

Mendip Caving Group

A Retrospective View



MCG Occasional Publication No. 5
2007

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Mendip Caving Group
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 Tony Knibbs

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Mendip Caving Group is a registered charity No. 270088

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Introduction

It is eleven years since the last major publication, during which time Mendip Caving Group has celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary. The purpose of this publication is to give readers a flavour of those 50+ years but is not intended to be a comprehensive historical document. Following this introduction is a Concise History of the Mendip Caving Group by Tony Knibbs which serves as a framework into which articles can be placed. The main source material has been old newsletters and journals and, of course, memories.

In his article 'A Caver's Ramblings into the Past' Malcolm Cotter described the events leading to the formation of the Group by four founder members, two of whom (Malcolm and Dennis Hemmings) we were able to welcome at the Fiftieth Celebration Dinner at Combe Lodge. Of course, the present membership will remember Malcolm for his enthusiasm for all things to do with caving and especially for his devotion to the exploration of Upper Flood. A special edition of the Newsletter paid tribute to Malcolm after his untimely death in 2006; MCG owes its very existence to Malcolm's enthusiasm and vision back in 1953.

Two other members who contributed to the success of the Group in its formative years have written about those times; Tony Crawford has lived in New Zealand for many years but remembers Mendip as if it were yesterday and his writings recall Malcolm's early role in the development of the Group. Richard Woollacott's 'Rather Random Memories' is wonderfully descriptive.

Anyone who has been on a foreign caving holiday/expedition will recall friendships forged and a team spirit that continues long after returning home. Most foreign trips have been written up elsewhere so 'Expeditions and Holidays - the first 50 years' written by Joan Goddard is intended very much as an *aide memoire*. The photographs in particular should jog a few memories.

'Tackle and Equipment' by Tony Knibbs explains how caving has changed since 1954 - caving trips that were arduous in the 1950s are now just Sunday afternoon bimbles because of improvements in clothing and equipment.

The final contribution was to have been an article bringing the Upper Flood story up to date with the discovery of Golden Chamber during the Group's 50th anniversary year. The amazing discoveries since then have put such an article beyond the scope of this publication - they will be written up in a future publication dedicated to Upper Flood Swallet.

This publication has been gestating for a few years and has been picked up and put down by more than one editor. Its foundation was laid by Yvonne Rowe who systematically abstracted information relating to the development of the Group from many of the old newsletters and journals. This proved a valuable source when producing this journal, and the abstracts are now housed in the library as a useful data source.

We hope you find this a "good read". If it encourages you to dig out old photos, a personal log or diary entries to share with the rest of us, that will be our reward - there must be many more tales out there just waiting to be told.

Joan Goddard
Tony Knibbs
August 2007

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the contributors, and to those who have helped in other ways, for patiently answering questions, supplying and identifying photographs, and to Linda Milne for proof-reading the final document. It has been very much a joint effort and it is not possible to thank everybody - you know who you are and we are grateful for all the help you have given.

The acknowledgement which appears on a photograph reflects its source. This does not always mean that person is the photographer but that he/she donated it to the Group's collection.

Compilation of this publication has relied heavily on the contents of the Group's library and the personal recollections of many people. The library is of significant and lasting value. Personal recollections are most reliable when held in written form, memories become fallible. Photos need conscientious filing so if you haven't done so already start recording for the future now.



Concise History of the Mendip Caving Group

written by Tony Knibbs

1953. Malcolm Cotter and Dillan Evans stayed at Main's Barn, Manor Farm, Priddy. During the 18-month period that followed, a nucleus of cavers formed an affinity group, staying at Main's Barn, and began referring to themselves as the Mendip Caving Group.

1954. Mendip Caving Group formally adopts the name, suggested by Malcolm, together with some basic safety rules. The Group's Easter meet is based in Velvet Bottom (camping), ending the "Main's Barn" era. Timber Hole dig started. First subscription rate decided at 12 shillings per year. The need for hostel accommodation was seen as an early requirement.

1955. Mr Ball, proprietor of the Lion Rock Hotel, Cheddar, is made an honorary member in recognition of his loaning the Group a small hut, behind the hotel, for tackle storage. Mr Saye of Sycamore Cottage, Cheddar, is similarly honoured for giving the Group access to the cave in his garden, Saye's Hole. First general meeting held.

1957. First AGM and Annual Dinner held in January. Petrol de-rationed in May (rationed following the 1956 Suez D  b  cle) resulting in an upsurge of trips to Mendip. Hon. Treasurer absconds with funds (about  100). We obtain the rent-free use of a tumbledown cottage in Nether Wood, Charterhouse, which we refurbish as our first Group headquarters.

1958. Death of H.E.Balch. Group starts survey of Longwood/August System.

1959. Longwood/August survey finished. Canyon Cave, Cheddar Gorge, discovered and surveyed. Goatchurch Cavern surveyed. First field meet based at the newly occupied Nether Wood Cottage at Charterhouse; this included considerable cottage work because the building was taken over as a roofed shell without facilities. Pinetree Pot dig started. Cooper's Hole dig started.

1960. First overseas meets in France: Vercors: Grotte de Gournier, Cuves de Sassenage and Alpes Maritimes - Canjuers plateau: Aven du Clos del Fayoun. Easter meet in Devon. Pinetree Pot opened. Ubley Hill Pot discovered (dug open in one weekend).

1961. Meet in Ireland (Co. Sligo). Meet in Austria. Work on Blackmoor Swallet started. Meet in France; Pyr  n  es. The Annexe, Browne's Hole entered by digging (human skeleton found during excavation). As a direct spin-off from MCG survey work, Christmas Crawl in August Hole was opened by digging, providing easier and safer access to the lower streamway. Fred Young (of Lower Farm) made honorary member. Other discoveries by digging in caves on Eastern Mendip: Elm Cave, Hunting Lodge Slocker, Merehead Quarry Cave, Pitten Street Swallet, St Vincent's Swallet. First exploration of Stock's Hole.

1962. Second Irish meet (Co. Sligo and Leitrim). Meet in Yugoslavia. A cave rescue conference at Han-sur-Lesse (Belgium) brings us into contact with the Swiss club Sp  l  o-Club des Montagnes Neuch  telloises (SCMN). Excavation at Blackmoor (Stainsby's) Shaft breaks into mined cave. Digging at Cooper's Hole reveals passage with ancient steps hewn in stalagmite and a small chamber; further work reveals animal scratch-marks.

1963. Very severe winter on Mendip; snow on ground from New Year until end of March. First meet in Switzerland with SCMN (Siebenh  ngste plateau, Luzern) camped at Fl  hli. Charnel Shaft (Charterhouse rakes) discovered.

1964. Eviction from Nether Wood Cottage leads to purchase of ex-army wooden barrack hut which we dismantle at Tilshead on Salisbury Plain and erect on Jim Fry's land at the Stirrup Cup, Nordrach. Jim kindly transported the monster.

1965. Group hosts a week's visit by SCMN on Mendip. Cottage warming party. Digging started at Knapp Hill Swallet in grounds of Wells Hospital.

1966. Meet in Ireland (Co. Clare). Clean-up operation in August/Longwood.

1967. Meet in Yugoslavia. Dig at Bone Hole started. Group carries out a clean-up operation in Longwood/ August.

1968. Charterhouse area receives torrential rain; the subsequent flood scours the floor of Velvet Bottom, washing away the causeway and road and causing damage in Cheddar Gorge and Village. On the bright side it opened Upper Flood Swallet and Middle Flood (Waterwheel) Swallet and Grebe Swallet. The long campaign of digging in Upper Flood begins. Meet in Czechoslovakia.

1969. Meet in Austria.

1970. Meet in Poland.

1971. Meet in Yugoslavia.

1972 Digging in Upper Flood enters a well-decorated chamber, then more passage with a further chamber.

1973. Meet in Czechoslovakia.

1974. Bone Hole opened and explored.

1975. Digging in Bone Hole continues. Planning permission granted for the present MCG Cottage. Building work commences after demolition of the old Axbridge hut, and building now severely interrupts caving activity. Dave Mitchell dies.

1976. Bone Hole surveyed. Meet in Ireland (Co. Clare). First of two 30-mile sponsored walks to raise money for Cottage purchase. Group becomes a registered charity.

1977. Surveying in Bone Hole. Second sponsored walk brings total cash raised to almost £1,000.

1979. New Year's Eve; gas explosion destroys almost-completed (not yet inhabited) cottage.

1980. Insurance cheque for £30,000 received and rebuilding work subcontracted.

1981. New building finally completed and cottage-warming party held. Work resumes in Upper Flood.

1982. First Group rescue practice in GB Cave.

1983. Meets in France ; Central Pyrénées (Arbas plateau, Réseau Trombe). Honorary membership conferred on Malcolm Cotter. Start of digging at Nether Wood Swallet. Small extension entered in Bone Hole. Trial dig at East bank tributary, Blackmoor.

1984. Easter meet with GSG at Elphin (Scotland). Group "adopts" Longwood/August System for annual clean-up operation. Winter Meet in Mallorca. Trip with Whernside Manor to France (Vercors, Gouffre Berger). Small finds made in roof of Great Chamber, Longwood Swallet. Work continues in Upper Flood.

1985. Winter meet in Mallorca. Major breakthrough at Upper Flood; Midnight Chamber and continuing stream passage discovered. Abandoned dig in the Oxbows, Longwood /August System.

1986. Meet in Malaga (Sima – GESM), and winter meet in Mallorca. Discovery in Upper Flood; Hannah's Grotto. Upper Flood (Bypass Passage) dig enters short length of high passage; digging started at end.

1987. Winter meet in Mallorca. Digging in Upper Flood (Bypass Passage) achieves several breakthroughs including the Red Room.

1988. Meets in Malaga (Sima – GESM), France (Vercors), and trips to Sarawak and Thailand. Death of our neighbours and friends Jim Fry and his wife Gladys. Survey of Shale Rift (Upper Flood) and observation of near-sumping at the Lavatory Trap; short upstream section from Puddle Lake entered.

1989. Meet in France (Dordogne). Group hosts visit to Mendip by the French Spéléo-Club d'Aérospatiale. Ron Saunders made honorary member. Digging in Battery Swallet. Death of Grant Shepherd in road accident near Cottage. Black Aven (Upper Flood) extended; voids found in Boulder Choke.

1990. Meets in Czechoslovakia and France (Pyrénées, Mâne). Trips to Italian Alps (Margaureis) and France (Vercors). Digging in Rod's Pot; Eyeball Rift discovered. Surveying in Boulder Choke (Upper Flood).

1991. Meet in Czechoslovakia. Digging in East Twin Swallet. M&M Passage opened.

1992. Meet in Mallorca. Digging in Milton Hill Cave. Digging in Pinetree Pot restarted.

1993. Ubley Hill Pot reopened. "A Pock Hole Lips Way" in Pinetree Pot opened. More progress in Upper Flood; Rip-off Aven.

1994. Meet in France (Jura). Meet in Mallorca. Belize expedition.

1995. Meets in France (La Chartreuse), Ireland (Fermanagh) and Mallorca. Phil Ingold made honorary member. Attempt made to make second entrance to Upper Flood by reaching Rip-off Aven – Rip-off 3 found from below. Some digging in Bone Hole. Fish seen in Midnight Chamber (UpperFlood). Drought allowed more progress upstream from Midnight Chamber. Lavatory Trap re-excavated.

1996. Meets in the Picos region (Spain) and Mallorca.

1997. Meet in Ireland (Co. Clare and Fermanagh). Meet in Mallorca.

1998. Start of digging Pontypool or Bust in Ogof Draenen. Meets in Fermanagh and Belgium. Expedition to Madagascar. Permission renewed to dig Blackmoor Swallet via Stainsby's Shaft.

1999. Second expedition to Madagascar. Meet in Mallorca. Digging in Ubley Warren Pot.

2000. Expedition to Argentina.

2001. Second expedition to Argentina. Meets in Belgium and Mallorca. Digging in Carcass Cave.

2002. Ogof Draenen extensions in Pontypool or Bust. Third Argentina expedition. Meet in Greece.

2003. Fourth Argentina expedition. Meet in Mallorca.

2004. MCG Fiftieth Anniversary Dinner. Discovery of Golden Chamber, Upper Flood. Fifth Argentina expedition. Meets in Slovenia and Mallorca. Deaths of Phil Ingold and Bruce Dean.

This article has been assembled from a variety of sources. It is intended merely as an overview of MCG history. The Library is where you will find answers to detailed questions. My thanks are due to Joan Goddard, Tim Francis and Malcolm Cotter for providing the information where my timeline offered only blanks.

Tony Knibbs (Mig)

UPPER
FLOOD
SWALLET

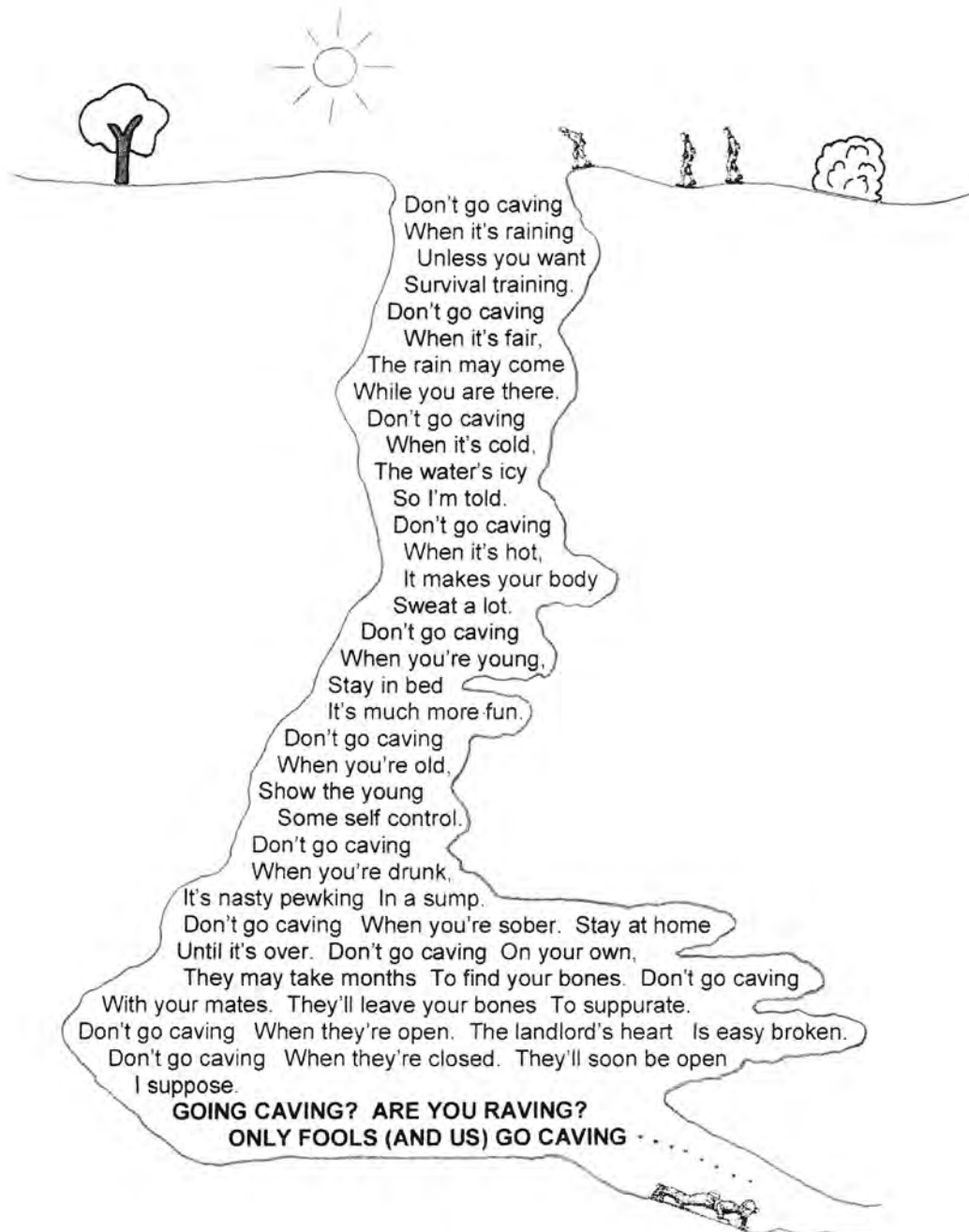


GOLDEN
CHAMBER
2004

Peat Bennett

Going Caving

by Fungus McBogle



[from Newsletter 165]

A Momentous meeting

written by Tony Crawford



Tony Crawford in the New Inn, Priddy

I was there when Malcolm first raised the idea of forming a caving group, but the idea was his alone. By pure chance I had ridden my 350cc side-valve ex-army motorbike via Norton St Philip when a torrential burst of rain swept across Mendip. Reaching the crossroads at Green Ore I turned right, then left, on the road to Priddy and Main's Barn. In those days farmer Albert Main of Manor Farm, Priddy, was blessed in the sight of cavers as he offered the only haven for miles around.

As I puttered along the straight road to Priddy I noticed a figure trudging along the road ahead of me, bowed under a huge loaded rucksack and covered by a rain cape. I just stopped, as any human being would do, and stated tersely that I was going to Main's Barn in Priddy and offered him a lift. He answered that he was going there himself and would be glad of a lift. "Hop on," I instructed; and he did.

When we arrived at Manor Farm and dismounted, I started to carefully cover my motorbike against the driving rain. A firm voice spoke urgently in my ear, "If you have any food, hand it over and I'll start a meal while you unpack." When I eventually got up into the hayloft of the barn I could see that my new friend Malcolm was cooking us up a meal of sausages, eggs, toast and bacon in a large frying pan over a paraffin stove perched on a long wooden bench seat. Suddenly the whole meal tumbled onto the dry straw-strewn floor. Quickly Malcolm scooped the whole lot back into the pan. He laughed saying, "You will eat a peck of dirt before you die." We were so tired that the odd bit of hay seemed to enhance the meal. That then, was our first meeting



Main's Barn, Priddy, 1950s

The following day we descended Swildon's Hole via the Wet Way. The second day we went to Burrington Combe. We got on very well indeed. I had never met a fellow so enthusiastic about caving. Needless to say he travelled home with me on the back of 'old faithful'. Thankfully the journey was in better weather.

Nobody is perfect and Malcolm was as subject to this truism as the rest of us. He had an annoying habit of never being up when I called for him in Southall and his dear mum gave me permission to wake him up.

First I went up and shook him – no response. So I grabbed the mattress and turned it and him over. Instant awakening! I should explain that I used to travel between 11.00pm and 01.00 am – the only time the roads were clear.

Malcolm and I travelled to Mendip at least another six times before he bought his own motorbike, a 350cc single-cylinder Panther. By now he had learnt to get up and travel early, finding it was the best way. He soon collected a large group of like-minded young people around him. His character was like a magnet.



Tony Crawford & Tony Davis, Long Churn, 1957

It was not long before we began to need equipment. Although money was scarce for a group of young people, some serving apprenticeships, we gathered enough money for me to buy the materials to start building the frail-looking 'electron' ladders designed by Lewis Railton of SWCC who gave us permission to copy his design, as long as it was not for commercial gain. Pete Goddard was my mainstay in those days, often coming to my workshop in Harefield, Middlesex, to assemble the ladders. Malcolm had to be told how much work was involved. He had the annoying habit of wanting endlessly to check on progress. This infuriated me since Pete and I left nothing to chance and missed very little. I was not accustomed to being checked up on!



Trying out one of the new electron ladders



Installing the generator in the genny-shed

Among numerous amusing things that happened in those early days was the incident concerning the Group's generator unit at Netherwood Cottage. This was a petrol-driven device in an outhouse. To start it you had to switch on the petrol supply and then wind up the inertia magneto. On the side of the magneto was written "Do not touch". However this proved to be but another challenge for Malcolm who duly touched it and got (literally) the shock of his life. We didn't agree on everything, which I think was the basis of our friendship. At a certain point in the early days I wanted to limit membership to an agreed number of between 60 and 70 members. However, Tony Knibbs vigorously opposed this in committee. With hindsight he was right and my view was too limiting, but as already noted none of us is perfect; Malcolm had this and other problems to contend with while he strove to keep the Group a close-knit unit – in this he achieved his aim. As do many others, I mourn his passing.



A Caver's Ramblings into the Past

written by Malcolm Cotter

My age is such that flashbacks and musing over the past have become more common. Thus, this is an account of an old man looking back through the mists of time, with help from a chronicle of events. The more I write, the more I remember. Our perception of past events seems tied to our own life span, so what happened before we were born is as distant history. Although a few of you are older, most are younger than the writer and born after the time the Group was well established. The early days of our organisation comprised a very young and, for the most part, integrated group of people. Our great and main asset was an endowment of youthful vigour where anything seemed possible. There were visits to mysterious places and the ever-present promise of discovery and exploration of hidden worlds. Those at the beginning were soon joined by others who were immediately involved, as must be the case with any organisation. Without everyone through time, nothing would have happened. Unlike a sculpture, we are a work of art able to change and survive. There was sometimes controversy but we are a fortunate species where through time our perception of what is bad is forgotten but what is good is enhanced.

Now, let me go back to the year 1953. It was eight years after the Second World War and England had conscription to military service. At the start of the year, I was a 19-year-old airman posted to Lytham St Anne's to attend a nursing-cum-first-aid course. Lytham St Anne's was within reach of the Craven District of Yorkshire with many of the mythical caves I had read about. Armed with a second-hand paperback copy of Norman Thornber's "Pennine Underground", a trip to the area was planned. This book was an excellent pocket-sized guide, giving very good instructions in note form of the whereabouts of caves and potholes and what was required and involved in their exploration. Some years before, in a book entitled "Modern Exploration", an address given for the British Spelaeological Association (BSA) turned out to be that of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society (UBSS). On making an enquiry, a helpful reply was received from the UBSS giving me the correct address of the BSA. On writing to the BSA, a swift reply gave news that accommodation was available at their Headquarters in Settle.

A booking was then made for a visit to Settle. The BSA HQ was in a mews and I had been asked to go up an external flight of steps on the right where I met Eli Simpson, known to all as Simmy. Simmy seemed to live in that part of the building. I had arrived without sleeping bag so Simmy kindly loaned me some blankets. I was then shown to the actual hostel accommodation, access to which was by way of a second flight of outside stairs at the end of the mews in Duke Street.

The year started with the vestiges of food rationing. On going into a Settle butcher, I was amazed to be told that it was not necessary to give in my weekend ration card. The butcher said that he would let me have whatever I wanted, so a couple of excellent chops were chosen.



'Cas' (Donald New) in Bar Pot, 1953

There then followed several months potholing every weekend with the BSA. Many hours were spent with Eli Simpson in his den adjacent to the sleeping quarters, where he outlined his survey work. The mode of getting to the potholes also came as a surprise since taxis were frequently used, everyone pitching in to the cost. Parties were generally large, but on several occasions my sole comrade was a slightly older caver known as Cas owing to his likeness to Norbert Casteret. (*I cannot remember his actual name although his first name may have been Don*). On one occasion during a discussion on caving organisation Cas remarked that he thought that I wanted to start a caving club. This was denied but he was right although I did not appreciate it at the time.

My course completed, a posting to Little Rissington, Gloucestershire followed. A further visit during a Bank Holiday was made to Yorkshire but my thoughts turned to the nearer caving area of Mendip

where, some years before, I had been treated to a day visit to Cheddar and its caves. On that visit a good guide to the Cheddar caves and another to Wookey had been purchased. Other information on the Mendip caves had been gleaned from E.A. Baker's book "Caving", that Mr King, Hon. Secretary of the Devon Spelaeological Society, had let me borrow. "Caving" described, in an exciting manner, the exploration of Swildon's Hole. Later, H.E. Balch's book "The Great Cave of Wookey Hole" had been given to me as a present. A caving trip to Mendip was therefore sought after.

Much excited conversation ensued among the many young people at the RAF camp and one named Dillan (or Dyllan?) Evans told me that he had been caving in Wales and had his own equipment. A partner was thus found and a trip planned. Knowing that John Hooper had caved on Mendip a letter enquiring about places to stay was sent to him. A quick reply let me know that Mr (Albert) Main allowed cavers to stay in his barn at Manor Farm, Priddy. A letter was sent to Albert Main and again a quick reply confirmed that cavers could stay in his barn.

In the 1950s many factories and offices worked Saturday morning and so it was in the RAF. Dillan and I obtained what was known as a 36-hour pass covering the period from about noon Saturday to midnight on Sunday. It was on the 14 November 1953 that we eventually set out.

The journey took all afternoon and into the evening. The bus journey from Bristol was slow and, since it was very dark outside, our senses of what lay there were influenced by the engine noise. The engine was in low gear for much of the time so it seemed that we were going up a mountain. On this our first visit we went all the way into Wells arriving there well after 8pm. After what seemed a long wait in cold weather we caught a bus to Priddy. This bus was the only one of the week, allowing people living along its route to visit Wells and to see a film. In the countryside, away from towns, there was no electricity except what was provided by rare privately run generators. Our bus therefore had the only electric lighting in the whole area. The bus stopped and the driver pointed to a dim light saying that was Manor Farm. We got off the bus and, since our eyes were used to the lighting inside, into total darkness. We watched the brightly lit bus leave and continue on up the hill, temporarily illuminating its surroundings and leaving us feeling lonely.

We made our way through an obvious gateway past farm buildings. This led us to the back door of the farm. A knock at the door was made, and Albert Main, carrying a paraffin lamp met us. He remembered my letter. We enquired if he could let us have milk and eggs and were told that he could supply them. We were then shown the barn. At about this time an enquiry was made regarding cave location. Albert Main told us that a group from Sandhurst Military Academy were going down Swildon's Hole that evening. He then pointed across Priddy Green saying that the party was in the New Inn and would probably let us join them.

The barn remains much the same today as it did then except that the vertical ladder to the loft had all its treads. The barn was divided into two halves. The side nearest the road had farm machinery and tools below and a room divided into two above. The upper room had probably, by its appearance, been a dwelling in the not too distant past. At the top of the ladder one alighted into a space used for storage of farm requisites such as horse harnesses. Beyond, a separate room space had at the end a fireplace with shelf above onto which a light such as a candle could be placed. Two small windows were set in the wall either side of the fireplace. Against each sidewall was a bare steel bed. Behind this section of the barn and up another ladder was a loft from which hay was forked to cows below. We were told that we could sleep in the hayloft which was a much warmer sleeping quarters than the other room. By the time we had taken our rucksacks off Albert Main came up to the living room with milk and eggs. *(The fee for an overnight stay was a shilling a head. Sometimes if the weather was very cold Mr Main would bring up coal for the fire.)*

On entering the New Inn, we found the Sandhurst party sitting on benches next to a bare kitchen table. The bench to the left of the window was high backed. On the table was a silent mantle lamp, so that the small gathering was contained in a lit area. *(There were two lamps in common use at the time both having a paraffin reservoir at the bottom and glass chimney. The simpler and cheaper lamp relied on the light directly generated from the wick and adjusted to burn with a flame just less*

than the smoke point. The brighter lamp was similar to the simpler lamp except that the light was generated by vapour burning on an incandescent mantle made of a fine woven filament containing Osmium. The latter lamps were very bright. In this country the main manufacturer of the wick mantle lamps was Aladdin. Another type of paraffin lamp known as the Tilley was occasionally used where portability and relative storm proofing was the main consideration. The principle of the Tilley was similar to the Primus. Paraffin was vaporised and burned on a mantle. The drawback was the need to start the process using methylated spirit, to regularly pump up the pressure, and a background hissing noise.) Behind the table was a range-style hearth. We enquired if we could join their trip down Swildon's Hole. A friendly affirmative was given with the added message that they would leave for the cave once we returned with caving gear on.



Possibly Mike Burbidge (L), Les James,
Julie de Gory , 1954

I cannot remember at what stage we ate if indeed we did that evening. Anyway we dressed for our trip. In my case clothing comprised a wool pullover next to the skin, a school rugby shirt above, plus swimming trunks, all covered by a cotton boiler suit. Footwear consisted of woollen socks and leather hob-nailed boots. My helmet, under the trade name of "The Cromwell Protector helmet" and manufactured by Helmets Ltd, was made of compressed fibre, sometimes being described in a derogatory manner in some circles, as 'paper helmets' owing to their ability to take on different shapes if wet! Our lighting was home made. My own comprised two headpieces made from cannibalised torch reflectors and bulb holders. One light was powered by a widely available twin cell cycle battery kept in my pocket giving 3V and the other a 6V-bell battery housed in a wire cage and slung on the waist. On this occasion I cannot remember if I used the bell battery system. It is likely that a small flat 4.5V battery powered my second light. (*Electric miners' lamps were available but very expensive. Miners' carbide lamps were also available. I had seen the Miners-type carbide lamp in Devon but not in use and did not know where to get them. Lighting as always was a subject under constant discussion. In Yorkshire, home-made electric systems were the norm,*

probably because of the regular wet conditions. Small government-surplus cells were available and being tried. On Mendip carbide was the main light, frequently backed up by a home-made electric system fitted to the helmet. Candles were also taken for emergency, prepared by a short burn to wax the wick and so render it waterproof.)

Once changed into caving gear, we returned to the New Inn and left at once for the cave. It was by now late, probably about 10pm. John Richardson, the leader and a charming individual, had caved in Devon and Yorkshire so we had something in common. We engaged in easy conversation and before long were within sound of the Swildon's stream. The cave would have been difficult for us to find on such a dark night. In addition, it would probably have been locked. A goodwill fee of a shilling a head (or was it sixpence?), was paid by explorers.

At that time the cave just inside the entrance was very different to that at present. There were two ways on, one dry and the other wet. We took the dry way just inside the entrance on the right. The way is now made difficult by a rock fall so is rarely used. A low short passage led to the top of Jacob's ladder. (*The present day short cut from the bottom of the drop a little way inside the entrance, to the top of Jacob's ladder, was not open*). We went down Jacob's Ladder and along the Short Dry Way into The Old Grotto. The contrast with Yorkshire was soon apparent, the steepness of the cave giving depth without the presence of numerous pitches. In those days the way down was by way of a pitch known as the Forty-Foot Pot. The actual climbing drop was closer to 30 feet but

the shaft measured from a higher way in was the reason for the name. On this occasion the Forty was descended by way of a wire rope ladder, the first time that I had used one. Water was diverted away from the ladder by a short length of pipe; even so enough leakage and splash ensured a thorough wetting during descent. *(In Yorkshire descents were still being made using rope ladders. On a long pitch, there was so much rope stretch that several steps had to be made, pushing rungs to the ground, before actual ascent began. The large rungs also cut into the ground, and could be sat on, so that a few people sitting on the top of the ladder could hold it without using a proper (and more desirable) belay. "Help" was also available from the lifelining party above, pulling one up the ladder!)*

Swildon's Hole made a great impression on me, being a beautiful, clean watercourse decorated by such a profusion of calcite formations. This was particularly so at Barnes' Loop where a grossly exaggerated note of the height of formations (75 feet) is made in my log. After a short wait at the sump we returned. At the Water Chamber we changed route, returning by the Wet Way. Our time underground was about 4½ hours.

The night outside was very cold with a hard frost freezing our wet clothes as we made our way back across the fields. John Richardson invited us to join his party for a hot drink in Fountain Cottage once we had changed. We were made welcome at Fountain Cottage and given a mug of hot coffee that was very well received. *(Fountain Cottage belonged to Sandhurst Military Academy for many years but was eventually sold and came into the possession of Alison and Pete Moody, of the Wessex Cave Club.)*

On our return to the barn there was another caver who had changed and put a miner's carbide lamp on the shelf above the fireplace. This was the first time that I had seen this small lamp in operation, and I thought it desirable to obtain one. *(There were two makes of carbide lamps then manufactured in England, Premier and Daylight. They were of similar brass construction although the Daylight lamp, being polished with a slim waist water chamber, looked the more elegant of the two. It seemed to me that the squat, uneven-surfaced Premier was the slightly more reliable. One fill of carbide generally required two fills of water and water lasted about two hours. It was important not to overfill the carbide chamber because by so doing the greater space taken by spent carbide bunged up the gas outlet preventing smooth operation. One place where carbide lamps were regularly lost was in Swildon's Sump 1. On one occasion my lamp came off there and in the process of feeling around for it I came across a second! Carbide lamps became known as 'stinkies' owing to the smell produced by the reaction of water on calcium carbide. Acetylene, the gas generated, produced a bright if somewhat yellowish flame of intense heat. Great care was thus required when ladder climbing to avoid a nasty hand burn. There were also hilarious incidents like an occasion when an open tin of carbide was dropped in the Water Rift in Swildon's, erupted with a mass of bubbles, and was set on fire. What may well be described as a consternation dance ensued by those in the confined space. There was also an occasion reported when a conservation-minded caver, aware of the unsightliness of spent carbide strewn about caves, used a tin into which to empty his lamp. Unfortunately the substance was not completely spent and continued to react, eventually exploding! There is little doubt that much could be written about the subject of carbide lamps!).* Now back to the barn where the other caver questioned me with regard to my caving background. I told him that I was a member of DSS and BSA. At that time Dillan and I knew nothing of Mendip caving organisations. A caving companion in Devon had told me that he had stayed in a wooden club hut on Mendip.

We eventually got to bed in the small hours and, because of time restraints, continued that pattern for many following trips. We slept well in the hayloft but woke to a very cold frosty Sunday. Looking out through the windows at the end of the barn gave us first sight of the landscape outside. A good view was gained across the road and up the valley leading to Swildon's Hole.

Water was obtained over the road from a constantly flowing standpipe, Priddy Fountain. This fountain ran for many years before being stopped and a plaque now marks the place. Water was boiled in a white churn-shaped billy-can over a small portable paraffin stove and a brew made. Breakfast was cooked in a couple of aluminium mess tins. These mess tins were not the ones issued to us although of the same pattern. Our service issue tins were required to be shown on kit inspections, so needed to be shiny, a requirement known in military circles as "Bull Shit".

Our return was started soon after we had eaten to allow us time to get back to camp. The only bus connection to Bristol passed Hill Grove so we had to walk the three miles to the road junction. That three miles has always seemed to be a long three miles. Everything was carried in or attached to a rucksack, wet caving things at the bottom. The clothing had previously been wrung out by the two of us, working together, one at each end of a boiler suit, twisting as much as we were able. My own outdoor clothing was somewhat sparse for the weather, comprising a vest, shirt, pullover, unlined anorak, short pants, trousers, socks and boots. At Little Rissington camp there was a communal warm washing and drying room. It was of course before the days of washing machines.

The next Mendip trip occurred on the 16th. January 1954. This may seem a long interval but thoughts among service personnel were becoming focussed on returning home for Christmas, and I had a birthday weekend falling in this period. In addition, staffing camp sick quarters (*like a small hospital*) required personnel to work a weekend shift system. The interval was however crucial for the future of the MCG allowing me to preach the joys of caving to everyone willing to listen. Not surprisingly my colleagues at the medical centre were among the first willing to try caving. Small gatherings were held in various rooms within our accommodation and the proposal of forming a club was discussed. An exciting focus was thus created to liven up what was otherwise a rather boring existence during the dark winter nights.

The party of the 16th/17th January 1954 comprised Dennis Hemmings, Tony Windale and me. Our travel to Mendip was as before except that we got off the Bristol-to-Wells bus at Hill Grove and there waited for the Priddy bus. As I have a note stating that we left for Swildon's Hole at 11pm we must have eaten first. Milk and eggs were bought from Manor Farm. On seeing the eggs, Dennis asked Albert Main how he managed to provide such large ones to which the reply came "It's the way the hens lay them!"

As we did not have any tackle we were completely content to explore Upper Swildon's, or the passages before the 'Forty'. Most present-day parties to Swildon's Hole go by as short a way as possible to join the Wet Way at the Water Chamber, then on downwards. Upper Swildon's, however, offers an interesting and sporting introduction to Mendip caving. There are walking-height passages, crawls, squeezes, climbs, all available wet or dry. The ways interconnect in an interesting manner and there are numerous calcite formations. In all, a fun experience and ideal as a training cave for new recruits.

The three of us set off keeping as dry as possible. We eventually reached the 'Forty', looked down and returned, with much laughter as we passed through a tight squeeze in the water rift that could be used to avoid getting wet. (*The passage then known as Water Rift lost its water as a result of the great flood of 1968. Before the flood a relatively horizontal stream passage extended from the Water Chamber to the squeeze leading to the Forty. The flood torrent removed ancient sediments from much of an old stream passage revealing the sloping stream way seen today. The relatively level Water Rift contained pools avoided on the way in but waded through on the way out. One spot in the rift tested the explorer's size and wish to keep dry where a tortuous and tight squeeze lay above a low wet crawl. It must be remembered that clothing before the advent of wet suits, fleeces and waterproof oversuits gave little protection against the cold. Many fatalities occurred as a result of hypothermia. The now dry Water Rift can be entered and forms an upper level passage to the top of the 'Forty'. When following the old route it is hard to imagine that it once carried the stream. The shaft of the 'Forty' now offers a clean and generally quiet chance to do SRT practice*). The return journey was made into a round trip by following the Wet Way. At the waterfall and low passage beyond, much kerfuffle ensued when Dennis thought he was stuck, so leaving Tony hanging onto rocks above the drop. When we reached what was then known as the Upper Water Chamber our exit stalled because the way forward through numerous entry streams was not apparent. Fortunately for us John Richardson was following with a Sandhurst party and pointed the way. As an added benefit we were again invited back to Fountain Cottage for a coffee.

Dennis and Tony greatly enjoyed themselves since their caving experience had turned out to be a great adventure with much laughing. I note in my journal "It was on this occasion that we decided definitely to put some ideas into operation and form the Mendip Caving Group". Even with this note my own view is that MCG started during our first trip in 1953, so it was written in information pamphlet no. 1.

Thus ended the first phase. Dillan Evans, Dennis Hemmings, Tony Windale and I became Founder Members. Dillan Evans and Tony Windale each took part in one more trip to Mendip. They, however, continued to attend our room gatherings at camp. Dennis had fortunately caught the bug and became one of our leading forces continuing for several years with great vigour and drive. Dennis had the ability to transform accounts of caving trips from somewhat matter of fact, to a life and death adventure. The stuff of sagas! He thus made an enthusiastic recruiting agent.

A note in my log details the second Mendip visit on 16.1.1954:

Leave Little Rissington by special weekend coach	1.50pm
Arrive Cheltenham	2.50pm
Cost 2/8, two shillings and eight pence, (13.3new pence today)	
Leave Cheltenham	5.06pm
Arrive Bristol (Temple Meads Station)	7.00pm
Cost 4/7, four shillings and seven pence, (22.9new pence)	
Leave Bristol by Bus	7.30pm
Arrive Hillgrove	8.40pm
Cost 1/8, one shilling and eight pence, (8.3new pence)	
Approximately 10-minute wait at Hillgrove to catch bus from Wells to Priddy	
Cost 7d, seven pence, (2.9 new pence)	

Total cost return journey 17/3, seventeen shillings and three pence, (86.2new pence). I seem to recall that my pay was 32 shillings a week less 3 shillings National Insurance leaving £1.45.

On present day equivalent, relative to average earnings, travel costs equate to about £44.00. My pay on the same basis equates to about £82.00. (£4264 per year).

Sunday evening a special coach also collected service personnel from Cheltenham, returning to Little Rissington.

Further reading.

"The Founding of MCG – The Early Years", *Mendip Caving Group Journal*. No. 4, 1967.
Mendip Caving Group Newsletter No. 1, February 1954(First Series newsletters)
Mendip Caving Group Information Pamphlet No.1.

The Rather Random Memories of Richard Woollacott!



Richard Woollacott riding into camp on the Piney Sleight farm pony c.1956

Malcolm asked me to put down on paper an account of some of the more important events in the early days of MCG history with which I was involved, for inclusion in a possible publication dealing with the Group's history how it actually was than a mere list of dates and facts would give.

I started to do this in a very factual way, but it ran away with me and all sorts of other things crept in. I considered editing out all the rubbish and self-indulgent opinion and memorabilia that had found its way into my screed, but decided that what follows is **MY** history of MCG and for me at least worth putting on paper. No doubt others will see the same period and events in different ways; if they were to record their feelings and memories as well one would get the feel of the time and a much better picture of how it actually was than a mere list of dates and facts would give.

My first trip with the MCG was Easter 1956. I think I was on my motorcycle, but I seem to remember the involvement of a coach. We camped in Velvet Bottom for the weekend, and I think it was cold. Malcolm walked us across the hills to Goatchurch which must have been quite a trek.



Drying gear on the rain-gauge railings



Camping in Velvet Bottom

Most members in those days were very young, ages probably ranging from 16 to about 25. Considering that, I think that we behaved by and large very responsibly. We had the problem that we were from London and therefore mistrusted by many locals, we started a policy of re-building dry stone walls when we found them down and closing gates and that sort of thing. It paid off in time, and we were eventually accepted as OK people.

In those days our means of transport were a little decrepit. One trip to Derbyshire a year or so later was made in a van borrowed from some Scouts. It went fine until the battery started to run down. A quick conference decided that something electrical had to go. Lights were essential, the windscreen wipers were also as it was raining hard, so it was the petrol pump that was disconnected. The journey continued with petrol from a jerry can being poured into a funnel that connected to the carburettor by a rubber tube. On one occasion a member, Barry Jackson who was expected on Mendip on Friday turned up on Sunday evening and was awarded the prize for the longest time taken from London to Mendip. His delay was caused by a track rod end falling apart and resulting in the car's entry into a ditch and his entry into the hospital that was at the top of the hill just before Marlborough. When discharged from the hospital, the track rod was re-assembled and held together.

with some electrical flex wound round it. This temporary repair took him to Mendip, back to London and running around there for a week or so before a new part was obtained. His other claim to fame was his general driving policy. He had the theory that if you were driving on a minor road that crossed a major road you should go as fast as possible since, the less time you were on the intersecting road, the less likely you were to be hit. He also claimed that whilst driving, particularly in fog, if you couldn't see it, it wasn't there. Malcolm Cotter was in those days famed for 'running out of road' on his motorcycle. It was rumoured that local dealers kept a special stock of handlebars for him since it seemed that most Mendip trips required a replacement pair.

Gradually our transport facilities improved, and I graduated from a motor cycle to a car – a 1933 Ford 8 Y model. After I had had it for a bit, I discovered the name Dolly May written in the dust on the back. This was so right as a name for the car. Paul Green had it engraved on two brass plates which were fitted to the bonnet. It was a long time later that I discovered that the author in the dust was Pete Goddard. One Friday it was announced on the radio that all roads to the west were impassable due to snow, so I telephoned a few people, Malcolm was one I remember, and suggested a trip to Mendip. We set off early on Saturday and did quite well until about Marlborough when a substantial snow rut broke the front nearside spring. The only way of proceeding was for two passengers to sit in the back on the offside on the lap of the third.. We proceeded to Devizes and a breaker's yard and purchased a spring. Fitting it had to wait till we got to Mendip, where the garage by the BEC hut fitted it.



Dolly May in Devon (with Robbie Charnock)

In June 1958 a new committee was formed. No doubt club records will give a more accurate record than my memory, but as I recall, Robbie Charnock was Treasurer, David Harle was Editor and produced the first Journal, Tony Crawford was Tackle Master manufacturing in his kitchen the best Electron ladder on Mendip and I was Secretary

The Club by this time was keen to get a cottage on Mendip particularly as we were the only club without one. During the previous few months, a sectional wooden shed had been found for sale and a deposit placed on it. Money was raised from the membership as loans to the club, the intention being that these loans would be repaid as and when the club could afford it. Robbie found that all the money (I think about £100, a lot of money in those days when the average member's earnings were £6 - £8 per week) had gone, filched by the person who previously had occupied the position of joint Secretary and Treasurer. My first job therefore as Secretary was to report the theft to the police. He was charged with this as well as with breaking into telephone boxes. I think he went to prison for a bit, but we never saw a penny back. We had to withdraw from the shed purchase and forfeited our deposit. The members all cancelled the club's debt to them, so it could at least start with a clean slate. Robbie was a fantastic Treasurer and restored the club's finances in no time. Actually one had to cross the street to avoid one's pockets being emptied by him.

Again I cannot remember dates, but a year or so later, we discovered a tumbledown building by the smelting tunnels at Nordrach. This had potential so we started to make enquiries. Jim Fry (who with his wife were the best friends that the club ever had) gave us the answer, the building was owned by Farmer Tucker who lived at Frome. The next weekend driving down, we called in on Mr Tucker, and eventually found him working in a field. I walked over to him and explained that we would like to rent the cottage from him if it would be possible. He replied in a lovely Somerset accent – "Well" he said, "I were going to put a tractor in there, but if you wan er, you have er". That was the end of the matter. Nothing in writing, no rent to pay. We used to send him a bottle of Scotch at Christmas and that was it.

THE COTTAGE



Malcolm Collier



Malcolm Collier



Robbie Charnock

Pete Goddard

We did a lot of work on it, as I remember the roof was pretty OK, but there were large pieces of wall missing and no doors or windows. This was put right and initially we had one room as a dormitory and the other as a kitchen/living room. The kitchen was equipped with calor gas rings. Incredibly as it may seem to some, we managed to install this without blowing up the building. On the dormitory door was placed a notice which read – “Foremen’s Lounge”, the same one that is still in the present cottage, its third site. This was ‘liberated’ by Tony Davis and me in about 1958 from the Kodak Social Centre under the nose of a painter busy painting the door he had removed it from. It is now heading towards being an antique. The dormitory was used by both male and female members for some time but as there was a small room in the centre of the cottage, as yet undeveloped, there was a suggestion that this could be female sleeping quarters. I conducted a survey amongst the membership on the question of segregation with a result that was most surprising for me at least – almost 100% of the females were happy with the existing situation and almost 100% of the males wanted privacy!

Outside we eventually built a concrete block building to house an electric generator we obtained. This was potentially somewhat lethal in that it was 250 volts DC, but gave us light. Even in those days vandalism could be a problem, so the building had a notice on it which read “Beware – sewage disposal”. This seemed to do the trick as it was never interfered with. Around the cottage we built a dry stone wall, a labour of many hours. The master craftsman at this was Peter Goddard who always put his hand on the right stone for the right place.

Our pub was the New Inn on Priddy Green, newly installed with electric light. Bitter was 10d (that’s 10 old pence) per



Pete Goddard

Malcolm wall-building

Always believing in modest ambitions, finding the master cave for the Mendips seemed a reasonable task to set ourselves. We therefore settled on Coopers Hole in the gorge. This was owned by the Marquess of Bath, so I had to write to him to obtain permission. How do you write to a Marquess I wondered. At the time I worked for Kodak, so I went to the Typing Pool Manageress, a noted dragon who scared everyone in the organisation. She was surprisingly helpful, perhaps impressed by a young man wanting to send a letter in a proper fashion, so she looked it up

pint and scrumpy was 4d a pint. In the 1950's it had two landlords, Sylvester and Oliver Speed. Sylvester was the elder, and had an affliction which caused spasms of twitching. One would order a round of drinks and after a considerable delay, they would arrive. He would ask for the cost and would disappear to the under-stairs bar with the money. You could hear much mumbling and chinking of coin, and he would return with your change. This was always wrong, always too much. Not wishing to 'do' him one would give it back, but when he returned with a modified amount of money after some significant time, this time it was too little. At this point you gave up as you were ready to order the next round of drinks. Sylvester died, and Oliver and his wife took over. Oliver in 1914 had never been further than Wells until he was picked up and transported to France to dig trenches in the Great War. Once returned to Pridly after the war, I don't think he left the village again. When Oliver died, Mrs Speed took over, assisted by her daughter (who's name I think was Phyllis. After a while, we were given the use of 'the best room' instead of the bar. Whether this was a compliment or because of the songs we sang I do not know. Eventually Mrs Speed became too infirm, Phyllis ran it for a while, but then it was sold. It had been in the Speed family for some 400 years.

Noel Dilly at Timber Hole (1958)



Robbie Charnock

The club had been digging Timber Hole in Velvet Bottom for some time without too much progress, so we thought a new project might be a good idea.

Digging at Cooper's Hole (1958 or 1959)
(Pete Goddard, who?, Don Searle)



Robbie Charnock

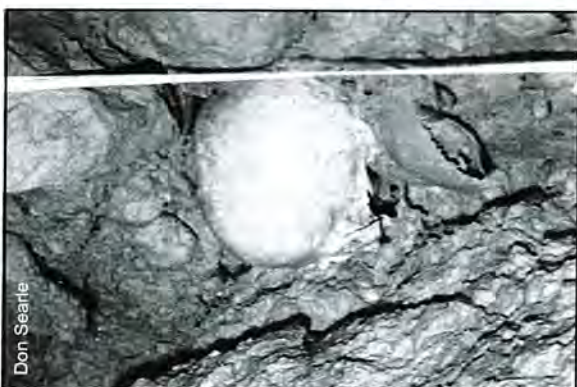
The New Inn, Pridly - Robbie Charnock, Don Searle,
Tony Crawford & John Green



Pete Goddard

in her Pitmans Manual. The result had to be seen to be believed. The signing off section ran to about 8 lines saying things like – I have the honour to remain, Your Lordship's humble and obedient servant and so on. This I duly copied into my letter asking for digging permission. How he must have laughed, I don't expect anyone had written to him like that for years. It did the trick though and we got the OK to dig. He was marvellous. We of course dug a man-sized tunnel, but being a man of vision, eventually he employed a gang of labourers to dig behind us and enlarge it to the full arch width as it is now. Malcolm and I took him down the tunnel to see it on one occasion, quite a thing for a man of his age. During the trip he entertained us with his colourful language that would have done credit to a docker. When we returned to the surface plastered in mud, he sat down on the solid leather seats of his car – something expensive like a Jaguar or a Merc – in order to remove his boots. When I said "You can't do that!" his reply was "I have **people** to sort this kind of thing out", a phrase I have used myself many times since, much to my wife's displeasure.

Skull found in Ubley Hill Pot (1960)



As well as Coopers, MCG had many other digs over the years. One successful one was Ubley Hill Pot, which amongst other attractions held a quantity of human skeletons. Then after the weekend of the breakthrough, Malcolm went back to London but I stayed on for the following week. Malcolm, unknown to me, decided that there was the opportunity of some publicity for the club and telephoned the BBC to tell them of the discovery. Apparently, the BBC got on to the local police to ask them if they knew about the human remains that had been found. It was news to them so they informed the Coroner who decided that they should be inspected to establish if an inquest should be held. Meanwhile, not knowing any of this, as my van had problems, I got a lift into Bath by Jim Fry to get the part I needed. I was coming back on the bus, when it was stopped suddenly in the middle of nowhere by a policeman standing in the middle of the road. I was sitting at the back of the bus in very scruffy clothes and with about a week's growth of beard. The policeman strode down the bus to me and said "Mr Woollacott?". When I owned up, he said "Come with me please" and marched me off the bus and into a police car. It was only then that I learnt what Malcolm had done and the resulting consternation amongst the authorities. The outcome was that I had to take a pathologist down the cave so that he could certify the bones as ancient. There had been the murder of a taxi driver in Bristol a few days ago, and that evening the Wells police were asked by the press if they would make a statement about the man arrested on the bus. Unfortunately they published nothing, otherwise I might have made some useful money from a libel action.

We were having a party, either the Cottage Warming Party or the Cottage Re-warming Party, I forget which. We thought that Patron the Marquess of Bath would look good on the club notepaper, so we invited him. I established that his favourite tipple was Worthington E, so we got Mrs Speed at the New Inn to order a firkin for us. We also had several Winchester jars of a clear distilled alcoholic liquid capable of stripping paint that had been prepared by a member who perhaps should remain anonymous. Diluted 50/50 with water it could be drunk with care, and I remember preparing a punch with it, but made sure that not a drop of it passed my lips. The party was good. The Marquess arrived with the Marchioness and two of his children. Lord Bath did justice to the Worthington and



Whitsun 1959 Cottage warming party—Richard Woollacott (Secretary) speaking to the Marquess of Bath

Lady Bath extolled the deliciousness of the punch. During the evening we visited the lake just below the cottage where she found, to her delight, quantities of tadpoles. "We don't have any of these at Longleat" she exclaimed, so an empty pickle jar was brought and a selection of tadpoles were captured so The Tadpoles of Longleat could be added to the Lions of Longleat as the house's attractions. During this process unfortunately her daughter fell into the lake, but by this time no one really cared. When it came to the time to go, Lord Bath drove his car straight into the ditch outside the cottage, and we had to push him out. What time he got back to Longleat I do not know. Anyway, the party did the trick and he accepted an invitation to become the Group's Patron, a position he occupied until his death in June 1992.



The Flaming Gunion (Don Searle, Pete Goddard, Bob Knott & others)

We had great times in the cottage. One great culinary creation emerged, The compulsory Mendip Goulash. The compulsory ingredient for this Cordon Noir dish was a tin of Mulligatawny soup. Then it was a matter of adding the contents of any tins of food to hand, preferably but not always savoury, and giving it a good boil up. After food, off we would go to the New Inn for the evening. The return drive was usually accompanied by a rendition of Ilkley Moor or something. We had a wind-up gramophone that was used regularly. I remember in particular a 78rpm record of a melody called Mosey's Turkey Trot, a modification of a melody by Mozart. This was improved greatly by an accompaniment on the tea chest double bass that we had. Often Bob Knott would perform his Flaming Gunion dance which involved him dancing around the cottage waving ignited water reeds that had been soaked in paraffin. All very simple pleasures, but those were innocent times.

We did actually find some time for caving. Goatchurch tended to be used for initial training trips for beginners. We introduced a lot of people to caving. I recall that we had a minimum age, fourteen I think, but we insisted on a signature on a permission slip that might or might not have been signed by parents. We never lost or damaged anyone though. In fact we were very safety conscious ensuring that party size gave sufficient experienced members to take care of beginners. Our gear was good too, and we spend a lot of money on our electron ladder and nylon rope. The main activity on Mendip probably took place in Longwood and Swildon's. In those days, access to GB was restricted to UBSS and their invitees. I think, though that changed later. We used to have away meets – Derbyshire, Yorkshire and South Wales and I recall one trip to Southern Ireland.

People are what make a club what it is. In our time we have had some real characters.



George Pape

Arthur Cox, who we treated as the club Granddad though he was probably only in his early forties. His false teeth had to be seen to be believed and he played the piano with the enthusiasm of a whirling dervish. He rode an NSU Quickly moped from Ealing to the Mendips with style and aplomb.

George Pape who learned each issue of Exchange and Mart off by heart and could give you a price and source of supply for anything.



Arthur Cox



Family commitments and other things caused me to leave the MCG, but I never completely lost touch with the Club or the Mendips. I got an enormous amount of pleasure and satisfaction from my time with the club and made a lot of real friends. My active membership period in the 50s and 60s was in a world much less stressful than the present day. Even so, for us, running away down to Somerset at weekends was a welcome change from the pressures of weekday life and the club got a lot of young men away from their mother's apron strings. In the stresses of the present day it must be an even more valuable safety valve. Present custodians, look after MCG, you have charge of something valuable that should be worth at least another 50 years.

Then of course there were the *Frys*, not members, though why we did not make them Honorary Members I do not know. Particularly in those early days they were enormously helpful to us. If there was anything you needed – wood, metal, some wheels or anything – Jim would find it. Mrs Fry (I never knew her Christian name) was a sort of mother figure, someone you could always call on for a chat, with a kitchen in which you were always welcome. She was the only woman I have ever known who could swear without it being in any way distasteful. I called in once to ask where Jim was, “Gone to bleden” she seemed to say. “Where?” I asked “bleden” she replied. “Where?”. Still puzzled I asked again “Gone to bleden bloody Bledon” she said. I remember visiting the Mendips after a gap of about five years. I tapped the door of the Fry’s kitchen and walked in. There was Mrs Fry seated by the Aga as always. She gave me a dirty look and said “Where the bloody hell have you been”, just as if I had been missing for an hour or so.



“The best friends we ever had”: Jim Fry with his wife Gladys and their son Ken

Mary Cox

Austin Saunders who disdained tents, and used to reside under a sheet of corrugated iron or anything else that came to hand. He maintained that on a trip of less than 10 days duration, washing was a waste of time. *Noel Dilly* was a medical student in the best tradition. He was our explosives expert, and once rode a Lambretta Scooter from London to the Mendips over snow and ice rutted roads with 5lb of gelignite in one pannier bag and 50 detonators in the other. At one stage there were a few pounds of weeping gelignite stored in the loft of the cottage, finally used for a waterspout demo in the lake. He became something very respectable, a Professor I think in a London teaching hospital. *George Savage* who was a time-served bookbinder and gave up that well paid job to join the Church Army. George never preached to anyone and was a person on whom one could rely completely. I wonder what he came of him?

Expeditions and Holidays – the first 50 years

written by Joan Goddard

I make no apology for the fact that most of the following information has been sourced from previous MCG publications. My aim has been to summarise the activities of MCG abroad over the last fifty years and leave it to the reader to delve into the publications and logbooks in the library to find out more. I have only looked at newsletters and journals, so more details may come to light when the logbooks are investigated.

It is worth remembering that back in the 1950s a trip to Mendip was quite an undertaking and visits to Derbyshire, Yorkshire, Scotland and Wales assumed almost expedition status.

1950s

In September 1954 Tony Knibbs and Malcolm Cotter travelled by train to Penwyllt station to spend a week camping near the OFD rising. They found about 150 feet of passage in Tunnel Cave and, with Noel Dilly, surveyed Downey's Cave, a small cave which is part of the OFD system. The following month Malcolm Cotter, Derek Holmes and Ken Wasie travelled to Scotland looking for new caves in the Durness Limestone. They visited Smoo Cave and Polop Pot (probably a blow hole) but as far as breaking new ground was concerned the trip was a disappointment. In 1957 Mendip Caving Group and Westminster Speleological Group members hired a coach to travel to Clapham for a weekend meet. The surveying of Longwood/August and Goaturch occupied members during 1958 and 1959, after which the Group began caving further afield.

Joan Goddard in Allion



Tony Knibbs

1960s

Europe beckoned during this period, no doubt encouraged by the translation of Norbert Casteret's books into English, the return of members from National Service and improvement in transport. Land Rovers were the vehicles of choice and vans were also popular - but were restricted to a maximum speed of 40mph in return for reduced road tax. The 1966 trip to Co. Clare was notable for the collision of Pat Walsh's and Tony Fitzgibbon's identical blue vans on the approach to the camp site.

1960: The first overseas meets, both to France: the Vercors region near Grenoble and the Alpes Maritimes region (Var Département). Two members, Pat Walsh and Peter Dyer, joined up with a French group of cavers to descend the Avon du Clos del Fayoun on the Canjuers Plateau near Dra-guignan. Although suffering from sunstroke, Peter Dyer later joined the Vercors group of Tony Knibbs, Malcolm Cotter, Robbie Charnock, Pauline Venn and Jack Green who camped at La Chapelle-en-Vercors. They had made contact with two of the team that had explored the Gouffre Berger and with their help a fine visit was made to Grotte de Gournier and Caves de Sassenage. Visits were made to local show caves Grotte de la Luite and Grottes de Choranche and they enjoyed a splendid five-hour dinner in Sassenage with local cavers to round off the holiday!

1961: The August 1961 news-sheet listed three caving expeditions going abroad, to the Pyrenees in Tony Knibbs' Land Rover (Tony Knibbs ("Mig"), Pauline Venn, Mike Rennie, Robert Templeman, and James Gibb), to Austria in Malcolm's Land Rover (Malcolm Cotter, Norma Hurst, Don Searle, June Searle, John Rutherford and Don Dovaston) and to the French Alps and Pyrenees (in Jack Green's Land Rover). The first two took place as planned but the third seems to have been replaced by a meet in Ireland (Sligo) [News-sheet No 6].

A brief report of the Pyrenees trip by James Gibb described visits to Lascaux and Grotte de Niaux, both containing cave paintings. The party explored a couple of small cavities in the hillside above the latter cave and then drove to Grotte de Bedeilhac and Grotte de Ker which was "remarkable only for its bat population and very liberal piles of guano". A trip was made into La Cigalère which had

been badly vandalised in the past - there were large slabs of paraffin wax, which had apparently been used to protect formations while they were being removed from the cave. Despite this, however, many fine formations remained. Later two of the group entered Grotte de Maouro via a tight squeeze past a locked barrier and reported a stream passage which they waded along "*nor ever came to the end thereof*". On the way to Luz they stopped at Grotte Gargas, the walls of which had impressions of human hands in black, before returning to Calais via the Cirque de Gavarnie [*Journal No.3*].

The **Austrian Expedition** by six members including Don and June Searle, Malcolm and Norma Cotter, Don Dovaston and John "Scruff" Rutherford included a visit to Tantalhöhle led by Felix Seiser. After a night spent sleeping under the stars, the party set off at dawn up a valley and into the mountains. They were unfit and ill equipped, had no framed ruc-sacs and struggled with an assortment of baggage up to a caving club hut above the snow line, having taken 4 hours to complete what was a supposedly 2 hr trip! After a rest they continued to the cave about 300ft higher up the mountain, to find the entrance almost blocked with snow. A narrow entrance crawl led via a 12ft fixed ladder and a scree slope to where they saw and photographed their first ice formations. Scruff described the cave as like a rather roomier and steeper version of Aggy-Aggy with many mud formations and some very good ladder pitches - "*slung with decayed electron ladder*". After 9 hours, at about 11pm, a hut was reached (made of a solid timber framework, alloy sheeting and with a board floor). Here the weary party ate and spent the night before setting out on the return journey, this time having to climb back up all the pitches and screes and with frequent stops for photography, food and rest. After 28 hours they reached the surface but instead of welcome daylight and a view across the mountains, it was dark and absolutely pouring down with rain. Kuloch and Hennehöhle were also visited [*Journal No. 3*].

Richard Woollacott began his description of the trip to **Sligo** (John (Jack) Green, Tony Noble, Peter Dyer and Richard) by admitting that on arrival in Ireland he discovered he had lost his document case with all the maps and information on caving - they had no idea where to look for the caves! They drove to Sligo and by a stroke of luck pitched camp in the right area, Ballinafad village. Information on the local caves was gained on a visit to Sligo library and by questioning local people, and the following day they set off to the Kesh area. Although they found some small caves which they surveyed and named 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' and followed a stream to a too-tight sink, it was only at the end of their stay that they found a man-sized swallet (Cave 'E') with an entrance about 7ft high and 3 ft wide. The stream cascaded down a couple of waterfalls and beyond, but it was late and as they needed to return across the boggy moors in daylight they exited the cave, resolving to carry the project further the following year [*Journal No. 3*].

Tony Knibbs reported on the follow-up trip to **Sligo and Leitrim** by ten members including Robbie Charnock, Ann Gibb (Davies), Geoff Davies, Joyce Dyer, Tony Knibbs, Maureen Taylor (Woollacott), Pauline Venn, Richard Woollacott and Robert Templeman.

J.C. Coleman (Irish Tourist Board) had loaned them maps, articles and even his own field notes. Firstly they examined the Bricklieve Mountains region in Co. Sligo and generally speaking the area was disappointing. There were active and dry swallets but they needed some work to gain access, although a 70ft dry resurgence was located about 2 miles north of Ballinafad at the foot of the plateau. 1¼ miles east of Ballinafad Lecarrow Swallet and an associated resurgence were marked on the O.S. map. A second sink was found, which was named Lecarrow East Swallet. The western swallet was explored although MCG was not the first to do so as they found two Irish names inscribed on a calcite flow. The cave had abundant flowstone and terminated in a wide, fast-flowing sump. A Grade 4 survey was carried out. At the



Eire 1962

resurgence a deep entrance pool was followed by a wide stream passage with a small stream entering from the left. 300ft later the main passage reaches a still sump pool c.15ft in diameter. The left passage was a 250 ft wet stony crawl to a chamber with a large sump pool.

A day was spent in the Geevagh-Tap area exploring Carrowmore Cavern. In the Glenaniff Valley a local shepherd told them about two pots (with a strong Yorkshire flavour) and nearby was an active swallet whose two passages quickly narrowed down. The following day the southernmost pot was examined and found to have a 155 ft pitch; the total depth was estimated at 185 ft.

A brief visit was made to the resurgence of the Marble Arch Caves in Fermanagh before travelling to Co. Cavan when the group contacted the White Fathers College where St Augustine's Cave runs below the grounds. The cave is close to the surface, a short unroofed stretch dividing it into an



Tony Knibbs

upstream section (300ft) and a larger downstream section (1100 ft). A dinghy was used to navigate an almost straight canal 5-8ft wide, the roof height being 15 ft and the water depth c.6ft. It was about 500 ft long. The cave has interesting and beautiful stretches which may all be appreciated in comparative comfort, and the welcome extended by college personnel included showers and a splendid high tea. [Journal No. 4].

There also appears to have been a 1962 trip to **Yugoslavia** by Jack Green, Don Dovaston (and others?) as the September news-sheet reported that a slide show was to be given [News-sheet No 15].

St Augustine's cave, Cavan, 1962

In **1963: Switzerland** was visited by Pete Goddard, Jack Green, Tony and Pauline Knibbs,

Simon Knight, Pete Moors, Peter Munt, Bryan Pittman, Richard Spain, Maureen and Richard Woollacott (and James Gibb?) The first week was spent with SCMN (Speleo-Club des Montagnes Neuchateloises) at Flühli in the Shrattenfluh lapiaz. – an inclined plateau of bare, serrated limestone. On the first day they discovered a new cave. Although a preliminary exploration ended at the top of an estimated 140 ft pitch, a return to the aptly named Mendiphöhle by three MCG and 3 SCMN proved it to be 155 feet deep. At the base was a huge chamber with a floor of fallen blocks, leading to a second large chamber with a very dodgy boulder choke at the end. Day 2 saw a trip to Nuenburgerhöhle, two miles long with the Grand Collecteur – “a stream passage of handsome dimensions” - but with few formations other than moonmilk. The team travelled to the High Alps for their second week and their efforts were divided between the Gouffre de Pertuis (480ft deep with pitches of approximately 10ft, 45ft, 90ft, 30ft and 140ft) and the Grotte de Lierre situated at the bottom of a deep gorge through which the river Doubs runs. It took over an hour to negotiate the 600 yards of almost impenetrable ‘jungle’ between the road and the cave entrance. 60ft of large level passage led to a chamber with a 40ft pitch, the lower part of which had been dug out of glutinous clay. In the evening a traditional Swiss fondue was held in an immense arch in the cliff face with a dry earth floor and several large rocks serving as tables. It was a jolly affair with two local clubs vying with each other to achieve the fiercest possible brew.



Jack Green's landrover, Switzerland

The following day, accompanied by Raymond Gigon (president of the SCMN), a visit was made to the underground Glaciere de Montési which occupies a chamber 200ft x 90ft and c. 60ft high, linked to the surface by 3 separate pitches. The largest one is a scramble down and ice axes were used to cut steps in the ice flows. Finally, on their last day an exploration was made of La Grotte de Môtiers

in the Val de Travers – a large entrance portal and a gently ascending roomy passage with a number of side passages eventually led to the subterranean river at a large sump pool [Journal No 4].

1965 MCG hosted a return visit of SCMN to Mendip.

1966: The Group's third visit to Ireland was to **Co. Clare**. Nine people including Pete Goddard, Tony Fitzgibbon, Simon Knight, Joan Robinson (Goddard), June Seath (Walsh), Julie Thrift (Fitzgibbon) and Pat Walsh took the overnight ferry from Swansea and drove along the (then) bad roads of Southern Ireland to Lisdoonvarna. We enquired about camp sites and were told to speak to a farmer who lived just down the road from Pollnagollum. Mr. Fitzgerald allocated us a field – but we could find no way in. It turned out that we were to “*just take down the wall and drive in; build it up again when ye go*”. We collected our milk from him each morning, warm from the cow, and the only downside to this idyllic location was that we were on the east side of Slieve Elva where all the scudding clouds from the Atlantic dropped their load! Too late we discovered that the western side of the hill basked in sunshine most of the time. After a particularly wet night we moved to a nearby cottage, owned by Mr Fitzgerald's brother I think. Not a lot of caving was done, as I recall; beaches, peat fires and Guinness all contrived to keep us on the surface most of the time. There was an attempt at Fisher Street Pot but dodgy route-finding meant we spent most of our time in Aille's Tributaries – a series of small, sharp, meandering, stream passages. To this day



Simon Knight & Pete Goddard

I recoil when I remember a long slippery creature sliding between my fingers as I crawled through the stream. Ugh! It turned out to be only an eel as these Clare caves connect with the sea. At the same time as we were there, Oliver Lloyd and UBSS were staying nearby and a bit of banter in the bar led to an exchange of ‘words’. These were the days when inter-club songs were composed on an almost weekly basis.

*The MCG went caving
In Ireland for a change.
They went down Doolin's Pothole
And found it very strange.
They got inside the entrance,
The way they couldn't recall.
They went up Aille's Tributaries
And not the Main Stream at all.*

O.C.Lloyd

*Oliver went to Ireland
And he went to O'Donague's bar.
He had ten pints of Guinness
Which was nine too many by far.
And he made up derogatory ditties
about the M.C.G.
Which accounts for the lump on his
forehead
And his car all covered in P.*

MCG

Around this time, Malcolm and Norma Cotter were living in Singapore and caving in **Malaya**, and Malcolm wrote an interesting description of Tempurong River Cave where they had to contend with rotting scaffold poles and ladders left by guano gatherers [Journal No.4, NL 36, NL 41, NL 45].

While on holiday in **Yugoslavia** Malcolm and Don Searle met up with some British and Yugoslavian cavers. They explored an 80ft shaft which was extended by enlarging a partly blocked squeeze, leading to a 30ft and 20ft pitch. Although the new finds were surveyed, Malcolm's article gave no name for the cave [NL 48].

1967: Twenty people travelled to **Yugoslavia** this time - Mick Brace, Robbie and Pam Charnock, Chris Fry, Brian Hillman, Dave Hodby, Sheila Killingback, Simon Knight, Mike Lovell, Pete Mathews, Ken Newcomb, Mike Nightingale, Mike Quartermain, Pete and John Virgo, Don Vosper, Roger Wallington, Pat and June Walsh (and another?).

The group made contact with Dr Rado Gospodaric from the Institute for Karstic Research who took them down Tkalco Jama (Rakov Skocjan doline) where they assisted him in plumbing the lake to

complete his survey of the cave. A crack on the other side of the lake, and c. 25ft above it, was entered and led to a chamber containing a clear pool, 'Mendip Lake'. Passages beyond eventually sumped or were choked. The new discovery amounted to 300ft.

This accounted for a celebration meal and the following day Andrej Kranjc took them to Laze where, at a local bar, they ordered 19 lemonades and a beer (must have been a very good celebration!). They were taken down Logarcek which began with a 70ft shaft and was very muddy. They eventually reached a 'gigantic' chamber with a small stream running through it. Apparently this is normally a strong river but because of a drought, the place where it normally sumped was a walkable passage. A party of four plus Andrej were able to paddle through the second sump in inflatable dinghies and they continued to the final sump surveying the newly discovered passage on the way.

The magnificent Krisna Jama and Planina Jama caves were also visited as well as the tourist caves Skocjanske Jame, Predjama and Postojna.

[Journal No 5 – "Those Meritorious Speleologists"]

1968: A month before the Russians arrived, Pete Mathews, Ken Newcomb and Don Vosper 'invaded' **Czechoslovakia**, completing a grand figure of eight tour and visiting all the main karst areas. Pete Mathews' account of the trip suggests that it was mainly a tour of show caves, of which there were many. When they signed the visitors' book at Chynovska Jeskyne, which they toured by candlelight, they noticed the only other British visitors had been E.K. Tratman et al in 1964.

The Moravian Karst area is noted for the Macocha Chasm (138m deep and c.100m across) which is fed by a number of caves – Sosuvka, Balcarca and Katerina Caves, and the Punkva River Cave from which a short dry series brought them to the bottom of the sheer cliffs of the Macocha where they got into boats and cruised along a river passage at about 3 knots, alighting to look at a beautiful side passage before returning to the entrance.

Driving northwards to the Liptov Karst, on the edge of the Low Tatra Mountains, they visited Czechoslovakia's most famous cave, the Demanova System. Two of the entrances are used as show caves, one of which (Dragon Ice Cave) had a few rather weary ice formations behind insulating doors. The Slobody (Freedom) Cave had fine examples of active stalactites and deep, crystal clear pools. Next on the programme were the High Tatra Mountains and Belanska Cave near the Polish Border. Then to Dobsina, which Pete reckoned to be one of the finest ice caves in the world. The South Slovakian Karst provided trips to Gombasek Cave, Domica Cave (which connects to the Hungarian Cave of Baradla from which it was separated by a heavy iron gate to prevent through trips), Ardova Cave, Isbica Cave, Hranice Aragonite Cave (entrance impassable because of the swollen river) and Mladec & Javoricko Caves. For a 12 night tour, Pete, Ken and Don managed to visit an amazing number of caves *[MCG Journal No 5]*.

1969: The Group's second visit to **Austria** was undertaken by twelve (not so) hardy souls (Joan & Pete Goddard, Dave Hodby, Pete Pierce, John Pudduck, Marion, Pete Mathews, Bill Scrace, Greg Smith, Roy Stephens, Don Vosper, Roger Wallington). We met up with Felix Siezer again and after an impromptu slide show, Felix explained that he was going to show us Eis Kägel Höhle (entrance 2250m ASL) the following Friday. We drove the vehicles some way up the mountain and then

continued on foot. We climbed 500m that evening to a mountain hut at 1526m, leaving the remaining 700+m until the next day. In the morning we changed into caving gear, set off - and the rain turned to snow. The snow got deeper and the wind got windier and Felix kept shouting "*Only 15 minutes more to ze cave entrance*". Time went on, there was no sign of the cave entrance and the weather was deteriorating. Felix fell into a waist-high snowdrift, promptly followed by Greg who was also complaining of altitude sickness - or was it the result of imbibing too much alcohol the night before? At the



same instant a thunderous roar was followed by a minor avalanche which landed on two of the party. Reluctantly we decided to abandon the trip. An ice packed traverse on the way down required a lifeline at one point, but the remainder of the descent turned into a romp and slide in the snow!

The following day, Joan & Pete Goddard, and Pete Mathews went to Eisriesenwelt Ice Cave (tourist trip) whilst the rest of the group accompanied Felix to Hennerhöhle which sported a stream reminiscent of OFD 2 [NL 77].

1970s

During the early 1970s walking, climbing and caving trips to Scotland and Yorkshire were a regular occurrence for many of our members. MCG News 101 referred to "MCG Northern Branch Activities" – John Miriam, Greg Smith, Pete Mathews, Roger Wallington, and John Macmillan provided the core members with Allan Wicks, Mike Lovell, John Evans, Don Vosper, Bill Jones, et al being frequent participants.
From 1976 caving took second place to the building of the first Nordrach Cottage.

1970: There was a visit to the West Tatra region of **Poland** this year, apparently by ten from MCG and two from Chelsea SS. Roger Wallington and Bruce Bennett were there but apart from a short piece in Newsletter No 86 entitled "A Trip that Never Was", I have been unable to find a report of the trip or a list of those participating.

In **1971** there was a trip to **Yugoslavia** but no report was published and in **1972** a four day visit to **Mallorca** with SMCC was written up by Tony Knibbs but with no details of participants - it was mainly a reconnaissance and show cave trip [NL 94].

1973: Bill Jones, Pete Mathews and Don Vosper travelled to **Czechoslovakia**, visiting the show cave Konepruska, near Beroun, while en route to Moravsky Kras where they met local cavers they had contacted prior to the trip. They camped at the Skalni-mlyn field centre where they were looked after by Mike, head warden of Moravsky Kras National Park. As he put it when asked what his job entailed, *"I look after conservation...the best way to conserve the countryside is to do nuffink, and all day long I do nuffink, so they make me head."*

"Time at Skalni-mlyn often stood still. During lulls everyone waited around, looked out of the window or up at trees and then at their watches (if they had them) as if something important was about to happen, but it never did. Then suddenly everyone would leap up and rush around, tackle and odd items of clothing would be thrown about. We would be late, we must meet our friends and off people would rush in all directions."

A tour of the local show caves was arranged, starting with Sloupsko-Sosuvské System beyond the show cave, Balcarka Jeskyne and Katerinska Jeskyne. Punkevní Jeskyne was the finest one we visited - 800m of passage led out into daylight just above the lake at the base of Macocha Chasm, from where the cave tour continued, mainly in battery driven boats.

Visits were made to some numbered caves; Cave 13C was a series of pitches in a 100m dry shaft leading to the Bila Boda River streamway down which the group paddled in inflatable dinghies. The streamway is about 1½ km long and disappears in a sump. The next destination was Rudické Propadání, a large cave where a trip to the end and back would take two days. The cave contained numerous slimy wooden ladders and jammed baulks of timber and every so often we cavorted from a pair of steel wires slung across a black bottomless lake (later found to be knee deep). The cave was arranged more on the lines of an army assault course with timbers and wires on every stretch which might otherwise have been a bit too easy! Bycí Skála is really two caves, a dry roomy cave where archaeologists during the 19thC discovered some magnificent bronzes and remains of mass human sacrifices. The other cave contained a deep lake about 100m across which we crossed on a large steel boat to dry passage ending at a dig face 6ft high and 5 ft wide, about a kilometre from the entrance. The ready drilled shot holes were 9 feet deep and wide enough to load with your arm.

Then on to the Tatras where two caves were visited, Demanovská Sloboda Jaskyna and an ice cave, Dobsinská L'adova Jaskyna [NL 110, NL 111].



Czechoslovakia, 1975:

Standing: Bernard Reeves, ? , Neil Brooker, Wayne Hiscox, Bruce Dean, John Miriam, Warden, Bill Jones, ? , Don Vosper, Dave Hodby.

Sitting: Pete Mathews, Tricia Wallington, Ann Hiscox, ? , Henry, Greg Smith, Roger Wallington

In August/September **1975** a larger group returned to the Moravian Karst, **Czechslovakia**, travelling in Dave Hodby's minibus. The trip does not seem to have been written up but Don Vosper recalls that the high spot was a visit to Amaterska (Amateurs) Cave. Rudicke Propadani and Cave 13C were also visited.

1976: Spring Bank Holiday week saw a contingent of MCG members, including Bill Jones and Greg Smith, caving in **County Clare**, but the only article to be published referred to Polican, Doolin, - a dig which was discovered, explored, surveyed and returned to its original condition in under four hours! [NL 117].

1978: Presumably a visit was made to **Switzerland** as Greg Smith gave a talk on it at the "Beehive" in 1979. (also on the trip: were Bill Jones and Tony Knibbs) and in **1979** several members including John Miriam joined an NPC trip to the Gouffre Berger.

1980s

With the destruction of the new cottage in the early hours of 1980 and its subsequent reconstruction by a firm of builders, caving again became the major focus of the club.

Regular visitors to the North now included Geoff Barton, Adrian Duckett, Roy Kempston, Neil Hutchinson, Ian McKechnie, Ian Parry, Martin Rowe, Steve Taylor and Alan Mellon.

Weekends in South Wales regularly featured on the meet programme.

Armchair meets at the Mawson Arms, Chiswick, became a regular feature and often took the form of slide shows of expeditions and holidays.

By 1985 Wednesday night sessions (caving and digging) were in operation and Somerset membership was thriving.

Caving in Mallorca was popular during the Christmas/New Year holidays between 1984 and 1987

In September 1987 the first 'Fragments from France' appeared in the newsletter. This feature by Tony Knibbs continued for the next twenty years and described a large number of caving trips in France.

1980: John Miriam, Don Vosper and Greg Smith joined 10 NPC and CPC cavers for an expedition to **Kephallonia, Greece**, where they hoped to discover caves in the central part of the island between a known sink to the west and known risings at the east. Unfortunately no caves of importance were found other than eight previously known ones around Sami, near to where the waters rise just off the coastline [NL 138].

1981: A family holiday in **Virginia, USA**, gave Ian McKechnie and Geoff Barton the opportunity to visit Luray and Skyline Caverns in Virginia [NL 145].



Roy Kempston and Geoff Barton breaking carbide into manageable pieces



Martin Rowe with the "Tackle Store"

1983: Arbas, Pyrenees (August/September). People stayed at various places in the locality but the only time they all met together was for Adrian's birthday! Trips were made to Trou Mile, Trou du Vent, Gouffre Raymonde, Gouffre Pierre and Pène Blanque (all part of the Réseau Trombe System) and they are described in Neil Hutchinson's excellent article. This was the first major MCG expedition for a number of years; many lessons were learnt and valuable experience gained within an enjoyable two week trip [Journal No. 8].

Staying at Arbas camp: Adrian Duckett, Neil Hutchinson, Roy and (Mandy) Kempston, Tony Knibbs, John and [Helen] Miriam, Mike Mintram, Ian Parry, Martin Rowe, Denise Samuel, Steve Taylor, Dick Housego and (Penny) and (Barbara).

Staying in gites: Ian McKechnie, Geoff and (Morag) Barton, (Kathleen Gardener), Clive Towner, Jill Attwood, Mick Lowe and (Sue) and (Lucy), Arthur Spain and (family), John Pudduck and (family), Steve and (Kate) Taylor.

Staying 'elsewhere': Pete Harvey and (Wendy), Mike Haselden and (family).
(Names shown in brackets were not caving).

*"If you see the MCG all hanging from a willow tree
Practising their SRT, you know it's not for Swildons Three.
We'll take a boat across the sea, and spend a night in gay Paris,
Then travel to the Pyrenees, where Arbas is the place to be.*

*Arbas, Arbas, Arbas is the place to be.
Arbas, Arbas in the Pyrenees.
Arbas, Arbas, make a camp among the trees.
Arbas, Arbas, loved by all the MCG
(Sung to the well known 'can-can' theme)*



Preparations for the trip included a Whernside Manor training course and weekly SRT practice sessions up a tree in Ian McKechnie's garden.

1984: A planned trip to Ireland was cancelled but at Easter six members visited **Assynt**, staying at the old Grampian hut [NL 172].

Alan Dougherty and Mike Haselden were part of a 30-strong Whernside Manor expedition to the Gouffre Berger in July. Alan returned to the surface after problems with some of the rigging but Mike solo-ed to the bottom. They also had time to visit Scialet de Malaterre (400ft shaft) and Grotte de Gournier [NL 172 and 175].

Over the Christmas/ New Year period Andy Beare, Adrian Duckett, Neil Hutchinson, Ian Parry and Martin Rowe flew to **Mallorca** for the first of the club's many visits there. They concentrated on the Pollença area and the Plateau of Escorca where difficult ground conditions and dense vegetation led to a routine of one day spent finding an entrance and the next day exploring the cave. Virtually all the caves were dry and very warm, many with 100m+ pitches and some with fine formations. Caves visited were Avenç de la Pla de Bassas, Cava Campana, Cava Cornavaques, Avenç D'Escorla, Cava Cal Peso, Avenç Comi and Cava Coma Freda. Much information was gathered about the island's caving potential and useful contacts made. [NL 179].

1985: Second Christmas/New Year trip to **Mallorca** (Andy Beare, Neil Hutchinson, Ian Parry, Martin Rowe, Kate Taylor, Steve Taylor, Joy Merron, Paul Merron, Paul Craig plus 3 more). In addition to the six caves previously explored, they went down Avenç d'Escorca, Avenç s'Aigo, Avenç Femenia (all with 100m+ shafts) and Cova de Can Sion (a predominantly horizontal cave where Andy Beare pushed a small squeeze through boulders into a new, large, superbly decorated, steeply inclined chamber) [NL 185].



Mallorca, 1985: Alan Mellon, Neil Hutchinson, Adrian Duckett, Pat Newman, Paul Craig, Ian Parry, Steve & Kate Taylor, Andy Beare, Paul Merron, Martin Rowe

1986: Spain. Sima GESM was the highlight of the trip to Ronda, Malaga region, in September. There were 18 expedition members and John and Helen Miriam, the Kempstons, the Bartons and the McKechnies stayed at the coast. A brief log of the trip can be found in NL 190. Seven different caves were descended, at least two new entrances were discovered and three separate parties descended Sima GESM (to 200m, 500m and 950m respectively). Mike, Ian, Neil and a Spanish caver Pepe were the ones who reached 950m but, unfortunately, they ran out of rope there. Mike ~ the Whirling Dervish ~ Haselden described descending one of the pitches:

I arrived at a pitch head as Neil was going down, clipped myself to the traverse line and made ready to descend. I waited for the signal and as I watched Neil's light become more and more distant I knew this was the big one. Eventually a faint signal told me the rope was free. I checked it for slack, loaded the descender and carefully swung over to hang on to the main rope. I started the descent and looked all around me as far as my light would reach to take in the feel of this huge pitch of about 700ft (213m). I passed a rebelay and continued the descent when I felt something wrong about the rope passing through my right hand. I stopped immediately and to my horror only inches away from the descender the rope was badly damaged. Before you could blink there was a jammer on the rope above and I was ready to prussik. The others were too remote for communication and there was a conflict of decision in my mind. My first reaction was to abort and make good my return to the surface but then I felt I had to effect a repair to the rig for the sake of my good friends below. I hung there for a while sorting things out in my mind and then prussiked up to the last rebelay to rearrange it with some spare slack, then abseiled down close to the damaged rope and tied it off with a figure of eight. Having made safe the rope I passed the knot and continued the descent at a steady gentle rate. My left hand got tired of holding the brake in and the bottom was nowhere in sight. But I went on,

observing a trail of steam coming off the damp rope generated by my very hot descender. Eventually the pitch bottom was discernible but even so it seemed an eternity before my feet touched down, much to my relief. There are times in life when words are inadequate for the expression of one's feelings. This was such a time.



Standing: Linda ?, Gary Padireau, John Miriam, Mike Haselden, Alan Mellon, Adrian Duckett, Pat Newman, Grant Shepherd, Johnathan Roberts, Victoria Arbizu, Genaro, Ian Parry

Sitting: Helen Miriam, Linda Gates (Milne), Sue Haselden, Yvonne Ward, Martin Rowe, Louise Curley, Lesley Robbins, Andy Beare, Neil Hutchinson

For many the Hundidero - Cueva del Gatto through trip (approximately 4km) was the highlight of the holiday and it was completed by most of the group. The other caves visited were Cueva Libar, Sima de la Ventana, Cabo de Ronda, Cueva del Chapi and Sima de Villaluenga [NLs 190, 193, 194].

Mallorca was again the winter destination of Andy Beare, Neil Hutchinson, Ian Parry, Leslie Robbins, Martin Rowe, Richard Stansfield and Yvonne Ward. A set of 1:25,000 maps was purchased, making cave location much easier than in previous years. This was the holiday when seven people plus caving gear had to fit into a hired Ford Fiesta – not easy, but proved possible. As well as caves visited on previous trips, four more were located, together with the latest MCG discovery, named Avenc Banc de Llorer – a 60ft shaft found by Martin Rowe and almost descended by Ian Parry in ‘free fall mode’ when the ground on which he was standing disappeared off down the hole! [NL 191].

1987: In September Mike & Sue Haselden and guest Peter Eckford met up with Tony Knibbs, Denise Samuel and Pete Harvey in **Vercors**. Mike and Peter descended Scialet de Malaterre, a 120m daylight shaft, and Tony, Denise, Pete Eckford and Mike tackled Scialet du Trisou, the latter two bottoming it. Pete Harvey produced an inflatable boat from the boot of his car which enabled everyone to explore 4km of fossil passage in Grotte de Gournier and on another day Mike and the two Peters visited Grotte de Bournillon [NL 198].

The usual Christmas visit to **Mallorca** was by Andy Beare, Mike, Sue and Oliver Haselden, Neil Hutchinson, Lesley Robbins, Martin Rowe, Yvonne Ward and three non-cavers. Caves found or descended for the first time were Cova de Muntanya, Avenc Fonda, Cova de Llenaire, ‘Five-to-Three’ and Avenc de na Blanca [NL 198].

1988: During the early part of the year Vince Simmonds and John Beauchamp visited Niah caves in

Sarawak, Borneo (Great Cave with its guano covered 'plank-walks' and population of swiftlets, and Painted Cave – a large through-cave with interesting paintings thought to be up to 4,000 years old) [NL 200]. Later in the year they went into Lawa Cave in Kanchanaburi province, Thailand [NL 201].

In August there was a second MCG expedition to Sima GESM in **Southern Spain**. Ten MCG members (Mike & Oliver Haselden, Lesley Robbins, Andy Beare, Martin Rowe, Yvonne Ward, Neil Hutchinson, Pat Newman +) and 6 Northern cavers (Dave Elliott +.....) camped near the Refugio Rodrigues de la Fuente. Two teams, the Northerners and MCG (Neil, Mike, Olly and Andy) rigged alternate sections, with Lesley, Pat, Yvonne and Martin acting as sherpas. They reached a depth of 800m - at which point they realised that unfortunately there was insufficient time to reach the bottom (1074m) *and* derig in the time available. To break the long drive back home the group stopped in the Picos and visited another system, Sima de la Cueto. As this cave is 30km long and 600m deep they only had time to explore the "ends", the 302m entrance pitch and the resurgence as far as the third lake [NL 203].

Carl Wright spent his annual holiday in Ireland travelling from County Clare (where he worked at Aillwee Caves) to **County Fermanagh** to visit the Marble Arch show cave. Colleagues there took him to the Cuilcagh, a massive flat-topped mountain from which numerous streams disappeared into swallet holes, and they descended a flood-prone cave (which he didn't name). Carl was sufficiently impressed by Fermanagh to write *"For my money this is the finest caving area in Ireland and Britain"* [NL 204].

1989: Dordogne. Brian Murlis, Steve Redwood, Vince Simmonds, Nick Geh, Digger Hastilow, Pete Harvey and Tony and Denise Knibbs were MCG members in a joint CDG/SWCC/MCG party camping at Gramat. The first cave to be explored was Gouffre de Reveillon where a huge entrance chamber (c.45m X 450m) narrowed down to a fine stream passage. A decorated upper series led to a 10m drop with a fixed handline and a notice at the top which nobody understood, leading to a miserable section of wet and muddy crawling. Brian wrote that on their return, *"back at the fixed rope, we think we worked out what the notice at the top said – something like: DON'T GO DOWN THIS ROPE BECAUSE IT'S BLOODY IMPOSSIBLE TO GET BACK UP AGAIN !!! And it very nearly was."* Returning to the stream passage they continued down a couple of pitches to a point where there is usually a sump, but due to the very dry conditions they were able to progress further to the final sump. The same day they visited Gouffre de Roque-de-Corn situated in a large doline (45m deep) and consisting of about half a mile of dry stream passage with some good formations.

The small entrance to Perte de Thémînes is located at the end of a deep, blind, very flood prone valley near the centre of the village. Brian, Steve and Vince explored the main streamway to two sumps bypassed by well decorated fossil passages, the second of which was extremely muddy – mud up to 1.2m deep and innocently overlain by 15cm of water. The passage before the first sump led to a complex of small crawls which branched and branched again. When they were just on the verge of turning back they investigated a hopeless-looking crawl - which suddenly opened into a magnificent gour passage leading after several hundred feet to an immense and beautiful chamber 30+m high and c.60m long, then on to a continuation of the huge gours and finally a 10m drop down to the main streamway. They had an exhilarating trip and wrote: *"The beauty and immensity of these chambers left us feeling very insignificant and totally spellbound"*.

Igue St Sol is a shaft of approximately 65m deep leading to over half a mile of horizontal passage containing a multitude of magnificent formations, huge bosses and columns, stalagmite forests up to 3m tall, beautiful curtains, crystal grottos, *etc.*

Gouffre du Saut de la Pucelle has an impressive streamway, reached via a duck followed by a climb to a huge fossil passage. The stream was followed for several kilometres down numerous short pitches and cascades, with many deep pools to swim across and some fine formations. At the terminal sump there is a plaque in memory of E.A. Martel who first explored the cave in 1889. [NL 208 gives more detailed descriptions of the caves visited, and is well worth reading especially if you are contemplating a visit to the Dordogne].

Italian Alps. Three MCG members, Pete Collings-Wells, Rich Hodgson and Dave Little and two members of WUCC travelled to the **Margaureis Region** where they met with local cavers who first took them to see a couple of newly discovered caves. Their next objective was Gouffre Scarasson which had a beautiful underground glacier (sadly spoilt by the remains of a 1962 camp now embedded in the ice – left from M.Siffre's 'beyond time' stay in the cave). Three days effort and a major bolting exercise was needed to rig down to the glacier. Straldi cave was difficult to find and the 90m entrance shaft (with a perched crows nest 40m down, complete with four or five tiny occupants) needed a few attempts at rigging. Further down the cave an impressive 80m pitch dropped through the ceiling of an immense chamber. Piaggia Bella is the largest system in the region and in spite of warnings from the CAF (Club Alpine Francais) cavers that they would get lost, Pete, Rich and Dave entered via the walk-in entrance, through stream and fossil passages to the enormous Paris Cote d'Azur chamber 200m x 100m x 40m before returning to the surface. Piaggia Bella has 11 entrances, 10 of them vertical, and is 25km long and 1108m deep. Other caves visited were Gouffre Pentothal and Gouffre Fera [NL 212].

1990s

Some of the members whose kids were now off their hands were able to participate in club holidays again.

Mallorcan Christmas trips once more became popular but with a different set of people, notably the MCG "Moles" (Royal Holloway and Bedford New College Caving Club).

Pete Hollings moved to Canada in 1994 and embarked on a series of trips to Mexico.

Fragments from France continued (Nos. 7 to 23)

1990: The advertised trip to the **Vercors** was attended by only two members, Brian Murlis and Steve Redwood, who camped for a week at Villard-de-Lans near the head of the 15km long Bourne Gorge. A visit was made to Grotte de Gournier (near the Choranche show cave) which is a major horizontal system consisting of about 4km of fossil passage with the main streamway running directly below. Scialet de Malaterre is a large daylight shaft with a metal footbridge over it – ideal for tourists to drop things on to cavers below! No trip to the Vercors is complete without a trip to the Grotte de Bournillon which has the largest known entrance in Europe (200m. height) and is a major tourist attraction. On the day that Brian and Steve were there it was full of Frenchmen carrying torches! Next visit was to Grotte de Favot high up on one flank of the Bourne Gorge - the 'Goatchurch' of the Vercors but with a 70m pitch at the end of it. Scialet du Toboggan was their final cave and had a free climbable 30m entrance pitch leading down to a streamway. Apparently, although the cave was only discovered in 1975, the devastation in the first part of the cave was unbelievable – virtually every formation was either broken or covered in mud – fortunately, beyond the streamway the damage was much less [NL 213].

1991: In July Yvonne & Martin Rowe, Joan & Simon Goddard, and the Pittmans (Bryan, Ann, Mike and Sian) joined up with Tony and Denise Knibbs in Thil before travelling to a campsite at Mâne (not far from Arbas) in the **Pyrenees** foothills. The first day we walked up to view the entrance of Gouffre Henne-Morte, on the way passing a 'trou souffleur' (blowing hole) where we took turns to cool-off in the ice cold air blowing out of it. The following day a visit was made to Trou Mile and later in the week we descended Grotte Francazal. The day before the Pittman family left, we tackled Grotte d'Alliou which is a half mile



Joan Goddard, Bryan & Mike Pittman, Simon Goddard and Denise Knibbs in Alliou River Cave

long river cave. We made our way upstream using a couple of dinghies, inflated inner tubes and flippers. If you swam on your back you could appreciate the fine formations overhead and also view a colony of large bats. Unfortunately there isn't much dry cave at the end of the swim, so no opportunity to warm up before the return – which was quicker and easier as we swam with the current. The obligatory holiday tourist cave was Grottes de Medous, Bagnères-de-Bigorre - a beautifully decorated cave and not too spoiled. It was quite a long excursion, the return route being by boat [NL 217].



Steve Albino, Jean-Paul Burch, Dave Tooke, Lee Hawkswell,
Barry Parker, Kev West, Bill Headington and Dod
in Czechslovakia, 1991

Also in July a party of eight set off to **Czechoslovakia**. Three days after arriving they met up with local cavers who took them to Kerjstein (Carlsteyne) Caves - the largest in the area and very "Mendips" in character. On leaving Prague they drove to Brno and met the caving group with which they had arranged the exchange visit. Unfortunately it turned out they didn't want an exchange - just funds for their next expedition to Greece! New arrangements had to be made, which were to donate £200 to their expedition fund and pay our own expenses in exchange for accommodation

and guides to caves in the Moravian Karst. Accommodation was a somewhat primitive caving cottage near Rudice – the latrine consisted of squatting over a precipice and being eaten by killer ants from behind! The caves visited are described in NL 219 and also in *Occasional Publication No.2*. They included Bulls Cavern (Byci Scala), Amiscar Cave (Amaterska Jeskyne), Sedmnactra (also called Cave XVII) and Pustozlebska Zazdena.

A visit was made to Macocho Gorge (530ft Deep), the remains of a huge collapsed chamber reached by walking through Punkva show caves; the highlight was the boat trip back to the entrance via beautiful unspoilt passageway [NL 219].

1992: In May, Charlie Allison, Tim Francis and Ralph Diment used a long weekend to recce the area around Rochefort, **Belgium**. They had arranged to meet someone from Speleo Club de Gerny, in Jemelle but in usual speleo-style the message hadn't been passed on. However, another caver at the hut pointed the way to Puits aux Lampes which they descended – basically a 180ft pitch, the bottom 130ft being a free hang. The following day they visited Trou Maulin and the next day La Laide Fosse, a 'Mendippy style' cave with a short pitch and a few climbs [NL 222].

In late June Tim Francis joined the Hades expedition to the Gouffre Berger, Vercors. His first trip was to porter two tackle bags from the entrance to the Balcony (-580m). In NL 224 Tim describes descending the pitches and then the breathtaking formations in the Hall of the Thirteen before dumping the gear at the Balcony and returning to the surface. He wrote:

Unfortunately as we made our way back up the Grande Gallerie water seemed to be appearing from all over the place. A dry hang [Aldo's] had suddenly become a roaring torrent. Returning to the lake we negotiated a tricky traverse to reach a safe(ish) pile of boulders. Grabbing a Mars bar we dived into survival bags – two people per bag for extra warmth. We estimate the water rose fifteen feet in under an hour. After ten long hours we were able to pass the lake and headed out after a 26 hour trip, much to the relief of the others at the campsite."

Tim's second trip proved to be as eventful as the first. His party decided to call it a day at the head of Claudines (-720m) as more rain was forecast. They returned to Camp 1 for the night and in the morning Tim set off on his own at 6.00am, catching up with two Belgians at Aldo's to find it again very wet. Not wanting to get stuck again he decided to 'go for it'. He didn't want to hang around at the top, because he was so cold, so he started to race up the relays.

Halfway up the second I noticed a disconcerting rumble upstream. Realising it to be a flood pulse I quickly snapped my tacklebag onto the rope and jammed myself in a crack. I yelled a warning in French to the Belgians but fortunately the last man up had passed the point at which the water hits the pitch.

After the water subsided the Belgian's decided to continue out but Tim found a relatively dry ledge and waited (in his wet sleeping bag) until the following party caught up with him, and they headed out together. The Belgian's had had one hell of an exit – one had huge lacerations on his hands which he had been unaware of because his hands were so cold. Tim made further trips into the cave and assisted with derigging [NL 224].

Martin & Yvonne Rowe, Tony & Denise Knibbs, Geoff & Pat Beale, Joan Goddard and Pete Harvey headed for **the Burren**, Co. Clare, for a walking-caving-archaeology sort of a holiday. Caves visited were Cullaun Two, Doolin Cave (St Catherine's One to Fisher Street Pot), Faunarooka Cave, Poulnagollum / Poulelva Cave System, Polldereen (we were looking for Polldubh!) [NL 227].

Mallorca was the Christmas destination for Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh, Pete Hollings, Malcolm & Norma Cotter. Much of the time was spent cave hunting but trips were made into Penja Rotja, Cueva Coma Freda and Cuevas del Pirata (the cave consists of a couple of chambers descending to a blue sump which connects to Cova des Pont, making it the second longest Mallorcan Cave). Also visited were the show caves of Drach and Hams [NL 228].

Charlie Allison visited the **Pyrenees** with RHBNC "Moles".

1993: Tim Francis and Julie Hesketh joined a Hades expedition to the **Apuan Alps, Italy**, which also included Pete Collings-Wells and Dave Little of MCG. They divided their time between two caves, Complesso Fighiera Farolfi Corchia (a 50km long system) and Abisso Paolo Roversi with a 1000ft (300m) pitch. Tim describes the challenges of helping to rig and de-rig the caves in NL 230.

Also in NL 230, is a report of Tony and Denise Knibbs' descent of the **Berger** with the SWCC expedition. They reached the Hall of Thirteen at -495m and pronounced it an unforgettable trip.

Malcolm and Norma Cotter, Ralph Diment, Tim Francis and Julie Hesketh returned to **Mallorca** in February and began by revisiting the well decorated Covota de sa Penja Rotja. Other caves on the



Julie Hesketh, Malcolm Cotter and Tim Francis in Covota de sa Penja Rotja [Photos by Ralph Diment]

agenda were Cueva de Ca'l Pessu, an impressive show cave north-east of Arta, and Cova de Can Sion (site of the 1985 MCG extension – further extended this time into an 80ft deep rift with 100ft of passage with helictites, straws and gour crystals). This holiday was notable for two attempted break-ins by car thieves, resulting in the final day being spent at the Justice Courts to identify the miscreants [NL 236].

In March, Andrew Bellamy, Julian Flavell, Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh and Pete Hollings left for the San Antonio Valley, **Belize** where they found over 2km of passage [The expedition report is published as Occasional Publication No. 1].

Eighteen members travelled to the **Haute Savoie** in August where they had been invited by the local Annemasse Caving Club (via Ralph Diment) to look for new cave entrances in “Area D” near **Samoens**. Joel Corrigan drummed up support, Ralph liased with SCA, organised permits, and booked the refuge, Charlie hired the Royal Holloway minibus, Julie made up the first aid kit, Tim organised equipment and at the eleventh hour Joe stepped in to replace Joel when he left to work in Hong Kong. “Area D” was made up of razor sharp limestone pavement and “Top Camp” was set up by the serious cave hunters further up the valley from the bunkhouse.



Photo from Cottage



Photo from Cottage

No significant caves were found but a good time was had by all. Participants were James Allen, Charlie Allison, Andy Bellamy, Ralph Diment, Joe Frampton, Tim Francis, Linda Gates, Joan Goddard, Lee Hawkswell, Tim Haynes, Julie Hesketh, Denise & Tony Knibbs, Mike Pittman, Martin & Yvonne Rowe, Dave Tooke and Marcus Ward [NL 240].

Pete Hollings spent a total of 7 days surveying and exploring the deeper sections of Lechuguilla Cave, **New Mexico**, and also joined an expedition to the Coahuilla Desert in **Mexico** where a few small caves were located [NL 240 and OCC Pub No.2].

1995: The dates of the **Mallorca** trip this year were dictated by a court summons to act as witnesses in connection with the car break-ins on the previous trip. The team was Malcolm & Norma Cotter, Joe Frampton, Tim Francis and Julie Hesketh and explorations were made of Campana (the deepest cave on the island and very well decorated), Cova des Diners, and Cova de les Rodes [NL 245].

Meanwhile, Pete Hollings was on the Tequila Expedition, in Veracruz, **Mexico**. The expedition was cut short when their permission to cave in the area was withdrawn due, it seems, to local politics. It all got rather nasty when a party of cavers were stranded at the bottom of a 100m deep pit after locals untied their rope and chucked it down the pitch! A change of plans saw them caving elsewhere and by the end of the expedition over 50 caves had been mapped [NL 245].

In August James Allen, Charlie Allison, Joan Goddard, Tim Francis, Zoe Hammersley, Lee Hawkswell, Julie Hesketh, Reggie Pain, Martin & Yvonne Rowe and Marcus Ward travelled to the **Chartreuse Massif** where a Trou de Glaz – Guiers Mort through trip in the Dent de Crolles system was the ultimate goal. Initial sorties were made into the system from both ends to ensure smooth route-finding. However one of the through-trip parties was astounded to find their way barred by a sump where there had previously been a large draughting



Joan Goddard

Trou de Glaz



passage. After a couple of hours in bivvi bags watching the water level fall VERY slowly Lee and Reggie set off to look for an alternative way out. Hey presto! They did and finally exited at 2.10 am [*Occasional. Publication. No. 3 and NL 248*].

Chartreuse 1995

Charlie Allison, Marcus Ward, Yvonne & Martin Rowe, Reggie Pain, James Allen, Zoe Hammersley (Ward), Julie Hesketh, Tim Francis, and Lee Hawkswell

1996: The plan was to visit Piaggia Bella System in the Alpes Maritimes (Italy), but due to lack of personnel we ended up at Tresviso, in the **Picos de Europa**. Earlier in the year, instead of the regular Mallorcan trip, Tim Francis and Julie Hesketh had volunteered to assist SWCC members with transporting their diving gear into Cueva del Agua [*NL 253*] and they felt the cave had the making of a good venue for MCG's summer expedition. Tim, Julie, Martin and Yvonne Rowe camped while Joe Frampton and Joan Goddard stayed in the bunkhouse attached to the local bar. The cave is located at the bottom of a 500m deep gorge and is entered via a Tyrolean traverse rigged across the deep entrance pool. The stream passage is exhilaratingly active but there are dry passages as well. Eight trips were made into the cave with the aim of consolidating leads made with SWCC. Tim, Julie, Joe and Martin cleared up some inconsistencies in the survey they were using and some new passage was found and surveyed. De-rigging the cave was a challenge as heavy rain meant that the river was in spate [*NL 256, 257*].



Julie Hesketh & Tim Francis traversing the entrance pool at Cueva del Agua

During the year Pete Hollings caved in **Virginia** [*NL 254*], **Montana** (the Silvertip Cirque [*NL 257*]) and in **Northern Mexico** where they targeted The Angel's Staircase in La Sistema Purificación; 2300m was surveyed pushing the system to over 87km [*NL 259*]. A return trip was made in March 1997 [*NL 260*].

Mallorca this year concentrated on the more unusual sites – Cueva Tancada the entrance of which overlooks the sea and has a fantastic view, Avenc de Fra Rafel with pitches of 61m and 117m and Cueva Sa Foradada which is unusual in that it contains two small streamways [*NL 259*].

1997: May in **Mallorca** - Charlie Allison, Andy Bellamy, Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh, Kerry Howard and Reg Pain plus James Allen portered for Joel Corrigan and his gang who were diving in Font des Vergers. They also visited Penja Rotja, Cueva Sa Foradada and Cueva Sa Campana [*NL 261*].

The Royal Holloway summer trip to **Matienzo** included MCG members Malcolm, Norma and Sonya Cotter, Lee Hawkswell, Kerry Howard and Reg Pain. They explored Cueva de Carcavuezo (Four Valleys System) which was a bit disappointing, Cueva del Agua where progress was halted by a torrential stream, Simas del Picon, and Cubija which Malcolm described as:

probably the most unstable cave I have ever been in. a humungous boulder came hurtling downslope. Reg performed a Herculean boulder pushing trick, so avoiding being squished and the possibility of the boulder trapping everyone inside the chamber.

Also visited were Torcon de la Calleja Rebollo (Toad-in-the-hole), Cueva de Cordisera and Torca de Mostajo (Cubija System) which was voted the best cave, due to having a huge well-decorated chamber and many formations [NL 263, NL 264].



Peat Bennett in Doolin River cave, 1997

A planned Group summer expedition to the Picos didn't materialise so Pete Bennett, Joe Frampton, Tim Francis, and Steve Jones squeezed into a hideously overloaded Ford Fiesta and drove to **Doolin**. Julie Hesketh flew to Shannon for the first week to be replaced by Cara Allison for the second week which was spent in Fermanagh. In Clare they did the St Catherine's – Fisherstreet Pot through trip, Pol-na-Gcéim and Faunarooska. In **Fermanagh**, from the luxury of Aghnahoo Cottage rather than sodden tents, they first visited the excellent Tullyhona Resurgence which develops into a well decorated streamway. Because of high water levels Marble Arch show cave was closed to tourists but it was possible for the party to travel upstream to the rest of the cave, finally swimming out of the Lower Cradle entrance. Poor weather meant they had time on their hands so they investigated Springwell Rising just downhill from the hut. By digging a choke and pushing onwards Pete and Tim extended it from 15m to 50m where it was completely blocked by a choke [NL 264].

Surprise! surprise! Pete Hollings went to **Mexico** again for Christmas [NL 267].

In March Tim Francis, Peat Bennett and Steve Jones joined Duncan Horne and three from CUCC for a return trip to **Fermanagh**. On Day 1 they started a small dig in the Marble Arch system but it only opened up a pointless loop of passage. Cascades Rising provided an excellent trip where the Boulder Series leads to a fantastic piece of streamway, the Brandywine River, with fine yomping passage and deep water. The next day Noon's Hole, with its 81m entrance pitch, was visited and then back to Springwell Rising which refused to yield any worthwhile passage. The last cave was Prod's Pot, with a tight entrance series of five pitches down to stream passage and an inlet with a delightful series of cascades leading to a perched sump [NL 269].

In September 1998 a team of five MCG cavers (Ben Cooper, Tim Francis, Yong Shik Park, Letti Patte and Dave Tooke) embarked on a six-week light-weight reconnaissance expedition to the sparsely populated and remote **Tsingy de Bemaraha World Heritage Site, Madagascar**. The purpose of the visit was to locate, explore and survey caves close to the village of Bekopaka, Antsalove district. The team visited two distinct areas during the expedition. The first was some twenty kilometres on foot to the North of Bekopaka, close to an area known as Andamozavaky. The second was an area of limestone just to the South of the Manambolo Gorge four kilometres upstream on the Manambola river (East of Bekopaka).

The first area was chosen because of the promising nature of the topography apparent from aerial photographs of the region. In addition a small spring at the base of the limestone cliffs provided a supply of fresh clean water: surface water is a rare commodity within the Tsingy in the drier months. The team had not planned on camping, and so without tents slept under their mosquito nets in the jungle. Two weeks were spent exploring a complex of cave passages at the base of a large doline. This cave was named Hunny Pot. Due to its importance within the local hydrology, and shortage of time, exploration concentrated upon this system. A few other small caves were briefly looked at but none were extended for any considerable length. The most significant of these lesser sites was a small resurgence, Source D'Andamozavaky.

The second area was chosen to provide a broader overview of the spelaeological potential of the Bemaraha. As before the availability of water was paramount so this necessitated camping close to the Manambolo River. A rock overhang in Vazimba Canyon provided welcome night-time shelter. A group of caves was explored half a kilometer to the south of the camp under a huge rock arch, and became known as Arch Caves. None of the caves appeared to have been entered previously and all were surveyed to BCRA Grade 3C. While both areas were left with un-explored leads, Arch Caves appeared to be the most promising.

At all times whilst in the National Park the team was accompanied by a guide provided by the Association Nationale pour la Gestion des Aires Protégées (ANGAP). In addition, the team employed a number of local villagers from Bekopaka to act as camp guards and porters. Whilst there, a large region of the Tsingy de Bemaraha around Bekopaka was being opened as a National Park and, half-way through the expedition, the team was required to return to the village for the grand opening celebrations, attended by the deputy prime minister. The team had front row "seats" for a ritual slaughtering of a Zebu, the local cattle. [Ben Cooper. Also see NL 273].

1999: Julie Hesketh and Tim Francis joined a Wessex weekend excursion to **Belgium** in March. They stayed in a castle at Assese near Mont-sur-Meuse - excellent accommodation but rather cold (mattresses on the floor in the grand hall!)- and began by visiting Trou d'Haquin (1704m long) where they did the round trip. The following day they descended Trou Bernard, Belgium's deepest cave (140m), and finally a small cave, Grottes de Floreffe, which was entered via an impressive wrought iron gate in the footings of another castle [NL278].

Also in March Pete Hollings accompanied 12 Americans and 3 Mexicans for a 6-day camp in Cueva del Tecolote (Owl cave). 4km of passage was surveyed making a total length of 36km. and many more leads were found [NL281].

The **Mallorcan** jaunt this year hosted eleven people, three of whom had to sleep outside due to shortage of space in the villa. Caves visited were Cova de sa Campana, Cova sa Foradada, Cova Tancada and Avenç del pla de les Basses. On the trip were James Allan, Andy Bellamy, Dave Cooke (Wessex), Ben Cooper, Ralph Diment, Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh, Rupert Knowles + 3 'Old Moles' [NL279].

Mike and Sue Haselden, Tony and Denise Knibbs and Pete Harvey joined SMCC in Laze, **Slovenia** and their trip is written up in NL 284.

A return visit was made to **Madagascar** by Pete Bennett, Ben Cooper, Tim Francis and Julie Hesketh. They camped at Vazimba Canyon on the banks of the Manambolo River and 'tidied up loose ends' in the Arch Caves explored the previous year. They found some new passage, completed surveys and made a photographic record before moving on to a large doline which they had identified on maps and aerial surveys. Unfortunately the cave at the bottom closed down. On returning to Arch Caves a bypass to a 15m pitch led to the discovery of hundreds of metres of passage, but lack of time meant that only 800m+ were surveyed [NL 285]

2000 - 2004

Three of the club's 'tigers' set their sights on the New World, specifically Argentina which they visited 5 times, while Julie travelled eastwards to India.

No "official" MCG trips were arranged until the 50th Anniversary holiday to Slovenia in 2004

'Fragments from France' continued with Nos 21 to 24.

2000: Pete Hollings had moved to **Tasmania** where he was re-introduced to the 'joys' of cold wet caving after his recent years of caving in warm Mexico. He visited Milk Run, Cyclops, Mystery Creek Cave (with its glow worms "lighting up the cave ceiling like a starry night"), King George V Cave and Kazad Dum which was apparently very wet [NL 290].

The First National **Argentine** Caving Conference. took place in February at Malargüe, Mendoza



Province and was attended by Richard Carey and Tim Francis. Visits were made to two lava tubes before proceeding to limestone country where they went down Caverna de las Brujas which was impressively decorated. Nearer the Chilean border La Cueva de san Agustin, formed in gypsum, was visited and a nearby new cave was pushed by Tim to 80m [NL 291].

Richard Carey,
Argentina

Later in the year Tim Francis joined the **Dachstein** expedition. (Austria) He spent the first few days 'furling' on the surface for cave entrances. Then hard pushing in C33 led to some desperate new passage. G5 (Eisturnenhöhle) was the main target cave and an underground camp 4hrs into the cave enabled a pushing trip to be attempted the next day. However, the hoped for connection of G5 with the Hirlatzhöhle was not to be [NL 294].

Christmas with relatives gave Geoff Beale the opportunity for a show cave extravaganza tour of **Australia** (Wombeyan and Jenolan Caves) and **New Zealand** (Waitomo and Aranui Caves) [NL 297].

2001: Julie Hesketh joined the Abode of the Clouds Expedition to **Meghalaya, India** - an international team of Brits, Germans, Swiss, Indians and an Austrian, in conjunction with the Meghalayan Adventurers Association. She was in a team of six who made a recce trip to Borsora, a politically unstable area close to the Bangladesh border. Borsora was coal mining country and one of the miners told them of a large cave entrance Krem Khlieh Kherthang, (the Bat Cave) in a spectacular limestone amphitheatre with a huge dry river bed running through the centre. In fact there were two entrances, one 12mx20m and the other 40mx40m, the latter with a refreshing entrance pool fed by a waterfall cascading over impressive limestone cliffs. Five days of exploration resulted in the entrances being linked via 3km of passage. Large tree trunks wedged in the cave were a reminder of the phenomenal Monsoon floods. The group then moved to the village of Kunjoy where they surveyed Ronga River Cave (almost 2km of passage, some of it well decorated) and Rongbaljoig Cave (620m). On leaving, the shy but friendly villagers gave them a wonderful send off. They rejoined the main team at Sutgna who had clocked up around 15km of passage, the major find being Nonghlhie Cave which Julie described as probably one of the best and most beautiful caving trips she has ever done - beautiful cascades, deep pools and glistening flowstone formations. In all, Meghalaya 2001 discovered >35km of new passage and 30 new caves [NL 296, 310].

Richard Carey and Tim Francis were joined by Peat Bennett for a second visit to **Argentina** (Malargue). Their main objective was to survey the gypsum cave Cueva del Federacion (350m) discovered the previous year. They investigated numerous other small holes and also returned to Cueva del Tigre, one of the lava caves where a huge draught led to four hours of frenzied digging - but no breakthrough [NL 298, 299].

Tim again joined the **Dachstein** expedition. The team's first challenge was in Schönberghöhle where there was known to be an undescended 200m pitch which turned out after a difficult rig to be blind, as was a 25m pitch at the end of another passage. Second challenge was a pushing trip to a little known area in the Hirlatz - three new pitches were found but lack of rope meant the cave was exited with an open lead for the following year. The trip out was exciting due to heavy rain which threatened to sump a section of the cave [NL 304].

After a year's absence, **Mallorca** was again on the agenda for Peat Bennett, Ben Cooper, Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh, Rupert Knowles James Allen + four others. They visited Cova Tancada, Cova Cornavaques, Cova de ca L'Herou and Avenc de na Maria. Cova Cornavaques required a two hour trek through dense pine forest, leaving time for only a short trip - and an eventful return in darkness to the car, which included having local farm dogs set upon them when they approached too close to a farmhouse [NL 304].

2002: The Jurassic Gypsum of the Poti Malal valley, **Argentina**, was this year's focus for Peat Bennett, Jules Flavell and Tim Francis, who were joined by local cavers. Avoiding sunburn and heatstroke was the main problem especially when looking for caves on the reflective gypsum. They visited Cueva Federación (but found no new passage) and then made a systematic but unsuccessful walkover of an outcrop of gypsum on the left side of the valley. Doña Palmira, a previously known 20m cave with a sump immediately inside the entrance, was pushed by the group resulting in some new tight passages. Another cave entrance (named Burning Man Dig) was opened up but didn't "go".

Some of the local cavers recalled a couple of small caves 15 miles away and almost in Chile. Seven horses were hired from a local farmer and a two hour trek led to the Green Lakes; Cueva de los Cangrejos is a walking sized entrance which soon closes down and sumps. Cueva de la Gotera is an impressive sink above the lakes but again sumps. There was a large entrance across the other side of one of the lakes which was not investigated. Tim's write-up includes a useful sketch map showing the locations of cave entrances [NL308].

In July Tony & Denise Knibbs donned their Shepton hats for a foray into **Eastern Europe**, to **Slovakia** (Low Tatras) where they visited the Demänova show caves (Demänovská Jaskyne Slobody and Demänovská l'Adora Jaskyne), Bystrianska Jaskyna and Harmanecka Jaskyna. A detour was made to **Poland** to join a tour of Wieliczka Royal Salt Mine with its amazing sculptures created by the miners through the centuries; then back into Slovakia (High Tatras) where they gave Dobšinská Ice cave a miss (too crowded!) but stopped at Domica Cave which forms part of the Baradla System running beneath the frontier and which is 25km long. Baradla Cave in Aggtelek National Park, **Hungary**, was the next port of call where a visit had to be pre-booked and was led by two "professional" guides. Eventually, some 8km from their starting point they entered the Josvafő show cave which was impressive in its own right. The following day they were taken to the nearby worked-out Rakocki iron mine which had broken into natural cave. Tony and Denise returned home via Austria where they took in the Eisriesenwelt (Cave of the Ice Giants), the world's largest ice cave. [The holiday is described more fully in NL 312].

Roy and Fiona Kempston's family holiday in August was to **Western Ireland** where they visited Crag Cave in Co. Kerry (explored by Martin Farr in 1983) - 3.8km long, although the show tour was only 350m. Later, they visited the better known Aillwee Cave in Co. Clare.

Greece: In November Peat Bennett, Ben Cooper, Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh and Rupert Knowles were met at Athens airport by three car loads of cavers from the Hellenic Caving Club who provided surveys and arranged a permit. One of their members, Georgia, agreed to accompany the MCG cavers for their two week stay, making the holiday much easier than it might otherwise have been. First cave was Baroutospilia which has the largest cave entrance in Greece but soon closes down. Tim was keen to visit the impressive entrances of Epos Chasm and Provatina, which entailed a seven hour drive to the Pindos Mountains and a couple of days walking up to see them, and back.

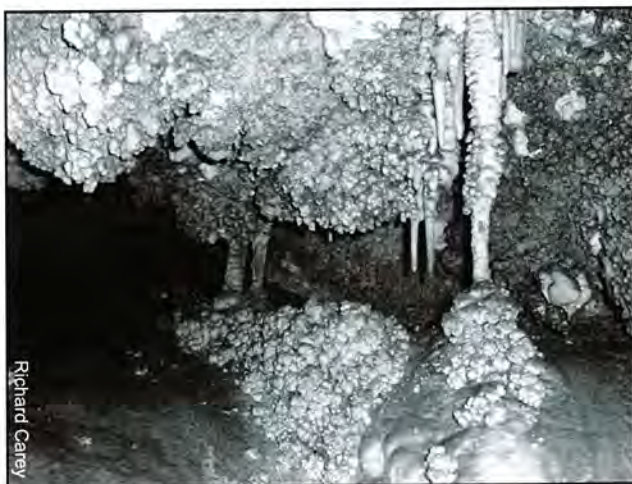
Left:
Peat Bennett
Ben Cooper



Right:
Rupert Knowles
Tim Francis

Photo from Cottage

A member of the Hellenic CC, who lived nearby, gave them some information on local caves and TZ14 was chosen and partly descended before running out of rope. Moving south again to the Peloponnis they visited Ermis Cave (a Greek version of Goatchurch!) at the end of which a strong draught encouraged them to persevere into some tight passage and a couple of new pitches. Armitza had been discovered recently during excavations for a new mountain road and few cavers had been down it's 50m entrance pitch. Formations were pristine and, true to form, some new passage was entered. Selenitza was a dry 'storming walking cave' located right on the beach – must have been an enormous phreatic resurgence at one time. Their final cave was Tripa tou Voria – in which they found a carefully placed cluster of World War 2 hand grenades! [NL 313].



Argentina Formations

which they had looked at previously. Only 20m away from it they were surprised to find a cave entrance (Cueva Miranda) leading to a long, low, crawly, wet, muddy passage which eventually popped out at the top of an aven down to the stream. Further exploration resulted in more high level and stream passage [NL 317].

Bill Chadwick, Doug Harris and Mick Norton (MCG/BDCC), Biff Frith (BDCC) + 2 other BDCC spent two weeks in September in **Cantabria, N. Spain**. Bill's write-up described their trips into Cueva Canuela or Cayuela (6hrs, spectacular formations and enormous passages), Torcal del Carlista (11 hrs, largest natural underground chamber in Europe with an awesome free hang pitch into it, lower part of cave well decorated), Cueva Coventosa (one trip along a splendid streamway to the first lake and another to view formations near the entrance) and Cueva Fresca (7hrs, sporting cave with a number of traverses and bold steps) [NL 317].

In the autumn Pete Bennett, Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh, Louisa Minahan and Duncan Horne returned to **Mallorca** where they met up with local caver Tony Merino. They revisited Cava de Les Rodes which at this time of year had poor air quality making the trip quite an uncomfortable experience. Tony took them down Avenc de S'Embut near Genova and they also bottomed Cova de Cornavaques [NL 325]

2003: Richard Carey and Tim Francis returned to the Malargüe, **Argentina**, where permission had been granted to INEA and MCG to explore Caverna de la Brujas beyond the show cave. In the event they made only two trips into the cave, to Arcita Fossilizada and Sala de la Madre, described by Tim in his article. A search of the limestone around Brujas yielded no new caves, apart from an 80m remnant of an old system.

On their return to the Poti Malal valley (where they had camped the previous year) they first visited two new impressive chambers in San Augustin, discovered by Croatians, before returning to a small resurgence near the Miranda farmhouse



Sistema Cueto Coventosa, Cantabria

2004: The main club trip was the 50th Anniversary bash in **Slovenia** which is described elsewhere, but there were other trips too:



Peat Bennett, Argentina

Peat Bennett, Richard Carey and Tim Francis saw in the New Year on a fifth **Argentina** trip. They explored Las Salinillas where they found some interesting cave paintings, then on to Poti Malal where their first task was to survey last year's discovery, Miranda (560m). Next area visited was Las Leñas near the Chilean border where they found many resurgences issuing very cold meltwater due to their proximity to the snow line. Most of them closed down almost immediately but 12 caves were found, including Cueva Naranja (Orange Cave), Cueva Langosta (Lobster Cave) and Cueva de la Nieve (Snow Cave) [NL 320].

During the summer Roy and Fiona Kempston visited the show cave Grotta del Vento (Wind Cave) while on holiday in **Tuscany** [NL 323].

Also in 2004 Cara Allison, Martin Peck, Louisa Minahan, Tim Francis and Julie Hesketh went to cold, blustery **Mallorca** where they visited the following caves: Penja Rotja, Cova Sa Campana, Covata des Puig Gros near Genova (a really worthwhile cave which is home to a colony of bats) and Avenc de Llorer which was a great cave to end the holiday – fine view of the sea from the entrance followed by a series of pitches [NL 325].



Tim Francis, Louisa Minahan and Cara Allison kitting up at Avenc des Llorer



Julie Hesketh in Penja Rotja,



If you are still with me at the end of twenty-two pages I hope you have enjoyed this gallop around the world via the Group's caving holidays and expeditions - significant progress has been made in the last 50 years, from 'expeditions' to Scotland and Yorkshire to more adventurous 'EXPEDITIONS' to Malargue, Madagascar and Meghalaya. Will the next 50 years see MCG caving on the moon?





A Few Thoughts on Tackle and Equipment

written by Tony Knibbs

The earliest accounts of cave exploration speak of the descent of vertical entrance pitches being accomplished by a team of navvies lowering the explorer into the depths using a stout hemp rope, usually with a wooden crossbar attached to it for a rudimentary 'seat'. The shortcomings of this technique soon encouraged the adoption of rope ladders featuring rope passing through or around wooden rungs. Such ladders were standard equipment for seagoing use during which the questions of volume or 'weight when wet' never seriously arose. The rope used was traditionally either hemp or sisal. Despite the availability of water-repellent treatments, the rope was prone to rot. The wooden rungs (traditionally oak or ash) would outlast the rope, but were also of limited life.



Tony Knibbs on the way to Swildon's in 1996



Easter 1956 Robbie Charnock in centre of group (Note rope ladder on left)

The first descent of Gaping Gill in 1895 by E.A. Martel was carried out using a combination of rope ladders, knotted rope(!) and rope lifeline.

Mendip caving required limited use of rope ladders. Nevertheless it was an interesting experience to drag a 40ft length of wet rope ladder out of Swildon's Hole together with 80ft of hemp lifeline!

The advance of caving on mainland Europe (notably France) led to the evolution of flexible metal 'electron' ladders using galvanised steel wire rope sides and aluminium alloy rungs ('electron' = an alloy of aluminium).

Mendip Caving Group came into being just as the changeover from rope to 'wire' ladders was taking place in Britain. Although I recall making a short ladder using ash rungs and sisal rope for my own use there was only one practical solution when it came to acquiring Group communal tackle. Flexible metal ladders were not available ready made, so a DIY solution was necessary. In those days the leading light on the subject of innovative tackle was C. Lewis Railton (SWCC) whose work "Some Notes on Ropes and Ladders" was published in 1952 by the Cave Research Group (CRG). This described a solution to the problem of attaching rungs to wire rope. Contact was made with Lewis Railton and the Group set about obtaining the appropriate materials and creating manufacturing jigs. Being engineers, it was Tony Crawford and Pete Goddard who led the way with ladder making.

In 1954 the Tacklemaster Mike Burbidge had obtained 560ft of "natural-lay" (1/8in dia.) aero cable for ladders. The 'aero' refers to the fact that these wire ropes were in common use in aircraft to link external control surfaces with cockpit controls. Tony Crawford undertook to verify and order the correct specification of the 3/8in dia. aluminium alloy tube for the rungs; he also prepared the

necessary jigs – “sufficient for 250ft of the best tackle”. The construction technique involved the insertion of a soft aluminium plug into each end of every rung then drilling both rung and plug for the passage of the wire rope. Before insertion of the wire rope another smaller diameter hole was drilled at 90° to the first hole. Having threaded the wire rope through the rungs, stainless steel pins were then forced through the wire rope using the smaller hole. This had the effect of expanding the wire rope into the soft plug to obtain a secure fixing. By August 1954 the first prototype ladder with 12in rung spacing was in use. The cost of materials for a 25ft ladder was quoted as £1-5s-9d (£1.29p). The only operation we had to have professionally done was the finishing of the ladder ‘tails’ where the thimbles with C-links were secured by swaged Talurit sleeves fitted by Yacht and Commercial Rigging Ltd of Twickenham. By October, due to the need to recoup the expenses of ladder making, members were being charged two shillings to borrow tackle, up to a maximum of five shillings per week. Meanwhile, the use of digging ropes was free of charge.

In parallel with the revolution affecting ladders there was a move away from hemp and sisal ropes in favour of adopting nylon ropes, driven by the needs of the mountaineering community. The only ladders or ropes made from natural materials were therefore only those ever used for digging.

The Group’s equipment was now increasing in both value and volume. The volume aspect was bad news because transport to and from Mendip was usually by motorbike. The search was already on for a headquarters building on Mendip. Here we had some luck when Mr Ball from the Lion Rock Hotel, Cheddar loaned us a small shed ‘with electric lighting’ to store our equipment. He was to become our first honorary member.

In 1955 the Group was given an ex-RAF inflatable rubber dinghy. At this time the cost of an acetylene ‘Premier’ cap-lamp from Caswell’s in Midsomer Norton was £0-5s-6d (27½p). ‘Daylight’ cap-lamps were available from Thomas Black & Sons, Gray’s Inn Road, London at twice this price. Mining helmets (lacquered compressed cardboard) were available from either of these sources at a similar price difference. By the end of the 1950s various plastic helmets added to our comfort and protection.

In 1957 tacklemaster Tony Crawford listed 180ft of ladder, 50ft of assorted length tethers and 380ft of nylon rope lifeline.

However, it was not all plain sailing; in 1962 tacklemaster Jack Green’s report in January read; “*My friends, you will see from the report below that we have hit a bad patch with our tackle, 13 ladders damaged, 95ft just SCRAP. I will pull no punches, this can only be your joint faults. Even allowing for wear and tear, the figure is too high! Can we afford it? NO!*” He goes on to say that more ladder has been assembled by members and advises that, “*the best way in which you can safeguard your handiwork is to check any bad ladder-climbing habits and any misuse of Group tackle.*” He also added, “*Dear member, thank you for the piece of slab fruit cake found in a tackle bag. Richard [Woolacott] and I buried it with full military honours.*”



In 1964 tacklemaster Pete Goddard reported, “*the Group has 675ft of ladder, 300ft of nylon rope and 600ft of Ulstron rope, 39 tethers, six helmets and one-and-a half carbide lamps. The rubber dinghy has perished.*” Just under £30 had been spent on tackle during the year and £2-17s-0d (£2.85p) collected in tackle fees. 1964 saw the price of ‘Premier’ acetylene cap-lamps rise to 17s-6d (87.5p). A hundredweight (112lb) of carbide was purchased for resale to members at one shilling (5p) per pound or three ‘old’ pence per fill.

A small (‘stinky’) carbide cap lamp could be kept going for up to four hours, but was easily extinguished under a strong waterfall or in a howling draught. To counteract this, it was usual to fit an electric lamp on the helmet for use as a backup. This was a step beyond carrying an electric cycle lamp or torch hanging from a string around one’s neck. The backup lamps were often simply that part of the cycle lamp holding the bulb and reflector removed from the battery container and mounted on the helmet by means of some crude bracket arrangement. Retaining the glass disc ensured a degree of water protection but was prone to end up as broken glass left

inconveniently in a crawl. The battery was either mounted on the back of the helmet or carried in a suitable pocket. Most cavers (but not all) were aware that tipping out spent carbide produced unacceptable litter on a cave floor.

Two useful novelties made their appearance around 1965: cheap rechargeable ex-NCB mining cap-lamps and the foam neoprene wetsuit. Almost overnight, wetsuits changed the face of British caving where so much exposure to cold water was unavoidable. Making a wetsuit, usually out of unlined foam neoprene sheet initially necessitated creating a paper pattern from which the neoprene could be marked out and cut. Cavers of a certain vintage may recall having to lie down on the floor of the wooden Cottage while an assistant drew around them to create a pattern. Eventually two-piece wetsuit kits became available in appropriate sizes. Sub Aqua Products kits came with a pattern already marked out on brown paper and consisted of:

- Six 3ft x 2ft x 3/16in unlined foam neoprene sheets
- Two rolls of 1/2in neoprene tape (choice of colours)
- Two metal turn-button fasteners (very uncomfortable in a really tight squeeze)
- Zip, adhesive, brush, solvent and instructions.

Constructing the wetsuit was relatively easy: cut out the neoprene foam shapes; coat the facing joint edges with adhesive; allow to almost dry, then firmly press the edges together ensuring a successful bond all along the joints. When joints were dry, the coloured tape was applied to the outside surface of the suit using the same adhesive – this gave the joints more strength and added a dash of colour. Unlined suits required the application of copious quantities of French chalk or (much more chic) perfumed talcum powder to all internal surfaces before being able to struggle into them.

It was not uncommon for some cavers to contract wetsuit rash after really long trips, but the condition was not fatal. Indeed, the condition was insignificant when compared to the state of near hypothermia it was possible to reach when doing the same trip dressed only in the traditional wool next to the skin, *ie.* submariner knitted wool longjohns, vest or other light woollen garment under an oiled-wool sweater.

The usual overgarment was a linen boiler suit or even what was commonly termed a 'goon' suit – an ex-WD (usually bright yellow) rubberised linen suit with seals at neck, wrists and ankles. This kept everything dry, but often resulted in overheating. Frequently seen later, the green 'anti-kerosene' suits (worn by aircraft carrier deck crew) which were like boiler suits but made of tough plasticised material without seals. Under really wet conditions the neoprene wetsuit provided a more practical solution. The bits of neoprene invariably left over from cutting out the suit were great for making kneepads, elbow pads and for repairs.



Joan Goddard in goon suit ready for practice rescue in GB, 1966

The following anecdote by Arthur Spain conveys something of the joys of owning a wetsuit:

Wesuititus It all started when it was planned to 'do' O.F.D and Dan-yr-Ogof. Up to this time only a few sensible types had acquired wetsuits. On the Saturday we did O.F.D with a few ribald remarks concerning the fact that some of us were wet-suitless. However, as the cave was not too wet, it happened that we did not take a great deal of notice. Next day we eventually got round to doing Dan-yr-Ogof..... With much gusto we wandered through the show cave part to the first lake where, much to my consternation, some members of the party became enthusiastically acquainted with the water. About ten minutes later we all came in contact with water – swimming. My hat! was that water cold. We swam to the entrance of the second lake, but after reconnoitre it proved to be too



Geoff Barton in
Dan-yr-Ogof

dangerous to go on. So, breathing a silent prayer of thanksgiving for the person who said "I think we ought to turn back," we retraced our swimming steps, Pat (Walsh) and myself both running to the cave entrance to regain lost circulation (we were both wet-suitless).

That day was the beginning of the end of ordinary caving clothes for me; I ordered a Wet-Suit Kit. The price caused a gap in the family budget for a few weeks, but we soon overcame that. When the kit arrived there was just under 2 weeks to assemble it before the second Wales trip, under canvas at Ystradfellte. It was touch and go as several alterations had to be made. The initial test came with a visit to nearby Porth-yr-Ogof where a few of us dived into the deep pool at the cave entrance. I was very dubious at first and lowered myself in gingerly. Apart from the initial cold water entering, I was delightfully warm. After an exploration of the dry series I actually agreed to go with Simon (Knight) back along the stream passage route against a strong current, a thing I would not have dreamed of doing a few months earlier, except perhaps by necessity. Next day some of us decided to explore the Neath River Valley area. Most of the caves in this area are small or end in sumps.we ended up shooting the rapids down the fast-flowing river with nothing more than wet-suits for protection; great fun (when adequately covered)!



Muddy wetsuits after Otter Hole Trip (Mark
Ward, John Crowsley, ? , Lee Hawkswell,
Dave Tooke)

After these stringent tests, surprisingly enough it (the wet suit) is still in one piece. I only hope that all active members of the Club eventually purchase wet-suits so that they can enjoy their caving to a much fuller extent. **Note:** I have no financial interest in Sub Aqua Products, as may be rumoured.



By the mid 1960s it was very rare to see anyone still wearing leather boots with nailed soles. 'Vibram' 'commando' soles were now

the order of the day, later followed by the use of short lace-up rubber boots. These eventually gave way to heavyweight industrial 'wellies' in the next decade.

Good quality retail (as opposed to cheaply produced) one-piece furry suits began to make their appearance at about the same time as higher-quality (expensive) PVC oversuits became available. By putting a rigid plastic 'sleeve' into the top of the 'welly' boot, the legs of the oversuit could be now be made reasonably watertight by fastening them with a rubber band outside the boot.

The choice of undergarments now increased. Man-made fibres such as Damart 'thermolactyl' effectively ousted traditional wool and varying degrees of insulation became available. No longer did we have to rely on ex-WD suppliers and jumble sales for our underwear! The cost of caving rose accordingly!

At the 1966 AGM it was reported that ladder stocks had reduced to 540ft: rope stocks were 450ft Ulstron and 600ft nylon. Soon afterwards the number of club helmets was increased to ten. The supply of lighting was left to the borrower.

In 1968 all the remaining stock of the original ladder with 12in rung spacing was deemed unfit for use and a number of lifelines withdrawn. John Miriam carried out a *post mortem* on a failed ladder (rungs broken in centre due to wear). He found that where the wire rope 'tails' emerged from the end rungs, some fraying of the wires had occurred. The rung fixing itself showed that the act of forcing the steel pins through the wire rope had fractured some of the strands. The Railton method had clearly given rise to some stress concentration. The decision to make new ladders took this evidence into account. The new ladders were to remain available in 20ft and 30ft lengths, but rung spacing was reduced to 10in. The wire rope size was increased to 5/32in dia. Two types of ladder were made: a version with 5/8in dia. rungs for use on Mendip and a lighter version with 1/2in dia. rungs for use in the Dales where it gave greater comfort than the original 3/8in dia. rungs when climbing longer pitches.

A new method of rung fixing using epoxy resin was chosen. Having drilled the rungs with a single hole for the passage of the wire rope and prior to threading the wire rope, a cork was pushed into each side of every rung to a point beyond the drilled hole before inserting the wire ropes. Through the ends of the rungs sharpened oval nails were now forced through the wire rope: one nail for the 1/2in dia. rung ladder; two for the 5/8 in dia. rung version, to open out the wire rope to maximise penetration of the epoxy resin. The ladders were now degreased in preparation for pouring the runny resin. Once the resin had set it was finally cured by placing the ladder into an oven for a short period. The 'tails' were finished as per the original ladders, but the C-links were of a heavier gauge steel.



Photos by Ian McKechnie

Left: Roy Kempston, Pine Pitch, Pinetree, 1982
Centre: Mike Lovell, Pine Pitch, Pinetree., 1982
Right: Geoff Barton, Lancaster Pot, 1981

Despite the tackle booking system that John Miriam instigated, by 1978 the tackle stocks were reported as 400ft of ladder, 20 tethers and no rope. It was decided to buy new rope as soon as Cottage building no longer took priority over expenditure.

It was always necessary to carry articles underground. WW2 had produced a wealth of canvas bags that were available for a couple of shillings from any ex-WD supplier. Alas, these were not usually waterproof, so things like food and cameras needed to be carefully wrapped to stay dry. Eventually the steel ammunition box was found to be an effective way of transporting food *etc.* in a watertight, crushproof container. Most cavers simply carried these boxes by their folding handles, attaching them by a karabiner when negotiating obstacles or pitches. A party of, say, ten cavers carrying ammo boxes through a boulder choke could make an astonishingly loud clatter and they also caused

damage to the cave. An interesting event occurred in Aggy Aggy in the First Boulder Choke when Tony Fitzgibbon dropped his box between the boulders; it bounced down for several seconds, then came a loud explosion! The box was recovered and found to have been 'inflated'. A spare carbide lamp in the box had been producing acetylene and the fall had operated the flint striker, igniting the gas/air mixture. We continued to Summertime Series without further mishap.

Unfortunately their weight and bulk could make them tiring to carry during very long trips. Returning from a trip to the Far North in DYO, Bob Varley was visibly making heavy weather of one particular passage; I asked him if he was OK. By way of reply Bob said he was very tired and asked if I would carry his ammo box (in addition to my own). This I did, but found that dragging two boxes through the Long Crawl was very arduous! Unfortunately Bob left the Group before I could get my revenge by filling his box with stones or suchlike mischief on a future trip.

In the Mid 1970s the use of single rope techniques began to influence British caving. Initially it was the rope-walking systems of American origin that were tried. A small group of members (including John Miriam and Greg Smith) used the Howie system successfully in the Gouffre Berger and Greece. Rope-walking systems worked very well on uninterrupted pitches, but passing a rebelay was not an easy task. Of the many single rope systems that were tried, it was the 'frog' (or 'sit-stand') system which was finally retained as the most practical.

In December 1971 during a visit to Lamb Leer Cavern several members tried Bill Jones's Jumar hand jammers on the return up the 65ft free-hanging pitch. Several people managed to ascend a few feet, but only Greg Smith managed the whole climb on Jumars. Single rope techniques really began to take root in British caving during the 1970s. Indeed the first fatal accident occurred in 1974 when a caver died while abseiling Gaping Ghyll main shaft. He was using a figure-of-eight descender on a 10mm dia. hawser-laid staple-spun polypropylene rope. The most likely cause of the accident was a combination of abrasion and melting of the rope. Group members were reminded that "*under no circumstances may lifelines belonging to the Group be used for single rope techniques*". John Miriam was going to look into the possibility of buying some 'Bluewater' static rope for resale to interested members.

During 1981 tacklemaster John Miriam reported tackle stocks as: 330ft ladder, less than 200ft lifeline and 20 assorted tethers. He also announced that any future acquisition of ladders would involve buying them rather than making them. Lyon ladders with 10in rung spacing were eventually chosen.



Denise Knibbs in Bull Pot

In the early 1980s Single Rope Techniques became more widely adopted by Group members. Discussion of ladders now began to fade into the background. With the condition of ropes becoming a key safety factor and SRT trips evolving into trips carried out among groups of friends (ie. not advertised as Group meets), lively discussion now surrounded the general issue of Group ropes for SRT trips. It was initially decided that extra ropes would not be bought and issued for members' SRT use. However, the decision was made to buy some rope for a trip to France in 1983, when the rope chosen was Edelrid 10.5mm – much more user-friendly than the ultra-stiff Bluewater. It was concern for the protection of SRT ropes that lead to the use of tacklebags for carrying equipment of all sorts.

For the first time we were faced with a caving technique of sufficient complexity and risk to warrant formal training. It was essential to have the right equipment and know how to use it. Following a gap of several years we decided to have an overseas Group meet in 1983 to the Pyrénées where it was planned to explore parts of the Réseau Trombe stem near Arbas: almost 100m deep and

over 100km long and with some 35 entrances. Now that the various SRT techniques had been narrowed down to just one, the choice was an easy one for those members who had yet to venture into SRT. Even though there existed various written descriptions of the generally favoured 'frog' system, it was felt that some professional tuition was necessary to get the best out of its use. Early in 1983 we booked a weekend course at Whernside Manor, Yorkshire where Dave Elliott, John Forder and Paul Ramsden introduced us to the equipment and its correct use. Saturday was spent dangling around trees in the Manor grounds; normal SRT was fine, but demonstration of rescue techniques seemed to indicate that their application on a wet pitch in the dark might prove difficult or even impossible. Sunday saw us out on the fells doing Gingling Hole, Bull Pot (not 'of the Witches') and Rowten Pot. The experience has since proved invaluable. We continued to practise our skills in trees behind Ian McKechnie's flat in Hersham, Surrey until the trip in August. We were late starters at the SRT game, but you cannot get too excited about SRT if most of your caving is done on Mendip.

SRT had the effect of making the descent of big caves much easier, and reducing the size of party needed to bottom big systems. Our Réseau Trombe expedition coincided with a visit by a large group from Whernside Manor who seemed to have rigged everything in sight. I can well remember meeting cavers moving around as individuals in Gouffre Pierre. This struck me as quite unusual in a sport that had always so much relied on teamwork. At one point I noticed a pair of boots in an alcove before a pitch. Looking in, I discovered that they had an owner who declared that he felt ill and was waiting for his group to collect him on their way out!

The need to be festooned with equipment to do even a short pitch seems to me to be an occasional drawback to SRT. There are numerous caves that are several kilometres in length, but only have one or two pitches of a dozen or so metres. Instead of walking for several hours encumbered by equipment, it would be easier and quicker to carry suitable ladders and lifelines. Even when ladders were the main technique for tackling pitches, it was not unusual for cavers to abseil down lifelining ropes to save time and effort. Often, using a ladder obviates the need for a rebelay.

The high point in MCG tackle stocks must surely have been in 1986 when Roy Kempston reported that we had 515ft ladder, 1385ft lifeline and 500ft of SRT rope plus belays etc.

By the 1990s, the job of tacklemaster had become almost one of 'keeper of the ropes, tackle sacks and specialised digging equipment' since the use of ladders was so much reduced, although these remained available. After protracted discussion, the vexed question of the Group buying and issuing SRT ropes had been positively resolved. Care of ropes and SRT equipment almost became a pursuit in its own right. The Group purchase of a rope washer served to underline the need to respect the ropes on which our lives depend.

A popular source of equipment was the 'MCG shop'; this existed thanks to the efforts of two people who, alas, are no longer with us. During the 1960s Malcolm Cotter began buying books at advantageous prices that he resold to members, mostly at Thursday night meetings. The natural evolution of this was that he eventually took to obtaining clothing and equipment. By mid 1981, ably aided and abetted by Phil Ingold, he was selling ladders, lifelines and SRT equipment in addition to ready-made wetsuits, furry suits, oversuits and lighting equipment. The 'MCG shop' flourished under their enthusiastic direction until it was finally wound up in 1994.

Space has not allowed me to deal with one aspect of equipment improvement that I have taken a keen interest in throughout my caving career. That aspect is lighting, without which we would not venture far underground. When I started caving the most popular 'last ditch' emergency form of lighting was half of a wax candle and a box of matches in a sealed tobacco tin. Thankfully times have changed and my main form of light is no longer the electric glow-worm I started with in 1953. It is a Petzl 'duo' LED helmet-mounted arrangement backed-up by another smaller LED system carried around my neck. Improvements in lighting have indeed been spectacular.





Caving equipment—the bare necessities!!



50th Anniversary Celebrations 1954-2004



The Group celebrated its fiftieth birthday in style and each event was reported in the newsletter. The following personal recollections remind us of the wonderful events which took place during the year.

Friday 26th March 2004 saw a commemorative trip down Swildons where 1950's style caving gear was much in evidence. A few old 'stinky' carbide lamps and at least two original waist lengths made their appearance. Arthur Spain provides us with a description:

Swildon's Nostalgia

The 50th Anniversary of the MCG on the weekend 26th-28th March 2004 was full of interesting activities and surprises dreamed up by our enterprising committee. Because Swildon's Hole was the highlight of the 50's caving scene when the club was formed, it was decided to have a trip to Sump 1. Then, of course, the cave still had the Forty Foot pitch and the entrance series was undisturbed by the 1968 floods. Certainly my memories of a trip into Swildon's in the late 1950's was one of inadequate clothing; no specialised oversuits for us, only woollen garments next to the skin covered by a very un-waterproof boiler suit, capped with an old compressed cardboard miner's helmet and of course the ubiquitous carbide caplamp, giving a good light when working well and a sooty flame when not, coupled with a tendency to expire if water hit the jet leaving you in darkness at the most inopportune moment. Finally of course were the leather boots with Tricooni studs, not too grippy on smooth calcite!!!



Julie Hesketh

So with this in mind some of us dressed for the occasion complete with ammo box housing a candle, non too waterproof matches, spare carbide, glucose sweets (years old) and anything else thought essential. Boiler suited and armed with carbide lamps (where available) fifteen hardy souls of various

ages gathered outside Main's barn on Priddy Green for the mandatory photo shoot, then off following the familiar route over the stone stiles to Swildon's entrance. We divided ourselves into two groups, one of which went to the Water Chamber, via the Wet Way, the other (my group) went via the Long Dry Way (the Short Dry these days has a small stream so not so dry).

Naturally the Forty Foot pitch had to be tackled using an electron ladder but, without the pipe pouring water down your neck, compared to then it was very tame; still, the Twenty Foot pitch made up for it. There was a fair amount of water in the stream so the next part of the trip proved to be quite interesting, especially at the twin pots which those in my party negotiated successfully without falling in, a frequent occurrence in the early days. It must have been a



Lee Hanksyell

mammoth trip in Herbert Balch's day – early photos show very wet conditions.

Finally Sump 1 was reached, which was an insurmountable obstacle up until 1936 but is now a simple duck under a six foot ledge holding the guideline (not in our case though). Yet another photo



Sump 1: Brian Snell, Linda Milne, Lee Hawkswell,
Gordon Lister and Bryan Pittman

shoot then back up the streamway following the familiar route to the Twenty and Forty Foot pitches and back via the Wet Way to the entrance, emerging into an overcast but dry day, eventually returning to Priddy Green very wet but satisfied that all had gone well.

The sequel as far as this scribe was concerned was that his dry clothes were locked in the van belonging to a member of the second party, so several laps of Priddy Green were necessary to keep warm; the joys of caving!!

*Arthur Spain,
MCG member since 1959*

In the evening, Malcolm entertained a packed cottage with a slide and film show beginning with the period when, as Linda put it, "the bobble hat ruled."

~~~~~

## 50th Dinner

The Anniversary Dinner took place on Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> March at Coombe Lodge, Blagdon, where the Group welcomed almost 140 guests, some of whom had travelled from as far afield as Canada and Brasil. Richard Woollacott recalls that in May 2003 he received an email from Malcolm Cotter:

**"Next year the MCG is having a 50th celebration. Hope you will both be present. I will give your e-mail address to Linda Milne the main organiser so that you receive news e-mails."**

*Fiftieth - what a shock! How time flies. We had been exchanging Christmas cards with Malcolm and Robbie over the years and had met a couple or so times but one could not decline this chance to experience the resurrection of one's past.*

*When the time came, off we set. Who would be there? Would we recognise and remember each other? We went to the hotel first. This perhaps was a clue to what we might find. A bit smart for MCG? Still it was a special occasion. After booking in perhaps we should try to find some members, but where to look? The Hunters of course. In we went to find a room full of unfamiliar but strangely familiar faces. Behind a face we could discern another that rang bells, indeed with many, we could pull out a name. It did not take long before we all sorted things out. One or two however seemed hardly to have altered at all, Jack Green and Arthur Spain in particular. No one said that I hadn't though. Others, who in the past had been, shall we say, characters were now all solid establishment sort of figures.*

*In the evening, we descended to the restaurant area to find an incredible display of photographs of people and events spanning those 50 years. Cries of "do you remember him/her?", "I had forgotten that" and "Wow!" filled the air. The labour of locating, identifying and putting that lot together must have taken many months.*



*The meal went magnificently. The speeches were good but not too long, and left plenty of time for drinking and circulating afterwards. Everyone I am sure had a very, very enjoyable evening reliving their past and renewing old friendships that they will remember for many a day. How good it was that Malcolm was there*

*Our thanks to the organisers for the vast amount of work and planning that must have gone into an event as big as this which went without a hitch. It is so good that there are still enthusiastic people in the club who will take on such a task. Has work started on the planning of the 100<sup>th</sup>? We cannot promise, but we will be there if we can.*

Richard &amp; Maureen Woollacott.

The dinner was a resounding success with fine food, a display of photographs from the last 50 years, a Grand Auction (which raised £400 each for the Mendip Rescue Organisation, the Council of Southern Caving Clubs and J'Rat's Bang Fund, as well as for MCG) and a raffle. Guests at each table were asked to sign their names as a permanent record of attendees.

1

At Firms      Two Firms      make the 4th, make the 5th  
See you at the 1st

C M Brown      CHARLES BROWN      By 2050 we'll be driving in  
Mars!

Reggie      REMON CROOK

Julie Hesketh      JULIE HESKETH - LINDS      Happy birthday H.C.!!  
Roll on the 6th!

Ross Smith      Ross Smith      names at 2000 1000 1000  
and 1000

Very flower      Very flower      garden garden garden!  
fantastic evening

Brian "Big" Paine      Brian "Big" Paine      Here's to the rainbow at the  
100th

Ben Croft      Ben Croft      Here's to the 100th  
Happy Birthday Ben!

Pete Bennett      Pete Bennett      Hope we will be coming  
by the 100th Ben's house  
in production companies.

Simon Hesketh      Simon Hesketh      Still having with me!

Dill Chesapeake      Dill Chesapeake      After 22ish years  
But we're at the  
night

Laura Hesketh      Laura Hesketh      here's to the above.

3

Jan. 1962 - Retired as Treasurer 1962/3

Lushy times so many old faces. What a well organised do. Congratulations to the next 50.

Rosemary Wickes

Thank you to all who organised this very good event. Well done

Allen Hicks. He doubts this where we are but it seems we do!

John Lewis, Workshop and me never ever did know where we were going! Thanks for this do.

Bryn Davies - a step back in time to a different age

Wilde Brace - a complete emotional roller coaster!

See Battlogan & Pedro (Brit.) 1962

Who are all these people - just the same blurry view as often a night or the other side, I suppose

[illegible]

1954  2004

*50th Anniversary Dinner*

27th March 2004  
Coombe Lodge, Basingdon  
7.15pm to 12.30pm

*Dress & Sweet Formal*



4

Bryan Pittman still caring  
Bob Tompkins wishes to restart  
Mike Pittman to have a talk to have that is the task  
H. McNeill Accident prone  
Roger Wallington When you can't get it down, you  
gotta get it up.  
Ann Ruma Speechless for me  
Tricia Wallington Mine's a E+T  
Sammy Louell Give me vodka anytime  
Julia Well I take after my dad.

5

2 passing years between some forms  
the planning  
not a bad 2 hour work  
Too many old facts present  
John Kuth I agree with him - A lovely evening  
and well organised weekend Thanks.  
Bob Hall Super venue, however a distinct  
insufficiency of scantily clad to fly!  
Eric Dooly What a lovely thing to see my  
old family tree again for you!!  
Klaus Oren He too - I didn't realise he was young!  
as I did I was to see all things in order -  
P.T.

6

Margaret Liddell's suggestions enjoyed, your evening great  
Martin Fiedler  
Hoffman - Splendid evening!  
Tina Bate Thank you for the invitation great evening  
Bridget Worsfold - Did to like Fines  
Hanna Worsfold How to the best of you  
Anne & Beatrix's new 'Luthelet' case a long way!  
Jay Chawker Next to celebration  
Next a good idea  
Next to Worsfold  
Let it be very good!  
Kelt Rasmak A wonderful evening meeting so many  
old friends.

8

Mendip is the place to be  
With all the gang of MCG  
On this their 50th Anniversary!  
John Jack Green  
A great gathering, so good to meet with old  
friends and make new ones  
Paul & Gayne Green London & Toronto  
This has been an excellent gathering with many  
thanks to the organisers. Lovely to meet so  
many old friends. Malakulitter  
An evening we shall remember for  
years to come. Great to meet so many  
of our old friends once more. Many  
thanks to all the people who helped to  
make it possible. Norma Coffer  
Bernard Reeves - taking pictures.  
It's really the early brand.  
Lolo G.  
Brilliant evening, brilliant company! Jan Goddard  
Great meal but better company than I could

7

To Ward  
George W. L.  
YVONNE ROSE  
(HAPPY 50th)  
Marta Rowe  
Cara Allison  
Mona Benson  
Garry Barton  
Penny McKechnie  
Jan McKelvie  
Kathy Ludbrook  
Gordon Lister  
Jonathan Ridd





9

JOY MARSH

STEVE TAYLOR

DAVID & Sue HANCOCK & LIL

BOFF FISHEN

GILES SMITH

PAUL MEEHAN

DECK WALCH

MARY HOLEY

JOHN PAUL BUCK

12

IAN PARNAL FANTASTIC TO SEE ALL THE FACES

TOO MANY CHINESE HAIRS, WHICH COME IN THIS ORGANISATION, REALLY LEAD I CAN'T.

PED BARTON

SO MANY 'OLD' FACES - FANTASTIC DO!!

Helen + Phil Inghel

Long live MCB long time no seeing, but the members are great Cheers

Steve Crockett

A member for 32 years and tonight it doesn't seem like that at all! A great occasion!

CHRIS WHITE

A MEMBER SINCE 1979 WIFE TO SEE SO MANY FACES THE LADIES HAVE GOT YOUNGER! BUT US LADS HAVE GOT OLDER (PROBABLY LOOKING DUE TO THE EFFORT OF LOOKING AFTER THEM DURING THE DANCE & HUSKIE)

NEIL + SUE AG HANFORD

Wonderful to see so many faces from the past. Good occasion!

PED MARTIN

SHOULD HAVE BROKE DOWN GB!!

THERE WAS NO MCB AT ALL!

Andy Beare

I AM IN THE CEMETERY

NEIL HANFORD

Has time stood still for the past 15 years? - it looks that way!

10

Brian Snell - Life the universe and everything!

Gillian Snell - Lots of very nice people, surprisingly some for others' lovely evening.

Julie Knight

HERA WHITFIELD

TAKES ME BACK TO THE DANCING AT THE STAR IN WELLS

WELL DONE WHITFIELD

POW KEMPSTON

THE STAR & ALL OTHER VENUES SINCE - THANKS TO LINDA AND LEE AND ALL THE OTHERS! MANY YEARS, AND MANY MEMORIES, BUT IT'S THE PEOPLE THAT MAKE THE DIFFERENCE!

Ditto

Fiona Kempston

LINDA MILNE

WORTH ALL THE EFFORT TO SEE everyone enjoying themselves - shows they still can!

VINCE SAKKOWISS

DIFFERENT - MISSING THE REVENUE THOUGH!

Julie Kearnagh

Fabulous venue, excellent company

Jane Bullock

Wonderful evening. Congratulations Linda et al for all your efforts

11

LAURE CROFT

A FINE COLLECTION OF 'CANONS' GREGARIOUS' LADIES, TO MEET UP WITH MY CANONIC SIGNATURE

SO MANY FAMILIAR FACES! - FAMILIAR!

A lovely evening! Good food + good company

Barbara Dewdney

Wonderful Evening - See you all the 10th

Steve Hutton

Great evening I feel I'm in a time when MCB was better than now. LINDA AND LEE BUT COME AND MEET STILL THE SAME!

MDY



## Competitions

The Burrington Challenge, on Sunday, involved a hunt to find as many cave entrances as possible, while the Cave Entrance Competition required identification of photographs of 18 caves. Both competitions proved to be quite a challenge and a real test for those who thought they "knew" Mendip.

### CAVE ENTRANCE COMPETITION





## Summer Celebration



A Summer celebration took place on 2<sup>nd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> July, billed as a weekend of fun and activities. There was a quiz on the Friday evening, huge cooked breakfasts prepared each morning (courtesy of Ann Pittman who masterminded the weekend), visit to Wookey Hole Show Cave, cycle ride and a walk from the New Inn to the Hunters via Ashen Hill and Priddy Nine Barrows. The social highlight was the Barn Dance at Chewton Mendip Village Hall where the Velvet Bottom and Backroom Bands provided the music

## Slovenia

*[Participants:- Cara Allison, Peat Bennett, Ben Cooper, Natalie Field, Tim Francis, Joan Goddard, Julie (Hesketh) Ross and Eva Laird, Tony and Denise Knibbs, Linda Milne, Louisa Minahan, Martin Peck, Jonathan Roberts, Yvonne and Martin Rowe]*

SpeleoCamp bunkhouse in Laze was the base for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary trip in August. Slovenia was chosen because it had 'something for everyone' - challenging caves, beautiful caves, show caves, wonderful scenery and comfortable accommodation - Julie and Ross checked it's suitability while on honeymoon the previous year! Yvonne's article *[in NL 322]* described the walks and show cave visits while Peat Bennett reports on the activities of the younger set!



SpeleoCamp - group photo

## The Wild Caves

*by Peat Bennett*



Peat in Jama Za Teglovko

Our first day of Slovenian caving was a gentle introduction by way of the cave walk from the caving hut in Laze. This ticked off **Vranja Jama** that had an impressive large entrance emitting clouds, and our first sighting of Proteus. We then popped over to **Skednena Jama** for a through-trip complete with a skylight to light our way.

Our first real challenge was **Najdena Jama**. Typical of the caves in the area, we had a bit of trek through the woods, before finally finding a gash in the ground which turned out to be the entrance. This was actually a 3m chimney that led to a slope before gaining the next pitch. From here we abseiled (with lots of rub points) down to the main body





Cara Allison in Najdema Jama

of the cave, at which point the team split into two; Martin Peck, Julie, Natalie and I headed down slope past a stal boss to reach part of the cave that wasn't on the survey.

We arrived at a graffiti strewn chamber with a bolt in the ceiling above a slope. Cavers being cavers we popped in a bolt and followed the slope to see where it led. A few feet down we encountered an overhang. However the rope didn't quite reach the bottom, so we fleeced Martin of his slings and just about made it down. Following deep glutinous footprints I then traversed round the side of a huge chamber with a pool 40m below. They led back up the chamber on the far side. Martin followed but somehow managed to follow the wrong footprints. After a spot of shouting across the chamber we were finally both on the same side. From here we followed a section of washed boulders down to another pool with lots of Proteus. Retracing our steps, we picked up the others. The fun bit out was trying to get back up the overhang as we only had one SRT kit, which was by now completely caked in mud. Back at the main pitch we met up with Louisa, Tim, Ben and Cara and headed out after having a quick look at what they had found.

The next day Tim, Ben, Martin Peck and I planned to do **Logarcek** which was probably the highlight of the trip for us. We followed the caving guide's description – drive to the last house out of Laze by a war memorial then head up hill. Unlike the previous day it didn't take long to find the entrance. The entrance series didn't give us too many hassles, but we were a bit surprised when we got to what was described in the guide as a hand-line climb. This was a 40m vertical climb down a flowstone with foot holes cut into it (not very conservationally minded) but we took the more prudent approach of rigging it as a pitch. At the bottom of this we first took the left hand passage that led off to stomping passageway. It was rather eerie when we arrived at Blaina Dvorana, a massive chamber. It was so huge that poles had been placed across the chamber to lead the way on and we could also hear trains crossing overhead – slightly disconcerting. This route finally finished at a sump full of Proteus. Back at the pitch we decided to go and have a look at the right hand passage. It was quite pleasant initially until we reached a wallowy section of mud that led to some impressive large formations. We had to climb down these to avoid huge holes in the floor. We then zig zagged between these fissures before being stopped in our track by a huge abyss. There was a traverse line going round the side of this, but as it looked too unsafe for any of us to trust on this exposed section, we decided it was time to turn back.



Ben Cooper in Logarcek

Our next cave involved a mass visit to **Zelške Jama** armed with two dinghies to do battle with the river cave. While waiting for the first party to depart, we set up an abseil from a rock arch above the river for an exhilarating alternative route down. After doing this (more than once in some cases) some of us passed the time by recceing the second cave entrance. Adeptly led by Ben and trusty GPS we soon found the right doline but a bit more bashing through the undergrowth was



required before we located the other entrance against the far doline wall half way up. Unfortunately it was gated and to add insult to injury it then started to shaft it down with rain. Not a pleasant change when we got back to the cars.

By the next day we were getting rather adventurous, rigging two caves in a day. Martin Peck and Ben rigged the pitch in Jama Za Teglovko, while Tim and I rigged Jama Na Meji.

Rigging **Jama Na Meji** would have been an easy affair apart from the mosquitoes attacking Tim while he rigged a Y-hang over the lip of the pitch. Luckily for me, I had liberally applied DEET. The swarm of mosquitoes might have explained why Tim tried to abseil down the loop from above rather than continue down the next part of the pitch. Two rebelay later and we were at the bottom. Down slope a hole at the bottom was signposted as dangerous. We could see why with an extremely loose right hand wall. It led to a pretty chamber with a tube heading off that had been blasted. Following this another chamber was gained, containing what looked like plastic explosive. From this a tube headed off to a wallow in mud before popping out in another chamber with a choice of two ways on. To the right closed down with a huge draft being emitted through boulders. To the left led to a slippery climb up a mud bank with a hand line. Further along we came to a pool in the floor with a Tyrolean going across and a hand line down to the pool. We went for the Tyrolean option to get to a tube on the far side. This brought us to a traverse which was rather slippery after now being caked in mud. We climbed up over some flowstone to reach a decorated chamber, and pretty much the end of the cave.



Tim Francis in Jama Na Meji

On the way out Tim had a closer look at the pool. Jumping in he landed up to his knees in mud. We found that the reason for the hand line was to reach an SRT rope on the far side from the entrance that led into the ceiling. We'd had enough of mud by now, so headed out to meet Ben and Martin on their way down the pitches. We left them to explore and went over to Jama Za Teglovko with Natalie, Louisa and Cara who had rejoined us after their stroll over to Vranja Jama to look at the Proteus.

On arriving at **Jama Za Teglovko** we admired the intricate rigging of the entrance pitch to three trees. I managed to slip on rock at the entrance and was rather grateful for the invention of cow's tails otherwise it would have been a quick descent. At the base of the pitch were quite a few animal bones. The cave led on to a muddy traverse with a slippery climb up onto flowstone. On climbing up on to this we reached quite a pretty section with the flowstone cascading down to the end of the cave. On the way out we met Ben and Martin coming back in, who pointed out a hole underneath the main pitch. Tim was duly dispatched and reported back that it led to a 10m pitch down.

Next day Tim, Louisa and I commissioned the good ship Knibbs for a trip down **Zelske Jama**. After inflating the dingy inside the cave we set sail along with pump and puncture repair kit – just in case. We headed for the terminal sump first which involved a few portrages to clamber over rocks or flowstone. Here we could see a diver's line heading off in crystal clear water which looked quite inviting. However, we resisted the temptation and turned back to beach the dingy at a dry passage that we had passed on the way in. After climbing up two fixed ladders and a tricky climb over a flat slab of rock we reached a pretty section of passage, at which point the cave started to gain more impressive dimensions. Walking through a rectangular passage with stalactite teeth we came to a T-junction. To the right, led to the second entrance we had poked our noses through a few days earlier while cowering from a thunderstorm. This section had loads of stalactites bent by the wind. The left of the T-junction led to copious amounts of mud and the way on. We called it a day when we reached a draughting dig in boulders.



The next two wild caves ticked off in a day were an easy SRT cave, **Brezno V Zavoju**, followed by a Mendip like cave, **Mackovica**. We were only able to find these after Ben (who had returned to Blighty by now) had texted us details of how to plug coordinates for the Slovenian grid system into the GPS.

We found **Brezno V Zavoju** easily enough after Cara spotted a cave sign on a tree. Couldn't have been much closer to the road even if we had wanted. The first belay point was to the tree directly above a slash in the ground. After a 5m pitch we landed on a shelf above a rebelay that was lassoed round a stal boss. We then followed the slope down to the next rebelay 4m below. A deviation and two more rebelay finally had us on the floor. Tim and I had a bit of a dig in the floor, while Martin Peck showered us with stones while descending the final pitch.

A short drive to the other side of Laze, taking a track by a crash barrier and then following a path brought us to **Mackovica**. The entrance was more impressive than we had been expecting. We followed a worn route to a breakdown chamber then took various routes through boulders to arrive at a huge chamber. A stomp downhill brought us to the end. Retracing our steps, we took a left hand passage, Blatini Rov. This section proved to be entertaining, involving traverses and muddy climbs with the assistance of somewhat dodgy hand lines. Finally we reached a small tube leading to a muddy chamber. Popping out of this we reached a muddy sloping bank. A hand line was rigged to aid getting down and more importantly so we could get back up! At the bottom we reached the glutinous mud of the normally filled sump pool. Opposite, we spotted some rifts that led off into the distance. We all declined traversing along these apart from Tim, as they were extremely slippery after the mud bath we had just had. So Tim went off for a furtle, to report back that he had climbed into an aven with several cascades. On the way out Louisa had a bit of difficulty with some of the climbs and we had route finding problems trying to get out of the large chamber. As a result we finally exited at around 9pm. Not surprisingly when we got back to the campsite the others were starting to get worried.

Two days later saw us armed with the repaired Pacesetter 200 and the Knibbs' dingy to tackle **Tkalca Jama**. After slogging down to the entrance of the cave with all this kit we found that the entrance was rather dry. We thought we'd do a quick recce to see if there was any need for boats. However, we kept walking and walking with only a few pools encountered. Finally we reached a narrow section of the cave that was jammed full of tree trunks. A way through was found but we soon reached the end that had even more tree trunks wedged in. Tim and Martin Peck investigated a climb for a possible way on but nothing was obvious. On the way out we inspected the cave flora and fauna including a toad.

After this we went hunting for **Jama pod Cesto** (cave under road) that the Shepton Mallet Caving Club had done a few years before. This took for ever to find but we found two other caves: **3865 SĚ** and **3865 JRKD**. The first one didn't go anywhere; but the second was about 50m long, quite pretty, but full of mossies.

During this time Cara had found the cave we were looking for. It turned out to be quite picturesque, which was surprising for being so close to the road. We then went off to look for **Pajkovka Jama**, another cave that the Shepton had done. This reminded us of Goatchurch with its maze like passages. It was good fun with a few nice formations. Again it took a bit of finding.



Cara Allison in Jama pod Cesto



Our final wild cave was **Gradisnica** and after reading the cave description we knew we were going to encounter something rather intimidating. On approaching the entrance we found a gaping chasm with the take off ledge sloping into the hole to add to the vertigo. Once over the edge we got to a Y-hang with an awesome 50m free hang. Two rebelay later and we reached a horrible sloping floor that funneled into a big black hole.

I passed the rope bag to Tim so he could start rigging the next part of the cave and waited for Cara to come down. After dangling at the Y-hang for 20 minutes trying to lock off her stop, she turned back. I went to see where Tim had got to by traversing the left hand wall which was more like a scree slope - so rather daunting. After crossing a gulley with the aid of a traverse line, I followed it down and continued to traverse round to the left to reach the head of the next pitch at the top of a slope. After the initial Y-hang we had four rebelay on the way down to land on a huge debris mound. Next we headed down to the sump, trying not to lose our wellies. Luckily we found a bit of streamway which made it slightly easier going. At the sump pool we found loads of proteus. With no other way on we headed back up to the debris mound. On the way we spotted the head of a hand grenade poking out of the mud. Needless to say we didn't investigate too closely.



Krizna Jama

Our last cave of the holiday was the show cave **Krizna Jama**. Meeting up with our guide he supplied us with oversuits and fetching white wellies. The trip was pretty impressive with the highlight being the calcite encrusted streamway. Due to this the guide was very particular about where we put our feet, pointing out damage caused by previous trips. This also explained why we had to wear the white boots, so as not to leave marks on the calcite.

Following the initial walk we got into a dinghy and paddled our way upstream with a few porterages to reach the final stop, Kalvarija. Disembarking we inspected the formations and had a few Kodak moments. Just before turning back we peered down Pasani Rov which became too low for the boat to pass.

Back at the first lake we lingered a moment, to watch a group of tourists at the start of their trip. The lights were turned off except for those underneath their boat to illuminate the crystal clear green lake.....



Krizna Jama -



### List of Wild Caves Visited

| Cave Name                               | Cave Party                                                            | Position Name | GPS Reading* |             |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|
|                                         |                                                                       |               | N            | E           |
| Vranja Jama                             | Mass hordes                                                           | LZ88          | 45°52.418'   | 014°14.786' |
| Skednena Jama                           | Mass hordes                                                           | LZ224         | 45°52.468'   | 014°14.499' |
| Najdena Jama                            | Peat, Julie, Natalie,<br>Martin Peck,<br>Louisa, Ben, Tim<br>and Cara | LZ259         | 45°52.572'   | 014°14.745' |
| Logarcek                                | Peat, Tim, Ben and<br>Martin Peck                                     | LZ28          | 45°51.902'   | 014°16.095' |
| Zelške Jama 2 <sup>nd</sup><br>entrance | Mass hordes                                                           | PS579         | 45°47.278'   | 014°18.451' |
| Jama Na Meji                            | Peat, Tim, Ben and<br>Martin Peck                                     | LZ208         | 45°52.554'   | 014°15.081' |
| Jama Za Teglovko                        | Ben, Martin Peck,<br>Peat, Tim, Louisa,<br>Natalie and Cara           | LZ207         | 45°52.304'   | 014°15.367' |
| Brezno V Zavoju                         | Tim, Louisa, Peat,<br>and Martin Peck                                 | LZ206         | 45°52.861'   | 014°14.177' |
| Mackovica                               | Tim, Louisa, Peat,<br>Cara and Martin<br>Peck                         | LZ52          | 45°51.532'   | 014°16.243' |
| Tkalca Jama                             | Tim, Louisa, Peat,<br>Martin Peck and<br>Cara                         | TJX           | 45°47.619'   | 014°17.236' |
| Jama pod Cesto                          | Tim, Louisa, Peat,<br>Martin Peck and<br>Cara                         | RSRC          | 45°47.483'   | 014°17.971' |
| Pajkovka Jama                           | Tim, Louisa, Peat,<br>Martin Peck and<br>Cara                         | RSLC          | 45°47.499'   | 014°18.116' |
| Gradisnica                              | Tim, Peat and Cara                                                    | LZ86          | 45°53.693'   | 014°14.172' |

\* GPS Settings: Position format hddd°mm.mmm'  
Map datum WGS84







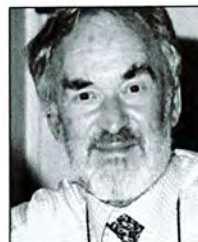


## GALLERY





## GALLERY



**MCG TRUSTEES**



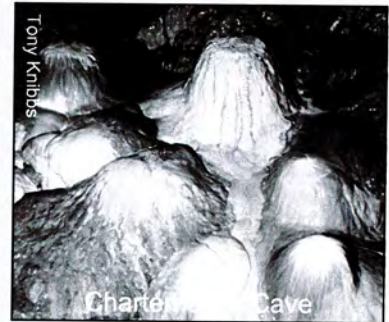
# GALLERY

Ian McKechnie



GB Cavern

Tony Kribbs



Charterhouse Cave

Ian McKechnie



Stoke Lane Slocker



GB Cavern

Tim Francis



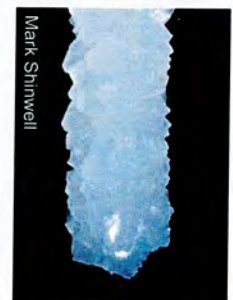
Upper Flood Swallet – Neverland

Mark Shirwell



Upper Flood Swallet  
The Cornet

Mark Shirwell





## GALLERY



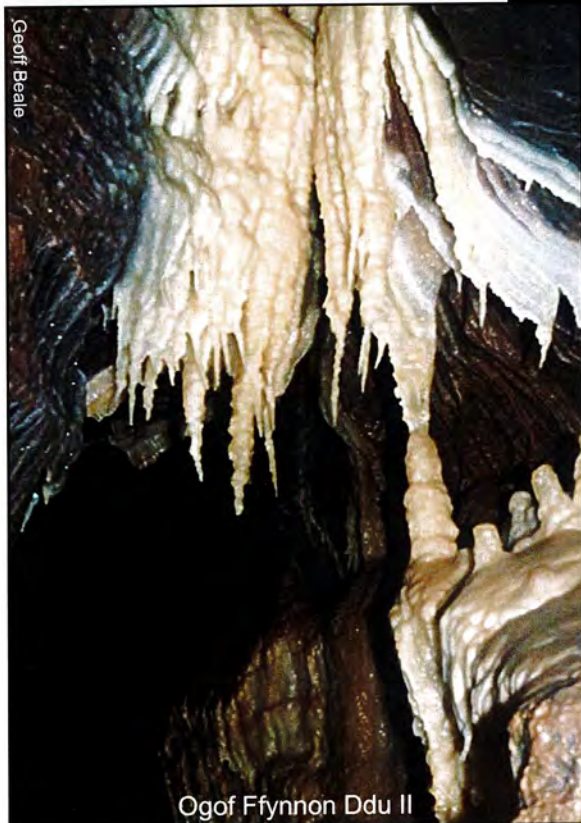
Joan Goddard

Geode



Ian McKechnie

Dan-yr-Ogof



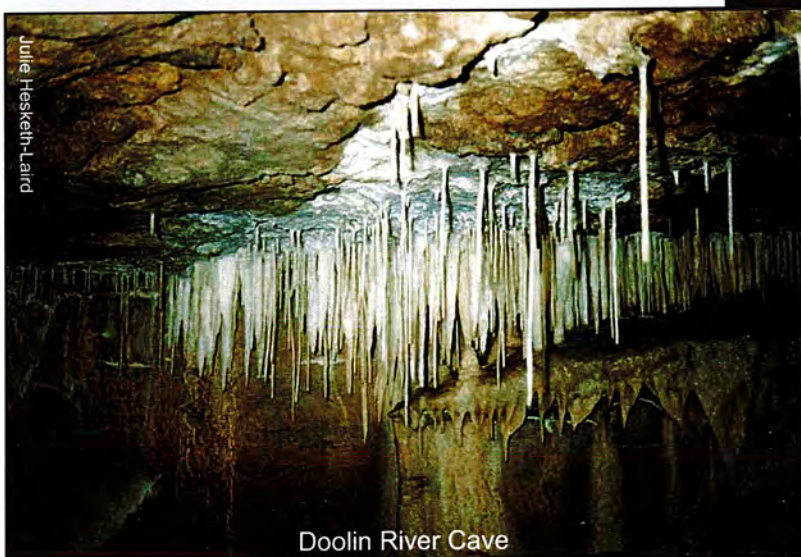
Geoff Beale

Ogof Ffynnon Ddu II



Ian McKechnie

Otter Hole



Julie Heskeith-Laird

Doolin River Cave



Ian McKechnie

Craig-a-Ffynnon



## GALLERY



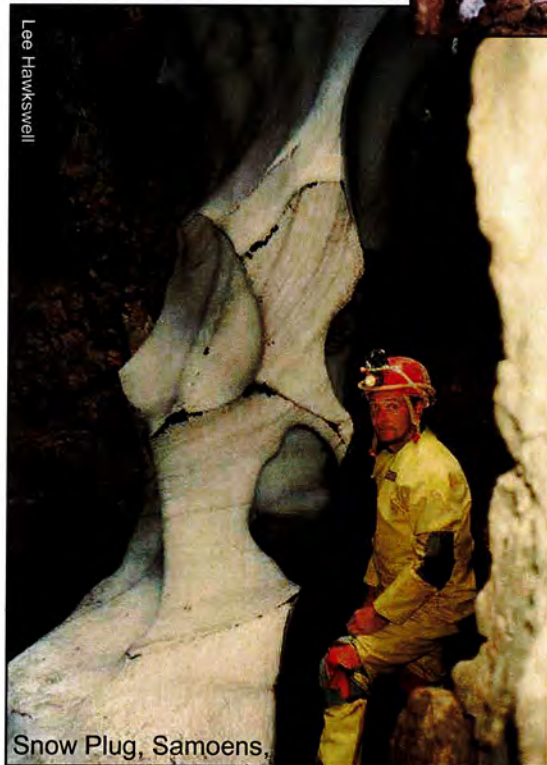
Ian McKechnie

Grotte Casteret, Pyrennees



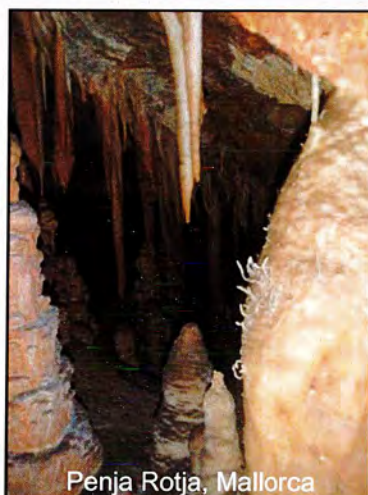
Bill Chadwick

Sistema Cueto Coventosa,



Lee Hawkswell

Snow Plug, Samoens,



Penja Rotja, Mallorca

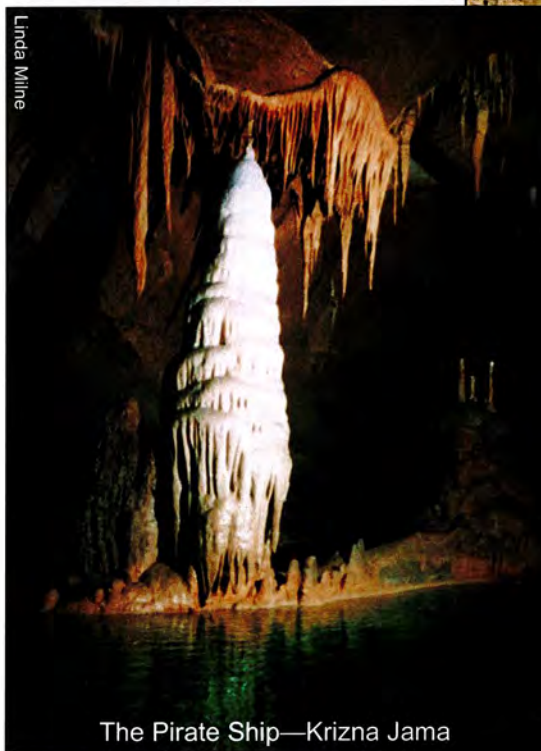


Ralph Diment

Penja Rotja, Mallorca



## GALLERY



## SLOVENIA 2004

