

# MCG News

MENDIP CAVING GROUP

COMMITTEE-----

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WEEKLY CLUB MEETINGS "The Royal Oak", New Road, Brentford, Middx.  
Thursday nights until closing time.

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COTTAGE Stirrup Cup, Nordrach-on-Mendip, Nr.Wells, Somerset.  
Accommodation for over 30 - all essential services - guests  
charged at 20p per night.  
Booking for parties through the Cottage Warden.

CLUB NEWS

CONGRATULATIONS to Bryan Pittman and Anne on their marriage on the 18th March. Rather extreme steps to take to miss the A.G.M. Bryan!

PETE MUNT, we here, is also to be married again soon. He is now back in Canada after travelling overland via Australia.

TONY BUCHAN and JOHN SHEEHAN are expected home fairly shortly, after their non-journey to India. They went to Africa instead.

"THANKS MATES" The club would like to thank Pete & John Virgo, and Mike Brace for their generous donations to the Land Purchase Fund.

COTTAGE MOUNTAINEERS contemplating the cottage traverse in the future should do it in their socks only(?), or paint over their footprints as they go, in which case the route will be classed super-severe.

+ MEMBERSHIP - most members have already paid their subs, but some of you are +  
 + holding back - so sort out your sheekles and send them to +  
 + R.Wallington, 113 Upton Court Road, Slough, Bucks. Cheques +  
 + made out to Mendip Caving Group please. +

AROUND AND ABOUT

"BEER" - one pint of cooking bitter at the 'Hunters' will now cost you 11p. Unfortunately, for some, Barclaycards are still not accepted.

BIG LINK-UP? - it seems quite on the cards that the biggest breakthrough in British caving will occur in 1973 (apart from U.F.S. - Ed), for that is the date hinted for merger of Cave Research Group and British Speleological Association.

MENDIPS VANISHING GROTTOS - a booklet published by the B.E.C. at 40p. It has 50 photographs of now EXTINCT formations. (anyone who's seen Fountain Passage - August Longwood - recently knows what that means)

STOKE LANE - a tight meandering stream passage has been discovered from the stream inlet near Sand Chamber in II - possibly by-passing the sump.

AV' YA GOTTA LOIGHT BOY? Y.H.A. shop, 29 John Adam Street, W.C.2., has new and used Oldham cells (lead/acid) - £8.50 (new), £4.00 (re-con)

Also carbide lamps at £2.18.

Ed. noticed new Oldhams at £5.50 at Penyghent Stores recently.

BOGS - anyone desiring to use the Marton Arms bog can obtain a roll of Supersoft over the bar upon receipt of a deposit (no not that sort), or else chance their luck with a free page of the Financial Times.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING - Saturday, 18th March 1972 at 5.00pm.

Held at the cottage, Nordrach, under chairmanship of Simon Knight. Apologies for absence received from A.Knibbs, J.Goddard, B.Mee, B.Pittman; and minutes of the last meeting taken as read - which was just as well for they weren't available.

Secretary's Report - the National Caving Association now in existence and was organising itself; seemed it would assume work of regional councils.  
(P.Mathews)

Activity within the group was very strong. Attendance at the A.G.M. disappointing. Membership stands at about 50. Hon. Editor and Hon. Treasurer not present at meeting. Upper Flood Swallet - Sec. outlined events leading to the present joint dig with W.Stanton and the Reservoir Hole Team(not Wessex C.C.). Digging progressing at impressive rate and should take first place in group efforts.

Meet Secretary (J.MacMillan) - outlined Meet programme, meets generally received good support.

Cottage Warden (P.Ingold) - cottage had been well used by members and guests. There had been a useful work weekend. P.Mathews remarked that cottage poorly used during summer - remedial action urged.

Tackle-master (J.Miriam) - tackle available; 1,000ft rope and 200ft ladder(more under construction). Electric cells hard to come by, but spares had been ordered. No carbide lamps held at present.

Recorder (J.Goddard) - "by letter" - work on the library had fallen behind. There had been a noticeable drop in number of exchange publications with other clubs, - probably reflection on issue of our own material.

Any Other Business - (a) Dinner - following question from Sec. the meeting agreed that formal dinner a desirable feature of club calendar.  
(b) Blackmoor Main Shaft - discussion prompted by P.Walsh and A.Cox led to committee being directed to investigate our legal responsibilities regarding dig and act as necessary.

Election of Officers 1972/73 - Joan Robinson, Philip Ingold, and Brian Mee stepped down from their posts(Hon.Recorder, Cottage Warden, and Editor respectively) - 'grateful thanks for all your efforts'. New officers elected as listed elsewhere in newsletter. W.Jones elected as Cottage Warden but had changed his mind so Wayne Hiscox co-opted for post until next meeting.

Flustered nun to Mother Superior - "Holy Mother, there's a case of syphilis in the convent!"

Came the shaky reply - "Well my dear, it'll make a change from that old Beaujolais we've been getting lately".

Just a few miles before reaching Bath along the A4 one passes by Box Hill. Box is celebrated, as every train spotter knows, for the Brunel Railway Tunnel constructed by the Great Western Company in 1841 with the aid of local mining concerns.

On the summit of the hill the visitor will come across the entrances to several mines. The seemingly independent entrances were, in fact, worked by separate companies, though, the mines will generally be found to link up underground. Miners retired from the old quarrying firms inhabit most of the houses in the vicinity of the mines known as Box Hill Village.

The Box Mining Industry There is much evidence to suppose that stone taken from Box was used by the Romans. They certainly built with a stone similar to Box Ground Stone but their early quarries, if they existed here, were long exhausted.

The finest stone, though, could only be reached by underground workings. A large expansion in the number of firms quarrying in this way took place during the 18th and 19th centuries. Because of transport costs the earlier firms only supplied stone to local builders. As transport improved and costs fell so the fame of Bath Stone spread. Towards the latter half of the 19th century production increased to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  million cu.ft. And, the many small firms protected their mutual interests with the formation of Bath Stone Firms Ltd. By the turn of the century production had doubled and the name expanded to The Bath and Portland Stone Firms Ltd.

Sadly, mining had already seen its golden days here before the Great War, and thereafter came the slow decline. During the depression the large, but hard won, export trade was lost for ever. Many of the old mines were taken over by the Ministry of Defence and converted for use as stores, a role which they still serve today. It is believed the greater part of the old workings were taken over for this purpose but their real extent is unknown.

Clift Mine was the only mine to work through the war years. But, during the late '40's there was much demand for building stone and many of the old mines were reopened. The old methods were still used but could not hope to compete and so their life was fairly short. Clift Mine itself used traditional hand methods to the last when its closure was forced in 1969.

Today, the only mine still working is that of Monk's Park Quarry, near Corsham. This mine was the only one to be mechanised. The stone is cut using coal cutters

and taken out by conveyor belt. It produces the hardest Bath Stone and is likely to be working for a long time to come.

The Stone Beds The Greater Oolite beds quarried from the area around Box lie below the Forest Marble. They form a series from 20 - 40 metres thick grouped thus :-

- i) Upper Ragstones
- ii) Fine Freestones
- iii) Lower Ragstones

The Fine Freestones were the most important as a building stone compared with the fossiliferous beds above and below. These fossil beds could not be sawn or dressed easily nor to such a high standard. Accordingly, the Freestones may be graded by the presence of oviform inclusions - the finest stones being free from fossils.

Beds and Props An interesting feature of the Freestone beds in this area is the hard layer of hard rock covering it. This hard rock varies in thickness - termed the 'capping' or 'cover' - it accounts for the rarity of props in Box. Its existence just above the building stone made propping almost unnecessary and freestone could safely be removed from below. Every so often a free standing column about 5m. square was left to support the roof.

When a section was found to be particularly unstable the roof was further supported by heavy round props approx. 0.7m. in diameter. Where less support was needed an unusual short angled prop, up to a metre in length, was wedged between the side of the free column and the roof.

These wooden props are beginning to deteriorate now and are often covered with fungi. There have been very few roof falls in the mines and most of these have been in sections requiring propping or else are close to entrances and so undergo climatic cycling.

The Method of Working The Mines Freestone quarrying is a much more skilful business than other forms of mining. The working face cannot be smashed up with picks or explosive since the stone would then be useless for building. In freestone mining it is of great importance to remove only highly finished blocks with the minimum of waste.

The traditional method of mining at Box is of some interest and working faces left in different stages can be seen in various parts of the mine.

The first step taken in cutting a face was to select a suitable working area. This was then scored down with vertical lines into three equal parts. Working at the top of the face with a range of picks of different lengths. The miner would cut out a slot a little over 2 metres deep into the face and immediately under the capping bed. He

would use short handled picks to begin this task and progress to long handled picks which could be swung into the back of the slot.

When sufficient room had been opened up on top of the face so as to allow entry of a saw the left hand block was sawn free down its score marks. A further crack, only 0.3m. deep, was then cut at the base of this block. Wedges were then driven into the crack until the back of the block sheared.

As it is taken from the face Bath Stone is comparatively soft. It may, therefore, be readily sawn into blocks. To facilitate this the coarse saws were lubricated with water. This is a possible explanation for the wells which can be found in various parts of the mine. On removal from the mine the stone rapidly loses moisture and hardens to a first class building stone.

An anchorage was, meanwhile, driven into the face of the freed block and roped up to a hand driven crane. This was used to draw the block out onto trolleys for removal from the mine. But, before it was taken away the block was examined for faults such as hair line cracks. This was done, in the same manner as used for steel castings, by 'ringing' the block with a hammer. If a flaw was found then the block was divided down into smaller good blocks.

Perhaps, it is difficult to realize the amount of work involved. A face of three blocks, about 500 cu. ft. of stone, took about a week to extract using such hand methods.

There are several abandoned cranes in the mine. Curious affairs, they consist of a heavy wooden pillar wedged between the floor and the roof, with a movable jib attached near the base - I leave you to see for yourself!

Methods of hauling trolleys to the surface varied widely over the years. Horses were used at first and sometimes surface winches. In the last years of Clift Mine trucks were drawn by diesel shunters.

Usually, the stone was taken straight out of the mine. But, some stone was liable to frost damage if taken out whilst still 'green'. This was somewhat unusual for Bath Stone, but if there was any doubt then the stone would be stored in abandoned galleries near the entrance.

Entrances to the Mine There were at one time a number of ways into the mine. Though, many of these have been sealed in recent years by the local authorities. The entrances are all at the bottom of quarried depressions and probably represented the interests of different firms.

Eastgate was the most impressive entrance until it was filled in a few years ago. It stood at the bottom of a 20m. high quarried cliff and consisted of a pair

of 6m. high arches. From these a gently sloping passage led into the depths of the mine.

Westgate is situated in a wood a little way down the hill from the other entrances. It is in a slightly unstable condition because of frost damage. Westgate is the largest entrance still accessible - after ducking under the barbed wire. It is a good way in for there are a couple of cranes in the entrance passage. In travelling from Westgate to the main series one has to crawl over a wall of deads at one point. As we can never find this on the return we make our exit via Backdoor.

Backdoor, as its name suggests, is the least impressive entrance being only about a metre high. It is hidden at the bottom of a cliff face behind some tennis courts. Fortunately, its insignificance has saved it the fate of other entrances.

### Exploring the Mine

The mine was systematically explored during the late '50's and early '60's by members of M.N.R.C. and Cotham S.S. They produced surveys based upon a system of marked routes around the mine. These routes provide only a skeleton for exploring the mine for side galleries lead off in every direction. The marked routes, though, do enable one to traverse from one section of the mine to another with the minimum of difficulty. Sections of the mine exist as a complex maze of passages with maybe one obscure route through to the next section, and so on through the mine. But, on the whole the routes follow main roads.

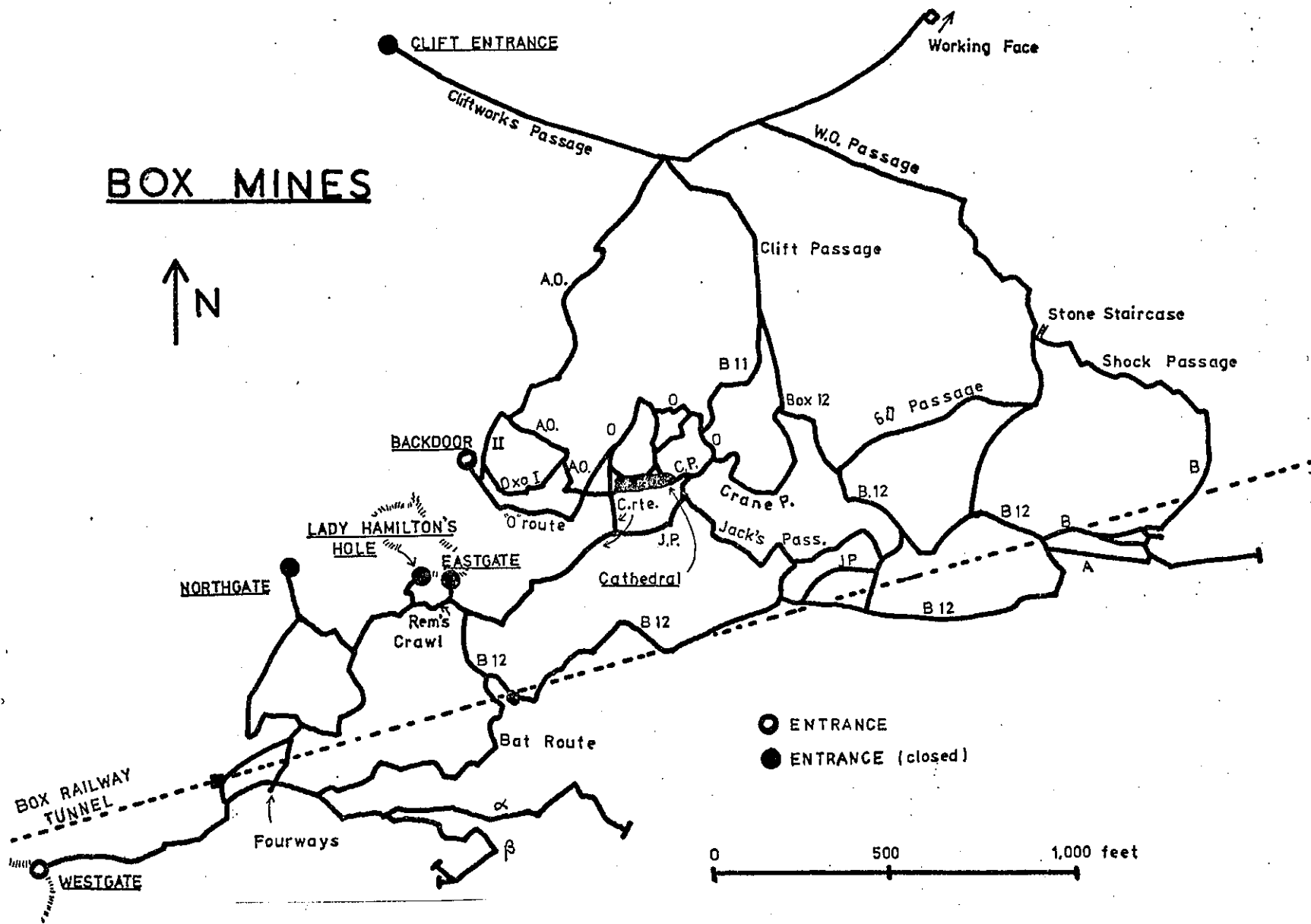
The longest route in the mine, also the best defined is the B 12. There are a number of interesting features on this road. One may, for example, come across a wall built from stone blocks. It is only when you happen to pass at 16.30 that you realize from the rumble that the wall connects with the railway tunnel. The wall is part of the ventilation shaft, leading to the surface. Also on this route one might find carved faces or drawings on the rock which were probably the work of miners.

### The Cathedral

This is the most impressive part of the mine, though there seems no obvious reason for its existence. It does contribute to the air circulation and may have developed from one of the air shafts. Perhaps, an air shaft was under construction and ran into a natural cavity or instability or maybe it was intended as a meeting place or store. The age of The Cathedral is also uncertain but it was probably hewn out before 1840 and must have taken a considerable amount of effort working only with hand tools.



# BOX MINES



One usually enters the Cathedral from Cathedral Passage and passes under a series of gothic arches each increasing in size. The chamber is 20m. wide, 50m. long and 35m. high. From the roof light streams down from two shafts leading to the surface. In recent years The Cathedral has been spoilt by rubbish being tipped down these handy shutes. A worrying feature too is that the air shafts are in the garden of a house which is partly built over the chamber.

#### The Working Face

This interesting place can be found by following the main railway from the end of Clift Passage. When Clift Mine was still working one could see the face and all the picks, saws etc. which were used. Although, I haven't been to this part of the mine since its closure I believe that it is still much as it was. A short message was inscribed on the face by the last miners at Box.

..ooOoo..

The passages of Box Mine make a fascinating spot for a Sunday afternoon stroll on the way back from Somerset. One need not get too filthy wandering around its passages which are 4m. high and 3m. wide. In the galleries close to the entrance there is much contemporary graffiti daubed on the walls. This is less common as one goes further into the mine and the only writing is the calculations of quarrymen. They were paid on a piece rate based upon the volume of stone produced, and hence the arithmetic. These distant, rarely trodden roads give the visitor a strange feeling of remoteness.

A little while ago a group on such a visit glanced down one of the side passages and noted lights blazing in the roof. They were somewhat taken aback by this but set off to investigate. Across the passage they passed through a heavy steel gate which stood ajar. Moving on a little further they felt heavy vibrations in the air. The sound increased as they came upon the next barrier, a huge fan blocking the passage. They bypassed this and came into a huge gallery disappearing into the distance. They also met two naval personnel, covered with security badges, who swiftly escorted them out of the top security section into which they had wandered while the door was open for maintenance.

This account is based upon articles in various M.N.R.C and C.S.S. newsletters and odd visits to the mine.

=====RAMBLINGS=====

DINNER - "THE STAR", WELLS. 18th MARCH

Five members kept M.C.G. tradition alive and were requested to move on by the fuzz well after 'time' - food too much for one person who collapsed several times on the way to the bog - Steak Bernaise excellent and Mathews Special ice cream recommended by all - "Your selection of the cheeseboard" turns out to be their selection; one piece (small) of mature mousetrap - one tables occupants appeared to lack muscle control and formed an endless chain to the loo - singing aided and abetted by Simon and Val - consistent drinking.

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+	Those of you who seek for fame,	+
+	While others chew their cud;	+
+	Grab a spade and make your aim,	+
+	To help dig Upper Flood!	+

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FASTER WEEKEND

A very interesting Easter was spent by club members on Mendip for a change instead of our traditional Yorkshire trip. The cottage was full to capacity, all being entertained at feeding times by the culinary efforts of John MacMillan and his flying popcorn. A lot of good work was done in U.F.S. which was irregularly dug as people's fancy took them, and at one time so it is said five committee members were seen digging away - seems that when it comes to shovelling they're all in their element.

On Sunday a party of 8 left for South Wales (230 mile round trip) to do a trip in O.F.D.1. Needless to say as soon as the Severn Bridge was crossed it poured with rain, and enthusiasm for caving diminished with distance from Mendip and closeness to Penwyllt. Eventually a good trip was made in two parties to the Crystal Pool Chamber via the streamway and back by the Escape Route with diversions down odd places here and there.

This was a calamitous time for cars - Pete Mathews car refused to start 'til almost closing time - Simon thought his big-end was knocking - Phil Ingold's machine conveniently stopped dead on a steep hill near Pen-y-cae and needed a tow - Don Searle's constant velocity joint blew apart - and the best bit; weegees were jammed in a queue stretching from Tynning's Farm to Charterhouse to see the stock car racing.

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FORTHCOMING MEETS

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| April 22nd        | MENDIP, rescue practice (Longwood entrance and surface rescue - victims apply to Bill Jones) |
| May 6/7           | DERBYSHIRE, accommodation at the Orpheus C.C.  |
| Spring BH, May 27 | ISLE OF SKYE, camping or your own arrangements.  |
| June 24/25        | SOUTH WALES, Dan-yr-Ogof (accomm. at S.W.C.C.)   |

Goodies; G.Smith, R.Wallington, G.Gregory, R.Norris,  
D.Vosper, J.Macmillan.  
Baddies; J.Miriam, Karate Bill & 3 other N.P.C.

Following a swift abseiling trip down Swinsto last Whitsun, the M.C.G. returned again with the N.P.C. for a Swinsto/Simpsons exchange. A meeting in the Marton Arms at the crack of noon sorted out the finer points of the trip, as well as the guests at a wedding reception who mistook the intentions of our merry jests and friendly waves.

Both parties reached the Turbary Road at 3.00pm. and set about finding the entrances. From here on we follow the fortunes of the goodies. The first pitch was already laddered in Swinsto but an alternative belay point was found. The tackle was then dragged along the 1000ft crawl (shades of Penyghent) to the second pitch where we caught up with a Bradford P.C. party and arranged to leave our tackle at the head of each pitch. The 2nd, 3rd, & 4th pitches were really delightful little wet drops leading to the two main pitches (the 60ft one now sports a new rawlbolt). The 7th pitch came after 450ft of passage containing deep pools and below this the passage enlarged into a high aven with water entering at a high level - Slit Pot, the last pitch in Simpsons.

Unfortunately we were held up for an hour at Slit while Sid Perou was filming someone abseiling, but it was interesting to see the colours of the limestone in the strong floodlights. The N.P.C. descended Slit and then sensing that the pubs were open, scuttled out of Valley entrance at high speed, leaving Swinsto rigged, with cries of "Bloody hell fire there's ale ta' be supped".

Slit Pot was an easy, but wet, climb of 80ft with a squeeze at the top. As in Swinsto the pitches are small and close together. Aven, Lake, Shuffle, and Carol Pots were soon passed and the duck negotiated - care needed not to drop tackle in the duck as it is deceptively deep both sides. Storm and Stake Pots were climbed and from here the party began to spread out as various ways were found of tackling the 5 Steps, which are tricky little climbs of about 10ft lacking good holds. After a 500ft crawl and many false alarms we were once more on the surface. We left the pot at 9.00pm. and returned to the Marton Arms to carry on where left off.

On Sunday J.Miriam, J.MacMillan, and R.Norris detackled Swinsto in 3 hours.

EXCLUSIVELY TEETOTAL - CLAIRVOYANT TOO!

Extract from Wessex Journal 5 No.73 1959 - p217;

'In reviewing Parkinson's Laws for caving, Phillitas states that;

"The Second Law refers to caving huts and states that the activity of a caving club will be in inverse proportion to the splendour of its caving headquarters. Thus a club which operates in cars from an hotel cannot hope to compete with a rival club which operates on bicycles from an abondoned caravan. We look forward to seeing on Mendip the Ultimate Cavers Hut, with glass doors, plush carpet in the entrance hall, internal telephones between bedrooms, and a well manicured receptionist behind the enquiry desk. Needless to say, the caving activities of such a club would be ZERO."