

Caves, Nooks and Crannies in Assynt, Scotland

By Julie Hesketh

Bored of family Christmases and with a bit extra annual leave to use up, Pete Bennett, James Allen, Duncan Horne, Dave Cooke (aka Cookie, WCC) and myself decided to head up to Assynt for what we hoped would be a white Christmas at the Grampian Speleological Group's hut in Elphin in Assynt, N.W.Scotland. Assynt is Scotland's biggest caving area, with 2 of Scotland's longest caves. 20 miles north of Ullapool, Assynt is quite remote (and a bloody long drive from London!) The aim was to do a spot of walking, a spot of caving, a spot of sightseeing and lots and lots (and lots) of drinking.

We had heard stories of hardship and cold up in the Elphin hut but luckily for us, the GSG have recently renovated an old crofting building into a luxurious caveclub hut with comfy bunks, excellent showers and the most magnificent views of any caving hut imaginable. Cookie and I had arrived at 1am after a long, long, cold, dark drive from London. Both hungover still from works Christmas parties, we were keen to get to bed on arrival. On awakening the next morning though, the massive change of scene, from Central London to the Scottish Highlands hit us. Directly across from the bedroom window is Cul Mor, a mountain of 849m, which loomed over us with a gleaming icing-white top. We would get to its summit the next day. Suilven (731m) with its 2 distinctive peaks stood proud of the otherwise flat and watery landscape in the distance and Canisp stood (just as the guidebooks describe it – as a wedge of cheese) against the white, snowy sky. A flurry of snow, which soon turned into a White-out began to fall as we went for a quick walk around Cam Loch to kill time whilst we waited for the others. The rest of the crowd had flown to Inverness and hired a car for the hour and a half drive from the airport. A poor excuse for not bringing your caving gear lads! So, it was just Cookie and I who were determined to get underground that Christmas.

The others duly arrived, laden with Christmas presents and provisions and as we were determined to make this the best Christmas ever, we started the holiday off with a wee dram or 6 to be going on with. We were lucky enough to have the entire hut to ourselves and got to chopping wood fairly quickly to raise the internal temperature from a chilly 5 degrees up to a more toasty 20 degrees C! (It rarely went below that indoors for the entire week(!), whilst the outdoor temperature rarely went above about 2 degrees).

Our warm-up was "a quick trip" up Cul Mor which had been calling us since we arrived. This turned out to be more tricky than it looked – the access to the hill is via typical boggy ground with rivers to negotiate (and, yes, I was the only one to fall in!) On day 2 though, Cookie and I got down to a bit of caving. The caves of Assynt are mainly concentrated in 3 areas: the Allt Nan Uamh Basin, the Traligill Basin and the Knockan basin.

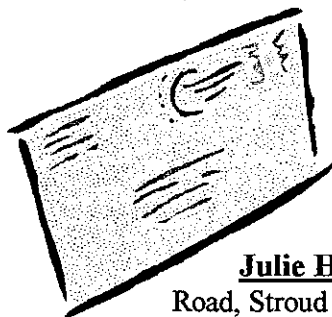
We picked the most picturesque of the valleys to do first and headed up the **Allt Nan Uamh valley**. Two cave systems, Alt Nan Uamh Stream Cave (ANUS Cave) and Uamh an Claonite dominate the drainage of the area though there are numerous other small caves en route. It's going to be hard to try to get across just how beautiful the area is without making you all puke but to say we were blown away by the scenery would be an understatement. By this third day in Assynt, we had only come across 2 people working in the local fishfarm and had hardly seen a vehicle except the regular snow-plough which passed by the hut. We wandered up the valley, past the resurgence which appears from almost no-where in a small stream bed, up to the Creag Nan Uamh Bone Caves, with only a heard of Red deer to keep us company. We walked up past the snowline, crossing the valley to the 50m high and 250m long limestone cliff which holds the caves.

More on Scotland on Pages 6 & 7....

News in Brief

Accepted as Prospective Member :

Paul Craddy , 29 Ormerod Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol. BS9 1BA. Tel. 0117 9686162. Email : mark@craddy.freemove.co.uk



On the move :

Julie Hesketh to 18 Albany Road, Stroud Green, London, N4 4RJ.
Tel: 0181 340 2613

Cara Allison to Stoke Gabriel House, Stoke Gabriel, Totnes, Devon. TQ9 6QY. Tel. 01803 782856

Victoria Arbizu back home to : 2420 McDuffie St. N.7, Houston, Texas 77019, USA

Steve Eddy to The Old Bakery, Llandogo, Monmouthshire. NP25 4TA

Allan Wicks to 68, Conisboro Avenue, Caversham, Reading, RG4 7JE

Change of Email address :

Tim Francis : Timf@bjm.co.uk

Committee Snippets :

Cottage –

Rusted manholes to be replaced
Worktops purchased for the library
Blind and door closer for library have been purchased.

Gas store door to be replaced by back door and a new door replaced.

Dry stone walling –

Training weekend was cancelled by the BCTV. A new date to be arranged.

Survey kit –

A new 30m and a 5m survey tape to be purchased.



X-key appeal –

If any ex-committee member still has an

'x' key please can they swap this for normal full members key with the cottage warden. We seem to be missing a few.

Bad Air Warnings

Ubley Hill: the way on from the chamber at the base of the pipes is still blocked. Note that there is still a serious lack of oxygen.

Pinetree Pot: CO2 levels in the main cave below the pitch are high again. Take care. Air quality in A Pock Hole Lips Way is ok.

Swildons: Over the weekend over the 8th August everyone seemed to be breathing rather heavily in Swildons, even in the streamway before sump 1.

Forward Meets Programme :



**MARK
THIS
DATE**

<i>DATE</i>	<i>VENUE</i>	<i>EVENTS</i>	<i>CONTACT</i>
14 th August	Mendip Shatter Cave (Fairy Quarry)	10am. Please let Julie Hesketh know if you wish to go on this trip - one of the first opportunities to go into the previously closed and well decorated Shatter Cave. Places limited.	Julie on 0181 340 2613(home) 0802 431 1588 (eves) julie.hesketh@cbi.org.uk
10 th - 12 th September	Leeds	BCRA Hidden Earth Conference. Leeds. Includes MCG talk on the 1998 expedition to Madagascar. Details available from the BCRA website on http://www.sat.dundee.ac.uk/~arb/bcra/index.html Or contact Pete Cousins on (01543) 251791	
11 th & 12 th September	Mendip Hills	A Cheddar & Mendip Walking Festival is being organised including walks ranging from 'family interest' to 'serious walkers'	Gorgeous Walks 01934 742688 tgo.cheddar@btinternet.com
1 st 3 weeks in October	Madagascar	Return to the Bemaraha. Tim & Ben have expressed an interest in a three week trip.	Tim Francis TimF@bjm.co.uk 0181 392 3572 (eves)
6 th - 7 th November	Nordrach Cottage	Half-yearly meeting. Contact Tim Francis for details of the forum. Skittles evening in the New Inn. For more information contact →	Tim Francis TimF@bjm.co.uk 0181 392 3572 (eves) Pete Moseley 01458 860524
13 th & 14 th Nov.	Mendip	CSCC training event.	



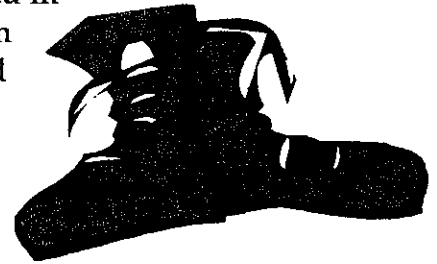
Cottage Bookings by Ben Cooper :

Date	Nights	Numbers	Who
3/9/99	2	10 Guests (L. Milne)	(Numbers to be confirmed)
24/9/99	2	12	Caswell Outdoor Pursuits
10/9/99	2	20	Heston & Isleworth Scout Fellowship
13/11/99	1	10	CUCC
9/6/00	2	?	Gloucester Guides

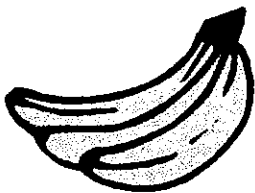
SHAKEN AND STIRRED IN COSTA RICA.

By Richard Carey

Knowing that there are caves in Costa Rica I got in touch with the Costa Rica Caving Association. They invited me to come and see them whilst I was there and if it was possible they would take me caving. The caves are located in the north east of Costa Rica about six hours away by car. Then a long hike up to the plateau. I was shown lots of surveys and the caves looked very interesting. They do everything on ladders here as the rock is very sharp with very few free hanging pitches. They are abundant with stal and some of them have rivers. Unfortunately I was unable to visit them, as no one wanted to go because the earthquake forecast was high. A tremor is something to be experienced. In San Jose there is a museum for children that has a machine for simulating earthquakes but it certainly not the same as when you are not expecting it to happen. I was having a cup of tea with Guillermo, the president of the association, when suddenly I felt very strange. My whole body started to shake and I felt quite unwell as if I was having some sort of attack. Guillermo then asked me if I had felt anything and then told me that it had been a tremor. I later discovered that it had only been a minor one, only 4 on the Richter scale. I then agreed that it was probably a good idea not to go caving. I was told that there is a lot of fallen stal in the caves due to earthquakes and he was also afraid that the entrances might collapse thus entombing the party inside. There are only about 15 active cavers in Costa Rica so the chances of rescue are pretty slim.



Thus thwarted from going caving I resigned myself to doing the normal touristy things. I visited a banana plantation and I shall certainly be more respectful the next time I eat one. They only get paid about a \$100 a month. Then I went down the river Sarapiquí to look at the animals where we saw Cayman, Howler monkeys poison arrow frogs, they really are tiny, lots of birds. Later I went through the Tropical Rain forest in a ski lift basket. This is an extremely commercial site and I



didn't see any animals although I did see a few humming birds. There are 67 active volcanoes in Costa Rica and I visited Poás. A mere 20-minute walk from the visitor centre. The crater contains a lake with a pH of 0 and a constant temperature of 40°. It was very active although plumes of smoke were rising and you could smell the sulphur from a long distance. I also went to the Pacific. The area is remarkably uncommercialised except where the cruise liners stop. Altogether a very pleasant trip although the country is very Americanised a very nice place to visit. I would certainly like to go back there although the 13-hour flight and 7 hour time difference is pretty hard to endure.



Apologies to Richard for not publishing this any earlier and thank you for sending it to again !!! Letti

CONTINUES FROM FRONT PAGE :

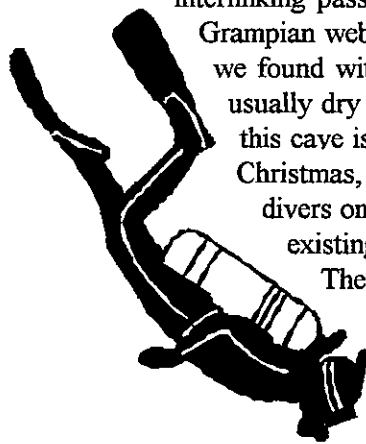
The Creag Nan Uamh cliff face is a striking feature to meet visitors to the valley. The three main cave entrances and numerous rockshelters that it contains are amongst Scotland's most important archaeological and palaeoenvironmental sites and have an interesting history. The easternmost cave ('Bone Cave') was partially excavated Peach and Horne (eminent geologists) in 1889 as little more than a diversion from their pioneering work of mapping the geological structure of the North West Highlands. In the late 1920's, the entrance chambers to the other two main caves ('Badger Cave' and Reindeer Cave') were systematically excavated by two more archaeologists, J.G. Callander and J.E. Cree. Numerous animal bones were found in Reindeer cave. The caves are well-known locally and are referred to on just about every local map or notice and there is a section on their excavation in the Visitors Centre in Lochinver.



Creag Nan Uamh has more than just the four caves normally referred to as the **Bone Caves**. On close examination, we found another four or five: Badger Cave (30m long), Reindeer Cave (45m long), Bone Cave (22m long), Foxes Den (a rock shelter), 3 further small rockshelters just known as caves 5, 6 and 7, and the Eyehole (6m long). The area around Creag Nan Uamh is both part of the Inchnadamph National Nature Reserve and a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is thought that the back end of Claonite 7 could lead to the Bone Caves and so the Scottish Natural Heritage are working with the GSG to fully survey the area. SNH are not surprisingly concerned that the remains may be disturbed so there is a strict no-digging policy. Resisting temptation, we moved up valley to Uamh an Claonite, about a 45 minute walk from the road.

Uamh An Claonite is the longest cave in Scotland (1800m) with a small, unobtrusive kind of entrance under a peat tuff covered with heather (and on our visit, snow). A squeeze down the entrance climb and a short walk to a 5 foot climb reaches the first sump which usually has a by-pass. Water levels were extremely high over our visit and we had read in the logbook of the recent rescue (which, traditionally, occurred during the Grampian CC AGM!) One of their experienced cavers had been sumped in beyond the first sump we had read the amusing stories of the rescue the day before. Unfortunately, more than 2 months later, the bypass was still flooded and we were forced to turn back, sorry we could not complete it as reports are that it is a fun cave to do.

Soaked to the skin, we briskly walked over to **Allt Nan Uamh Stream Cave (ANUS Cave)**. ANUSC is the 2nd longest cave in Scotland at 900m long. It seemed to us to be a complete rabbit warren of interlinking passages and climbs and I'm not even going to try to describe the route we took! The Grampian web-site describes ANUSC as "mostly dry with some large chambers". Large chambers we found with no problem but water levels were again, very high here which made some of the usually dry climbs "sporting" and some of the low level digs "interesting". The digging effort in this cave is huge though with some impressive shoring and tramways for spoil removal. Back at Christmas, only around half of the cave was open to dry cavers, the rest (the Farr Extensions) to divers only. By the time I returned to Assynt at Easter, the Grampian had finally connected the existing dry cave to Sotanto Chamber, beyond Sump 2 – another 600m of cave to explore.



The return visit (with members of the Shepton Mallet CC) was certainly worthwhile as the cave beyond the sumps is very wet and truly exhilarating. Water levels were high (but by this time I was coming to the conclusion that they have been high in Assynt since the drought of '76 broke!) This downstream part of the cave gave us a brilliant trip with crashing waterfalls and some excellent watery-climbs. We found it was possible, due to the maze-like nature of the cave, to do a kind of mini-round trip and took in some unique pointy mud formations in a dry aven.

SCOTLAND, THE END..

Whilst waiting for people to de-kit, I had a quick potter around **Bear Cave**. The entrance lies directly opposite that of ANUSC and looks like an old, fossil inlet. It was a small cave, only about 18m long but proved an excellent shelter to store gear in and keep warm whilst waiting!

After a most excellent day's caving, we headed back in the dark (it gets dark at 4pm in the winter) to the hut to prepare for Christmas Day. Joined by Les Brown, Christmas was truly one to remember with a morning walk up **Stack Pollaidh** – a fascinating hill which we all agreed had the shape of a **Tyrannosaurus Rex**

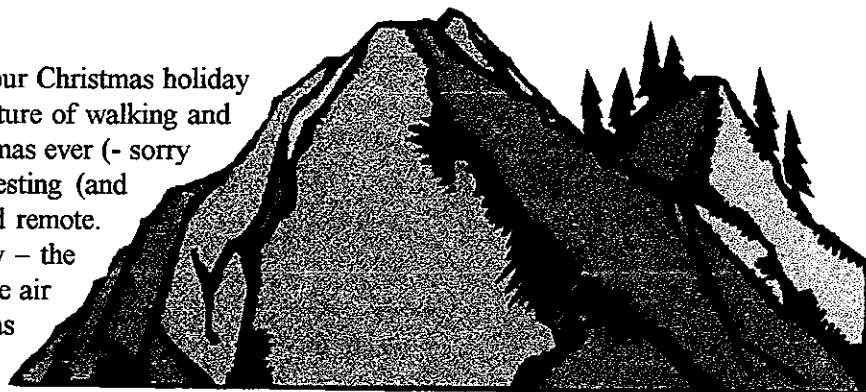


with a jagged rocky summit and fabulous views of the watery landscape. Back to the hut for a full Christmas dinner of turkey and ham (OK, so it was microwaved as there is no oven) but still brilliant because of excellent company and fabulous views.

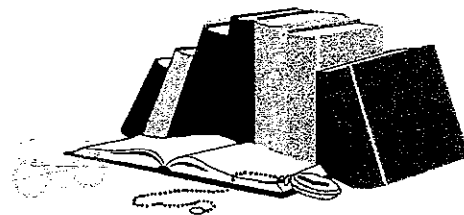
On Boxing day, Les, Cookie and I headed up to **Smoo Cave** for the day – a fair journey to the north coast of Scotland, East of Cape Wrath, at **Durness**. Smoo is usually described as a sea cave and without any good literature reference to it, I will not disagree but it looks a bit like a natural karstic cave to me with a large upstream pothole entrance (unfortunately in flood, so too dangerous to abseil), leading out through a chamber and onto the beach below. The cave has certainly been expanded at its downstream side by the sea and there are a number of other small sea caves in the area. Smoo is worth a quick look but the most memorable thing about this day was the blizzard-like snow storm which came on as we were leaving Durness. The single-track road back home all but disappeared and we witnessed the most spectacular of skids from other less cautious drivers!

The following day we went to the **Traligill Valley**. The walk up the valley takes you under **Ben More Assynt**, one of only 2 Munroes in Assynt and again the walk was certainly one of the most picturesque I have seen whilst en route to a cave. We headed straight to the **Cnoc Nan Uamh System** (Knockers for short – imagine talking to the locals later in the pub and saying you've been down Anus and Knockers!) This is an interesting cave as it has 3 entrances – all very different – a pothole, 20m deep, an arched entrance (**Uamh an Tartair** – Cave of the Roaring) and a thrust plane entrance (**Uamh Uisge** – Cave of the Water) which is the most impressive due to the large "waterslide" which was taking a phenomenal amount of water to the sump. We gave the waterslide a miss due to high water and tackled Tartair entrance. A very scary traverse of the entrance stream was negotiated. The water was nearly thigh high and was thundering through the passage, making it very hard to get a grip. The knowledge of the steep waterslide and sump was an incentive to stay on our feet! Light failure and the fear of having to tackle the rising stream on the way out made this a short trip for me but Cookie had a potter about the 1400m long cave, which like all the others we had seen, was a maze of passages.

A couple of walks rounded off our Christmas holiday well and overall we had done a good mixture of walking and caving and I probably had the best Christmas ever (- sorry Mum and Dad!) The caving was interesting (and very, very wet) and the area stunning and remote. We left Assynt on an incredibly clear day – the hilltops were still dusted with snow and the air was completely still – I knew I was definitely coming back, soon!



New Library Books by Joan Goddard



Only two books have been purchased this month, one of which is the new edition of **Mendip Underground** by Dave Irwin and Tony Jarratt. Tim will be reviewing this item.

The other is **Dan yr Ogof - the Jewel of Welsh Caves** by Martyn Farr

This is the third book on Welsh caves to be written by Martyn Farr in as many years (following on from *Darkworld: the Secrets of Llangattock Mountain* and *The Secret World of Porth yr Ogof*).

It has an attractive glossy cover and the text is interspersed with numerous photographs (I particularly liked the *before and after digging* photos of Tony Donovan of SWCC!).

I have one small criticism to make. Because the book appears to be targeted at a wide readership, including the show cave visitor, it has lost the relaxed narrative of the earlier publications which were aimed at specific sectors, namely cavers in general (*Darkworld*) and outdoor pursuit/novice cavers (*Porth yr Ogof*). In an attempt to give an overview of the history and development of caving in South Wales the book strays from the Dan yr Ogof theme and confuses the issue by introducing OFD, Little Neath River Cave and even Gower. However, don't let that put you off. The chapters based on Martyn's first hand experiences more than make up for the earlier sections; in particular, the chapter in which Martyn describes his near death in 1971 while pushing the Mazeways Sumps, is gripping stuff!

MCG's library copy can be borrowed via Joan - or if you can wait just a few weeks longer the library just **might** be finished and the book will then be available at the cottage.

NAMHO '99 Conference, Forest of Dean, 24-26 September

(NAMHO = National Association of Mining History Organisations)

For anyone interested in mines this should be an interesting weekend of lectures, underground visits and surface walks around various mine sites. As well as the mining history and exploration of Forest of Dean iron and coal mines, lectures will cover Derbyshire, North Wales, North Yorkshire, Roman Mining law, Mining archaeology etc.

Saturday evening's meal will be followed by a film *Forest of Dean Freeminers* with a 'brilliant monologue by Dave Carlisle in the role of a Victorian mining agent' which is apparently not suitable for the easily offended - should suit MCG though!

Further information is available from John Hine, NAMHO '99, The Grotto, Mile End, Coleford, Glos GL16 7QF (enclose A4 SAE).

'A Brush With Darkness', 3rd - 30th October 1999 at Wells Museum by Joan Goddard

Following successful 1998 shows in Cardiff and Wells, ISSA (International Society of Spelaeological Art) is putting on another exhibition at Wells Museum in October.

I visited the Cardiff exhibition and found it interesting and thought provoking. There were exhibits to suit all tastes - ranging from David Bellamy's delicate watercolours to Bud Hogbin's bold abstracts of Gough's Cave and from Ceris Jones' drawings of cave divers to Ian Chandler's unusual sculptures depicting cave passages in Wales.

A number of the exhibiting artists are Mendip based and many of the pictures are for sale. This could solve your problem of what Christmas present to give the caver who has everthing!