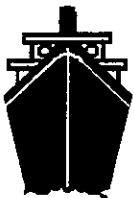


A Belgian Long Weekend (5-7 March 1999)

(By Julie Hesketh)

On the promise of a cheap weekend abroad in a "castle" in the Ardennes with caves similar to Mendip, it took little persuasion for Tim Francis and myself to join the Wessex CC on a long weekend to Belgium. The fine mixture of incredibly cheap ferry deals and the lure of even cheaper Leffe Brun Beer seems to be making a trip to the Ardennes a regular Wessex CC meet.



Our ferry left Dover at 12.30 (although usually there would be room on an earlier ferry to get cavers to Belgium at a more sociable hour) where we met up with the rest of the Wessex team – 11 of us in all. An overnight drive down to the Ardennes was the usual sleepy, blurry haze of French petrol stations, mad drivers and obligatory wrong turnings before reaching the Belgian town of Dinant with its impressive limestone cliffs and its less impressive range of café's open at 6.30am for breakfast. After eventually finding a café au lait (but no tea.... what sort of country is this!!!!) we headed to our accommodation in the village of Assese. And boy, were we impressed. We stayed in a castle (circa 1760) reputedly built for Marie-Antoinette in private grounds. Sleeping accommodation was mattresses in the grand hall on the first floor (complete with walk-in fires (not lit, unfortunately) and original wall murals and ceiling decoration (incredible, though rather dilapidated)). Downstairs, a large dining room, this time with a roaring log fire, served as our living/dining/festering room. Excellent accommodation, though rather cold.....

The caves of Belgium are all in the southern part of the country, in a narrow limestone strip running from east to west. The caves are focussed around 3 main centres: The Massif de Boine (which is home to the show-cave, the Grotte de Han), Rochefort and Mont-sur-Meuse, the area we visited. Access to most of the caves (around 80%) in Belgium is via a key system, administered by the UBS (Union Belge de Spéléologie) – rather like the "Mendip key" administered by the CSCC. All caves have the same lock and Belgian clubs hold a key. Unfortunately, without access to a key, caving opportunities are limited – but enough caves are open for a good weekend's caving.

Foregoing sleep for the opportunity to go caving on our arrival, 5 of us (Les Williams, Dave Cooke, Bean, Tim and myself) headed to one of Belgium's longest (1704m) and most well-visited caves, Trou d'Haquin. I was told (by Tim, who had caved in Belgium before in 1991 – see MCG newsletter 222) that the caves were "very Mendippy". In fact, they were a real home-from-home. Trou d'Haquin was a short walk along a muddy track and an excellent and fun introduction to Belgian caving – an easy trip, not surprisingly used as a novice trip. The entrance is an active swallet taking a large (larger-than-Swildons) size streamway. The gate had (luckily) been left open allowing us easy access. A second, dry entrance 20 feet upstream on the river bank was locked. An exciting, wet entrance series, following the thundering stream took us over and under huge, well worn, boulders into a large chamber with 2 options – the active streamway route or the fossil upper series. We took the dry option and split into 2 groups. Tim, Cookie and I explored to a small inlet sump with a bypass to a muddy dig. Continuing through the more obvious fossil passages, we eventually found a small slot, fondly named by the Wessex from their last visit to the cave as "the cow's c**t" due to its incredible likeness (unbelievable – honest!) which led to a complex series of chambers, often well decorated, though worse for wear due to cave-traffic. Up and up we went, trying to find the others who had headed off in the opposite direction on a small round trip which we had been told was possible. After checking out various dodgy, loose climbs, we finally found the others who pointed us to the way they came so we could complete the round-trip. We had a quick nosey down the main streamway but in view of flood warnings and the flat-out crawl (which floods to the roof), we headed out to promises of local friendly bars with good Belgian beer.



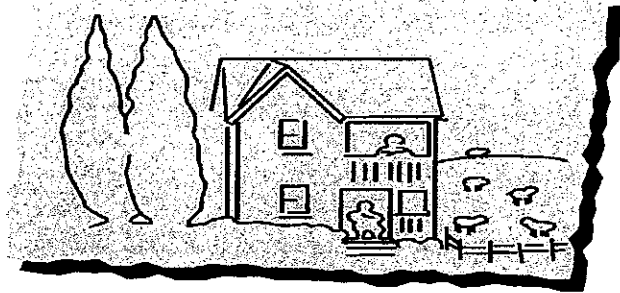
More on Pages 6 & 7...

MENDIP CAVING GROUP

Nordrach Cottage
 Charterhouse – on – Mendip
 Blagdon
 Bristol BS40 7XW. Tel. 01761 462797

High quality caving accommodation available for bookings of up to 16 people. All usual charging facilities, keys etc. Guests £2.50 per night.

Marcus Ward (**Cottage Warden**) Tel. 01252 815112
 Or email: m.ward@nichicon.co.uk
 M.C.G. information: - Tim Francis (**Secretary**)
 Tel. 0181 392 2572 email: t.francis@nopres.co.uk



Weekly Meetings:

- At The Beehive, Egham, Surrey, on Thursdays from 9.30 pm
- At The Hunters Lodge, Somerset, on Tuesdays around 10pm or at the cottage at 7pm for caving trips.

Prepayment Stickers:

(Available to members only) 12 nights accommodation £15.00
 25 nights accommodation £30.00
 55 nights accommodation £55.00

Annual

Full and Probationary members : £25.00

Subscriptions:

Associate members : £12.50

Reciprocal Rights:

MCG (members only) have reciprocal booking rights with SWCC and NPC.
 NPC bookings via Nic Blundell on tel. : 01203 713849 (home) or 01203 838940 (work) or on email : nic.blundell@bigfoot.com.
 SWCC bookings via Ian Middleton tel. : 01703 736997. Email : ian_m@tcp.co.uk

THE COMMITTEE :

Secretary	Tim Francis	Flat 6, 16 Lambert Avenue, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4QR.	Tel : 0181 392 2572 t.francis@nopres.co.uk
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Tacklemaster	Dave Tooke	44, Beechtree Avenue, Englefield Green, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0SR.	Tel : 01784 436237
Cottage Warden	Marcus Ward	56, Barn Meadow Close, Church Crookham, Fleet, Hants, GU13 0YB.	Tel : 01252 815112 m.ward@nichicon.co.uk
Editor	Letti Patte	44, Beechtree Avenue, Englefield Green, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0SR.	Tel : 01784 436237
Recorder / Librarian	Wayne Hiscox	3, Keward, Glastonbury Road, Wells, Somerset, BA5 1TR.	Tel : 01749 671282
Social Secretary	Pete Moseley	Pendle Cottage, Mearway, Westhay, Glastonbury, Somerset, BA6 9TZ.	Tel : 01458 860524

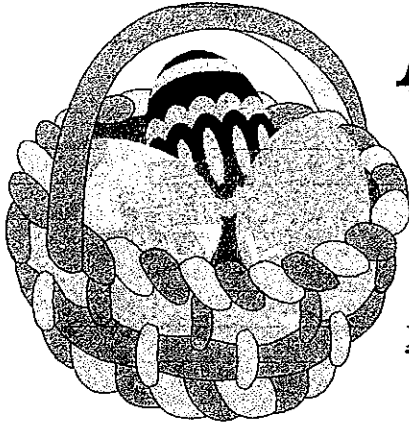
Rescue Warden
Conservation Officer
Cottage Extension

Brian Snell 01329 238341
 Marcus Ward 01252 815112
 Wayne Hiscox 01749 671282

Examiners

James Allen & Ben Cooper

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News in Brief



Change of e.mail address :

Simon Fryer is now at : Simon.Fryer@tesco.net

Now on e.mail : Tony & Denise Knibbs : - tony.knibbs@wanadoo.fr

- denise.knibbs@wanadoo.fr

Notice of Annual General Meeting, 1999

The Annual General Meeting of the Mendip Caving Group will be held in the Long Room of the Hunters Lodge Inn on Saturday 17th April 1999, commencing at 2.30pm.

Agenda

(Chairman: to be confirmed)

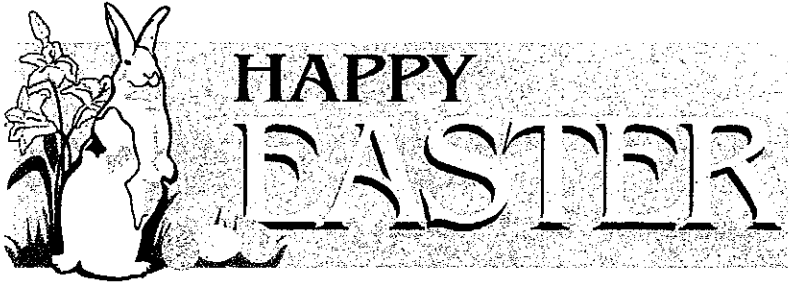
1. Apologies for absence.
2. Minutes of the previous AGM held on 25.04.98.
3. Agreement that the minutes are a true record of that meeting.
4. Matters arising.
5. Officers reports and matters arising from those reports.
6. Election of Honorary Officers for 1999 / 2000.

Nominees-

		<u>Proposer</u>	<u>Secunder</u>
Secretary:	Tim Francis	Ben Cooper	Marcus Ward
Treasurer:	Dave Tooke	Alan Mellon	Joan Goddard
Caving Secretary:	Julie Hesketh	Rupert Knowles	Tim Francis
Cottage Warden:	Richard Carey	Ben Cooper	Geoff Beale
	Ben Cooper	Richard Carey	Geoff Beale
Tacklemaster:	Marcus Ward	Charlie Allison	Adrian Duckett
Editor:	Letti Patte	Pete Moseley	Wayne Hiscox
Recorder/Librarian:	Wayne Hiscox	Joan Goddard	Dave Tooke
Social Secretary:	Pete Moseley	Wayne Hiscox	Marcus Ward

7. Election of Examiners 1999 / 2000.
8. Election of Rescue Warden and election of Conservation and Access Officer.
(Nominations for these two non-Committee posts will be accepted at the meeting)
9. Motions.
10. Any other business.
11. Date and venue of next Annual General Meeting.

Copies of the 1998 AGM minutes were circulated with the November 1998 newsletter, number 273. Members may obtain further copies of the minutes or Constitution and Rules from the Secretary.



Forward Meets Programme :



MARK THIS DATE

<i>DATE</i>	<i>VENUE</i>	<i>EVENTS</i>	<i>CONTACT</i>
17th April	Hunters Lodge	Annual General Meeting & Anual Dinner.	
15th May	Mendip	Rescue Practice down Waterwheel. For more information contact →	Brian Snell on 01329 238341
15th & 16th May	Wales Agen Allwedd	Key booked for Saturday & Sunday. Maximum party size 8. For a place contact Julie →	0171 395 8053 (day) 0802 431 1588 (eves) julie.hesketh@cbi.org.uk
5 th - 6 th June	Nordarch Cottage	Cottage Work Weekend. Contact →	Marcus Ward on 01252 815112 m.ward@nichicon.co.uk
11th - 13th June	MCG Yorkshire Meet	BCRA Regional Meet, Punchbowl Inn, near Reith, Yorkshire Camping space has been booked. Contact Julie →	0171 395 8053 (day) 0802 431 1588 (eves) julie.hesketh@cbi.org.uk
19th-26th June	Nordrach Cottage.	BTCV will be staying at the cottage in order to finish the dry stone wall, if interested, please contact Julie on →	0171 395 8053 (day) 0802 431 1588 (eves) julie.hesketh@cbi.org.uk
25th - 27th June	North Wales Meets	Trip to Powells Lode, Milyr Tunnel booked. Accomodation to be confirmed (but probably B&B or camping at the Colemendy Arms pub).	Julie on 0171 395 8053 (day) 0802 431 1588 (eves) julie.hesketh@cbi.org.uk
1 st 3 weeks in October	Madagascar	Return to the Bemaraha. Tim & Ben have expressed an interest in a three week trip. *see below	Tim Francis t.francis@nopres.co.uk
6th — 7th November	Nordrach Cottage	Half-yearly meeting. Skittles evening in the New Inn. Contact →	Pete Moseley



* The Madagascar "Tsingy de Bemaraha Caves Expedition II" has been awarded 600 pounds funding by the Sports Council.

First European Cave Rescue Symposium

More than 150 registrations from the whole of Europe have already been received! So, the first European cave rescue symposium is going to be, what it meant to be: A meeting of people interested in cave rescue all over Europe.

The symposium relies on contribution of the participants : Please introduce your group/organisation with a presentation or exhibition! Most welcome are all kinds of contributions to cave rescue subjects. Everybody wants to get informed about the European cave rescue scene, so also about you!

The symposium starts on Saturday 30th October 1999 - the registration office opens at 2 p.m. - and finishes on Sunday 7th of November.

The symposium will be held in English, exceptionally some presentations may be in French or German.

During the symposium (5th and 6th of Nov.) a special trade fair takes place. Speleo-gear merchants and exhibitors may please restrict their display and goods to cave rescue relevant articles.

Free participation in the symposium is offered all those delivering presentations. Please provide us with a summary of your presentation in written form (ASC II-file or e-mail) till 17.09.99 (deadline!) to enable us to organise the conference proceedings.

Workshops are no lectures! They will be meeting points to work on and work out special projects and to exchange experiences. - So, please bring your gear, records and material to the workshops. Workshop No. 4 "mines" will be held in the area of Freiburg (Black Forest) from the 31.10. till 3.11. All other workshops and excursions take place in Goeppingen (southern Germany)

The following excursions will be offered:

- Laierhoehle (shaft and horizontal system, spacious, more than 100m deep)
- Falkensteiner Hoehle (water cave, more than 3km long)
- Todsburger Schacht (shaft system, spacious, more than 70m deep)
- Mordloch (water cave, more than 2km long)
- Rossgallschacht and Gustav-Jakobs-Hoehle (vertical and horizontal caves)
- Caves of the "Fils"-valley (vertical and horizontal caves)
- Various exhibition caves.
- Visits of the fire department and red cross rescue department.
- Additional spontaneous excursions.

The fees:

Symposium participation fees (conference proceedings included): 30 DM / 15 EU (has to be remitted in EU or DM together with the registration via eurocheque, bank transfer or postal order). Bank: Volksbank Uhingen, bank code 610 914 00, account no. 425 720 004, slogan "symposium"

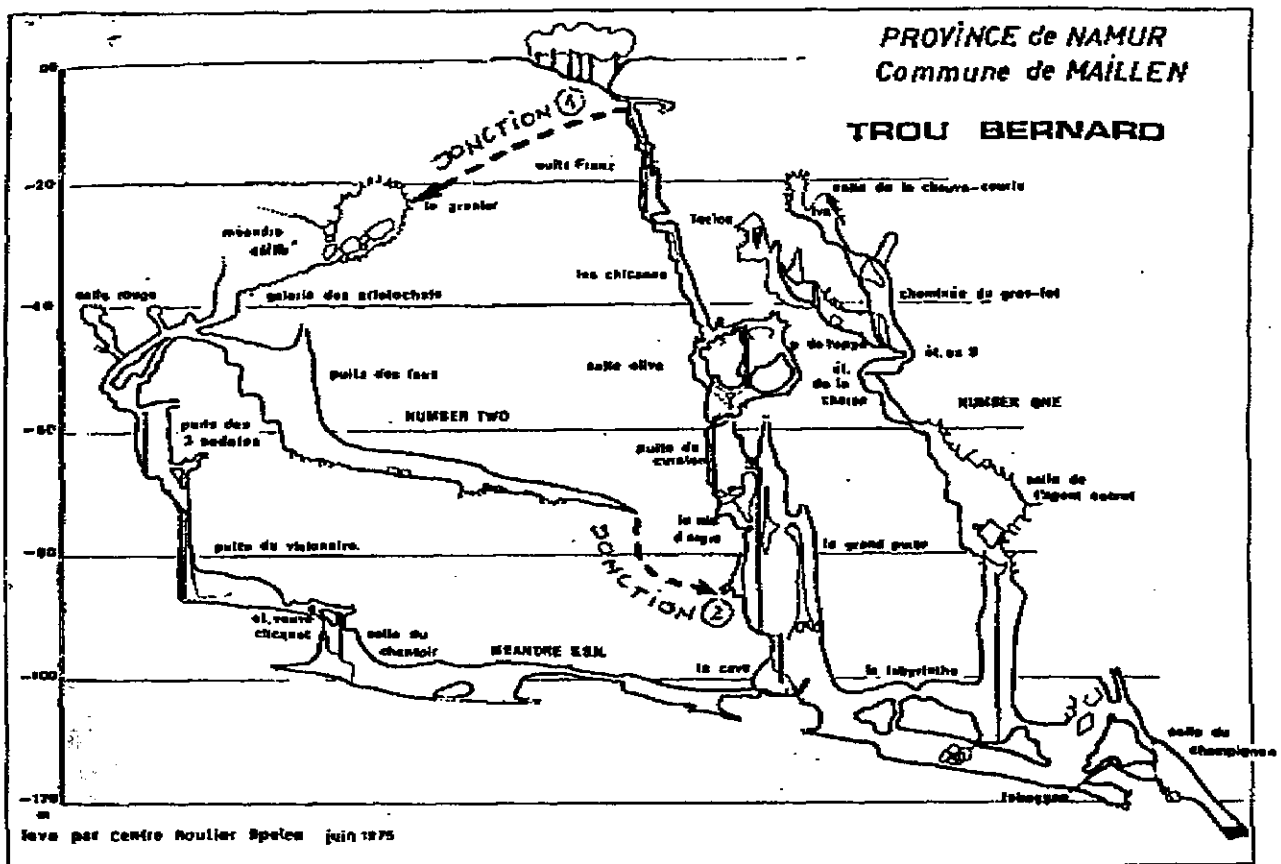
General deadline:

(Registration, papers and fee entry (30 DM / 15 EU))
17.9.1999

All detail and actual information (free workshops and excursion places), new offers (e.g. workshops), changes, presentations, ... can be found at our website:
<http://www.hochlenrettung.de>

We were relieved we had chosen to take the alternative route as there was a sizeable waterfall in the main shaft – not really suited to SRT. Things got a bit tight and meandery at the bottom with a fairly complicated series of passages leading to a final sump.

As with all tight, awkward SRT trips, the outward journey was sweeter than the inwards and a few more SRT kits came off on the way out than the way in! We were also held up by a party of Belgian cavers who had decided to take 2 complete novices on their first ever caving trip, down Trou Bernard – Belgium's most technical trip. God only knows how/if they got out!



Monday saw the already cold, damp weather take a turn for the worse with snow flurries over another fine cooked breakfast. We decided to head over to Jean-Marie and Nadia's other castle at Floreffe. The castle of Floreffe is being decorated and is a bit more luxurious than the castle we stayed in Assese – it had central heating where the freezing cold Assese castle had none. It is also built right on top of the Grottes de Floreffe – the entrance being a rather impressive wrought iron gate in the footings of the castle – it looked rather like it could easily be a wine cellar! Armed only with helmets and lamps, we had a potter around this ex-showcave. The cave itself was a bit worse for wear with some damage to the formations. This is the reason that the cave has been closed to visitors and there is some evidence of a small amount of regeneration to some of the active stal. To everyone's amusement, the castle's small, ginger cat followed us down the cave and stayed with us for the hour or so we were underground! A caver's castle, complete with its' own cave and a caving cat... how cool is that!!!!???

Unfortunately, time was moving on and so we were forced on Monday afternoon to start heading homewards. A leisurely drive to Calais got us back in London by 10.30pm – usual time for a weekend really. All in all, an excellent long weekend – one which I should organise for the MCG (though in better weather). A bargain too – about £60 including ferries, petrol, bed (well, cold mattress on the floor!), 2 breakfasts and 2 evening meals. And just like Mendip really – a home-from-home!

For more information on Caving in Belgium, good websites to check out are : The Union Belge de Spéleo (UBS): www.speleo.be.ubs In French but has a good links page at www.speleo.be/index.htm The Speleoclub Avalon: http://users.skynet.be/sky75112/avalonuk/cib_gen.htm The best English language website which has full descriptions of over 20 Belgian caves and some surveys. Also a good links page

Going Underground...

"How did you get into caving then?" we are all asked from time to time. Sometimes, the answer is through friends or at university and often through colleagues at work. In general, caving is not a particularly easy sport to hear about or get involved in. To put this right, the MCG has now held 2 beginners weekends aimed purely at allowing people to "have a go" We've had a surprisingly good and varied turnout - work colleagues, college friends, family and friends of friends have all joined in. And some have even come back for more!

Here is an extract from my staff magazine, written by Rob Walker a colleague of mine who came underground with the MCG for the first time in January.....



"Julie Hesketh may be a policy adviser Monday to Friday, but at weekends she is active member of the Mendip Caving Group. Rob Knight joined a group of CBI folk to try out a different way to spend your time out of the office, underground.

Before this very cold and damp weekend in the Mendips, about the closest I had come to experiencing the feeling of *going underground* was listening to The Jam on my walkman whilst stuck in a tunnel on the Northern line. I guess it was one of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time and had the potential to broaden my pub repertoire of scary experiences, adrenaline rushes and other physical pursuits that I seem intent on putting myself through. Rock climbing was something that I previously tried and that was certainly up there in the scary stakes. It doesn't matter how much science they throw at these modern leisure pursuits, in terms of Gore-Tex clips and accessories it still doesn't get away from the basic fear of heights, falling and will the rope hold?

Caving? Well that was a bit more difficult to imagine. I guess small spaces and claustrophobia is what runs through your mind and that time I got a bit panicky on the tube when it was especially crowded and I had a hangover. As it turned out small spaces and the overwhelming feeling of "I wanna get out!" was actually pretty tame compared to the other major preoccupation I had for more or less the whole 5 hours or so I spent underground - drowning!

There were five us in all who volunteered (were coerced) into going down Swildons Hole, one of the famous and popular caves in the Mendips area. Call me paranoid, but I couldn't help overhearing a couple of conversations by the regular cavers the night before, "...what, you're taking beginners down Swildons...on their first time?". It soon became clear that Swildons was not only one of the wettest caves around on account of a river running pretty much full pelt through the middle of it, but it was also pretty 'challenging' - a word that I had encountered before and tended to imply - fear, close encounters with death and other situations you wish you'd never put yourself in.

Anyway, twelve sleepless hours later (to be fair that was on account of the snoring in the dormitory, rather than any real apprehension) we were squelching across a muddy field in our full caving garb, we looked like a cross between Jacques Cousteau and the Michelin Man. One of the group stopped in what looked like a brick outhouse. "What a considerate farmer putting a toilet in the middle of the field" I thought. Little did I know that in the next five minutes I would be disappearing head first like Ewan McGregor down some rusty drain, flushed away by a swollen river intent on following its course down the same dark hole in the ground.

The look on Stuart's face, a fellow first timer, probably said it all and it was at this point that I really did question going on. "Surely, there is no way we're going down there!", he exclaimed. I think he knew the answer and before you had chance to say 'panic attack' we were down there.

Crawling along on my belly, looking ahead at the sole's of the guy's wellies in front I kept hearing reassuring comments from our guide, such as, "don't worry it will open up soon" and "this first leg is a bit challenging" - once again, that old word, challenging. But sure enough, things did open up after a while - we regrouped, our hearts slowed below 160bpm and we contemplated the journey ahead.

Continued on the next page...

Swildons for the first time, the end....

The passage down Swildons follows the course of the river and there are sections of belly crawling followed by big open spaces in which to contemplate cave life and the remains of the odd stalagmite. The cave structure is pretty well designed as just as you reach a point where it gets a bit unbearable, you get a break and a chance to stand upright on both legs. The biggest fear, however, is the sheer volume of water rushing down behind you. I naively asked what happens if it rains upstairs and our leader got a bit vague and I only caught part of the answer, amidst the roar of water, "not since.....tends to fill up around...but then other people wouldn't be down here." I tried to avoid thinking about this question, but those watery thoughts were hard to suppress.

Getting soaked to the skin was no figment of my imagination and outer suit or no outer suit it was pretty difficult to keep three hundred gallons of water from running down the back of your neck as you slide down a waterfall on your bum. The marigold gloves were surprisingly effective, keeping a warm layer of water close to your skin, which is more than could be said for my undergarments.

Having successfully navigated a 20 foot drop (you forget just how hard those wire ladders are to climb) we eventually arrived at the end of our watery trail some two and half-hours later at 'The Sump'. The sump is where the roof of the cave meets the river and safe passage through this obstacle involves doing the caving equivalent of the full monty and going 100% underwater. The banter the night before had not quite lived up to the reality and we decided to give the experience of a 'head rush' on account of the freezing water a miss and head back to the surface.

I guess we were all a bit chipper at this point, pleased with our accomplishment, revived by the medicinal qualities of a Mars bar and already the bravado was getting into full swing. Perhaps, what none of the beginners had realised, myself included, was that we now had to do the same all over, but this time up hill, with the full torrent of water against us.



I won't go on about going back up the wire ladder as I've already said too much around the office. But let's just say we all found it tough going, the waterfall in your face was particularly challenging, especially when you can feel your contact lenses washing away. But, Stuart, well he had his very own set of difficulties and all I would say is thank God for the beefy set of cavers with us. If it wasn't for these guy's winching abilities he would still be down there!

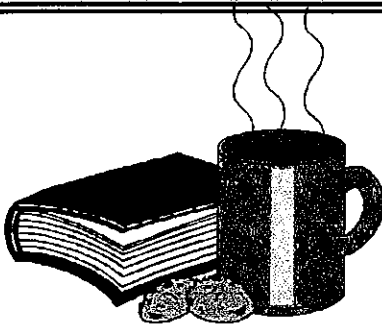
The smell of fresh air brought a huge sense of relief. The last hour had sapped all my upper body strength and some of the obstacles seemed so much harder on the way back. The feeling of elation as we reached the surface was immense, by this time it was pitch black outside but this didn't detract from what can only be described as exhausted euphoria. We squelched back to the car, emptied our wellies and following a tepid but none the less welcome shower, we were in the pub.

This weekend was coincident with the local village stomp. As the locals swapped tips on the latest cattle grills for their 4x4's, my first yeasty pint hit straight to my head. That day's endeavours had indeed been exhilarating and I soon slipped into pub speak, blurting out exaggerated tales of woe of cliff-hangers, near-drowning and the joys of caving.

It will never cease to amaze me what people get up to in their spare time in the name of leisure pursuits. As I return to the office in my city attire it seems a million miles away from that mud soaked weekend. I wouldn't go as far to say as I'm hooked but in the immortal words of the man himself, "I'll be back."

Keep an eye on the meets list for future Beginners dates – next one will probably be in the autumn. Start to spread the word... ..

Julie Hesketh



Library additions up to 16.03.99

by Joan Goddard

- **A Guide to Speleological Literature of the English Language, 1794-1996** compiled by D. Northup, E. Davis Mobley, K.L. Ingham, W.W.Mixon, 1998 - an invaluable 540pp. reference book with a geographical index, title index and bibliography.
- **Floodpulse** - a short story by Andy Sparrow - worth a read and quite fun!
- **Dartmoor Mines** by M. Atkinson, R. Burt and P. Waite, 1978 - members holidaying in Devon may be interested in this little book with its gazetteer of mine sites including directions for finding them (but remember the book is 20 years old!),
- **Flight Underground** by J. Hamilton Paterson, 1969 - a childrens' story. Real 1960's stuff, this, with spies, disused railway tunnels leading to nasty wet caves, even a bit of nearly nude caving - and finally, of course, Goodies triumph over Baddies!
- **Macocha and Moravian Karst** by V. Stehlik and J. Kunsky, 1961 - short text [English, German, Czechoslovakian(?)] and lots of b & w photos of caves in the area to the north of Brno.
- **Slovene Classical Karst, Kras** edited by J. Kranjc and published with UNESCO assistance, 1997 - a comprehensive description of the area with chapters on geology, hydrology, caves, as well as more general topics.
- **Karst and Caves of Switzerland** by A. Wildberger and C. Prieswerk, 1997 - produced for the 12th International Congress of Speleology which was hosted by the Swiss Speleological Society, 208 pp; glossy production, good photos, cave descriptions arranged by type rather than locality, bibliography [but no contents page, index or decent location map - making the book a little difficult to use, although good for browsing].
- **Karst Hydrology and Physical Speleology** by Alfred Bogli, 1980 [translation] - a classic book, heavy going but a useful reference tome.
- **Proyecto Cerro Rabon, 1990-1994, Oaxaca, (Central Mexico)** - expeditions to the Cerro Rabon massif began in 1985, and this 190pp report (in four languages) describes many of the caves and includes clear surveys and photos.
- **Unlocking the labyrinth of North Florida Springs** by Wes Skiles, National Geographic Vol 195, No 3, March 1999 - Cave diving, lots of glossy pictures.
- **Cooper's Hole, Cheddar Gorge** -, 24th Jan 1999 - Video starring Malcolm Cotter, Andy Sparrow and The Time Team. Also the C4 booklet which accompanies the series.
- **Westminster Speleological Group Bulletin**, 1997 - lots of foreign caving reports including, Cuba, Lebanon, Russia, Spain (Picos), Switzerland and a report on 'Hydrological work in the Brecon Beacons'. - 78pp.
- **Cerberus Journal, Vol 24, Nos 4 & 5, Sept & Dec 1998** - includes a list of references to Mendip caves in Cerberus publications, and 'An evaluation of the effects of blasting at Fairy Cave Quarry' (quite topical as an access agreement and management plan has recently been agreed with the quarry owners).
- **Chelsea Speleological Society Newsletter, Vol 41 No 2, Feb 1999** - 'Guide to the caves of Albania'.
- **Wessex Journal, Vol 25, No 263, Feb 1999** - 'The discovery and exploration of Honeymead Hole', Pt 2 by Richard Whitcombe (Pt 1 was in Dec 1998 issue).
- **Proc. UBSS Vol 21, No 2, 1988** - includes 'The St Cuthbert's Roman mining settlement, Priddy, Somerset: aerial photographic recognition' by R.G.J. Williams, and revised surveys of Pierre's Pot and Manor Farm Swallet. Also articles on caves of the Aran Islands and of Co. Clare.



Fragments from France - 18

by Tony Knibbs

On Thursday 25 August 1983 Denise and I first visited Grotte de Pène Blanque with Adrian Duckett and Andy Beare. This cave forms part of the 100km+ Réseau Trombe in the Forêt d'Arbas plateau in the Haute-Garonne. The trip was one of many into this vast system during the MCG summer expedition and was concerned with the task of identifying the through-trip route from Trou Mile to Pène Blanque, but bad weather hampered the reconnaissance explorations and the through-trip never took place. The GPB trip ran out of time, failing to reach its objective of locating the junction with the Pont de Gerbaut streamway - Adrian and I halted at Salle du Bivouac, only minutes away from the immense Salle du Dromadaire and the nearby passage to the junction at the Puits Arrosés. I hoped to return to complete this task and duly did so - last weekend!

On Saturday 20 March we set out under the noonday sun from a convenient parking spot (alt. 900m) on a forest track beyond Labaderque for the one-hour approach walk down a wooded valley to cross a dry streambed (alt.840m) then up over Col de Couenque (alt. 1040m), finally descending a moving escalator of scree, dead leaves and tree-trunks against the cliff-face of Pène Blanque in which the entrance porch is situated at 930m altitude, reached by an 8m climb on knotted rope.

The 250m horizontal entrance passage opens into a roomy chamber with a 15m fixed rope descent of the first "toboggan". Galerie Martel continues as a 15m-high stroll, passing below a large colony of bats at one point, then reduces in size where a 2m drop down a hole in the floor leads to a second, wider toboggan with a 7m rope. Continuing downslope (much steeper than I recollected), the passage retains an average cross-section of about 1.5m wide x 4m high and offers numerous sporting fixed-rope descents and traverses before reaching the flat-out damp crawl at the sump-prone Chatière. There is now a marked high-level bypass indicated by a notice about 200m on the downstream side of this potential problem.

Descent continues in a roomy rift to where a fixed-rope traverse - the Pont Humain - leads down to the left and out over a deep slot in the floor, 1.5m wide. Reducing to a more-or-less circular cross-section of about 2m diameter, the passage slopes on down to the Boite aux Lettres - a 30m pitch starting as a 5m narrow slot to a rebelay from which a 2m move to the left departs from the remaining open drop to give a further 10m descent in a narrow rift which slopes down into a large, horizontal passage. (In 1983 we made the mistake of descending the entire 30m to reach a damp, descending rift with some good formations but which was not the way on!)

Easy walking in the large, dry passage leads on to a succession of well-decorated chambers with various ups and downs, then a final scramble up to Salle du Bivouac. Here a massive clean-up operation has recently removed the unsightly debris left by a generation of explorers, mainly in the 1960s. It was here that Adrian and I very reluctantly turned back sixteen years ago. The truly enormous Salle du Dromadaire is only minutes away from here: along a big, dry rift passage, up a 3m fixed electron ladder and across a narrow slot to reach a balcony looking out on black space.

Following the right-hand wall for 50m reveals an obvious climbable opening down over huge blocks, descending maybe 15m to a horizontal passage with a level floor of dry mud. This leads towards Salle du Brouillard before which, 100m along on the right, an easy 5m climb opens into a stretch of gently sloping dry passage with a muddy toboggan down to the head of the first of the Puits Arrosés. After the bone-dry approach, the wet and cleanwashed traverse out over a dripping shaft provided a stark contrast. Here, 165m below the entrance and 2.5km into the system, is the link with the Pont de Gerbaut streamway, which has taken me such a long time to reach!

Continued overleaf....

Fragments from France, the end...

Having spent almost four hours descending to this point, it now took just over four hours to regain the entrance to look out at stars and the crescent moon. The return walk took longer than usual - the 110m thrutch up the scree slope was painfully tiring. Thinking about it, the total effort expended was equal to walking from Wookey, up through Ebbor Gorge to Priddy, doing a trip into St Cuthbert's to Sump 2 via September Chamber, then walking back to Wookey.

Back at the cars, with an air temperature of exactly 0°C, we ended the trip exactly as we had in 1983 - with a much-appreciated drink of Fuller's London Pride!

But were we being watched? On the walk up to the cave we had seen the clearly identifiable imprint of a bear's paw (about the size of my hand) in soft mud...and we had seen similar signs of this recent reintroduction to the Pyrenées a few kilometres further east near Herran last year. Bears are said to roam extensively and to be shy of humans - how fortunate!



Namho Conference 1999

Between Friday 24th and Monday 27th September 1999 the National Association of Mining History Organisations will be holding its biennial conference in the Forest of Dean. The conference includes lectures which will be based upon the mining history and exploration of the Forest of Dean and other mining regions. Guest speakers will be covering aspects of different mining rights and their origins in diverse mining regions in Britain. It is hoped that a small publication, combining the papers on mining customs, might be produced for sale sometime after the Conference.

Trips into mine workings will cater for a wide range of abilities from gentle walking, to difficult and extensive trips lasting 7 hours. Trips include Clearwell, Wigpool, Westbury Brook, Perseverance mines and many more. Surface walks will take in some familiar and several lesser known mining sites, with leaders interpreting as the walks progress. There are also a couple of self led drives around the Forest mine sites for those unable or too lazy to walk any distance.

Saturday night's event will allow people to discuss the days activities over an evening meal; to be followed by the showing of the well known 'Forest of Dean Freeminers' film by Mr Melville Watts OBE and the brilliant monologue by David Carlisle in the role of a Victorian mining agent.

The event is being run from the Civil Service Motoring Association (CSMA) site, Whitmead Park, Parkend village, in the heart of the Forest itself. Accommodation is available at Whitmead in the form of chalets, camping or caravanning. B&B, hotels and hostels etc. are plentiful in the locality. An accommodation list will be sent out with booking forms and further details of surface and underground trips.

For bookings and information contact: John Hine, NAMHO '99, The Grottage, Mile End, Coleford, Gloucestershire GL16 7QF. Tel. 01594 833217.