



MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS OVERDUE.

Are you seeing red when you read this? If so, it's because our treasurer's records show that you haven't paid your subs.

As I write, there is about £200 overdue in subscriptions. So if you haven't paid for 1982, take out your cheque book BEFORE YOU READ ANY FURTHER; write a cheque for £10, (or more if you wish); and send it to Arthur Spain at the address shown on the next page.

If this page is red and you HAVE paid, (other than in the last week or two) - pick up the phone and ask the treasurer why his records are not up to date.

THANKS TO WAYNE AND BRYAN.

The following is a reprint of a letter received by the Editor after the A.G.M.:

"I have written to both Wayne Hiscox and Bryan Pittman apologising for my omission as chairman of the A.G.M. to thank them both on behalf of us all for the work they have done for the Group as Cottage Warden and Editor .

"Wayne's was the most exacting period of cottage control endured by any of our Cottage Wardens - we have already thanked him for his enthusiasm in building the cottage, but it was still of vital concern to us all that he kept the old cottage fully booked, thereby providing us with the funds to help build the new cottage. It was a make do and mend existence in the old wooden hut, and he preserved it with a minimum of expense.

"Bryan had to do a lot of cajoling and badgering to get the articles for the Newsletter, and somehow he succeeded in producing a lively and informative communication to our members. It is so easy to forget that the Editor is all the while forging and reinforcing the links of the chain which keeps our far-flung group in contact.

"'Thankyou' to them both from us all.

Ron Saunders."

CONGRATULATIONS.

John Miriam and Helen Booker have announced their forthcoming marriage in May. Congratulations, John and Helen.

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CAVING ACCOMMODATION		MENDIP CAVING GROUP NORDRACH COTTAGE CHARTERHOUSE on MENDIP BLAGDON BRISTOL BS18 6XW N.G.R. ST 5147-5605
GUEST BOOKINGS:		To be made with the Cottage Warden
THURSDAY MEETINGS		THE FOX & HOUNDS & MAWSON ARMS CHISWICK LANE SOUTH, LONDON, W4 FROM 8.30 pm

EDITORIAL.

As you probably know by now, Bryan Pittman has retired as Newsletter Editor, and I have taken over the task. The work Bryan has done is appreciated elsewhere in this issue; a result of his work is seen in the amount of material you have submitted. I think some of you now write in your sleep. Keep it up; send in the technical articles, dig progress reports, news, observations, or any snippets of information that may interest or entertain club members. My address is on the opposite page, and I am usually at the Thursday meetings.

For more than a year we have had a fat and regular Newsletter; to follow that will not be easy. However I understand the need for a regular Newsletter to keep the Group informed, and will make every effort to maintain the standards that have been set. Please forgive me if the publication dates fluctuate a little.

Ian McKechnie.

PIGEON POST.

(Do you live/work/drink with another MCG member? Can you guarantee to deliver his newsletter as quickly as the Post Office? If so, please ask for an extra copy on distribution night, and tell the Editor who it's for.

COTTAGE BOOKINGS.

APRIL	JULY
16	2
23 Dave Gibson	9
30 MEMBERS WEEKEND (Bank Holiday)	16
	23
MAY	30
7 MEMBERS WEEKEND	
14 West Midland C.C.	AUGUST
21 Phil Ingold + 20	6
28 MEMBERS WEEKEND (Bank Holiday)	13
	20
JUNE	27
4 MEMBERS WEEKEND - RESCUE PRACTICE	
11 Dave Gibson	
18 MEMBERS WEEKEND	
25	

M.C.G. MEETS PROGRAMME 1982

	Leader	Base
APR 17 POACHERS CAVE	B. Pittman	N.W.C.C.
MAY 15 SWILDONS 9	J. Roberts	M.C.G.
JUN 26 OFD / DAN-YR-OGOF	D. Samuel	S.W.C.C.
JUL 17 LAMB LEER	D. Walsh	M.C.G.
AUG 14 GIANTS HOLE	G. Barton	Orpheus
SEP 18 DOUBER GILL PASSAGE	T. Knibbs	N.P.C.
OCT 16 RHINO RIFT (SRT)	J. Miriam	M.C.G.
NOV 20 AGEN ALLWEDD	P. Ingold	
DEC 18 EASTWATER	I. McKechnie	

POACHERS CAVE 17 APR.

Any late entries for this trip - contact Tony Knibbs or Greg Smith.

RESCUE PRACTICE 5th JUNE.

The M.C.G. rescue practice will take place in G.B. cave on 5th June. As many members as possible should be there. We hear there may even be a barrel.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS.

Well done Steve Taylor and Dave Howe, who have been accepted as full members of the M.C.G.

We welcome the following new names to the members list:

Paul Phipps, 105 Eastland Road; Yeovil, Somerset. (Probationary).
Barbara Dewdney, 9 Windermere Road, London, SW16. (Associate)
Anne Davies, 72 Aldenham Road, Bushey, Watford, Herts. (Associate).

Please note the following changes of address:

Tony Ingold, 96 Forbury Road, Upper Clapton, London, N16.
Mike Bygrave, Rookery Cottage, Church Street, Effingham, Surrey.
Bill Jones, 6 Craighall Place, Alloway, Ayr, Ayrshire. KA7 4XD.

ANNUAL DINNER 1982.

The Annual MCG Dinner was held in the Star Hotel, Wells on the 27th. of March, with about 80 members and guests attending. Following an excellent meal, we were asked to compose and perform limericks on the subject "Annual Dinners". These were judged by a panel of experts from BEC, Shepton and Wessex. Two of the winning entries, from Simon Knight and Tony Knibbs respectively, are printed below:

Each year we come down to The Star;
We travel from near and from far.
We wine and we dine
Like the Gadarene swine,
And then we get pissed at the bar.

There was a young caver named Smith,
Who went for a closing-time pithth.
He got lost in the bog
In a drunkardly fog,
And his aim was impaired, so he miththed.

A special mention goes to Jane Reynolds for her outstanding performance. Unfortunately, due to a technical hitch, we were left not knowing how her limerick ended.

We were then treated to a review of "The Ten Ages of the Caver". From the beginner, the expert, the gentleman caver, the cave diver, through to the armchair caver, they were introduced to us in all their glory by Tony Knibbs. Val Knight was in evidence behind the scenes, directing the proceedings.

The entertainment then took a different turn as Brian Terry and Jane Reynolds treated the citizens of Wells (at least those who were in the High Street at 11.30 that night) to a fashion parade. Brian looked especially lovely. A representative of the BEC, not to be outdone, showed the other half of Wells what he was made of by taking the air around the cloisters "au nature".

An excellent evening enjoyed by all present; our thanks to all those who were involved in the organisation and with the entertainment.

CROSSWORD COMPETITION.

The crossword competition has been won by Greg Smith. Jon Roberts won a consolation prize for total abuse of the English language, and still finding words to fit the crossword and the clues.

OVERHEARD ON THE COACH RETURNING FROM THE ANNUAL DINNER:

"Can I sit next to you? You won't be sick over me, will you..."

SUMMARY OF THE A.G.M.

The meeting, held on 27th March 1982, was attended by 37 full members and 11 probationary, prospective and associate members. Ron Saunders was in the chair. The main business of the meeting was to discuss additions to Nordrach Cottage.

John Miriam explained the need for background heating to protect the cottage structure. A scheme was presented using three or four storage heaters and off-peak electricity. Capital costs would be low, and annual running costs between £150 and £250 depending on the number of days per week considered necessary. A vote gave general approval to the scheme subject to committee discussion of details.

A proposal for a "lean-to" outside the changing room/shower area (see article elsewhere in this Newsletter) was presented. After much discussion, the scheme was agreed in principle and a sum of £1000 was allocated. Comments on the proposed design, or any alternative proposals, should be submitted to the committee by the end of April 1982. The committee will then decide on the plan to be adopted.

The need for an additional soakaway was discussed. As the cost of cesspit emptying is at present low, it was agreed to reconsider the matter at a later date if emptying costs rise unreasonably.

Committee membership remained unchanged, with the exception of Wayne Hiscox, Hon. Cottage Warden, and Bryan Pittman, Hon. Editor, who both retired. They were replaced by John Miriam and Ian McKechnie respectively.

It was agreed that the Constitution and Rules be amended to delete the "Members Spouse" class of membership. The "Associate Member" class was extended to include the non-caving associate. Caving spouses should apply for membership in their own right.

Tony Knibbs outlined the current position on funds, which at present total over £4000. During discussion on income, it was pointed out that cottage income from guests is double that from members. The current policy on guest bookings will not change. Parties of members' guests may be accepted any time there is space at the cottage. Contact the cottage Warden first for his approval.

A vote of thanks was taken for retiring committee members Wayne Hiscox and Bryan Pittman. Bryan reminded members that he wanted articles for the 1982 Journal.

The 1982 Half Year General Meeting will be held at Nordrach Cottage on Saturday October 16th at 3pm.

LIMERICK COMPETITION - LATE ENTRIES.

A pre-prandial imbibor named Rowe
Was expected to put up a show.
But his little black bat
Squeaked "Please don't do that."
"I'd be so embarrassed, you know."

A comely young lady called Jane
Thought the MCG Dinner was tame.
So after the trifle
She gave us an eyefull:
Please will you do it again?

A troglodite clogger named Bob
Gave his partner a bash with a log.
His partner's last words
As he fell to the boards
Were "Why not use a tea-tray, you nog."

Our Brian, this year at the Star,
Changed clothing with Jane in the bar.
After walking round town
He said with a frown,
"That's going a little too far."

Greg Smith is a choosey young man;
He eats daffodil heads when he can.
But sometimes they cause
Him to open his jaws
And call "Wo-ords..wo-orth..."
..through gaps in his hand.

LIBERATION AGLOW IN THE DARK.

The news came as a shock. "Oh, yes. You've been abolished..." (Sniggers...). That was how we first heard of the AGM vote. Spouse cavers unite! Come and chain yourself to the GB blockhouse with us on June 5th! Throw yourself in front of a party of cavers racing for sump 9! Protest and survive, they say - why should this form of cheap membership be abolished? We think we've hit on the answer. In a word - SEXISM!

Yes, ladies, this has to be a plot to keep women out of caving. Perhaps the men can't take the competition.

What about the 2000ft of passage discovered in Burnley Pot very recently? - Yes! By that infamous speleologistesse, "Muddy" Marcia Zump. (Need I say more? But I'd better....)

Or - may I remind you of the even more outstanding discoveries of South Texas caveresse Nerys Scape?

It's time our Oldhams weren't hidden under bushels (or even thrutches) any longer. Don't be shy! Burn your carbides and follow the emergency light of liberation!

In sisterhood,
(Ms) Kate Swallet

TREE STUMP GONE!

Do you remember that tree stump that was outside the cottage last time you were down there? The one you nearly backed your car into? The one that was always surrounded by a group of members with picks and shovels, intent on avoiding caving at any cost? Well, it's out!! On AGM morning, Ken Fry came in with some of the Machines normally found lurking in his yard - and there it was, gone.

The front carpark was levelled; next day the gravel was spread; and I understand that work is now well under way completing the stone wall.

BERNARD'S BUMP.

On the Sunday afternoon following the AGM, while Bernard Reeves was turning right from the Priddy road into the gate of the cottage, his car was hit from behind by a following car. No-one was hurt, but the tailgate of Bernard's car was badly dented.

According to eye-witnesses, the car which caused the accident had overtaken the car immediately following Bernard, not realising that Bernard was slowing down in front. There was nothing Bernard could do but sit and wait for the bump.

It must have been quite a surprise for the drivers who stopped. They are miles from anywhere, yet suddenly they are surrounded by swarms of people, taking names and addresses and statements, and directing the traffic. And they all have pints in their hands??

HIGH LEVEL CAVING?

Some people will even try and turn an Easter Sunday stroll into a caving trip. One of these people is Martin Rowe, who reports that while 1700ft up on Whinn Rigg in the Lake District, above Wastwater Scree, he found a band of limestone. Large slabs and boulders formed cavities, and true to form - in he went. He got 6ft underground before running out of light - not quite a depth record!

Owing to our Meet Secretary getting his optical focus wrong and putting me down to lead an MCG meet to Swildons 9 (I'm sure I wrote 4 originally), there were only 4 ways out of this conundrum. I could: (1) break a leg/arm/neck; (2) plead I had too much work to do in the library and lock myself in for the day; (3) not buy the new wet suit I desperately needed if going down damp holes again; or (4) pretend I really meant to go to Swildons 9 all the time, and hope to persuade a few other impending suicidees of their urgent need also to visit the further reaches of the cave, secluded from the hordes upstream of Sump 1.

Not having a four-sided die, I reached for my computer and typed `prinrnd(4)`. Nothing happened. I switched on the computer and typed again: it responded "syntax error". Finally I typed `prinrnd(4)` once more, and got the answer "4". Best of three I thought, and promptly got "4" again. Clearly the computer wanted me out of the way that weekend.

A crisis arose at that point: quite apart from the rigours of leading as far as Swildons 9 via sumps 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, I had not yet been further than Swildons 4 and there were tales about sumps 4 and 5. Nor, as a corollary, did I know the bypass route avoiding sump 6. There was only one thing for it - not only had I to go on the official meet, I had also to test-dive the route before then. Which is what was finally achieved last weekend (April 3rd), in the company of one scrounged wet-suit and two Imperial College cavers - one of whom had ventured there before - finally stopping short at the top of the descent into Swildons 7 streamway. What follows is a brief and possibly mendacious description of sumping 2, 3, 4 and 5, as an appetiser for those who wish to venture underground on May 15th. Members chary of 2 and 3 can of course thrill at the alternative route via Blue Pencil.

To begin with, you will have been through sump 1?? If you haven't, you'd better hurry up, for over the past year it has silted sufficiently to be only body-sized (very obvious if you wear a face-mask through the sump), and one wonders if it is only the passage of cavers which now keeps it from turning into a gravel choke. Technically not a high risk sump because of the short distance, it is in my opinion nevertheless less pleasant to dive than sump 2.

Sump 2, according to that paragon of caving books Mendip Underground (psst - does that get me a free beer, Tony?), is 25 ft. long and 6 ft. wide. Personally I have never stopped to work out exactly how long it really is, but slow steady pulls on the guide rope have always got me through (and back) with no worries about running out of air. There is a technical risk because of the length and the problem of recovering the guide rope if you let go of it (solution: don't), but wearing weights, face mask and hood I find it the most comfortable of all the five sumps. Paradoxically perhaps, I think it is also the most dangerous, as its very roominess means that you never know quite where you are in the sump and so cannot gauge your progress. The only reliable clue it gives is on the downstream trip when you are liable to bump into a roof ledge shortly before entering Swildons 3. You shouldn't worry when you make contact with this ledge - instead regard it as a useful tell-tale, cheer (if you can underwater), duck under it, and shortly afterwards you will emerge in 3. One final point about sump 2 - if you are under-weighted, you may break surface or feel air above you when passing Little Bell which is midway along the sump. You will be well advised to ignore Little Bell and carry on pulling the rope until you have physically emerged into Swildons 2 or 3 (depending on your direction of travel). That way, you won't cause alarm and despondency by failing to emerge when expected, nor will you risk carbon dioxide poisoning from the air in the bell.

Between sumps 2 and 3 you are never out of the water, being up to your leg or chest continuously. You will have to duck under a roof ledge between Great Bell and St. Johns Bell, which is obvious in the downstream direction but not on the return: remember on the way back to duck under where the sump 3 rope is attached to the wall. Towards 9, you will at once encounter the sump 3 rope

which leads off diagonally and underwater towards the further side of the bell, The rope has some slack in it, and by holding it and walking along the left hand side of the bell you can get as close as practicable to the sump 3 entry point.

I really like sump 3, despite its nominal 35 ft. length and 8 ft. depth, as you always know where you are. You are either in the first third, descending and probably bumping into one or more ledges; or in the middle third with your head and body rubbing along the roof; or ascending in the final third. So it is easier to regard it as a continuous series of three 12 ft. sumps (from the users point of view). The protrusions are encountered from both directions, but feature more in the downstream direction, possibly because the entry tends to be precipitate and you realise afterwards you should have dived more vertically than you actually did.

But it would be wrong to worry about bumping into the ledges. On my first ever try at sump 3, I crashed into one, dislodged my helmet, and had to turn round - there was enough room. Less than 5 minutes later I had successfully free-dived it starting from scratch. Personally I now find it a useful tactic in both directions to pull slowly on the rope to begin with, even though you may like to be in a hurry to get the 35 ft. distance over with, and duck gently under each protrusion when you bump. In less time than you imagine you will realise you have made it to the middle third of the sump and can make more rapid progress. The final third is of course quite enjoyable as you know you are going to get through.

Sump 4 is reputed to be tight, and it certainly needs to be approached in the downstream direction lying flat out in the water, while upstream the water level makes it difficult to use the full length of the available airspace on the approach passage. But, that apart, I personally wonder why I waited for years to go through 4, for downstream it is a mixture of sump 1 for tightness (for about the same distance) followed for a slightly longer period by the roominess of sump 2. And that's all there is to it - just take it slowly on the return journey, and watch both ways for the Things wiggling in the water.

Sump 5 was, it emerged, a duck last weekend, and the passage is like two stretched Z's, thus: ζ ; with the caver approaching from 4 at the top left corner. The guide rope cuts across (or rather under) the angles, and has lots of slack in it, so that depending on water levels you can dive the whole distance (about 30 ft. length) or duck part or all of it (up to 60 ft. length). If diving under the angles, you will bump into the walls of the passage, so go slowly and bob under them. The two most worrying features of sump 5 are the Things (again) and the genteel way the dexion holding the guide rope at the upstream end just rests lightly against the stal (DON'T pull hard on the rope, or more than you may come unstuck).

And that's all the sumping obstacles you should encounter en route to 9. Unfortunately, my new wet suit has just arrived (courtesy of Phil Ingold) so that's the last excuse gone.

Hope to see you on May 15th.

NEWSLETTER BACKNUMBERS.

Don't forget the MCG backnumbers scheme described in newsletter 150. The index is well into the 1960's and proceeding. If you will want any backnumbers, or a copy of the index, please contact Jon Roberts as soon as possible.

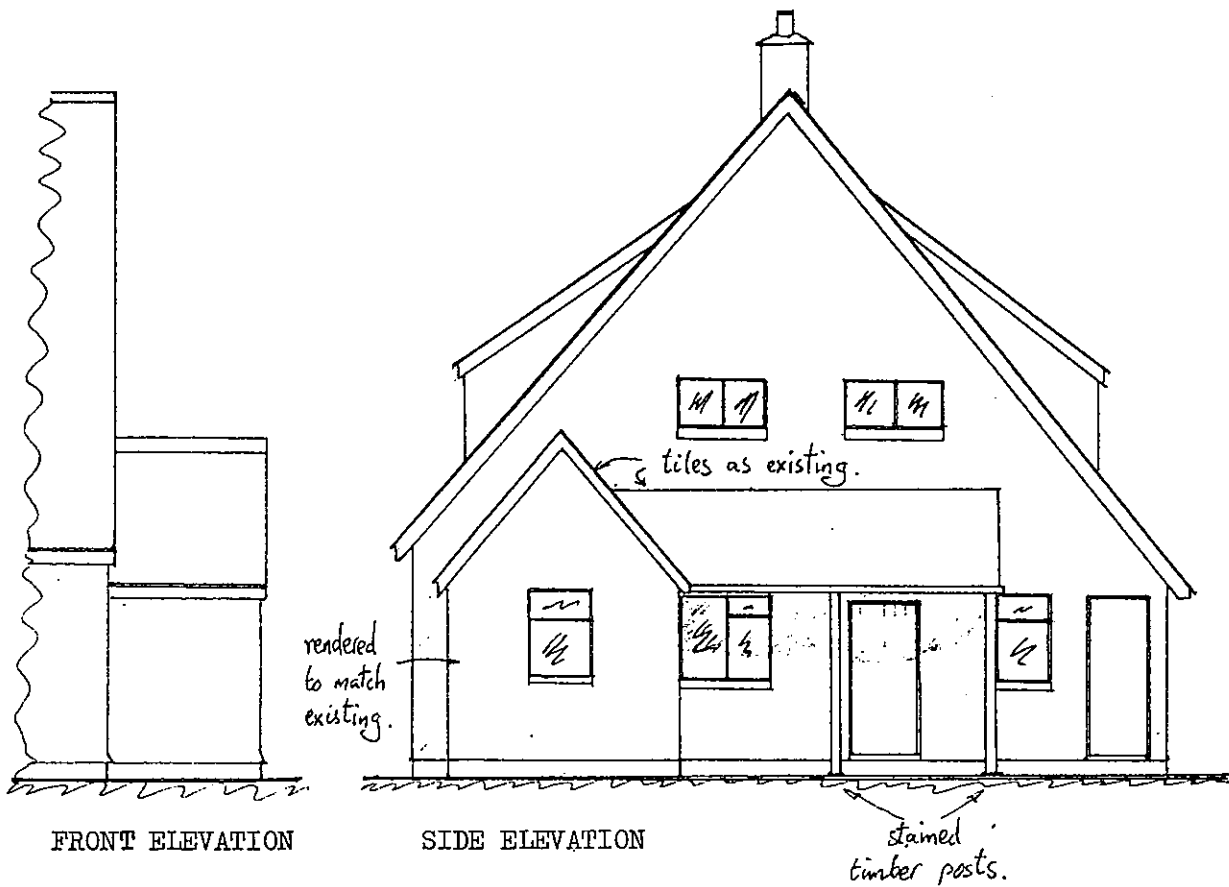
HOT STUFF.

Overheard in the bar. Bernard: "What we really need in the shower is holocaust heating....." Didn't we try that once?

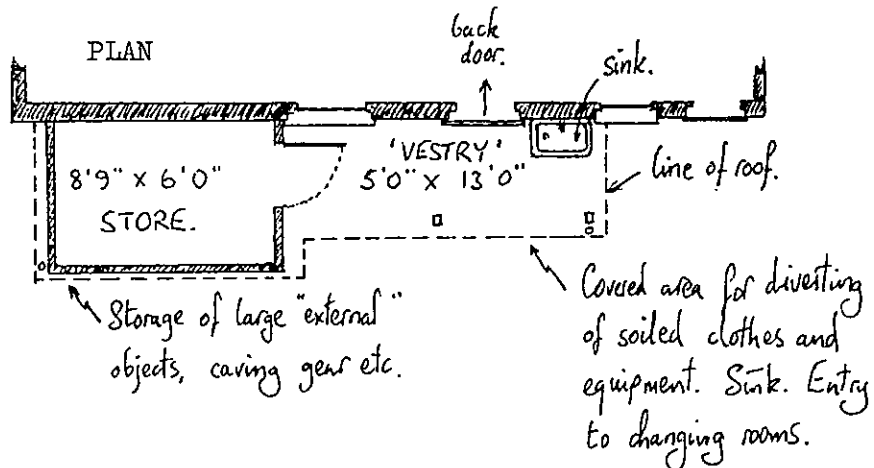
EXTENSION TO COTTAGE.

At this year's AGM, a proposal for a 'lean-to' outside the changing-room / shower area was discussed. This would allow muddy clothes to be discarded before entry, caving gear to be hung up to dry overnight, and some gear stored other than in the tackle room. The idea had been raised at the HYGM, and one design was presented featuring a built-on extension two-thirds of the length of the Eastern side of the cottage, half of it roofed over and the other half closed in. The outside sink would be moved from the rear to the side of the cottage as part of the proposal. The extension would not be subject to planning permission.

The meeting voted a sum of £1000 (with 10% margin) for the project. The committee will decide on the plan to be adopted as soon as possible so that work can start without delay. Comments from members on the existing design (shown below), or any alternative proposals, should be given to a committee member before the end of April 1982.



MCG COTTAGE
 PROPOSED STORE
 AND VESTRY
 Scheme A
 Mar. 82



AT

FIELDWORK CENTRE

by Angela Brennan

From the Wells Journal.

Reprinted by courtesy of the Mid-Somerset Series of Newspapers.

A FORMER isolation hospital and country club at Charterhouse on Mendip is being restored to its former glory as a field study and leisure course centre combined with a private members' club.

The grand Victorian manor house was built by a German doctor as an isolation hospital at the end of the last century and has been in the Shuckburgh family for the past seven years.

The new venture is being run by Mark Shuckburgh, who has just completed a business studies course, and his brother-in-law David Niven, who has been a social worker for 10 years.

They are concentrating on a wide variety of courses and David said the object was to create a comfortable place where people could relax and enjoy themselves.

The first course on offer will be on Birds and Wildlife and the instructors will be two acknowledged Mendip wildlife experts, Bill Butcher and Doug Woods.

It will start on April 8 and will occupy the whole Easter weekend, giving guests a chance to learn about the birds of spring while relaxing in the informal atmosphere of a country house.

The weekend will start with an introductory evening and will include a large amount of fieldwork, the pleasure of birds — their flight, plumage, song and habitat.

Those taking part will be able to enjoy the dawn chorus before taking breakfast and then taken in the evening to hear some of the delightful feathered natives and visitors of the Mendips.

All the course fees take into account a full week or weekend accommodation offering full board in the country weekend style.

BALLOONING

Ballooning is another holiday the two young men hope will take off in more ways than one.

David says this would be the most expensive course they would run but it would include several days ballooning with the Ciruss Balloon School.

He said: "The idea is that after one night here the people involved will take off in the balloon and drop into a country pub for lunch before flying off for another hotel that evening. The balloon will eventually return here."

The two have also booked the expert Patrick Moore to talk about astronomy. Mr. Moore has a strong association with Charterhouse observatory which he opened several years ago.

In June the house will be turned over to a week-long drama course and a weekend of playwriting given by the



The Manor House Country Club, Charterhouse, which is being turned into a new field and leisure courses centre.

director of the theatre school at Morley College and formerly of the Royal College of Dramatic Art, Mr. Roy Kendall.

The drama course will cover a wide range of acting techniques and problems, helping the actor to develop his or her voice, body and imagination.

The playwriting course includes an examination of technique for those who may be experiencing some problem in the development of the craft.

Landscape painting is another topic offered as both a week and weekend study.

WEALTH

Taking the course will be Peter Coate who has exhibited with the Royal Academy, the London Group and the New English Art Club.

Mr. Coate is perhaps better known in the Somerset area as the founder of the Mendip Painting Centre at Rickford.

The course will concentrate on oil and watercolour and welcomes all painters who wish to enjoy the wealth of beautiful subject matter in the Somerset landscape.

Photography is also being

featured and this will be taken by a graduate of the Royal College of Art, Brian Trenerry.

Photography in the field and practical photography for beginners will be the subjects of the courses and it will demonstrate what can be done in the darkroom to improve what comes out of the camera.

Naturally, being in the midst of such beautiful countryside, the centre will be offering courses where people can just enjoy learning about the Mendips and its pleasures.

The whole operation will be a two man business so if you think the waiter, barman, porter and receptionist look similar, they are probably all the same person.

Mark will be concentrating on the business side of the venture and David on the day-to-day running of Charterhouse Manor.

SPACIOUS

The setting for the club is beautiful, with a long drive through trees and flowers leading to the front door.

The Manor offers room for 36 guests and the restaurant can take 40 people. There is a

spacious and comfortable bar, a cocktail bar and a residents' room.

David stressed it would not just be a drinking club but somewhere people could drop in, provided they are members, and enjoy the facilities on offer.

"To members we are offering a 10 per cent discount on all the courses and of course they will be able to eat in the restaurant and enjoy the bar."

Future plans being looked at include the addition of a tennis court and the conversion of the golf pavilion into a conference centre.

David said: "We are operating a commercial venture but we are not being mercenary about it. Most of the renovations we are doing ourselves. In fact we are putting everything into it and we hope it will be fun."

Full details of courses and memberships can be obtained from the Charterhouse Manor Club, Charterhouse, near Blagdon. The telephone number is Blagdon 62262.

David said: "We hope people will be interested in what we are trying to do."



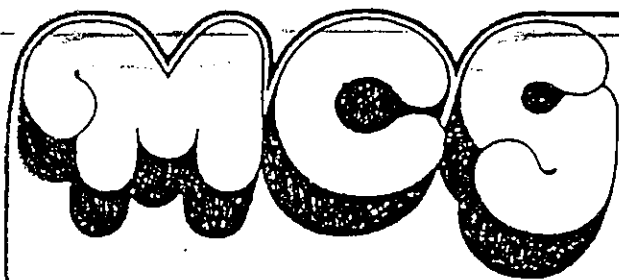
LINES UPON THE SUDDEN AND UNPRECEDENTED ILLNESS WHICH OVERCAME
 MR. GREGORY SMITH DURING THE 1982 ANNUAL DINNER OF THE MENDIP
 CAVING GROUP by Jonathan Wordsworth
 (Composed 1804, Published 1807, Round of drinks bought 18.10)

I sat down bloated as a toad
 That squats on low midst minnows' gills,
 When all at once I saw and crowed,
 "A host, of golden daffodils";
 Beside the wine, beneath the lights,
 Enticing in their watery bights.

Delicious as sardines in brine,
 And celery on the salad tray,
 They stretched in never-ending line
 Along the room and window bay,
 Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
 (Though drink *had* set my eyes to dance).

The wines beside them danced; but they
 Out-did the sparkling wines in taste:
 A caver could not be but gay
 Nor let choice food be left as waste:
 I ate — and ate — but little thought
 What state the flowers to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
 With tortured tum and bilious mood,
 They flash before the outward eye
 Which is the bliss of puke up-spewed;
 And then the room with sickness fills —
 And half-digested daffodils.



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APR 1982

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TECHNICAL SUPPLEMENT

SECONDHAND NICKEL CADMIUM CELLS

by Tony Knibbs.

For several years secondhand nickel cadmium (NiCad) cells have been available from caving equipment suppliers, sold either as single cells or as pairs fitted into gutted lead acid battery cases and supplied as complete caplamps. The availability of these cells is somewhat erratic and the range is normally limited to two sizes - 10 ampere hour (Ah) and 20 Ah capacity. The latter is the most popular because they most nearly match the size of the two compartments in an Oldham or Exide battery case.

These Nicad cells are usually described as being ex-Ministry of Defence. Suppliers seem unable to offer much information regarding the cells apart from quoting an Ah capacity (erroneously in the case of the 20 Ah cell) and a recommended charging rate.

Having been long interested in the many and varied forms of rechargeable cells suitable for caving use, the acquisition of a caplamp fitted with ex-MOD NiCad cells prompted some investigation. In this article I offer some comments concerning the installation, operation and maintenance of these cells.

The comments apply specifically to the type of cell used in my caplamp and the way in which they were fitted. However, there are some universal truths involved which are relevant to any situation where ex-MOD NiCad cells are used to power a caving caplamp.

To release the battery lid of my lamp, it was necessary to remove a special screw from one end. A special tool is normally used for this, but a pair of circlip pliers did the job. A hacksaw cut across the screw head enabled an ordinary screwdriver to be used thereafter. Now why did the supplier not do this simple operation and save me needless trouble.

A strip of 5mm foam neoprene was placed across the cell tops to combat the real danger of short circuiting across the terminals. The cells were a very sloppy fit in the battery case and would certainly move easily if the case suffered any shock while in the inverted position. A thicker foam strip and a tighter installation of the cells is strongly advisable.

My lamp had no fuse fitted, but it now has a 2.0 A fuse in the wiring inside the battery lid. This omission could have been serious. The two NiCad cells installed can deliver 1.0 kW of power on short circuit - enough to make an accidentally crushed cable into a memorable occurrence.

The cells are SAFT semi-open V016KH type with nickel plated steel cases; type and serial numbers are stamped on the cell top plates. Contacts are provided by two 8mm threaded studs with nuts and spring washers. The positive contact is clearly identified by a red plastic washer.

The cell top also carries a green screw-in plastic vent plug with a hexagonal recess in the top to allow removal using a metric Allen key. Internal gas pressure above 0.5 bar (7.25 psi) is released via a rubber sleeve, hence the description 'semi-open'. The battery should be kept upright when not in use and during charging to avoid leakage of electrolyte. Vent plugs should not be removed other than for the purpose of topping up the electrolyte.

Although retailed as 20 Ah, these cells are rated at 16 Ah by the manufacturers. However, their rating applies to a discharge current of 16.0A and 17.5 hours burning time was obtained using the 2.5V 1.0A bulb fitted to give 17.5 Ah capacity from a full charge.

The nominal voltage of each cell is 1.2V. They reach approximately 1.45V after a full charge and are regarded as discharged on falling to 1.0V. A constant voltage charger should provide between 2.8 and 2.9V for a pair of these cells connected in series. Few of us have this type of charging facility; most chargers are of the constant current type with some control over the ampere rate applied.

The normal recommended charging rate is 1.6A for 14 hours from a fully discharged (1.0V per cell) condition. However, much faster charging times are permissible, but careful control is essential. For example, a current of 8A can be applied until the cell voltage reaches 1.55 (or for a maximum of 2.5 hours), followed by 4.0 hours at 1.6A. After charging, the cells should whenever possible be left standing upright for 24 hours before use.

As an example of charge retention, a cell will yield 80% of its rated capacity after 3 month's storage at 20°C. Better retention is obtained at lower temperatures.

There is no satisfactory way of judging the state of charge of a NiCad cell. If in doubt, the cells should be discharged to 1.0V (or until the light output noticeably dims) before giving a full charge.

The electrolyte is a solution of potassium hydroxide (KOH) in distilled water; It is alkaline and highly corrosive, particularly to the skin. Regular topping up with distilled water is required, ideally at every charging operation over the first few months of use to observe the rate of water loss. The electrolyte level should not be allowed to fall beyond a point at which more than 15cc of distilled water is required to bring the level up to 12mm below the vent plug seat.

Adding water is best done using a syringe to which a rubber stop has been fitted to accurately place the end of the needle 12mm below the filling hole. The correct technique is to add water until withdrawal of the syringe plunger draws up water followed by air bubbles.

SAFT recommend that topping up is done near the end of a charging sequence when the electrolyte is at its maximum level as bubbles of hydrogen and oxygen are being liberated.

General maintenance requirements are limited to keeping the cell tops clean and coated with petroleum jelly (Vaseline) using a small paint brush. Because water will inevitably enter the battery box when caving in wet conditions, it would be wise to remove the cells occasionally to check for any rust. Any cleaning required should not be done using an acid; a plastic abrasive pad may be used to remove stubborn deposits. Wash off with clean water, allow to dry, then apply Vaseline.

With care and regular maintenance, ex-MOD NiCad cells should last for several years of caving use. Suppliers cannot be sure of the service history of the cells that they offer; but they can, and do, carry out a visual inspection and check the available capacity of each cell. Indeed, there is little else which can be done to establish the condition of the cells.

I have numerous manufacturers leaflets and operating instructions for SAFT, VARTA, BEREC, ALCAD, and CYCLAD NiCad cells. These are available on loan to any members who are interested in deepening their confusion on this subject.