploration they continued to the end to help with the survey. We all met up again in the decorated chamber at the end. While the rest of us were admiring the muddy formations Andy being a small kind of chap was volunteered to go up the muddy crawl at the end with the survey tape, but after a couple of survey legs and a small climb up, Andy suddenly announced that he was back walking in clean washed rift passage once again. Jon and Laura took the lead and continued the exploration and survey down a series of climbs to drop down a final 5-meter climb back into a large stream passage.



Jon and Andy at Sump 1.

Photo F. Vassuer

Jon Beal

With Andy and Mike now holding the survey tape and compass it was nice to take the lead into new passage. Frantically writing down the called out bearings and distances. Climbing up a stall 'beehive' I noticed a hole up into a high chamber (of which more later) More exciting was the sharp clean rift to my left, seemingly a different limestone to what we had been in. Clean and no mud! Squeezing into the rift added yet more holes to my wetsuit but turning a corner found me looking down a steep climb with a couple of ways on. Stopping to shout back to the others my heart leapt as the sound of roaring water came from below!

Barely containing the urge to race ahead, we surveyed down the climb into a keyhole passage - a lot of water flows down here at times! A few meters along this and I was suddenly perched on a bridged rock, looking down to a river roaring over gour pools five meters below. A cautious but straightforward climb down and the four of us were standing in a chamber, our new river disappearing both up and downstream into the blackness.

At the top of the climbs down to the river the ramp up into the small chamber was investigated by Laura but closed down in a vertical rift. Back in the stream we milled around like headless chickens not really knowing what to do! We first went upstream for about 50 meters to find a sump a little disappointed we then headed downstream to find a long canal in high rift passage after 100 meters. This was much better - Laura, Andy and Jon swam down the canal and I stood at the start and held the survey tape, it was a wonderful site watching exploration cavers swim down a deepwater canal. All too soon the canal seemed to sump but Laura decided to give free diving a shot and passed two ducks until a final sump was met. It really did look like we were going to have to resort to diving again to push on further. On our way back to Sump 5 Andy climbed up into a high level passage we had noted earlier and gained us another 100 meters of fine cave. Life is sometimes too good! On reaching the sumps Andy and Laura dived back to Seoubio 2 while Jon and I surveyed Seoubio 4 and Sump 5. We also did some photography in Seoubio 4 and 2 on the way out before regaining the entrance chamber and returning to the camp for dinner and an expensive bottle of wine or three, I think we broke the 3 Euro a bottle mark!

DATE: 7-5-2005

DIVERS: M Thomas, J Beal

The aim today was to start surveying the sumps and main chamber to tie them into the survey of the extensions. We started by surveying the entrance chamber. While we were doing this we also attempted to photograph the entrance pitch and chamber, but yet again a lack of flash interfered with this! After the usual kitting up saga we surveyed Sump 1 and Seoubio 2 followed by Sump 2. Low air reserves forced us to return to base. Several very heavy cylinders, or so they seemed to Jon, were pitch hauled to the surface for filling after the dive. Well if he will volunteer who am I to argue.

DATE: 9-5-2005

DIVERS: M Thomas, J Beal

This was to be our final sump survey dive. We both swam through to Seoubio 2 with the usual minimal kit and prepared to dive. Jon dived first and headed up to Sumps 3 and 4 to start the survey work. I swam along behind with several string bags to try to make a better job of some of the line belays - most of the sump floor consists of very small pebbles and gravel, ideal for filling the string bags with then attaching them to the line. After I had run out of bags I swam on and caught up with Jon to assist with the last bit of the survey. Once this was done we both then returned to dive base and exited the cave. That evening much huffing and puffing was heard from Jon's drawing corner in the tent as he tied in the sumps to the survey.

DATE: 11-5-2005

DIVERS: M Thomas, A Judd, J Beal, F Vasseur

After a rather amusing evening phone call with Frank starting in my best French! He was somewhat keen to join us on our final pushing and photographic dive! After a guided tour for Frank, to most of the new cave and lots of photographs all around the system we eventually reached the end. Jon inspected the terminal downstream sump with a mask and passed one more short duck before it finally sumped again. Next we set about pushing Andy down most of the small inlet and stream sink passages we had noted on previous trips. I was quite amused to see Frank really get in to the swing of short person abuse on caving trips! These amounted to a few more tens of meters of cave but one of interest ended over a very slippery 6 meter climb down back into a stream way in a narrow rift. This was not entered due to a lack of a ladder, although Andy did make a bit of a fuss about the climb at the time!

Andy Judd

At the end of an enjoyable exploration trip there were two bits of advice I really wished I had ignored. The first from Jon " just pop down there it'll close down but we need another 10 meters for the survey" Beal, saw me on hands and knees off down a side passage. All was going well before Mike "come back for the survey tape" Thomas chipped in and I ended up going back down the tunnel holding the tape in one hand and going feet first. As my legs started dangling in mid air, whilst slowly sliding on a mud slope I began to think all was not entirely well! My feet came to rest on a wall wedging my body on the muddy slope. Looking about confirmed that I don't understand "close down" in geology terms. Apparently it means perch your self over a 6-meter deep mud covered rift more by luck than judgment.

At this point I politely asked Mike without any trace of panic for a bloody rope to replace the survey tape post haste. Pushing myself back out - to an appropriate level of abuse in both French and English - I persuaded Mike to go and have a look. Only a couple of minutes later he began to agree with me rather loudly. It may not happen often, but this time I was right! Of equal interest the small chamber visited by Laura on 6-5-2005 was re-investigated again by Andy and I, fresh air was detected along with roots from the trees and bushes above. Radio location from this point will be done on a future trip. After all leads had been looked at or logged we all exited the cave in the now fairly poor visibility, Frank commented that it was nice to dive on British 6mm dive line in these conditions rather than the usual continental dental floss! Once back in Seoubio 2 Frank and I passed the choke in Sump 1 for the last time on this trip and Andy and Jon pushed all the dive gear that had lived in Seoubio 2 for ten days down through the choke and it was shuttled back to the entrance chamber by myself with Frank taking photographs. After we had all regained the entrance chamber, a mammoth pitch haul was made easier by Frank (who is a big strong lad) on the haul line shouting to Andy (who is nearly a big strong lad!) "Two Bottles Please!" Over dinner that evening the completed survey was brought out and various parts of the cave named over some very expensive wine brought by Frank, well over budget that was!

A total of 1936 meters of cave was surveyed with around 1500 meters being explored on this trip. Several projects remain to be completed in the down stream part of the cave. Sump 6 needs pushing to conclusion, as do both sumps found in the new stream way. We have several dry leads that need looking at including the rift stream way found by Andy and a bolt climb above the small pot looked at by Laura and Andy, we can see ongoing passage. But the first project on a return trip will be to radio locate the small chamber, that is close to the surface and dig another entrance in to allow us easy access to the downstream cave and more comfortable diving trips to the end. In total this system has given us around 2100 meters of fine French cave up and downstream, increasing local knowledge of the immediate caving area. A return is already being discussed with Frank and company probably in 2006, but we are going to need a team of dry cavers as well to assist in the exploration of the Caleven de la Seoubio.

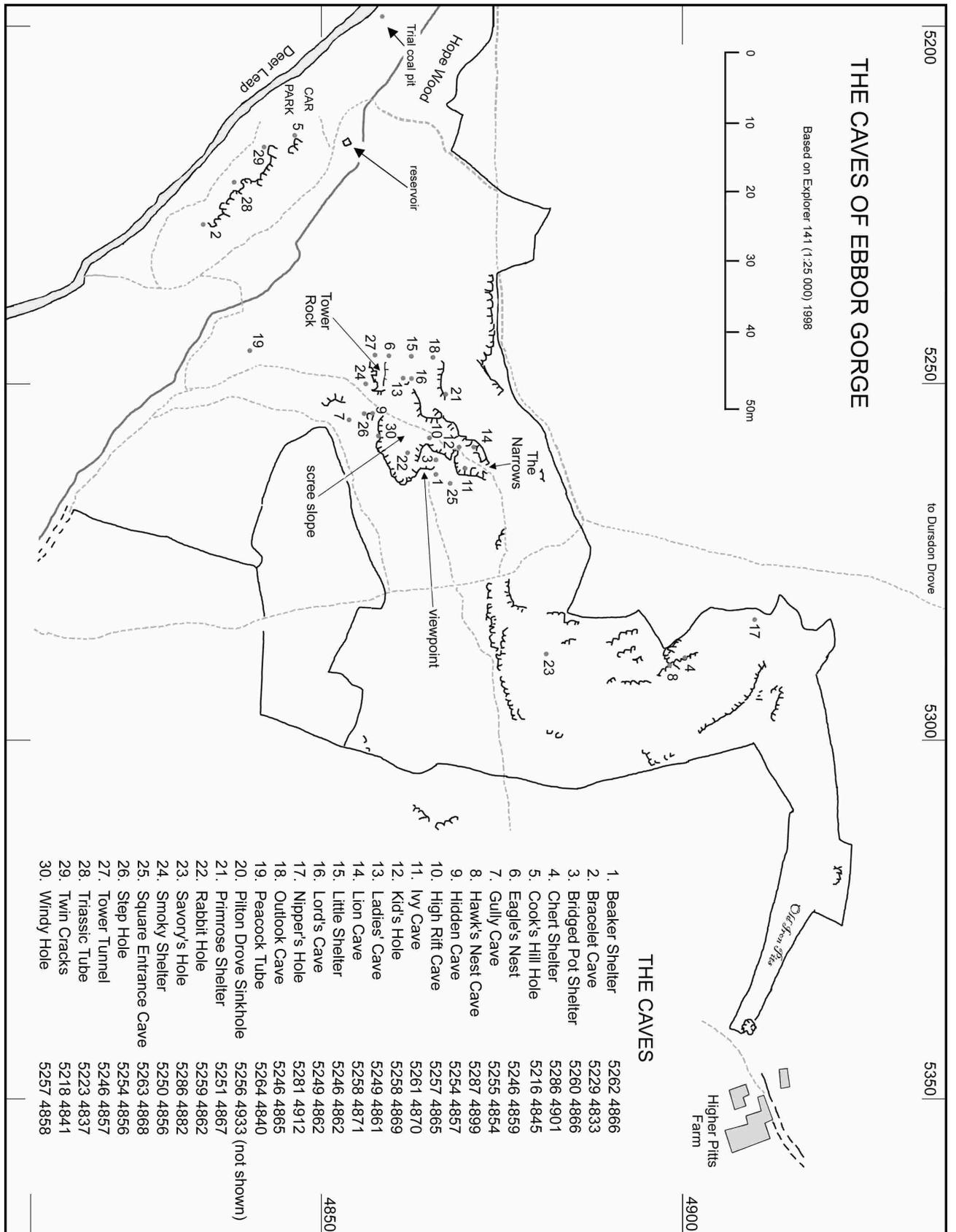
Within the Mendip caving literature there does not appear to be any concise description of Ebbor Gorge and its caves, and this article attempts to rectify this. It draws heavily on the last edition of 'The Complete Caves of Mendip', and work by Chamberlain and Williams (2001), plus my own fieldwork. Geological information was gleaned from 'Limestone and Caves of the Mendip Hills'. There are 30 named sites in and around the Gorge, plus several potential caves and shelters. Six of the sites have yielded archaeological material ranging from the Late Palaeolithic (ice age) to Romano-British age. None of the caves offers a 'caving' trip, though many are interesting sites in their own right, apart from any archaeological significance that they may have.

Ebbor Gorge was given to the nation by Olive Hodgkinson, of Wookey Hole Cave, in memory of Sir Winston Churchill. The Gorge is now a National Nature Reserve controlled by the Nature Conservancy Council and the National Trust, and no digging is permitted. Visitors are discouraged from straying from the footpaths, though the CSCC website does not list any access problems. Archaeologists with varying degrees of skill excavated many of the caves in the 20th century, and some remarkable artefacts of Palaeolithic to Roman age were found. Undoubtedly, there are other caves and shelters, which would yield more artefacts and information, but no digging is allowed. The crude excavations of cavers who may disturb important archaeological materials in search of new cave should, of course, be discouraged. It is harder to understand why competent archaeologists are denied access to the sites.

The NNR consists of an area of woodland in two converging valleys lying to the east of the Deer Leap road from Priddy to Wookey Hole. The valley nearest the road, Hope Wood (also known as Primrose Valley) runs to the SE. Ebbor Gorge begins at Higher Pitts Farm on the Mendip plateau, and runs down to the SW, joining Primrose Valley, and heading towards Wookey Hole. Primrose Wood is formed on the Ebbor thrust, part of the Cheddar-Wells thrust. It has a small stream fed from an excavated pond at the head of the valley. The upper part has no speleological interest, apart from a deep flooded pit in the valley floor, and a trial coal pit in the roadside hedge. Although the Lower Coal Measures (and Upper Carboniferous Millstone Grit) are found in the valley, they outcrop in the valley floor - the prospectors for coal were looking too high up! Balch records that Thomas Willcox found a seam of coal in the valley floor 8 - 15cm thick. He also mentions that some rock in Primrose Wood appears to have been metamorphosed by frictional heat (possibly associated with the fault). There are traces of shallow quarries on the right bank. Many years ago, there was a small covered reservoir in the valley floor.

Running into Hope Wood valley from the north is the more spectacular Ebbor Gorge itself. From the south, it begins as a wide valley, but becomes steeper with the high cliff of Tower Rock (with Smoky Shelter at its foot). The cliffs themselves are in Carboniferous (Hotwells) Limestone, which overlies younger rocks outcropping on the valley floor (shales and sandstone of the Quartzitic Sandstone Group) due to the Ebbor thrust. The thickness of limestone exposed is about 150m. The Gorge becomes much narrower and steeper (The Narrows) before widening again, and rising to Higher Pitts, with a short tributary northwards to Dursdon Drove. The Narrows is a steep series of rocks, like a natural staircase in what could well be an unroofed cave (Ford and Stanton) complete with potholes and scalloped walls. At the foot of this is a slab placed by Balch as protection over a small spring (really more of a seepage). This water is soon absorbed into the ground, so there is no surface stream.

It is probable that Ebbor Gorge and Primrose Valley were the result of early run-off of streams



from the top of the Mendip plateau. During Triassic times, when the climate was hot and dry, and desert conditions prevailed, many Mendip valleys were infilled with Dolomitic Conglomerate. There are outcrops of this rock low in the Gorge and at Templeton, at the very head of the east tributary. It still fills the valley above Wookey Hole, where the cave has penetrated the conglomerate to form the First and Second Chambers. The Wookey Hole valley probably predated Ebbor Gorge as a channel draining water from the Mendip plateau, but during the Jurassic marine period a dam blocked the original outlet to the cave. This allowed Ebbor Gorge to develop, until the dam was breached. Subsequent erosion of the gorge seems to have taken place during periods when the southern flank of the hill became exposed as sea levels fell during phases in glacial periods. The Gorge was probably scoured of its infill during the last Ice Age, when the top of Mendip, although not covered in ice, was permafrost. Run-off of melt water during warmer periods during the glaciation rapidly deepened the Gorge, exposing caves that had formed during earlier periods, although this was probably attenuated by capture of the subterranean drainage by Wookey Hole Cave.

There are some caves visible from the path that runs along the bottom of the Gorge. At the foot of the Narrows on the right is the obvious chimney and shelter of Kid's Hole. This site may have been an early resurgence related to a postulated Wookey Hole outlet associated with the high-level Chamber 20. Lion Cave can be seen in the cliffs opposite. Beyond the Narrows, the valley sides open out, and a T-junction is reached. The path to the left will take the walker up the hillside to Dursdon Drove. To the right, a path can be followed up to a cross-roads. That on the left leads out of the wood, past a pond and disused limekiln, to Higher Pitts Farm. The path ahead leads off the hill towards Wookey Hole. The right fork passes down the flank of the gorge to rejoin the main path down from Hope Wood. There is a detour to a grassy area at the top of the cliff above the scree slope, from which there are spectacular views of the valley and the Levels beyond. The main Gorge continues from the T-junction, although there is no path. The valley floor is littered with moss-covered rocks and boulders, making progress difficult. There are more cliffs, and the high rift entrance to Hawk's Nest Cave is visible on the left (right bank). Beyond this, the valley divides into two tributaries. To the west, a short valley ends at Dursdon Drove, while the valley to the east curves round to pass Higher Pitts Farm. Here, in the valley and surrounding fields, are traces of old iron pits, though most if not all of the open shafts and adits have been sealed by the farmer for the safety of his children. The valley becomes less pronounced, until at Templeton it is little more than a long dip in the ground terminating in a series of shallow depressions.

THE CAVES

The location map shows that the caves of Ebbor Gorge fall naturally into four groups: Hope Wood, the left and right banks below the Narrows, and caves above the Narrows. They will be described in that order. Distances and dimensions are in metres.

HOPE WOOD

There is a low cliff on the right (south) bank, just below the car park, and accessed to the right of the path leading over the stile from the information board. The four caves here lie along the foot of this cliff. From the path, running NW to SE, they are:

5. Cook's Hill Hole 5216 4845 A.156 L.26 VR.11

At the north end of cliff, a narrow 4m shaft leads down to a small chamber. A too-tight tube connects with the surface a few metres to the south. Dug in 1950-51, an Iron Age skeleton was found, together with mid-late Bronze Age pottery, together with flint scrapers and flakes, and animal bones.

29. Twin Cracks 5218 4841 A.154 L.3 VR.1

Towards NW end of cliff, 12m SE of Cook's Hill Hole. Two low cracks (bedding plane) at foot of cliff, sloping down to chokes.

28. Triassic Tube 5223 4837 A.154 L.4 VR.1
In the middle of the cliff, 21m NW of Bracelet Cave, near the top and reached by short climb. Phreatic tube with possible Triassic deposits in roof. There is an impassable tube nearby.
2. Bracelet Cave 5229 4833 A.135 L.24 VR.11
At SE end of cliff. Large excavated passage with two high level entrances to surface at the back. Excavated 1955, when a late Bronze Age gold bracelet was found, together with chert blades and Romano-British pottery. and the remains of 9 skeletons.

EBBOR GORGE, LEFT BANK

These caves are described from SW to NE. Some lie above the Narrows, and can only be accessed by walking back through the undergrowth from the top of this feature.

7. Gully Cave 52554854 A.144 L.3 VR.1
High on bank opposite Tower Rock, below gully near S end of highest cliff, in wood. Wide choked archway, which with an impenetrable tube above is inhabited by badgers.
26. Step Hole 5254 4856 A.125 L.2 VR.1
At foot of cliff behind brambles, due E of Tower Rock, and reached by rock step. Short rift.
9. Hidden Cave 5254 4857 A.125 L.2 VR.2
Behind brambles at foot of lowest cliff, opposite Tower Rock, 2m N of Step Hole. Short and uninteresting.
30. Windy Hole 5257 4858 A.149 L.3 VR.2
Just S of scree slope, high up in wood. Horizontal phreatic tunnel piercing rock buttress. South entrance accessible, N entrance high in rock face.
22. Rabbit Hole 5259 4862 A.144 L.2 VR.1
At foot of cliff halfway up N edge of scree slope, in wood. Descending earth-choked tube.
10. High Rift Cave 52574865 A.140 L.8 VR.5
10m up gorge of the scree slope, a 10m rock climb leads to a narrowing earth-choked rift with tufa.
12. Kid's Hole 5258 4869 A.136 L.9 VR.8
By path, 15m below the Narrows. Roomy arch with high rift in roof, leading to low choked (backfilled) tunnel. Partially excavated 1907 and 1912, when bones of a child and goats were found.
3. Bridged Pot Shelter 5260 4866 A.160 L.6 VR.6
Halfway up left bank among cliffs 18m south of the Narrows. Roomy shelter with perforated rock bridge spanning entrance. Excavated 1926-29 and 1958. Finds include Neolithic and Bronze Age pottery including a beaker. There was also a Late Pleistocene polished flint axe, a flint knife, scraper and flakes, and a hoard of 11 Neolithic (possibly Bronze Age) flint blades. The animal bones included bear, red deer and reindeer.
1. Beaker Shelter 5262 4866 A.178 L.12 V.4
Above Bridged Pot Shelter, 24m south of the Narrows. Three entrances, in calcite veins. Excavated 1931. Beaker deposit, possibly ritual burial, with floor of small limestone flagstones.
25. Square Entrance Cave 5263 4868 A.174 L.5 VR.3
Above Bridged Pot Shelter, 20m SSE of the Narrows, 6m N of Beaker Shelter. Short roomy tunnel in low cliff with trenched entrance, excavated by persons unknown with no record of any finds. Creep leads to low chamber, with dry broken stal.
11. Ivy Cave 52614870 A.164 L.2 VR.1
On 3m wide ledge near top of bank, 10m S of the Narrows. Wide, low, earth-filled arch, the right hand side of which is open. The entrance has been trenched. Floor of brown stony earth with broken stal.

EBBOR GORGE, RIGHT BANK

The caves are described from SW to NE. they are at various levels, from the valley floor to near the top of Tower Rock.

19. Peacock Tube 5246 4840 A.108 L.2 VR.1
100 yards up valley from junction with Primrose Valley, in cliff of Dolomitic Conglomerate. Small descending earth-choked tube with tufa.
24. Smoky Shelter 5250 4856 A.115 L.3.VR.2
At foot of cliff under Tower Rock. Shallow wide shelter with walls blackened by smoke.
27. Tower Tunnel 5246 4857 A.148 L.2 VR.1
In wood below and 5m W of Tower Rock. Low earth-choked tunnel by calcite vein.
6. Eagle's Nest 5246 4859 A.165 L.6 VR.1
In cliff 20 yards NW of top of Tower Rock and slightly higher. Short tunnel in solid rock, with second tight entrance to the right.
13. Ladies Cave 5249 4861 A.147 L.1 VR. 1
At foot of cliff near NW corner of scree slope, 7 yards S of Lord's Cave. Small arch with earth floor and choked rift on the left.
15. Little Shelter 5246 4862 A.167 L.4 VR.2
Fifteen metres N of top of Tower Rock, and 10m higher, in low cliff. Small shelter with attic (too tight to enter), excavated 1907 and 1922. Human bones, part of a sandstone axe and flints, possibly Neolithic, were found. A dig in 1955 revealed Roman pottery.
16. Lord's Cave 5249 4862 A.144 L.2 VR.1
At foot of cliff near NW corner of scree slope, 2m N of Ladies cave. Short tunnel choked with earth.
18. Outlook Cave 5246 4865 A.179 L.12 VR.6
Ninety metres N of top of Tower Rock, 20m higher, in small cliff. Artificially widened entrance leads to small chamber with pit in floor leading to an extension heading back towards the hill-side. Excavations in 1907 and 1922 found human and animal remains (Neolithic and later), with Late Pleistocene human and animal bones under a stalagmite floor. A leaf-shaped arrow-head, possibly Neolithic, was found in 1922. At one time, it appears that it was used as a den by bears. In 1972, the author found a 1918 penny and a 1962 florin on the floor.
21. Primrose Shelter 5251 4867 A.168 L.3 VR.1
On wooded ledge between Outlook Cave and Lion Cave. Shallow shelter, trenched in 1959 to find a small Late Pleistocene deposit with flints.
14. Lion Cave 5258 4871 A.147 L.6 VR.3
Just below the Narrows, opposite Kid's Hole. Wide low arch with phreatic hole above which leads to a small chamber and connection with the shelter below. It was partially excavated about 1910, but only one cave lion tibia was found.

ABOVE THE NARROWS

The caves here are not accessible from any path. They are described using the T-junction at the top of the Narrows as a starting point.

23. Savory's Hole 5286 4882 A.184 L.4 VR.2
Ninety metres above the Narrows. Choked shelter, excavated 1913 - 1919. Human bones from at least five individuals, possibly burials, were found. Excavated by J.H. Savory before WWII, an archaeological dig in 1958 only revealed animal bones.
8. Hawk's Nest Cave 5287 4899 A.204 L.9 VR.6
200m above the Narrows, 10m up on right bank. A high rift entrance slopes steeply down to a level floor ending in a too-tight rift and a flat-roofed aven. A low bedding plane on the right ascends to the surface. Partly excavated about 1900, revealing many small animal bones from the hawk's nest in the entrance.
4. Chert Shelter 52864901 A.206 L.5 VR.2
200m from the Narrows, 10m up on right bank, 6m NW of Hawk's Nest Cave. Wide low shelter with chert beds in the roof.
17. Nipper's Hole 5281 4912 A.228 L.5 VR.2
High on right bank, where the valley divides into west and east tributaries. Shallow arch in

angle of 3m cliff with low descending creep at back. The nearby cliffs contain several small caves.

20. Pilton Drove Sinkhole

5256 4933 A.248 L.5 VR.5

This is not shown on the map, and lies outside the NNR, but is in a shallow valley leading down to the west tributary at the head of the Gorge. In 1951 a collapse occurred by a stone wall. A dig in ochreous earth revealed nothing, and it was filled in.

There are many low cliffs, some overhanging, on the right bank (north) of the main gorge. Some of these may well have been used as shelters by our ancestors, and be worth excavating. There are also signs of recent illegal digs (now taken over by badgers) in the upper part of the valley. Permission to dig for any reason will not be granted.

Records of mining in the area are scant, and most mines have been filled or capped. Higher Pitts Mine is at 534 491 and was mined for manganese. In 1890, the rare oxy-chloride of lead, 'mendipite', was found there. Now filled, it used to be a cowsh-filled drift. The Mining Journal of 1856-71 (not accessed) describes the Little Downs Mine at Ebbor Rocks. This was worked by the Ebbor Rocks Mineral and Mining Co. Ltd., also known as the Little Down and Ebbor (sic) Rocks Mineral Mining Co. but Thomas Willcox, manager of a company which re-worked the area, reported that earlier shafts and underground workings were small and by no means extensive. Willcocks was manager of 'The Somersetshire Manganese and Iron Ore Company, Ltd' floated in 1890 and terminated in 1891. Apart from manganese, it was hoped to find commercially viable copper deposits, and the lead was reported to have 7% silver content. These hopes came to nothing. There are some small pits in the valley below Higher Pitts Farm, which were dug in search of iron ore in 1890 and 1891. The valley was in the past known as Iron Pit Bottom. The ore was probably ochre; both red and yellow ochre is found in small amounts at Templeton, together with some haematite. (Many of the stones at Templeton are coated with a thin layer of manganese oxide). Of the trial coal pits, only the one in Hope Wood remains.

The fieldwork on which much of this article is based was conducted many years ago, when access to sites off the beaten track was easier. Readers are reminded that they are requested to keep to the paths, although there are no known access restrictions. Visits would be best during the winter months. Not only would there be no risk of disturbing nesting birds or breeding animals, but also the lack of undergrowth would make many of the caves easier to find. I have spent hours scrambling around the Gorge, but have yet to locate all of the sites.

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From Tuska's Reliquary

Hi, and welcome to a new club year, and a good one to be hopefully. Apart from my new duty to ensure that the supply of bog rolls at the Hut never runs out and ensuring the Templeton spoil heap does not get so large that it resembles a ski slope to Glastonbury. I would also like to know how I may help with anything, if I can. Now I can guess issues to be aired, by listening to conversations and can encourage debate on the finer details that are brought to my attention. Oversee right and wrong club decisions, but if possible I would like to encourage greater, perhaps more proactive, communications between us all, so that any decisions, if there are any to be made, can be informed ones.

For my two-penny-worth I have outlined to the current committee what I feel is the stodgy stuff we should be concentrating on this year. My thoughts on this may be misguided and I would like to know if this is the case. Some items listed were raised by club members at the AGM, others rather selfishly are what I failed to explore and discuss during my last foray in this post and some are new after listening to others and their ideas. The list is there to be delivered, changed or added to, whatever.

The List so far includes:-

HUT MANAGEMENT-

Review DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) access issues, review of the door entry system (to key or not to key, go electronic etc); consider current and future proposals for provision of a new library room through extension to the hut including the possible opportunities gained by a vacated room on the ground floor; more balanced access to current library stock whilst conserving our more historic bibliographic assets; safety measures on the cooker gas taps.

POLICY, PROCEDURES AND PROCESS-

The club should always be there to help and support as required an individual or group of club members in their endeavours of caving and all that goes with underground exploration, and decisions taken, should be taken on the basis of what is best to ensure this core value is maintained; which brings me onto the Council rates issue (CASC or not or what if anything); overseas voting procedures and proxy voting; concessionary rates for membership of the club in particular in relation to encouraging young people to become involved in club caving; accounts preparation and presentation; sales and marketing expansion on consumer group for certain Wessex products; review of the effectiveness of maintaining current committee member numbers and lengths of period in office for certain responsibilities.

WHAT ELSE-

Two more things, as a leading caving club, I believe we should explore soon. The first is the issue of how we encourage younger people to become involved and sustain an interest in caving. The second, how we can externally influence a more balanced and reasonable approach to access, risk, liability and conservation is taken.

Thank you for considering my ramblings, I've think covering the main bits. Apparently I may be doing this column more than once, if this is the case I will try to make the next a tad entertaining if I can.

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Club Diary

December	
3rd-4th	Yorkshire, Lost Johns, Boxhead, Deaths Head
11th	Comittee Meeting
Feb	
18th	Clearwell Caves (see below)
For further details on any club meets contact Dave Meredith: melndave26@hotmail.com	

CLEARWELL CAVERNS

FOREST OF DEAN

SAT 18TH FEB 2006

LEAVE UPPER PITTS 9.30am

The Wessex club stand at Hidden Earth 2005, won a prize for 10 people to dig for ochre in the further reaches of Clearwell Caverns. We have opened the trip to everybody for a small donation per head on the day.

FREE mini-bus transport has been arranged for 32 people, on a first come first served basis. (those who helped on the Wessex stand get priority)

Return to Upper Pitts for around 5.30pm, where there will be the usual buffet spread of soup / bread / cheese / cakes and trifle at £2 per head.

The skittle alley at the New Inn, Priddy has been booked for 8pm
SUITABLE FOR SAGA & CHILDREN ALIKE!

Please bring your caving kit / old clothes to Clearwell. The showcave is easy walking but the further reaches are not!!

There is a tea and cake shop on site.

To confirm your attendance or for more information, please contact:
Brian Prewer 01749 870678 or Christine Grossart 07815 316681