

MCG NEWS

May 1986

No. 185

NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDIP CAVING GROUP

MALLORCA '85

by Neil Hutchinson

The MCG foreign trip took place for the second year in succession over Christmas on the Island of Mallorca. Ten members were present for a two week period from 14th to 28th December with two others joining for the second week only. Even by last years standards, this meet was a resounding success, the highlight being the discovery of a huge new chamber in Cova de Can Sion - the largest MCG discovery to date.

Locating entrances again proved by far the most difficult and dangerous element of the expedition, but with the aid of a good altimeter we were able to locate three caves we had been unable to find in 1984. One particular cave however, resisted the combined efforts of eight people over two days to find it, leaving one person with a badly cut hand and another group narrowly missing and enforced bivi on the mountain - two close shaves those concerned will not be in a hurry to repeat!

One additional problem facing us this year was the extra organisation required for a much larger group, some of the logistical details making quite entertaining reading, for example, over two weeks we consumed 25kg of potatoes, 10kg of peppers, 18kg of cheese, 30kg of fruit, 150 yoghurts, 40 litres of fruit juice, 30 litres of wine, 300 sausages and 615 bottles of beer - amongst other things.

One result of all this was the promotion of Martin Rowe to the position of Honorary Member with special responsibilities for shopping! - a post for which it must be said there is very little thanks. The other result was to illustrate that a group of about 10 to 12 is the maximum that can work together without the logistics getting out of hand.

In all we descended ten different caves during our stay, six of these were visited the previous year, whilst the remaining four, one was descended but not bottomed in '84 and three were located during our stay this time. Brief descriptions were given of the six previously known caves in the July '85 newsletter and the following are very brief descriptions of the remaining four:-

AVENC D' ESCORCA

Located in a valley bottom in the Escorca area; an inconspicuous vegetation-filled gully forms the top of the large entrance shaft dropping straight down from the surface for 116m. A short climb up and descent to a ledge then leads to a further very broken and messy pitch of about 25m down into a muddy chamber at 146m with all ways on blocked by mud.

AVENC S' AIGO

A huge and very impressive shaft with excellently placed bolts giving a superb 90m free-hang down to a large ledge, and re-belay for final 15m descent to the shaft floor. According to our information this should be the end of the cave, however, a small hole in the chamber floor emitting a very strong draught (obviously only recently opened up) leads to a 15m pitch dropping into a dry stream passage which can be followed down for about 75m to a large mud blockage. A way on could be seen overhead, but further progress would require climbing gear. With the bottom of the cave still 180m above sea level and a strong draughting, recently opened up passage, the potential for further extensions is quite significant.

SPELEODATE

May 24	.....	Bakers Pit, Devon (Arthur Spain)
Jun 7	Member's weekend	.....
	Geology (Malcolm Cotter)	.....
Jun 28	.....	Pant Mawr, Wales (Steve Taylor)
Jul 12	Member's weekend	.....
	St Cuthberts (John Miriam)	.....
Jul 26	.....	Lancaster Hole, Yorkshire (Ian Parry)

Aug 9	Member's weekend	.....
	Radstock Mine (Yvonne Ward)	.....
Aug 23	.....	Tunnel Cave, Wales (Any offers?)
Sep 13-27	.....	Malaga, Spain (Adrian Duckett)
Oct 11	Member's weekend	.....
	Half Yearly	.....
Oct 25	.....	Lost John's, Yorkshire (Mike Lovell)

Nov 8	Member's weekend	.....
	Cheddar Gorge (Jon Roberts)	.....
Nov 22	.....	Dan Yr Ogorf, Wales (Tony Knibbs)
Dec 13	Member's weekend	.....
	Mangle Hole (Dave Baxter)	.....

Here is the committee's 1986 meet programme. If anyone has anything they would like raised at a committee meeting they should make their ideas or feelings known, preferably in writing, prior to the appropriate date.

MAWSON ARMS MEETS.

May 8th
July 10th
September 4th
November 13th

MENDIP MEETS.

June 7th
August 9th
October 11th
December 13th



Secretary: Tony Knibbs, 85 Cavendish Ave., London, W13 0JY
01-997-2032 (home) 01- 546- 7741 x 2199 (work).

Treasurer: Mike Lovell, 4 Settrington Close, Loddon Park,
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Meet Secretary: Geoff Barton, The Lodge, The Heath,
Weybridge, Surrey. 0932-49241 (home).

Tacklemaster: Alan Dougherty, 3 The Cottages, Wrington,
Nr Bristol, Avon. 0934-863056 (home).

Cottage Warden: John Beauchamp, St Hugh's Cottage, Charterhouse,
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Editor: Yvonne Ward, 15 Jesse Close, Yateley, Camberley, Surrey,
GU17 7AH. 0252-876783 (home).

Committee Member: Gordon Lister, 127 Seaford Road, West Ealing,
London, W13. 01-579-3466 (home).

.../

AVENC FEMENIA

An awe-inspiring shaft situated high up on the side of Puig Caragoler. An evil looking funnel shaped area is the top of a 120m shaft, the descent of which is somewhat technical requiring several re-belays in not particularly sound rock. This cave, unlike most others on the island, is very cold and dank, and the whole area has an atmosphere of foreboding about it - not a place for the faint-hearted.

COVA DE CAN SION

A predominantly horizontal cave consisting essentially of a huge inclined chamber, having some of the finest formations to be seen on the island, mainly in the less frequented lower end of the cave. It was while poking around in these lower levels that a certain Andy Beare simply squeezed down between boulders and dropped onto a ledge overlooking a very large and superbly decorated, steeply inclined chamber. Descending into the chamber moved so much loose rock that we knew immediately that this was new territory. The chamber is about 75m wide, dropping about 60m vertically, and is well over 100m long. Unfortunately we did not have time to carry out a full exploration so the length of the chamber was not determined, but as all we could see was blackness it presumably goes for quite a long way! Before leaving we informed the local cavers of our discovery, and after convincing them that we weren't mad, they appeared very impressed and offered to send us a copy of their new survey!

SURVEY

During our stay this year we in fact found less than half the caves we had hoped so there still remains much to do on the island, especially as our latest trip opened up even more possibilities for future expeditions.

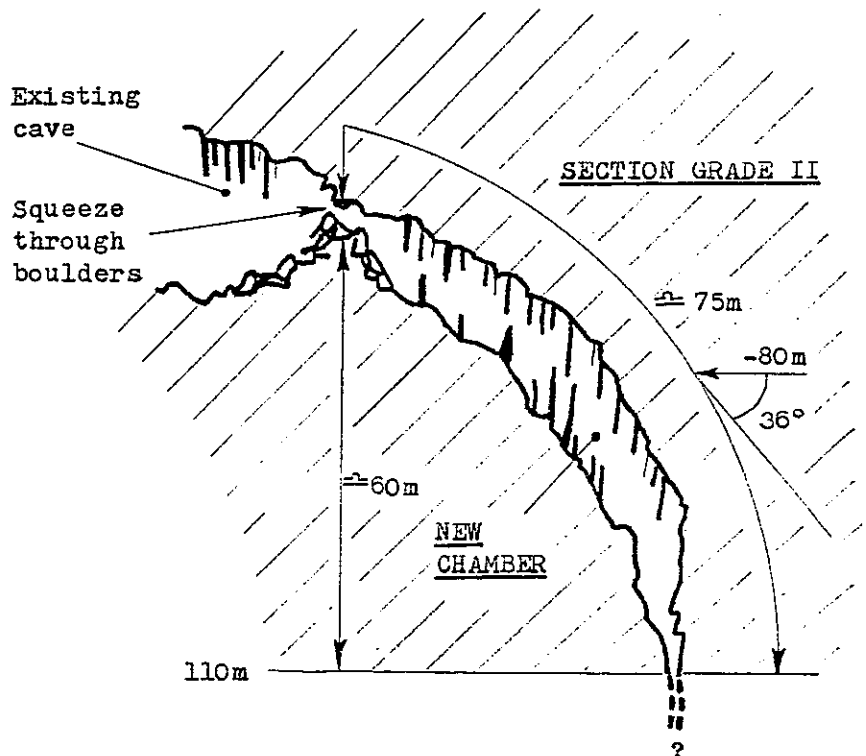
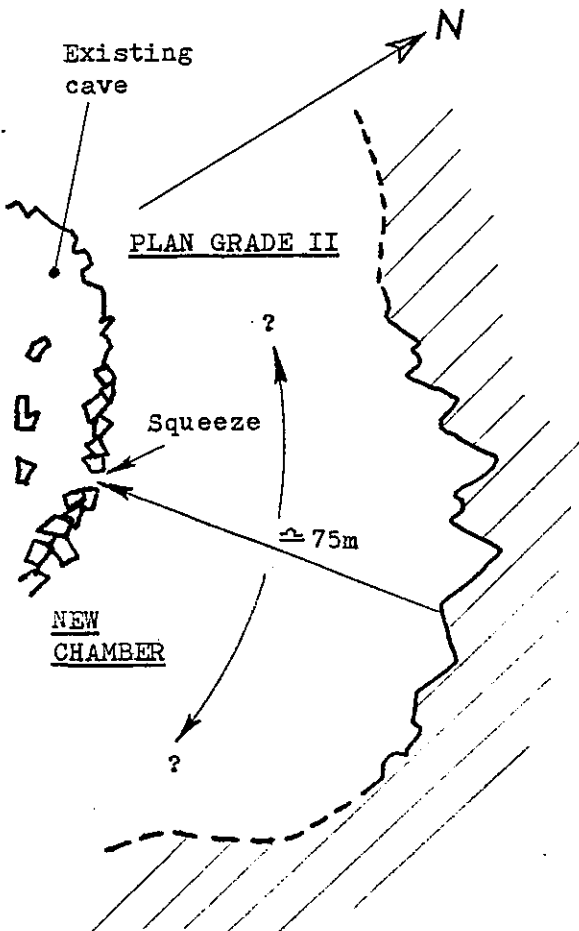
With this in mind, we are currently correlating all the information gathered over the past two years with the aim of producing a Mallorca 'information pack' to enable easy planning of future trips to the island, this will hopefully be published in the next journal.

Also our intrepid photographer - Ian Parry, took even more pictures this year, many of which are quite spectacular. ■

COVA CAN SION - MALLORCA

(2 59'54" / 39 50'09" / 310m)

DEC'85 EXTENSIONS MCG-BCRA GRADE II



Here are a few snippets taken from the minutes of the Council of Southern Caving Clubs who held their meeting at Upper Pitts, Priddy, on 16/11/85.

Jon Roberts was there representing MGC and Alan Dougherty as Novice Training Officer.

Conservation and Access Officer Brownes Folly / Swan Mines

Avon Wildlife Trust has bought the hillside surrounding Brownes Folly mine from Sir Charles Hobhouse. AWT wants to keep the same access arrangements (ie locking the entrances, and keeping other ways in sealed). They will fit new gates and locks, and supply keys to SCC Ltd shareholders (they said by Aug. 1st, but entrances are still open). A new arrangement has to be drawn up with AWT, at their expense. The rental will drop from £10 pa to £5 (£5 pa will still be paid to Sir Charles Hobhouse, for access to Swan Mine) (The two mines will have different keys).

Lamb Leer The land is now owned by Mr Burdge, who bought it from Somerset County Council. He wants people to call at the farm and pay trip fees (10p per head?). Nothing will happen until the current licence with ACC expires, then it will be transferred to Mr Burdge. The rental is likely to go up. A notice is required by the entrance to tell cavers to call at the farm.

Singing River Mine The land around the entrance has been sold to local residents, who have fenced it off. Access remains unchanged, but there is still a strict requirement to keep the gate locked, otherwise the shaft is likely to be filled.

Sludge Pit The pipes are to be delivered on 23rd Nov., at no charge. £50 is required for cement etc. This is to be collected from the member clubs if a grant application from the Sports Council fails. The Wessex objected, saying a subvention should be raised amongst the clubs, but the motion was passed. It was felt that a stockpile of pipes should be held for future needs. Graham Price said they could be obtained for £11.75 per unit, plus transport from ARC at Mells. We should hold at least six, and the Wessex offered storage at Upper Pitts. A top price of £100 was agreed to obtain and deliver a stock of pipes. Anyone able to transport the pipes should contact Graham Price.

Hunters Hole Hades have adopted the cave, and noted the entrance depression being filled by Roger Dors (Hunters Lodge Inn). Roger is likely to agree to a concrete pipe shaft being installed over the entrance so he can fill around it. The Hades are to talk to Roger.

Somerset Trust for Nature Conservation are believed to be interfering with access to some small caves on Western Mendip (Axbridge Hill?). Tim Large is obtaining details.

Access Handbook Graham is short of time to edit and update this. All being well, it should be ready by Easter '86. It was agreed that we should aim for an update every two years.

Fairy Quarry Caves CSS has so far failed to re-negotiate access to Shatter or Withyhill Caves. Hobbs Quarries are looking seriously again at proposals to open Shatter as a showcave. Their planning permission (outline) expires in March '86. A caver has surveyed the cave, and performed a feasibility study. They want to tunnel into Diesel Chamber to allow easy access to the Hobbs family, who will then decide whether or not to continue. Access to Withyhill is not likely to be granted, but the other quarry caves can be visited as before. CSS and the Nature Conservancy Council are not happy with the situation, and are trying to get restrictions imposed to cause as little damage as possible to the stal (the cave could be opened up as far as Pillar Chamber). Mendip District Council will discuss the matter with the NCC before granting planning permission.

CSCC minutes cont...

Equipment Officer The Equipment Subcommittee has produced a draft Equipment Failure report form, to be circulated to clubs to be completed and returned if necessary. Some slight alterations are needed. There have been some near misses with the Petzl Stop descender, due to ignorance of the correct mode of use. The rope test project has transferred from Whernside Manor to Troll, who are providing facilities free of charge. A non-destructive rope testing rig may be installed on Mendip for cavers to test their own ropes - the MCG may be working on this, and CSCC could liaise.

Novice Training Officer Locally, a new proposal has been received from Somerset LEA regarding teachers who take pupils caving. The old scheme is in effect dead. Somerset LEA wants to go ahead without CSCC, though we may have an ex-officio watchdog role. We are not happy that some caves listed by the LEA for novices are not in our view suitable (eg. Swildons Hole).■

ADDITIONS TO THE LIBRARY:

The following publications were added to the library list during November'85 and are now filed in the library on Mendip:-

Grosvenor Caving Club N/L no.14 1985

Chelsea Speleological Society -

Vol.27 no.11 Aug'85.

Vol.27 no.12 Sep'85.

Vol.28 no.01 Oct'85.

Subterranea Brittanica 29 Apr'85

N/L no.4

Belfry Bulletin Vol.39 no.5 no.431

Oct'85.

Caves and Caving no.30 Nov'85.

Chelsea Speleological Society -

Records Vol.14.

Caves and Tunnels in S.E. England
Part 6.

Karst Geomorphology, J.N. Jennings,
Basil Blackwell 1985.

Wessex C.C. Vol.18 no.203 Mar'85

no.204 May'85

no.205 Aug'85

no.206 Oct'85

LIBRARY BOOKS

On looking through the library signing-out book, your ever-diligent librarian notices that some books have been out for over two years! But your librarian is a man of the world, and knows that books are meant to be read, not locked up in libraries, and he is therefore delighted to see that people are making good use of the library.

However, just in case you have finished with a book and forgotten you have it, I produce below a list of those who, according to the records, have had an item out since before 1st February'85. If you think you have already returned the item, please contact me and I will amend the records. If you haven't finished with it, fine - please just let me know that it's not sitting idly on your shelf when someone else could be reading it.

The list starts at 2½ years, and works down to 1 year....

Andy Tizzard (4 items), Martin Rowe, Jon Roberts (3 items), Tony Knibbs, Roger Wallington, Christine Martin, Arthur Spain, Alan Mellon (4 items), Alan Dougherty (3 items), Pat Walsh, Simon Knight, Mike Lovell.

Thanks - Ian Mckechnie.

FOR SALE:

The club S.R.T. rope is NO LONGER SUITABLE for S.R.T. or lifelining but would make an ideal tow-rope or washing line. Anyone interested in buying some at the give-away price of 10p per metre can contact Alan Dougherty on 0934-863056 or see him at the cottage.



The BOB SPLEDO Column

Dear Bob,

With regard to the use of brassiers as warmth retaining hats, I feel that it should be pointed out that most of these garments, being constructed of cotton or light synthetics would prove very poor insulators when wet.

The padded variety may be a little warmer, but would become heavy when waterlogged.

Should you be able to find a woollen or fibre-pile model, this would be better, but may I suggest that you should then consider changing your female friends should such an object be requisitioned.

Yours supportively
Alan Dougherty.

OVER A BARREL

From a recent undated newspaper cutting:- "Cave rescuers have added fun to their practice by using full beer-barrels as stranded potholers. When they have 'saved' the barrels, donated by a brewery in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, they celebrate with a pint!".

DRIP - DROP

In a letter written to a paper recently, someone asked if the 'c' for 'ceiling' in stalactite and the 'g' for 'ground' in stalagmite were deliberate or coincidental. For those who don't already know, the actual words are from the Greek Stalaktos, meaning dripping, and Stalagmos, meaning dropping.

ZOOM BOOM

It was said in Farming Weekly that the Petzl zoom headlamp won the Lambing Aid of the Year award!

OVERHEARD...

Dave Elliott: "Climbing ladders is like w!!!!g - it's hard work and it makes your arm ache".

Adrian D to Neil H: "Are you going down Bone Hole?"

Neil: Well, it's been raining so it could be a bit muddy".

When discussing the new site shed to replace the extension, John Beauchamp referred to a 'shite sed'. Someone in reply suggested a portaloos!

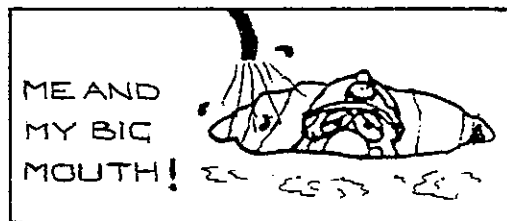
WHATSISNAME?

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------|
| THINK IN SMOG | JUMP BEACH NOAH |
| RON WAVY-END | NUDE SEA SLIME |
| NARROW ITEM | RANTERS ON THE JOB |

Who are they?



WHAT ARE THEY GOING TO DO ABOUT THE HOSEING AREA? IT KEEPS FLOODING.



S.R.T. ~ Lizzard

For all of you, like me, who were disappointed by the cancellation of the Whernside SRT courses, here's some good news:-

Lizzard Speleo Systems have opened a training centre at Sedbergh, Cumbria. They hold many courses to do with all aspects of caving, which I will mention later, but first I will tell you about the SRT course.

The course provides a sound basic introduction to SRT designed to equip each caver with the skills needed to negotiate vertical sections of cave safely and efficiently. This involves:-

- ▲ A comprehensive set of "progression techniques" and practised familiarity with the equipment used in descent and ascent.
- ▲ An understanding of the main factors involved in pitch rigging.
- ▲ Some awareness of the means of aiding others in difficulty and the wider skills necessary to be safe and effective underground.

The best way to learn anything is at first-hand from an expert and Lizzard's instructors are widely experienced working cavers, well practised in passing on their skills. To allow for detailed instruction, they work in small groups, usually 3 - 4, with one instructor. Surface practise takes place on rope circuits in a specialised indoor training area using the very latest equipment. Underground sessions are carefully designed to demonstrate the application of rope techniques and maximise practise in the time available, rather than to explore difficult caves.

The centre runs SRT courses from April to October and the course fee is £30 which covers all instruction, technical equipment, literature and a packed lunch each day. It does not include accommodation or transport as they say most cavers share transport costs and can usually find cheap accommodation in club huts etc. Accommodation can be arranged on request if sufficient notice is given.

The course instruction includes prusik / abseil techniques, ascent and descent changeovers, use of traverse lines, crossing rebelayes, deviations and mid-rope knots and long rope climb practise.

Special non-scheduled courses can be arranged to suit the needs and abilities of a particular group and Lizzard's instructors will travel to run a course at another location eg. Mendip or South Wales. The idea being that it is cheaper for two instructors plus equipment to come to us than for a group of cavers to travel to Cumbria. This appears sound logic but would depend on what Geoff (of the practise tree) and Alan (of the ropes) think of the idea.

The other Lizzard courses:- For those who are already practising SRT there is an Advanced SRT course, 3 days - £45.

Also Rescue and Survival, 2 days - £35.

Cave Photography, 2 days - £35.

Pitch Rigging, 2 days - £35.

Scaling Techniques, 1 day - £18.

Cave Technique, 5 days - £110.

Classic Systems, 5 days - £110.

I will put the wallet containing all the details on the cottage noticeboard but please don't remove it as it is the only one at the moment■

Yvonne

I know - Lizzard only has one 'z' ... Ed.

MCG doings

Welcome to new probationary member Geoffrey Fisher of 47 Florence Road, Brighton, Sussex, BN1 6DL. Introduced by Steve Taylor.

Congratulations to Jo Davies on becoming a full member.

Wessex Challenge on 5th July '86 - it's time to think about designs - any ideas? We might be able to get hold of some dexion but will need other materials and constructors. Send your ideas and offers to the editor please.

The AGM and dinner will be held at The Star Hotel, Wells on Saturday 4th of April 1987.

In future there will be a 10% non-returnable deposit to be paid on all guest parties booking bunks at the cottage. This has become necessary due to parties booking bunks then not turning up, which apart from being unfair to others who might have used the cottage, means a loss of revenue for the club especially where large parties are concerned.

When the paints and brushes have been purchased, members will be able to colour-code their equipment with their membership number. Most of you will know the resistor colour-code, but for those who don't, here it is:-

0 = Black	5 = Green
1 = Brown	6 = Blue
2 = Red	7 = Violet
3 = Orange	8 = Slate (grey)
4 = Yellow	9 = White

Earwig...

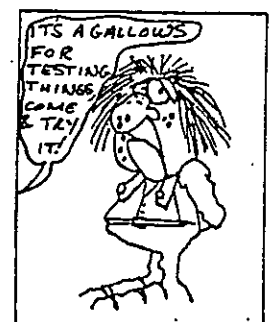
What's going on? Are they talking about me? Earwig listens in on the committee:
13/4/86



All Fairy Quarry caves shut - Cerberus to re-negotiate access... Plans afoot for a small round car sticker bearing the MCG logo... The extension has been cancelled due to lack of interest but instead there will be a site shed for drying gear and storing digging tools ... A hosing down area has been proposed with either a drainage ditch to the road or a soakaway in the middle...

The rope tester has been installed and is working... Besides the 'emergency' key ring, it was suggested that we hold two keys for each of the popular caves so more than one party can go down at different times... card to be put on key hook when a key is taken so it's whereabouts can be traced if it is not returned... the life and condition of all ropes to be assessed... will we hold SRT rope for members use or just for practice? New SRT rope will be bought for practice as soon as possible as existing rope is no longer safe... Alan is to get slings for the tackle store which are to be used in place of wire tethers.

Bob Speleo 6



★ I COULDN'T see what Anneka Rice was up to—or down to—in Sporting Chance. But the dialogue in the dark was quite hair-raising. "Oooh, it's fantastic... Give me some more slack... Push that end in... Ah, got it... This is the real biggie... the great vertical experience..."
When I turned the brightness up, I discovered she was... pot-holing.
Oh well, a man can dream! (THE SUN!)

Barry Haslam - Snail cultivator

The risibility of snail hunting, as a topic of conversation, has long lost its bite for Barry Haslam. You can hardly experience the thrill of the chase when your prey flees at 3½ins a minute. And, when it comes to selling them, he has heard every variation on the theme of "slow trade" there is.

Similar ennui greets any mention of the term escargots. "Now look, I'm always telling people this. What I collect and sell are English Mendip snails, served with a special herb-and-butter sauce. French and garlic just do not come into it." In five years of running a restaurant in Priddy, Somerset, with snails thus billed on his menu, he's had "quite a bit of fun with all these snobby types, demanding garlic. They had to back down."

Even the French are interested in Barry's snails: two years ago he got an order from France for one million. And his English wholesalers, Hales Snails, take as many as Barry can supply.

The variety Barry collects is 'Helix Aspersa', prolific in an area stretching from the Severn to the Wash. They like damp weather conditions, so are easiest to find in the dawn or dusk dew, or after rain, along dry stone walls and in the undergrowth in limestone areas. The snails are only active from May to September, hibernating the rest of the year.

Captured snails are taken back to Westbury sub Mendip, where Haslam also runs his brewery, and stored and fed under supervision for at least a fortnight. "They could be toxic when you first get them - they may have been eating ivy, for instance. I feed them on spent grain from the brewery and keep them in plastic laundry baskets, which of course people find a hoot. But I find them ideal for the purpose."

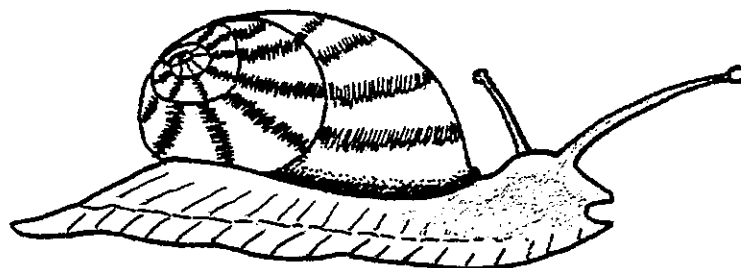
In the nine years Barry has been collecting snails, they have become ever more popular. "Often people will eat snails just to say they've tried them - it's the "in" thing to do. But then they get a taste for them."

Pressure of work has meant that nowadays Barry mostly gets other collectors, frequently schoolboys, to get snails for him, for which he pays 75p a pound (roughly 50). "They guard their hunting grounds very jealously - they won't even tell ME where they've found them."

For local inhabitants, eating snails is nothing new. They've been doing it at least since the turn of the century. "Bristol tobacco workers were told to eat them to alleviate chest complaints. And you'd always see the roadmen frying them up at the side of the road on their tar braziers."

Now that snails have gained a wider appeal, however, Barry has plans for expansion, hoping to persuade a Guernsey tomato farmer to turn greenhouses into special snail-breeding units.

But does the "healthy interest" most people show on tasting Haslam's snails affect him? "Well, put it this way. If there are other starters to choose from, I won't have snails. Quite frankly, I see enough of them".■



Majorcan Speleos

By Kate Supergrass.

Christmas 1985

Andy forgot to take his helmet and lamp on the expedition to Majorca. Still, when he arrived he made up for it by volunteering to go and buy matches... except when he came back it took him ages to light the fire... he'd bought 600 toothpicks by mistake! (It was even written in English on the box: 'Finest quality toothpicks made in Spain')

Geoff kindly let the Majorcan team buy an altimeter for £10. It worked brilliantly - as the team came down the mountain, it showed they were going up - still, who needs to go caving anyway, when you can spend happy hours scaling mountains in prickly scrub?

Andy was official navigator on the first visit to Escorca and directed the driver up the Torrente de Parais (massive mountain gorge, full of 20ft boulders, trees, caves, etc., but no road) FOLLOW THE BEAR?

Martin was happily dropping rocks down Sago. Suddenly he realised they were taking a long time to reach the bottom - so he ran away. The others carried on looking down the hole, taking photos, jumping over the hole, etc...

Later they found out it was 100M or so straight down. (Wot's Spanish for sh--t?).

We met Miles Drake, a lone American caver. Kate asked if he had any caving gear, but he didn't understand. 'Equipment,' she explained... 'Oh yes, I have full vertical equipment!' he boasted.

'God, these roads must be horrible in the winter' said Joy on a hair-pin bend. But Joy, it's December!

Paul Craig, who travelled with Kate, hadn't flown since he was 12. As he got on the plane the hostess said 'good evening' but Paul just gave her a dirty look. Later he said 'Why did she say "keep moving!"?'

After the duty free drinks, Dan Air perfumes, etc, Paul waited for the loo queue to go down... 'There's only one person in there...' said Kate, bossily, 'You'd better go now, because I think it's going to be a constant stream'. 'Even I don't know that yet!' protested Paul.

An innocent abroad - a middle aged woman alone had nicked Paul's window seat when we boarded the plane. Politely Paul sat next to her. Half way to Majorca she invited Paul to 'unclip and look at the lights'. 'Oh yes', said Paul. 'No, right down there...' Politely he leaned right over to look below the plane... 'I've got this nice Spanish library book... full of useful phrases on dating' (Was this the moment when worried Paul noticed her seamed stockings and Kate dashed to the loo to hide a mega-smirk explosion?)

Later that week...

'Bear tried to put it in, but it was all loose and dangly!'

'What's Spanish for stuffing' (Joy)

'As a whole, we've done a lot of caves...' (Ian)

'Okay, who put the balloon in the loo? I went in the dark... wot's going on, I thought?' (Joy)

Catch phrase of the week...

'So I do a bit of shopping - I can handle it'. (Martin)

SITES OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST (SSSI)

A pronounced fluttering is currently taking place in the Mendip dovecots - conservation has been declared in several directions. Landowners, in a fit of pique, have closed Swildons Hole, Eastwater Cavern, North Hill Swallet, Sludge Pit Hole, Nine Barrows Swallet and Hunters Hole. Cavers (BEC) have closed St Cuthberts Swallet in sympathy for two weeks from 17th May.

What's gone wrong? How has the seemingly beneficial act of declaring a cave to be an SSSI - hailed as a step towards long-term conservation - become a matter of animosity and embarrassment?

Since 1957 several Mendip cave entrances have been given a measure of protection, scheduled as SSSIs, which safeguarded them against interference or destruction through any operation for which planning permission is required. The duty of preservation placed on the landowner or occupier on objectionable conditions, nor did the Nature Conservancy Council's role as watchdog pose more than a potential restraining hand. And it worked!

Under the later Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 the NCC was given much wider powers over land management in the belief that conservation aims occasionally required the wielding of superior force. No doubt they sometimes did. Let's pause now and go back a few years.

In 1974 NCC decided that a Geological Conservation Review was needed, and this included caves and karst sites. NCA and BCRA were jointly contracted to nominate cave SSSIs. The task was completed in 1980 but the new sites have only just begun to be formally notified. (April 1986).

Of course, the strengthened provisions of the 1981 Act now apply and these are most apparent in a list of 28 Potentially Damaging Operations (PDO) which has been served on landowners and occupiers by NCC, either with notification of a new SSSI or with re-notification of an existing SSSI.

The list of PDOs imposes conditions of land management, which extend beyond the original restrictions relating to operations requiring planning permission. Individual PDOs bear directly on the day-to-day management of land as the first four items from the list indicate:

1. Cultivation, including ploughing, rotovating, harrowing and reseeded.
2. Grazing.
3. Stock feeding.
4. Mowing or other methods of cutting vegetation."

For a farmer to carry out any PDO he must apply to NCC for written consent. Mendip farmers in Priddy were simply given the whole list which made it seem that they had to ask NCC for permission to farm their own land. You can imagine the reaction!

To make matters worse, farmers see the whole situation being due to cavers and, ipso facto, blame the caving community. And they deserve our sympathy. Geoff Baynes owns the Queen Victoria Inn at Priddy; he has a field adjoining his car park, which has been notified as a SSSI because it has part of Swildons Hole passing beneath it. Not linked, you understand, simply 350ft below the grass! Yes, we all know about hydrological pollution, but try persuading a now-stroppy landowner. Ironically, it was the cavers who, via NCA/BCRA, requested NCC to declare the following caves to be protected as SSSIs at Priddy:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Swildons Hole | 5. Sludge Pit Hole |
| 2. Eastwater Swallet | 6. St Cuthberts Swallet |
| 3. North Hill Swallet | 7. Hunters Hole |
| 4. Nine Barrows Swallet | |

Having proposed this list with the best of intentions, cavers now find that the whole thing has rebounded against them because the constraints on landowners and occupiers have dramatically increased since the list was submitted. It is a situation not unlike phoning the AA and suddenly finding the SS Panzer Division coming to your aid instead.

There are many different viewpoints to be taken on the question of conservation. At a very lengthy general meeting of the Council of Southern Caving Clubs, on Saturday 17 May, most comment was in favour of wholeheartedly supporting the farmers in their castigation

of the way in which NCC had issued SSSI notices. It had been done in a highly impersonal, bureaucratic way, the attachment of the list of 28 PDOs providing an ominous threat. Views were openly expressed to the NCC Regional Officer, Bob Corns, who attended the meeting.

Initial caver reaction through CSCC was that a formidable list of PDOs affecting the use of large land areas was more than landowners should suffer in the name of cave conservation. As a result of CSCC representation to NCC the applicable PDOs have been reduced to the area of the cave entrance.

NCC is to make a second approach to landowners, defining each individual SSSI situation, and inviting them to apply for consent to carry out any PDO which they feel is unacceptable in their use of the land. The NCC is empowered to reimburse landowners for any loss of profit which SSSI status causes, and there is the possibility of grant aid to make improvements which bear on conservation.

Cavers remain in a strange dilemma; they support (however tacitly) the need for cave conservation but have to reconcile this view with supporting the objections of farmers with whom access to the caves must be agreed.

If the situation is bad at this level of cave SSSI scheduling, it can only get worse if more sites are notified. The effects of this fear is that permission to continue digging or to start new digs will rarely be forthcoming from landowners, and cavers will cease to publish data or surveys of new discoveries.

There is little doubt that we are faced with a serious problem; it could affect access to many caves, hamper exploration, yet do virtually nothing to achieve an improvement in cave conservation. And it may not readily go away.

CSCC has formed a working party to deal specifically with this vexed question of SSSIs. No all-embracing plan of action has so far been formulated, but a move has been made to get a small number of SSSIs de-notified in order to free the farmers from the PDO constraints. However, it seems unlikely that this will be an easy task because it entails overturning a decision already taken by cavers at local and national level, and passed on for ratification by NCC. We are asking NCC to go against principals which we have stated are central to the issue of cave conservation.

If de-notification is not possible, or the relaxed constraints fail to appease the farmers sufficiently, then we have a serious problem. We have to persuade the landowners that they can live with whatever PDOs remain in force and that continued cave access is a good thing.

On current showing, NCC is behaving as an extension of central government and believes that it is simply following instructions to implement the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act. It may be necessary for cavers to voice their dissent in the time-honoured fashion of writing to the Secretary of State for the Environment and the Minister for Environment, lobbying MPs or committing acts of civil disobedience in public places.

The Priddy notifications are only a beginning. There are six more notifiable cave sites on Mendip: Charterhouse caves, Cheddar caves, Lamb Leer Cavern, Thrupe Lane Swallet, St Dunstons Well Catchment (including Fairy Cave Quarry SSSI), Stoke Lane Slocker and Wookey Hole. Add to these: 20 SSSIs in Yorkshire, 6 in Derbyshire, 10 in Wales, 2 in Scotland, 2 in Devon and 1 in Sussex (Beachy Head) - in all, 20 areas and 29 smaller sites.

Karst feature SSSIs to be notified on Mendip are: Cheddar Gorge (including Velvet Bottom), Burrington Combe (including West Twin Brook Valley), Brimble Pit and Cross Swallet, Sand-pit Hole and Bishop's Lot, Wurt Pit and Devil's Punch Bowl. There are 34 additional Karst sites nationwide.

Mendip has caught the first volleys, South Wales is also a target, so the problem surrounding SSSI notifications is a national one. Consequently, a national initiative led by NCA with full and active regional participation is essential and urgent. As a constituent member of NCA, BCRA has a valuable part to play in a national response. Enough criticism has been levelled at the utility of our national bodies - perhaps this is the opportunity they need to play a decisive role in a caving problem.

Tony Knibbs