

ROYAL FOREST OF DEAN

CAVING CLUB



FEBRUARY 1974

NEWS LETTER No 51

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FOREST NEWS

Scouting Old Ham

A few weeks ago preparation for our usual Sunday evening pub crawl was rudely interrupted when a phone call from John Court put us on the alert for a possible rescue . A party of adventure scouts from Reading were overdue from a trip to Old Ham (possibly Old Bow) After some time a search party got together and as part of the back up we arrived at Ham entrance after this first party had gone down for the initial search . We found two scouting types sitting in their van and asked them what the situation was . Their answers were somewhat vague and although they were obviously older than the usual age of scouts neither of them would admit to being in charge of the lads we were looking for , even more so when the Coleford constabulary arrived . We remained and waited for the search party to return .

However before long a procession of lights announced the return of the missing scouts . Roger Solari had found them sitting at the top of pipe shaft in Gelly Churn . They had become “bushed “ in Lost Churn in spite of one of them who had stuck his head into the way out and reported back that it didn't go but that's not as bad as another of the party who had been that way about five times before on previous trips .

OLD BOW

The fall on the way through to St Pauls and the through route has had several large blocks down recently , care must be taken in negotiating it .

LOST

Four green helmets belonging to the club .
100 ft of rope belonging to the Court's .

FOUND

At the Robin Hood rescue practice one British Army trenching tool , now in the possession of Jim Hay .

FOR SALE

TEXOLEX helmets all sizes at £2 each .
Replacement headbands for the above at 45p each .
Electrolyte crystals 10p for sufficient for 1 pint .
Carbide lights (cap) £2.60 (this price is a rough estimate)
2 Oldham hand lamps at £2.50 each .
Proper NIFE cell cable , brand new at 50p per length .

TRIPS

24th Feb - Buckshaft and any other sites of interest in the area .
7th March - Club meeting , talk on Buckshaft .
10th March - The Mendips visit the new cave at Manor Farm .
24th March - Westbury Brook Iron Mine .
12th - 15th April - (Easter) camping at Porth -yr-Ogof .
28th April - Devils Chapel .
Whitsun - Camping in North Wales .

ADDITIONS TO THE LIBRARY

Birmingham Polytechnic Carabiner Club - News Letter No 4 Winter 1973
DCA News Letter - No 17 and 18
Descent No 26 Jan/ Feb 1974
PCG News Letter and Journal No 53
The British Caver Vol 161 Jan 1974

COLIN MELLOR

Colin has returned to his home area near Rugby , his first job is to rebuild the cottage he has bought , he must have caught the habit from the rest of us .

MIKE HOWELL

Mike and his wife Lynn are off to the States for a one to two year stay . Numerous digs have been left undug and Mickey has been warned off the French fries and hot dogs if he wants to remain in trim to finish them off when he returns .

CLIFF SEYMOUR

Whatever happened to Cliff ? Our spies report that Clifford is getting spliced in May . That's what's happened to Cliff Seymour !

PYRANEES 1973

Thursday 2nd August :- We awoke to find John E safely back in his tent and over breakfast he related his adventures . Listening to his sometimes horrific account of climbs and traverses both JC and I were glad we had been unable to go with him .

After breakfast we borrowed the BSA Journal giving the history of exploration of the PSM and then John E was able to see what the French Speleos had been trying to do . We slowly began to get a picture of the huge system in our minds and we were filled with renewed enthusiasm to get in and see as much of the system as possible .

' Fish ' and Liz , who were camped next to us , then joined us and Fish agreed to demonstrate some new prussiking devices that he had brought . They were called ' Gibbs Rope Walkers ' He rigged up a double rope from a nearby tree and tried various ways of using them , but as he only had a clog for the chest sling they would not work at full efficiency even so we all tried them and they appeared to be the best type of ascenders we knew of . Fish agreed to send us all the information he had about them . Whilst trying these out a very heavy storm burst on us and after extracting Fish from tree and ropes we sheltered and then had lunch and then prepared for our trip .

The PSM had at last been officially declared open at 5 pm the day before . We decided to take cameras up to the hut and leave them there so that if it were possible to do some photography we could fairly easily go back for the cameras . We left the campsite at 3.30 pm and walked up the track in very humid conditions with the cloud lifting now and then enabling some photo's to be taken of the route up . It was 5.30 by the time we were ready to enter the cave .

We opened the door and forced our way inside against the gale and managed to get the door shut behind us . The tunnel stretched ahead just like a level in a mine and we felt quite at home until we emerged into the Salle de La Verna . The tunnel breaks into this enormous chamber at a high level and we stood on a small platform area over awed by the view of - nothing . Rubbing our eyes and making sure our helmets hadn't slipped forward we looked again and could just make out some small flickering candles . We studied these twinkling lights for some time and decided they must be route markers . Feeling a little shaken by the vast size of the chamber , for vast it was as we could see nothing but the ground we were standing on , we stumbled forwards to try and find the route .

We had been told the routes were marked by Scotch-Lite tapes a different colour for the upstream route to that of the downstream , but we could not remember which colour to follow . Following the one we guessed might be going the right way we started climbing down the side of the chamber . Down , down and down but still no sight of the bottom . We passed the Bulgarian team man making his way up and continued going down and down . Eventually we reached the bottom and could hear the river . Following the markers and making sure the next was in sight before losing sight of the last was not an easy task and we made slow progress .

Cont.

The marker lights were a little brighter now and as we neared them they appeared to be moving . We reached a wall and started to climb up . Up and up we went and then we realised the lights were the large carbides of the Bulgarian team climbing a 150ft pitch up this wall . Realising we were on the wrong route we attempted a conversation with two of the Bulgarians at the bottom of the pitch , then made our way back to where we had started . It had taken us over half an hour to cross and return . Feeling demoralised by the sheer size and difficulty in finding the way we trudged off after the other markers.

At the top of the chamber we passed the plaque to Marcel Loubens and climbed up through some boulders and came out where the river cascades down into the Verna . This was our first sight of the river and from now on we were to follow it up to the bottom of the Lapineux shaft , although we were doubtful if we'd get that far . We eventually became used to finding the markers and climbed up over huge boulders and scree slopes , on and on .

There are five chambers from the Verna to the Lapineux but as the river passage was so wide and high and we could only see one wall it was difficult to tell whether we were in a chamber or the main passage . As we became more used to the size our confidence began to return and we pressed on feeling more determined to reach Lapineux . The constant climbing up and over house sized boulders was very wearing and it was with relief that we reached a chamber that could be compared with the scrap of survey we had found along the route . Thinking that we were nearly there we continued through more boulders and climbs and on and on . The next chamber we came to had a saucepan conveniently placed under water falling from an aven and here we collapsed and drank thankfully , all of us felt dehydrated . Somewhat refreshed by this we pressed on and began a climb up away from the river . Every time we thought we'd reached the top , the route twisted round and continued to climb . After rising about 400ft from the river we searched around realising that the shaft bottom must be near by the usual scree slope and rubbish we were climbing up . Although all three lights were trained above us neither roof nor shaft could we see , so after a good look around we made our way back .

It was with a feeling of relief we reached the tunnel and were blown out of the entrance . It took all our strength to shut the door and then stagger back down the steep valley to the tents . It was 11pm when we came out of the cave and we collapsed at the campsite at 12.30pm . The trip had only taken 5 ½ hours which was surprising as it had seemed much longer and we had been told it was about an 8 hour trip, no wonder we were shattered .

Friday 3rd :- It rained until lunchtime but as soon as it cleared up it was decided to walk up the next valley. The valley was thick with undergrowth and trees in the bottom through which a dry stream bed ran , with sheer rock cliffs rising high up on each side . It was still humid and the going was rough and feeling weary after yesterdays trip we gave up and returned to camp . In the café that evening the news arrived that the English team had found 1000m of new passage off the Meandre Martine which was received with great enthusiasm .

Saturday 4th :- The weather was still unsettled and nobody felt like trudging back up to the EDP tunnel again so we agreed to break camp and head for Spain . We crossed the border without any problems and immediately the scenery changed to barren rocky ground . Finding a suitable campsite proved difficult and we ended up on a partly demolished bridge over a ravine .

Sunday 5th :- We drove through Spain to the Maladetta area but decided to cross back into France and end the holiday on the Mediterranean coast . Again we had difficulty in finding a camping site and we finally ended up in a vineyard .

Cont.

Monday 6th :- Drove around the coast towards Spain and camped near the border on the cliffs above the sea . The snorkelling was good with the visibility very clear and beautiful fish in large shoals to the shore . The water was very deep with a rocky bottom and many sea plants growing , but although the sun was hot the water was cold .

Tuesday 7th :- Had another swim then packed up and set off towards Dieppe going via Gorges du Tarn and Avon Armand is one of the show caves in the large limestone plateau , the Massif Central and the whole area affords scenic routes with many gorges and limestone outcrops . We camped on top of the plateau by the side of the road .

Wed 8th :- John C and I had a tourist trip into the Avon Armand which became boring to travel through . We found a disused quarry to pitch the tents that night .

Thursday 9th :- After negotiating the Autoroutes around Paris (More difficult route finding in the PSM) we made it back to Dieppe and had only a short wait for a boat back to England .

If anyone is interested in reading about the PSM the BSA Cave Science Journal Vol VI No 48 has a descriptive account of the history of exploration .

Diana Court .

DIVING IN DUNN

With the new year in, and water levels in New Dunn the lowest for many years a diving project had to be started . Therefore with a tough GSS support party one cold Wednesday evening down we went . I will record and indeed recommend a wet suit for New Dunn trips .

There were surprisingly little choice of sites . However one of the few was more than interesting . Following east from the pump house (Pit Bottom) and carrying straight on down the incline , the level ends blind but in the water could be seen a hole in the floor . This indicated (to me) that the level had been driven and had hit perhaps old workings . I hoped possibly to connect below water with Sling Mine , Dunn's nearest neighbour in this direction .

A nearby level also dipped below water so this would serve as a cool off . After kitting up , as usual , only left entering the icy water . One tries to do this casually for the patient spectators .

Underwater a quick fin takes one clear of the mud and into clear water . The level has levelled out and continues uninterrupted . I swim on round two shallow bends , but after 100ft the base line tightens and that's all there is . Turning back into the usual stirred up silt and a quiet fin back to base is on the priority list . I then notice that the base line is tightening and I think that the base party are keen on giving me a free pull . This fine but they can probably see a little more than me . Through my mask a red haze is lit by the light of my lamp . But as I collide with a roof I can't see , even that is taken away from me . In total darkness good or bad viz' is totally irrelevant . However by tracing my head it is possible to find my helmet and by fending with the free arm which also holds the base line one can at least push off offending walls and things . About this time comforting lights could be seen in the distance and this gives a better guide for home .

A plod to the next dive and off again . A quick swim then a descent through the hole in clear water . I descend into a circular chamber with a large cone of rubble on the floor . A careful search revealed all ways on were blocked , most disappointing .

The next Wednesday with a RFDCC back up team and Colin Graham to dive as well (still with the same cold that prevented him diving last week) we returned to the hole . Colin dived and confirmed my findings .

We then transported kit to south east of Pit Bottom to the large chamber and adjoining 'lakes' . Colin dived the right hand one but no way off could be found . I then dived the main lake entering a large passage . Following the left hand wall took me round to the right into an area with high stacks of deads . I was disoriented at this point and had difficulty in finding the direction on , large chambers are more difficult than smaller passages , to navigate .

Cont

The way on appeared to be a large passage with a high wall of deads along one wall . The base line snagging so I decided to return . Visibility was perfect until nearer base . Distance from base was 70ft . Colin then dived the far pool for 50ft to a heavily timbered passage which he did not pass as the route back in bad vis' would be very risky . As the porters , or some of the m , were grumbling about thirst we took the kit and ourselves back out . The dives were interesting and rewarding . Many thanks to those who helped .

John Elliott .

CAVING COMMENTS 1974 (Or Suchlike)

Firstly , apologies to those who offended by my cheerful reports (even if some of might be true) and a solemn promise to all and sundry that I shall not write any more comedy sketches for the John E Beano . Well with that orf me chest back to the real thing . The famous four are still pushing the dig in Tufts Iron Mine and its still going . It's now about 15ft into the fall and what looks like solid rock in the roof is in reality extremely rotten stuff , you just have to tap it gently and BOFF out it drops . Probably more than 3 tons of debris has been excavated up till now .

The entrance adit is now flooded to over knee depth and the water down at the boiler has come up quite quickly . The main tramway down through the coal workings was investigated by the intrepid caver John Hine at Christmas time and he managed to take a quick glance at one or two passages off it that obviously went to coal , but apparently it seemed too grotty to push , and I can vouch that the water is pretty cold even with a wetsuit on .

I accompanied John on a few days general grotting about when he was down and we entered quite a bit of ground including a poke at Devils Chapel area where some interesting holes were uncovered . Another probable way on was found in me dig in that area and a bit of a hammer might open it up . Any offers ? There is a good draught .

We also had a look at an adit up on Carters piece , it's crutch deep in water and blocked with a seemingly solid extremely sticky clay fall about 60 yards in . It used to be a main tram road for the transportation of ore down to Lynbrook .

“ Wye Knot have a look at it ? “

Gordon Burch .

OGOF Y CI 31 - 1 - 74

Club members on the trip - myself , Jim and Daph , Colin Clements and Steve Potts.

A late start was made from Jim's due to Colin damaging his throat by eating two of Daph's ham samm'os , and we arrived at Vaynor which is just the other side of Merthyr Tydfil , it was raining and very cold with it so we retired hastily to the pub in order to warm up with a pint or two .

It seemed at this point no one except myself wanted to go underground . Potts even made an urgent call to his girlfriend (so he said) I think he was trying to get a taxi home . However braving the bitter cold we changed and toddled off up stream to find the cave entrance .

Jim showed us Rhydd Sych entrance which had a fair old stream emerging and as none of us fancied drowning we carried on up stream and missed both the lower and upper entrances of Ogof Y Ci . After about half a mile we came upon a car graveyard where Potts had a glorious fifteen minutes ripping and tearing bits off cars , and when you've had a look at his car you will understand why he has the mania for scavenging spares .

Cont.

Working back down stream we found the upper entrance and with cries of “ Boo “ and “ Lets goo ‘ome” we did the opposite and slid down the entrance hole . After a drop of ten feet or so and a walk of six yards we stepped into the main stream which was about a foot deep . We explored upstream first , the passage-way being roughly triangular in shape and high enough in places to allow one to walk comfortably . Further on we reached a dead end and came back to a side passage which we followed to what looked like another dead end , but noticing a crawl on up through a waterfall I bravely struggled up what proved to be a very wet and awkward crawl . Upon reaching the top and finding the way on non-existent I shouted for the others to come on up and casting aside all selfish thoughts I lay in the stream and damned it off a bit for ‘em

However as each one got up to the halfway stage the cold overcame me and I had to stand up for a minute . Unfortunately I came back headfirst and got stuck , the water ran up my back and came out of my collar , it was bloody cold too .

We then followed the downstream route looking for the lower exit , by this time Colin was feeling a bit groggy so we made off out fairly quickly . Back at the car we changed hurriedly , the weather had deteriorated drastically so after coffee and scoff we set off home arriving back at Jim’s at 1am .

Although a lot of time was used in exploring the stream and hunting for the way in the cave was well worth seeing and an enjoyable time was had by all . Full marks to Colin for taking us and sticking the trip out even though he wasn’t feeling to grand . Roll on the next away trip.

Gordon Burch
(Ex reporter for the Beano)

CAVING PROGRAMME

This caving year started off very poorly . This was due to the government allowing the national crisis to affect the caving community , who of course should be exempt from such matters . This was coupled by the lack of enthusiasm shown on away meets last year .

The committee have therefore suggested that a bias to caving in the Forest this year will be tried , covering the main areas of mines and caves .

As restrictions have eased since November further away trips will be arranged as required , probably one per month but nothing will be booked unless there is a team to do it .

Suggestions from members are welcome so lets have ideas of what you want to do .

John Elliott . Meets Sec’.

WIGPOOL IRON MINE

Sunday 20th January

Jim Hay

This was the first trip in this years series of visits to local mines etc . The thinking behind the trips being that away visits have not been very well attended and the petrol shortages might make attendances even worse . By getting a club member to lead trips locally in mines they know particularly well , other club members will get to know the more interesting parts more quickly before hopefully embarking on original exploration themselves .

So to the Wigpool trip - I had volunteered to lead the trip to try and scotch rumours that outsiders knew Wigpool better than club members . Eight members and friends turned up on the morning of the trip - Me and Daph , Sue , John E , Andy , Tony Wall and a friend Alan Garmin . Having persuaded Andy that the insurance business really could do without him for a while , we got away underground about 10.30 am . First of all we had a brief look at Mouse Hole which lies very close to Fox Hole and was the entrance we were digging originally when Fox Hole was found and thought to offer better prospects . Mouse Hole always has been some bodys private rubbish dump and they still insist on using it even though Wigpool now has a dustbin service . Not only is it now full of rubbish but it is almost completely grown over . It has never been proven but Mouse Hole is almost certainly an entrance to Wigpool Iron Mine and is likely to be the passage that joins Fox Hole just below the entrance .

It is quite common for parties using Fox Hole to exit from the mine to miss their way and finish up in the blind passage of Mouse Hole .

Fox Hole was as wet and muddy as ever - it was blocked by a large slab and silt when found and , although the silt was dug away sufficiently to let caves in , the slab was to large to move . This means that you have to lie on your back in mud for the first ten feet to get in . Once all the party was in , the progress downwards was fairly rapid with short halts to look at sections that have broken into natural cave . About half way down is a natural boulder choke with a mined route through it to an aven with the entrances and exits of original water course . All too small to be followed .

About 250 ft down vertically from the surface and about 800 ft in there comes a choice of routes where the original Fox Hole route can be followed down to the first (350) level or it is possible to turn right to the north to take a route towards the old entrance passage of Meeks Hole . We all turned this way along the passage known as Meeks Hole shortcut - like the shortcut in New Dunn , it is shorter in distance but takes longer in time . The start if the route means crossing a low pool and although it is possible to traverse it in a flat out position , it is safer to wade in the shallow water . People have been known to fall in from flat out position .

Part of the shortcut route uses a main up dip passage that stops short of the surface but looks as if it intended to go all the way once . Why it stopped just short of the surface isn't known but it may be that it was thought that Wigpool had enough entrances without driving others out from below .

Cont.

A further short crawl brought us to the first main chamber on the Meeks Hole route and a short rest was taken to ease bruised knees and to look at the fine formations . These are mainly of flowstone and crystal pools in this first chamber . Behind the formations , a short passage and climb leads into Meeks Hole chamber No 2 and this chamber is characterised by the bacon formations on the roof . The main Meeks Hole route continues on up from the rear of this chamber but we turned right half way up it and linked up with Meeks Hole chamber no 3 . This was where we had been aiming for as it contains what is probably the largest curtain in the Forest Mines . Not big by caving standards it is about 2 ½ long and about 9 inches deep .

Finding it isn't easy and I have spent over an hour looking for it on previous trips and not found it . The trick is to follow the right hand chamber wall as far as possible and then go behind the third boulder on the left . This leads into a short passage with the curtain up on the left hand wall at the end of it . The passage actually continues on up-dip for some way .

Starting the descent back down through the chambers towards the first level in the mine , the route leads out of the bottom of the first chamber . Almost immediately there is a choice of routes and the party split into two groups to caver them . Most cavers will normally take the left hand route when descending as it is the most obvious and is also the shortest but the right hand route is more interesting and is also the quickest. Another example of the shortest route not always being the quickest . Both parties met up again just above the 350 ft First Level and we all descended the large easy passage to Columbus Pit crossroads . The crossroads is formed where the drivage from Columbus Pit (Old Pit) crosses the Main First Level and continues on up dip as Meeks Hole passage to the surface . Not much is known about Columbus Pit as the records are very sparse and the main drivage to the shaft is blocked by a fall of clay and shale . The worrying aspect of Columbus Pit is that water emerges from all around the area and gives the impression that there may be a head of water backed up behind the fall . A closer examination of the workings down dip of the shaft may show where the water originates and may also give a route into the Pit Shaft itself . However , after looking at the fall in the main drivage and noting that the water flow is very low at the moment , we all descended into the series under Columbus Pit using the very obvious entrance by the crossroads . This leads into a maze of workings and here the reserve leader took over when I led everyone up a passage filled with water at the end . The whole area is filled with perched water levels and John noted two sites that would be interesting to dive later on . On the way in we also passed a large hole in the floor which echoes with running water but left it to look at on the way out . What we had come to look at was found at the end of the passage - a flooded drivage overflowing down a passage in quite a stream to enter another sump lower down . The sump was crystal clear until we walked in the water but could be seen to be a large chamber dropping away from a ledge .

Very similar to one of the flooded holes seen on the way down to the stream . I had been in this area a number of times before but had not noticed that there was another small stream entering the sump from the opposite end of the chamber we had entered . This was followed up but led into a large number of old workings - none of which seems to have been entered before .

However - we left them for another time as we still had a lot to look at and not much time .

Returning to the main level after a quick look into the hole in the floor - another possible diving site - we revelled in the easy walk upright along First Level to the junction with Fox Hole / Steam Hole exit route . From this point , the down dip route leads to Second (375) Level and then to the Third (400ft) Level but we detoured slightly to look at an interesting ore chute just of First Level . This lies off to the right of the connecting passage between First and Second Levels and is also connected by a low water filled arch . As lights can be seen through the water under the arch , it is possible to wait on one side until lights are seen on the other and then to give the wearers of the lights a fright by chucking large bricks into the water . If the bricks are aimed correctly it is possible to send a mini tidal wave over boot tops . But - back to the ore chute - this is about 20 ft high and leads down from some small upper workings .

Cont.

A puzzling feature is that there is a shaft under the chute and it must be blind as it is filled with another of Wigpool's perched water levels .

At this point it becomes obvious that we were running out of time , light and energy so route plans were made and we headed straight for Pit Bottom and the Main Shaft . The route followed was - First Level - Second Level - Third Level and turn left towards the shaft . On the way down , the levels in various holes in the floor were the same as always - totally different to the last time . There doesn't seem to be any reason at all to the water levels in Wig pool . After passing through the nasty fall on Third Level we continued to Trial Pit and the deep floor hole beyond . Trial Pit is only known because it is marked on the old survey but exactly what it was is not known . It probably went to the surface at one time and , if it did , would have come up somewhere near where the rough track from Andy's meets the tarmac road . Beyond it underground is the very interesting deep hole . This is just off to one side of the main drivage and protected by some timbering that may have been to stop ponies straying into it . It looks as if it were a continuation of double cage surface shaft going down below Third Level . Only the roof above it is absolutely solid . In previous years the water level has been about 15ft down and its depth was not known . Now the water level is getting on for 50 ft down and it is quite a hole . What it was for can only be guessed at but it appears to be located at the bottom of the Wigpool Syncline and may have been a pumping sump . Unfortunately the Mine Shaft itself also has a deep sump under the level (130ft) and it would surely have been the pumping sump ?

We all continued on through the very dodgy fall beyond the Trial Pit area and made for the shaft itself . I had never been to the foot of the shaft although I had been within about 200ft of it eight years ago when the dodgy fall was first dug through by Rex Keane . Then the route was blocked by 3 ft deep water with a large concentration of sewage , sheep and household rubbish . Now with the levels right down , it is only 6 inches of mud mixed with the above concentration .

The shaft area itself is very interesting and could be the subject of a full separate description - if you haven't seen it , go and see it soon as the levels are on their way up and it may be that they will never go as low again . While we were at the foot of the shaft , someone (thought to be the Bailey brothers) took to throwing cans and bottles down the shaft . Much as we shouted , they continued to throw so we gave up . It was very tempting to provoke a cave rescue call out by shouting " we've been down here three days " . The water levels in the shaft area are as puzzling as anyone else .

The level of the water in the deep hole by Trial Pit is perhaps 50 ft below third level while the water in the main shaft sump is only about 12 ft below third level .

Lighting was now looking a bit dim - especially mine - so we set off out but used one more non - standard route on the way . This meant turning right just after where the ' Men and Boys ' sign used to be and just before the fall , to climb up the long drivage that appears to have had twin railways on it , to reach the main level above . This level is actually a continuation of first level in a southerly direction although there isn't a direct connection with the first level that runs to Columbus Pit . We used a little known crawl connection to get through and , with a little trouble we eventually all reached the start of Steam Hole passage out .

Steam Hole has the very definite advantage over Fox Hole in that it gets bigger as it nears the surface . And we needed that advantage as it was the first serious trip underground for some of us for some time . Although we hadn't been underground too long and hadn't covered very long distances , the effect of Wigpool is noticeable . We surfaced in a long straggle around 3 o'clock , tired but with a long list of things to see and do on future trips into Wigpool Iron Mine .