

Cave rescue a la Francaise. Le Gouffre des Vitarelles.

As most of you will have seen on the news there has been some massive flooding in the south east of France near Toulouse in the Lot. There has been great mention of the damage to homes and property on the surface and of course the 31 people who lost their lives however there has been an incident in a cave that has received little news this side of the channel.

On Thursday 11th November 7 experienced cavers entered the Gouffre des Vitarelles (8k long 100m deep) with the intention of bottoming the cave. Their timetable was for three days. The weather was good and only forecast light rains. However the region received a years rain in just two days. These rains completely blocked the entrance trapping the cavers inside. The rescue was called out and there were 82 cave rescuers assisted by a hundred or so soldiers whose base is nearby. They were unable to get through the flood waters in order to get to the cavers trapped inside. By Wednesday 17th still unable to enter the cave it was decided to bring in machinery in the form of a giant drill which would drill a hole 60cm wide 40m deep to break through to where they expected the cavers to be sitting out the flood. Other holes would be drilled to try and make voice contact.

By the Friday, after 8 days underground, there were now about 130 cave rescuers (they are professionals in France) who had come from all over France but because of more rain the levels had begun to rise again and normal entry to the cave was called off. Despite this length of time underground the rescue did not feel worried about the trapped cavers maintaining that they were experienced and had reserves of food.

On Sunday 21st November at 1 minute to 3pm after 10 days underground the cavers were found safe and sound exactly at the spot expected. As soon as they had realised they were in trouble began to head out of the cave and they allowed themselves be carried by the rising floodwater using inflatables back to their bivouac at the Cle de Voute 4k from the entrance. The stream had become a raging torrent some 30m deep. This is where their training and experience kicked in. They had enough food for 12 days and immediately began to ration their lights. They knew they just had to sit it out until either the water subsided or someone came and got them. They were extremely well organised and alternated between sleep and exercise so that when they were rescued they had neither lost track of time nor their heads. The vertical adit allowed them to all be hoisted to safety. They were very tired but in good health but were taken to hospital for observation but released the very next day.

All over bar the shouting. The cost of the rescue, 4 drilling rigs, 250 men has been estimated at 3 million francs (£300,000). The question of the weather has also been raised. An expert who knows the Gouffre des Vitarelles very well argues that November is not the best time to be going down this cave especially considering that the ground was already saturated.

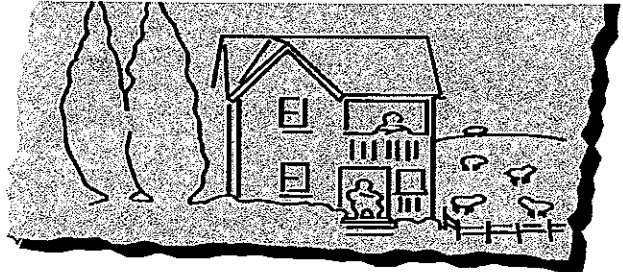
Richard Carey

MENDIP CAVING GROUP

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

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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

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

Stickers:

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

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Rescue Warden
Conservation Officer
Cottage Extension

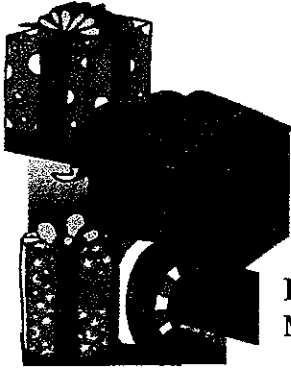
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James Allen & Martin Rowe

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News in Brief

Change of address

Dave Tooke & Letti Patte to 12 Ashdale Close, Long Lane, Stanwell, Staines, Middlesex. TW19 7BA. Tel. 01784 244479

Co-option of Social Secretary

Unfortunately due to work and family commitments Pete Moseley has decided to stand down as Social Secretary. He feels that he is unable now to devote sufficient time to the post. The Committee would like to thank Pete for all his hard work over the last few years.

At present Lyn Furneaux has expressed an interest in the position. However, should any other members wish to be considered for the post, please could they contact the Secretary as soon as possible. As well as being a trustee of the MCG, the Social Secretary is primarily responsible for organising the AGM dinner and half yearly social function.

It is hoped that a new Social Secretary will be co-opted at the January Committee meeting.

Forward Meets Programme :

<i>DATE</i>	<i>VENUE</i>	<i>EVENTS</i>	<i>CONTACT</i>
6 February 2000.	Mendip	Shatter Cave (Fairy Caves Quarry): Trip limited to 5 plus leader. Please contact Julie to reserve a place.	Tel : (0181 340 2613)

Library - it's nearly there!

By Joan Goddard

At the Half Yearly weekend, Martin and Yvonne took up the challenge of assembling the cupboard and drawer units which had been languishing in their cardboard boxes in the library for many weeks.. Then on the first weekend in December, thanks to a really hard day's work by Wayne (helped by a couple of others who were around at the time), the work surfaces and cupboards were fitted to the 'alcove' area of the library.

However, **A WORD OF WARNING:** a little more work needs doing to strengthen and finish the work surfaces, so please do not use them yet.

Some books and boxfiles have been put on the shelves but they are not in any order at present. Feel free to look at them when at the cottage, but please don't take any home with you until the main stock of books returns from it's enforced holiday at sunny Weston-super-Mare.

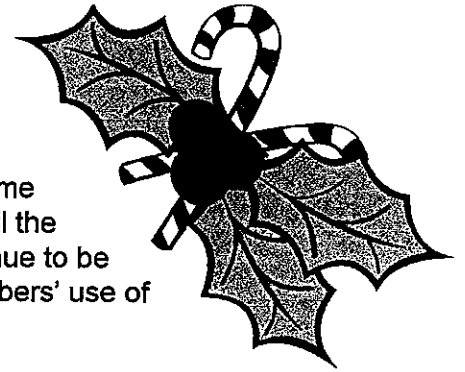
Over the Christmas/New Year period I will organise a '**Loans Book**' which will need to be filled in when a book is borrowed. You will need to list the author, title, your name (in capitals), signature and date of borrowing. There will be a further column for the date and your signature when the book is returned. Please fill this in, but leave the book in a '**Returned items**' tray, so that I can return it to the right place on the shelf and also check the loans book details.

Please return books promptly. Remember, there are another 120-odd (very odd!?) members who may also want to look at the same book.

Access to the library is via a Full Member's key. Probationary members can use the library under the supervision of a Full Member. The library door must be locked when there are no full members around.

Mid-Week Thirty-Bed Booking Proposal

By Ben Cooper



The following was presented at the Half Yearly meeting, and after some discussion it was agreed that the committee will trial the proposal until the AGM. Provided there have been no problems, the scheme will continue to be operated after that, but will be regularly reviewed to ensure that members' use of the cottage is not being disrupted.

Before the scheme goes live, the committee will define the fine detail of the proposal, and write to all local members to ensure that they are aware of the new scheme.

The major concern is of course that the Thirty-Bed Booking scheme may inconvenience any members who might turn up at the cottage mid-week without booking. Local cavers in particular fall into this category, and the committee are very keen to hear if the new scheme causes any problems. The proposal is designed to accommodate members' wishes as much as possible.



The Problem

The Cottage Warden has been asked a number of times if groups can book the entire cottage.

- Youth groups need to sleep in segregated accommodation: boys, girls, and adults.
- Special needs groups are very disturbed by outsiders, particularly if high-spirited.

Predominantly, the issue is about organised youth groups, and increasing legislation / litigation. The groups need to book the three bedrooms, one for boys, one for girls, and one for adults, and guarantee that no one else is sleeping in those rooms (there might be scope for sharing the adult's room). Also, during the evening the groups often want the lounge and kitchen to themselves for their own activities. However, they don't mind members having access to the tackle store, perhaps the library or even changing room and showers, provided any visiting member checks with the group leaders, particularly to co-ordinate use of the showers. The presence of members in the building during waking hours is not in itself a problem, provided those members are not partying or being rowdy, which does occasionally happen when members consume alcohol in the lounge in the evening.

It seems that there is solution here for our guests, which is to grant appropriate use of the cottage to them – but only during mid-week, and only when sufficient notice has been given.

The benefits will be threefold. The public (in line with our constitution), will be able to use the cottage when previously they will not have been able to. The cottage will be used more often at times when it was previously empty. The club will get an increased revenue.

Proposal

1. Thirty-bed bookings of the cottage are permitted only for Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday nights (i.e. not weekends).
2. Thirty-bed bookings are not permitted during any week during which there is a bank holiday.

3. The booking is made at least two months (for the avoidance of doubt that is 9 weeks or 72 days) in advance, to allow sufficient time to advertise the booking via the newsletter to the membership. A non-returnable deposit may be required to fund the advertisement, deducted from the total fee owing.
4. The cost will be 30 times the current guest rate per night (currently equal to £75 per night). The rate is the same for members and non-members, on the grounds that members making such bookings will only be doing so for the benefit of non-members.
5. Members are encouraged to make forward bookings for their own casual use, for example, for a mid-week meet, to ensure that a thirty-bed booking is not subsequently made for those days.
6. Members will be able to access the cottage during the day during a thirty-bed booking, to access the library or tackle store. Members are asked to show courtesy to the guest group, by discussing with the guest group any such access and timing of use of the showers.
7. Members are requested to respect a thirty-bed booking, and to not attempt to stay overnight during such a booking.
8. I would ask the membership that they allow a 6 month trial of this proposal, to be reviewed at the AGM, and annually thereafter.

Answers to possible objections:

The club is there for the benefit of the members, and members do not need exclusive access. In fact we are a charity and according to the constitution: "The object of the Group is, for the benefit of the public, the furtherance of all aspects of the scientific study and conservation of caves." The proposal is designed to ensure that members do have access to the cottage whenever they want. The rules of the proposal will restrict the numbers of exclusive bookings, and restrict the times when such bookings are allowed.

Members pay £25 a year for access to the cottage. In fact only 20% of subs is put towards the cottage. Under the proposed scheme, members will still be able to access the cottage, and turn up on spec at weekends to stay at the cottage. Members will know in advance whether the cottage is available during the week.

We don't need the money. While it may seem that the club has a lot of money, this must be put in perspective. The club has a lot of overheads and projects and needs more money than it currently has.



Library Additions



by Joan Goddard

Deep Secrets, the Discovery and Exploration of Lechuguilla Cave by Stephen Reames et al, 1999, published by Cave Books. I have only 'dipped into' this book but it seems a very readable history of events since the first major breakthrough was made. in 1986.

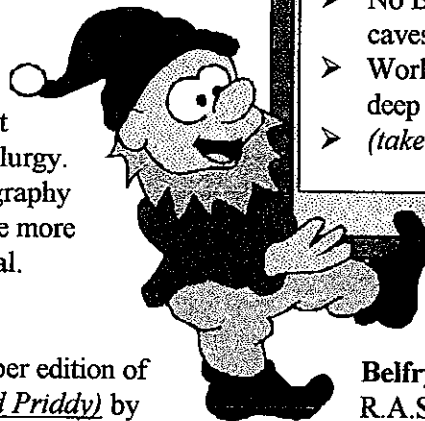
The natural and other histories of BATU CAVES by Shaharin Yussof, 1997. Anyone holidaying in the Far East will find these caves easy to visit as they occur only 12 miles north of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This little book (55pp + 46 colour plates) has a short geological description followed by a section on cave ecology, a good bibliography and some colour plates of creepy crawlies and underground scenery.

Cave Science for March 1999 comprises indexes for the Journal and Proceedings of the British Speleological Association 1937-1938 and 1947-1973, and for the Journal of the Wiliam Pengelly Cave Studies Trust 1964-1995.

Compass Points (*Journal of the BCRA Cave Surveying Group*), Sept 1999 contains an article by our very own Ben Cooper on *The Spring Field Meet Compass Trial*. It makes interesting reading but further trials are required to increase the quantity of data available for analysis.

International Caver No 25, 1999 - describes the *Kolkblaser-Monsterhöhle System* (on the Austria German border) which is 44km long; included is an impressive cross section through the cave, a section on its speleogenesis and a plan of the system and associated caves. Also in the magazine are features on *Vietnam 1999* and *Jamaican Caves*. Unfortunately this is the last issue of International Caver in its present form although an annual publication is planned in its place.

Axbridge Caving Group Journal, August 1999 includes an article by E. Keith Middleton (with additional notes by Jim Hunt) on *Lead Mining on Mendip*. It provides a summary of the history of lead mining through pre-Roman and Roman times, the Middle Ages and finally the reworking of slag which culminated in the closure and dismantling of the last lead works in 1910. I found this an interesting article which has attempted to place Mendip in the wider context of British mining and metallurgy. However, I wish the bibliography at the end of the article gave more details of the source material.



Cave statistics

- Ease Gill cave system is the 17th longest in the world (70,500m)
- Ogot Draenen is the 26th longest (57,000m).
- OFD is the 36th longest (50,000m),
- No British caves occur in the list of the 50 deepest caves in the world
- Worldwide, there are now 433 caves over 500m deep
- (taken from *International Caver No 25*)

Coincidentally, the September edition of *Lead Mining (Chewton and Priddy)* by J'Rat's near incarceration in Stock's House Shaft while digging into a 60ft extension to the mine.

Belfry Bulletin also has some notes on *Mendip* R.A.Settrington - as well as a description of