

Mendip Caving Group

NEWS

NUMBER 220

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Caves of the Alyn Valley

Recently, whilst browsing through an old copy of Descent (No. 39) I came across a letter from Liverpool University Potholing Club, which bemoaned the lack of information available about the caves in North Wales. Unfortunately this still remains the case some thirteen years later! From conversations with other members of the MCG, it appears that few cavers are aware of the extent of these caves. I have restricted the article to the Alyn Valley, mainly because of the cloud of secrecy and access problems that surround the caves associated with Minerva Mountain, including the Ogof Llyn Parc system.

The impressive gorge cut by the Alyn can be found on the Eastern flank of the Clwydian hills, and runs roughly between Loggerheads and Rhydymyn. All the caves can be found by walking downstream if the bridge at Cilcain. Take the A541 from Mold for approximately five miles where Cilcain is signposted on the left.

Ogof Hesp Alyn is the longest cave associated with the Alyn gorge drainage. The entrance is located at stream level eight minutes walk downstream from Pont Cilcain. As drainage by mining activity only occurred this century, the cave is almost entirely phreatic. The sporting nature of several glutinous canals, awkward pitches, and nasty ducks mean that despite its moderate length (2.5 km) trips are long. Apart from the 25' entrance pitch the rest of the cave is best done on SRT to reduce the amount of tackle needed. The highlight of the cave is an awkward 80' pitch where a free-hang is impossible to achieve. Two well positioned bolts provide anchors for a Y-hang, with several back-ups, including a large natural available. After two easily missed natural deviations, the pitch lands on a large ledge. Bolts, or a natural, can be used to rig this final 20', either as a separate pitch or as a continuation of the first. Beyond, there are many smaller pitches where rigging depends on the quality of fixed ropes, and the party's climbing ability. Some of the pitches are extremely loose and muddy, making climbing very technical, especially the rock bridge. After two siphoned sumps the cave ends in a tight fissure where a streamway can be heard beyond...

In summary, trips to the bottom are extremely arduous, with the ever present glutinous mud hampering progress! Furthermore the whole cave floods in very wet weather, and a rapid exit would be difficult. Despite this the cave is well worth a visit if you like a more demanding trip.

An easier, although just as interesting, trip can be found in Ogof Hen Ffynhonau. This only has one fifteen foot pitch close to the entrance to hamper progress. Although a rapid flooders some extensions do lie above the phreatic zone allowing some fine formations upstream including a strange stalagmite boss. The large stream gallery contains several impressive mudbanks, moonmilk deposits, and two spacious ducks. The recent extensions downstream are more awkward, but provide some fine sporting climbs. Prospects here, including a connection with Ogof Hesp Alyn, are excellent. Or to put it another way; if Ogof

MCG 1992 MEETS PROGRAMME +++++ BANK HOLIDAY WEEKENDS UNDERLINED

DATE	AREA	MAIN EVENT	CONTACT	TEL. NO.
29 Feb - 01 Mar	S WALES	OFD DAN-Y-OGOF	J.P. Burch	0737-767738
05 Mar	Eclipse	Slide Show	M. Rowe	0252-872006
07 Mar - 08 Mar	MENDIP	Archeology	Yvonne Rowe	0252-872006
22 Mar - 23 Mar	W LONDON	SRT WORKSHOP	Kevin West	081-570-6624
04 Apr	MENDIP	AGM/DINNER	Arthur Spain	0749-679358
<u>18 Apr</u>	MENDIP	COTTAGE CURRY	J.P. Burch	0737-767738
<u>02 May - 04 May</u>	COTTAGE	COTTAGE WORK	Brian Murlis	0934-412048
<u>23 May - 25 May</u>	S WALES	DAN-Y CAMPING	Mike Lovell	0734-663747
11 Jul - 25 Jul	COUNTY CLARE		Martin Rowe	0252-872006
			Joan Goddard	0608-810382

Accommodation in Yorks & S.Wales can be booked through the relevant cottage warden

Yorkshire	Northern Pennine Club	Steve Thorpe	0582 559214
South Wales	South Wales Caving Club	Debby Stevens	0202 679602

WEEKLY MEETINGS are held at the Group's Mendip Headquarters on Wednesdays at 7.00pm. and at the Eclipse Inn, Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey, on Thursdays from 8.30pm.

COTTAGE FEES per night:

MCG members, members children, SWCC and NPC	£1
Guest Clubs and member's guests	£2

ANNUAL SEASON TICKET:

Optional Exemption from cottage fees, for members	£10
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ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION:

Full and Probationary Members:	£20
Associate Members:	£10

The subscription includes free day-time access to the cottage by the member, their children, and their accompanied guests

SECRETARY:	Malcolm Cotter 249 Feltham Hill Road, Ashford, Middlesex, TW15 1LU	tel: 07842-526643
TREASURER:	Bernard Reeves 16a Newbury Way,	Northolt, Middlesex tel: 081-864-3559
MEET SECRETARY:	J. P. Burch 19 Raneleigh Road,	Redhill, Surrey. RH1 6BJ tel: 0737-767738
COTTAGE WARDEN:	Brian Murlis 1a Arundell Road, Weston-Super-Mare, Avon. BS23 2QG	tel: 0934-412048
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ORDINARY MEMBER:	Arthur Spain Waitangi, Long Lane, Dinder, Wells, Somerset. BA5 3PQ	tel: 0749-679358

The Mendip Caving Group is a registered charity, number 270088
The Group's Trustees are: Ron Saunders, Malcolm Cotter, Pat Walsh and Peter Matthews

H F was in Mendip it would have gone years ago!

Finally, although not connected to the Alyn drainage, Ogof Nadolig is well worth a visit, especially for beginners. There are two 25' pitches and some fine formations, as well as plenty of Alyn mud to be found in this small cave. As with Ogof H F prospects for extending the cave are good. Elsewhere there are numerous potential dig sites, with perhaps the Small Leet caves upstream of Pont Cilcain being the most promising site. It will surely not be long before the length of the cave in the Alyn valley becomes significantly extended. Perhaps a more open minded attitude in the North Wales caving scene in general would help in furthering the obvious potential of the Alyn Valley.

References

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|-------------|------|---|
| Appleton, P | 1984 | Ogof Hesp Alyn Caves and Caving, May 84 |
| Appleton, P | 1989 | Limestones and Caves of North Wales, in Ford, T.D (1989) Limestones and Caves of Wales. |
| Kealy, L | 1988 | The Caves of North Wales, Crewe CPC Journal, Volume 2 |
| Oldham, T | 1988 | The Concise Caves of North Wales. |

Tim Francis

ANNUAL DINNER 1992

The Annual MCG Dinner will be held on 4th April at The Crossways, North Wooton, starting 7.30pm for 8.00pm. Tickets are available from Arthur Spain, or Malcolm Cotter. The guest speaker will be Martin Farr and there will be a live show and a bowls competition. Four teams of six people required. So it should go well this year.

Full details are on the attached booking form.

BONE HOLE

Bone Hole entrance needs shoring and Brian Murlis needs the materials as soon as possible. It would be easier for them if the poles can be provided in the following lengths. If anyone can help, please contact Brian Murlis.

8 lengths at:- 1x4.1 Metres

3.5	"	"
2.2	"	"
1.9	"	"
1.4	"	"
1.3	"	"
1.0	"	"
0.8	"	"

Also required 7 swivel type joiners and 3 fixed joiners.

LEATHER JACKET

A leather jacket has been apparently abandoned at the cottage. Unless it is claimed soon, the committee may auction it, and put the proceeds to a charitable cause such as the MRO.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCURSION AROUND BURRINGTON, DOLEBURY AND ROWBERROW

As an alternative to caving, you are invited to join Yvonne Rowe on an archaeological walk around Burrington, Dolebury and Rowberrow on Saturday 7th March 1992, commencing at 9.30am. This is a circular walk of about 8 miles beginning and ending at Burrington Cafe and visiting the following sites:

BURRINGTON CAMP IRON AGE HILL FORT
BOS SWALLET BRONZE AGE OCCUPATION SITE
READ'S CAVERN IRON AGE OCCUPATION SITE
DOLEBURY WARREN IRON AGE FIELD SYSTEM
DOLEBURY IRON AGE HILLFORT
ROWBERROW CAVERN NEOLITHIC - ROMAN OCCUPATION SITE
ROWBERROW WARREN IRON AGE EARTHWORKS
CHARTERHOUSE - UPHILL ROMAN ROAD
ROWBERROW CAMP IRON AGE HILLSLOPE FORT
WEST TWIN IRON AGE EARTHWORKS
AVELINE'S HOLE PALAEOLITHIC OCCUPATION AND BURIAL SITE

The walk commences at the car park at Burrington Cafe (ST47655890) at 9.30am sharp. You will need stout footwear and (probably) waterproof clothing. Three of the sites are caves and headlamps will be useful! This is a full day's walk so bring a packed lunch.

FULL DETAILS FROM YVONNE ROWE,
TEL. 0252-872006

'STABLISHED ROPE TECHNIQUE

In his article in N/L 219 on hanging around underground, Charlie Allison seemed to favour rope as a suitable support. He also seemed to think that SRT rope games could be deemed an MCG-recognised and funded event. It was heavily inferred that proponents of SRT are chiefly to be found in the younger echelons of the group.

Perhaps in my middle-aged way, I can add a little support to his argument. But let me first dispose of a slight misconception concerning the ageing process of normal cavers.

Later this year I will reach the speleological age of forty, and, since I wasted a few years before seeing the (carbide) light, this puts me in single digits to normal retirement age. It is now, in later years, that most advantage is obtained from such developments as SRT, thermal underwear and the wetsuit. It is now that any technique or equipment which prolongs active caving is earnestly sought and readily appreciated. Alright?

Whilst I am aware of the considerably reduced weight and bulk of SRT compared to a ladder attack, I had not looked at a case in point. So let's imagine a trip down a classic Yorkshire pot where 200m of pitches could be on the menu. Using rope and ladder types which are commonly available today, it is very interesting to look at how the techniques compare in weight.

A. Classic ladder/lifeline

200m ladders, Petzl	25.5kg	(10m = 1275g)
400m Cousin Superlight 8.6mm rope	18.8kg	(47.5g/m)
Total	44.3kg	

B. SRT technique

220m Edelrid 10mm Super Static rope	13.2kg	(60g/m)
Personal SRT kit (say 4 cavers)	16.0	
Total	29.2kg	

Note. Wire ladder belays and rope anchors have been assumed equal and omitted from the calculation. SRT penalised +10% rope for rigging.

Clearly, SRT offers a great weight saving; as a member of a four-man team my ladder/rope load would be about 11kg against 7.5kg of SRT equipment. If we added figures for comparative bulk, this would show SRT in an even better position.

Of course, there are pitches (usually short and indirect) where ladders are the best bet. But for anything else SRT is a far less strenuous and demonstrably safer technique.

So how does SRT work as a club technique? The French caving club to which I belong opted to use SRT as the mainline method around 1980; few ladders remain in the store. Few of my colleagues are true masters of the art, but no problems have ever arisen due to the storage or use of the rope. The present Tackle Officer has inherited a motley collection of ropes and has discarded some of the tattier examples. He operates a basic booking system, but his best attribute is that he regularly uses the ropes himself and errs towards caution in making a judgement on condition.

In our part of the Pyrenees it is the custom to rig some of the bigger systems in March and leave the tackle in situ during most of the year. This helps local explorers and benefits visiting clubs. Henne Morte is one such permanently rigged system: pitches are 10,27,10.5,5,7,35,44,11.75,25 and 17m. plus an exposed traverse line out to the head of the 75m pitch. Having descended the system at the end of the year I found the ropes looking mostly rather grubby and some had been used sufficiently to begin developing sheath slippage with consequent "bunching", giving an impression of shuddering during descent - but not noticed climbing. This phenomenon is known here as the "chausette" effect and is probably the result of not soaking new SRT rope in water for 24hrs as recommended.

With the Henne Morte example we are talking heavy usage - several hundred cavers per season - and an annual visual inspection. Only a small percentage of users could be classed as very experienced cavers; the system offers a good through-trip on which relative beginners may be taken. In the same (Foret d'Arbas) area are several other entrances to the 100km long Felin-Trombe system which are similarly left rigged semi-permanently.

Contrary to popular British opinion, French cavers are very much aware of risks, readily undergo training in the techniques, and accept the need to be insured. Their sense of responsibility and knowledge of the limits of SRT rope is as good as any and better than some.

Considering the ease and security with which the whole question of club holdings of SRT rope (and indeed the anchors and maillons) is associated here in France, I would expect MCG to find such a situation acceptable in UK, particularly at the lower usage rates which that would entail.

The main points for consideration are :

- that the Tackle Officer is sympathetic and an active caver
- that a correct choice of rope for group use is made. ie. 10-11mm and from a reputable maker.
- that basic records of use are maintained (ropes date marked)
- that storage and use (including cleaning) meet the same criteria as for ladders and lifelines
- that this expenditure is viewed as entirely normal.

Looking back quite a few years, the arrival of wire/duralumin ladders was treated to a reserve similar to that accorded SRT techniques. Happily this was overcome through experience and common sense, and the original hemp rope/ wood rung ladders are now found only in museums.

For the purposes of caving within the conditions of our insurance policy. I would consider SRT rope to come under the same heading as ladders and lifelines - except that SRT is safer. If satisfying the sometimes over-zealous demands of our insurers is a real hurdle, perhaps we should change insurers.

Evidently, the aims of MCG are to promote cave exploration: this is an uncontestable fact. It is, of course, quite reasonable that a few members may not wish to use any given technique. However, such dissent should remain passive rather than manifest itself as a vote against something with which the voter will not be concerned.

TONY KNIBBS

DO WE NEED A COTTAGE EXTENSION?

I think we do. For some time now the library has been desperately short of space, many documents are having to be stored at the home of the recorder, which of course means members do not (a) Know of their existence. (b) If they do, they can't see them at the cottage except by prior arrangement. Space would then also be available to view surveys.

Another excellent reason would be to give the committee a home, a place to hold meetings with a certain amount of privacy, and not have to meet in Pubs or members homes.

As yet no costing has been done, but I would propose a fairly low profile extension, about 6' out on the car park side and 6' on the camp area end. This would virtually double the ground area which should be quite sufficient for a long time

A sketch should be available by the AGM, but in the meantime I would like you all to consider this proposal seriously, as it would considerably improve library facilities, and greatly assist the committee who now meet regularly on Mendip.

Arthur Spain.

THE SPOIL SCENE

by Tim Francis

Below is a brief summary of what a few of us have been up to in between the usual trips to "Bat" and "The Castle". Efforts have been made at several sites, but progress has been hampered for several reasons - politics, conservation, moving or, stubborn rocks.

EAST TWIN SWALLET

Since the last write-up, thirteen trips have been made to the rather awkward face in "Mole and Munchkin Passage". Considerable efforts were made to force the right hand continuation from the cross rift. After ten feet or so an extremely resistant lump of rock was met, which we were unable to shift. This was despite bringing in the Bosch drill and Charlie's car jack. We'll be back in the near future with some more persuasive methods. There are still a few other leads in East Twin that might repay some effort. For instance there has been a considerable collapse at "The Hairpin Bend". Interestingly, this is the furthest point in the cave where the passages are influenced by the direction and amount of dip C.C.N18° E60°. Elsewhere in the Spar Pot Series, the intricate maze of passages is essentially a Strike-cave.

UPPER FLOOD SWALLET

Several trips have been made to the terminal boulder choke to try and find the way on. However there have been several small collapses which have brought down considerable amounts of loose mud. One crowbar is now imprisoned beneath a sizeable boulder, and most of the promising voids have disappeared from view. Therefore we are seriously considering blasting the streamway - a very long project!

LONGWOOD/AUGUST SYSTEM

We are currently waiting for the next Charterhouse Committee A.G.M. to obtain permission to dig in the Fault Chamber. Digging will be extremely uncomfortable, with water and bad air just two of the problems.

Diggers:- James Allen, Charlie Allison, Andrew Bellamy, Ralph Diment, Hugh Edwards, Tim Francis, Richard Gandy, Michael Pittman and others.

CHRISTMAS COMES TO THE LIBRARY

The following new additions have recently been made to the library:

A MAN DEEP IN MENDIP, THE CAVING DIARIES OF HARRY SAVORY 1910 -1921 edited by John Savory, 1989 - Interesting reading for those wanting to know more about 'the old days' of Mendip caving, and includes some fascinating early photographs.

YORKSHIRE DALES: LIMESTONE COUNTRY, by Tony Waltham, 1987 - First published as 'Caves, Crags and Gorges' in 1984 (also in library), the Yorkshire content has been expanded to form this well produced and easily readable pocket sized book, attractively illustrated with photographs and sketch plans.

CAVES OF ASSYNT, published by the Grampian Speleological Group, 1988 - Primarily a guide book, it also contains a useful bibliography of published work relating to the area.

THE UNDERGROUND ATLAS, A GAZETTEER OF THE WORLD'S CAVE REGIONS by John Middleton and Tony Waltham, 1986 - very superficial!

CAVE DIVING, THE CAVE DIVING GROUP MANUAL, 1990 - replaces the 1975 edition.

ON ROPE - NORTH AMERICAN VERTICAL ROPE TECHNIQUES, published by the National Speleological Society, 1987.

DEEP INTO BLUE HOLES, THE STORY OF THE ANDROS PROJECT by Rob Palmer, 1989 - Diving in the Bahamas

CORNISH MINING - a collection of nineteenth century essays on the organisation and economy of Cornish mines - not a general interest book, but it was a 'bargain'!

GORGES ET CANYONS, GORGES ET CANYONS EN LANGUEDOC ROUSSILLON, LES PLUS BEAUX 30 CANYONS DES ALPES DU SUD. These are in the DESCENTE SPORTIVE series of books, (French text), and include techniques, locations and rigging diagrams for river canyons in France - sounds like an above-ground alternative to caving, but not for the unfit.

Feel free to write a short review for the Newsletter, of any of the books you borrow from the library - it may stimulate other members to read the book when you return it.

JUST A REMINDER; There is a library loans book in the library. Please fill it in when you borrow a book.

Returned books should be left in the box marked RETURNED BOOKS, and you should enter in the loans book the date of return and your initials.

Please do not keep books out longer than necessary: there are another hundred or so members who may like to read them!

SENSIBLE ROPE TECHNIQUES

By Kevin West

In reply to Charlie's fine letter, I would just like to clarify some points he made, and supply some slightly more technical information as well as beat the old drum about use and maintenance of tackle.

Firstly, I believe the accident he refers to in Thrupe Lane Swallet was not the fault of the lifeline, but the lifeliner who was using a stitch plate, but failed to use it properly when the caver (who was unfamiliar with ladders) fell. Highlighting the need for practice or training in the use of lifelines and belay devices.

Secondly with reference to Charlie's Item iii) Para 2. Static or SRT rope does have a tighter weave to the sheath than Dynamic rope. This does not give it greater abrasion resistance. It does however mean that it is harder for dirt and grit to pass through the sheath or mantle and into the kern or core of the rope. Once this grit is comfortably inside the rope it sets about severing the small strands that make up the kern (which accounts for up to 70% of the it's strength) of the rope like a little knife. Completely undetectable without careful checking and or drop testing. This is why a muddy rope should never be run through an abseil or belay device, or even over a krab or pulley. Ropes should always be carried in a tackle sack (Yes, I know a coil of rope over your shoulder looks more macho) underground, and Dynamic ropes should be protected from water etc, by placing them in a plastic bag within the tackle sack. In any case, any rope is weaker when wet. So, although neither rope is stronger than the other, Dynamic rope suffers a lot worse in underground conditions.

We tried to get the club to buy some SRT rope once, but seeing how the tackle is abused does give me some concern. I imagine no-one would join the "C" Links of a ladder together through the eye bolt at the "Twenty" because it damages the end wires, right, meanwhile back at the tackle store the ladder is probably coiled as tightly as possible, then it's a test of muscle to bend the end wires around the ladder and clip the "C" Links together, leaving the wires under a considerable stress, maybe for weeks on end. Rope is often returned unwashed, to just given a quick hosedown. If you can find a clean rope you can stuff it in a tackle sack only to find that the inside of the bag resembles the dig at Bone Hole!

Lastly some thoughts on the comments by Charlie in point viii). If we decide to buy some static rope and we decide we can't trust our members with it, and there is to be a register of keyholders, then I suggest just an oral or written exam is useless. No Disrespect meant, but Kat could easily pass such a test, and she has never rigged an SRT pitch! I recommend an underground trip in a multi pitch cave using "Spits" and natural features for rigging. After all, the rigging may be spot on but the applicant's techniques may themselves be dangerous (e.g. introducing a potential fall factor whilst passing a re-belay.) Also Care of the rope whilst above and below ground (e.g. a rope chucked in the boot of a car may be contaminated by a leaky oldham lamp. (Acid and Nylon is a recipe for disaster.) The cleaning and coiling of the rope after use and finally the checking of the rope for damage before replacing in the store.

Finally, if a person is unsure about a rope or other item of equipment, it should be put aside, in the loft for instance, and checked by the Tackle Master. Only He should be allowed to throw equipment out otherwise the system is open to abuse and theft.

WELCOME, TO THE CAVES OF ARTA.

Such subtle filigranity and nobless of construccion
 Here fraternise in harmony, that respiracion stops.
 While all admit thier impotence (though autors most formidable)
 To sing in words the excellence of Nature's underpropps,
 Yet stalactite and stalagmite together with dumb language
 Make hymnes to God wich celebrate the stregnth of water drops.

You, also, are you capable to make precise in idiom
 Consideracions magic of ilusions very wide?
 Already in the Vestibule of these Grand Caves of Arta
 The spirit of the human verb is darked and stupefyed;
 So humildly you trespass trough the forest of colums
 And listen to the grandess explicated by the guide.

From darkness into darkness, but at measure, now descending
 You remark with what esxactitude he designates each bent:
 The \$aloon of Thousand Banners, or The Tumba of Napoleon,
 The Grotto of the Rosary, The Club, The Camping Tent,
 And at Cavern of the Organs there are knocking strange formacions
 Wich give a nois particular pervoking wonderment.

Too far do not adventure, sir! For, further as you wander,
 The every of the stalactites will make you stop and stay.
 Grand peril amencases now, your nostrills aprehending
 An odour least delicious of lamentable decay.
 It is some poor tourists, in the depth of obscure cristal,
 Wich deceased of thier emocion on a past excursion day.

ROBERT GRAVES

Inspired by the guide-book to the Caves of Arta on the island of Mallorca.

