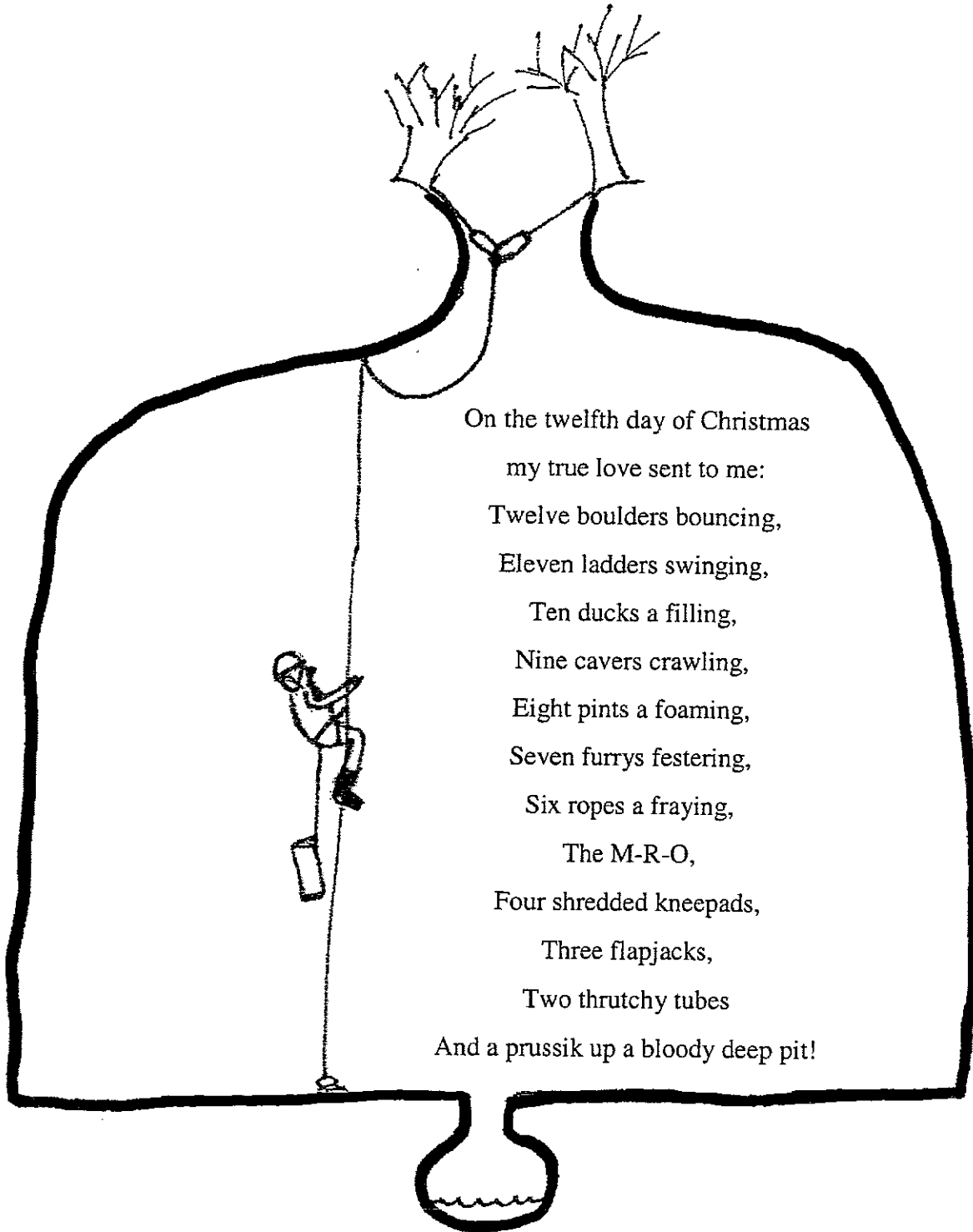


UBSS CHRISTMAS NEWSLETTER 2003



On the twelfth day of Christmas
my true love sent to me:
Twelve boulders bouncing,
Eleven ladders swinging,
Ten ducks a filling,
Nine cavers crawling,
Eight pints a foaming,
Seven furrys festering,
Six ropes a fraying,
The M-R-O,
Four shredded kneepads,
Three flapjacks,
Two thrutchy tubes
And a prussik up a bloody deep pit!

Welcome to this bumper Christmas edition of the UBSS newsletter. With over 50 people joining the UBSS at Fresh back in October we have had more trips and more people caving this term than I can remember in my three years here. Many thanks to all those who have been so active in organising and leading trips and of course giving up the best part of Tuesday evenings to help with ladder and SRT training. Thanks to all people who have contributed material to this newsletter, keep up with the caving in interesting places and keep up the write-ups, I hardly had to threaten anybody to get this done before the end of term!

Have a great holiday and see you underground next term

Ed Hodge

DIARY – SPRING TERM 2004

23rd Jan – Burns night supper at the hut

7-8th Feb – Wales weekend

21-22nd Feb – Yorkshire weekend

6th March – AGM and Annual Dinner (Manor Hall, Bristol)

13-14th March – Wales weekend

Easter Vacation: An Ireland trip is being planned, get in touch with Lou Crowe (lc1769@bristol.ac.uk) for details. Probably some sort of Yorkshire visit as well!

As always, come to the pub on Tuesdays and check your email for details of changes, confirmation of the above plus extra trips, talks and extra-spelaeo activities!

Treasurer's Note.

Graham Mullan

I thank all those who have sent back their updated banker's orders and trust that the remainder of you will do so shortly. Please note, however, that you can send them straight to your bank, they do not have to go via me.

Some of the debtors shown in the last N/L have still to pay their subscription for this year. I know who you are and We Know Where You Live.....

Peas in Pierre's Pot: A First Caving Experience

Would there exist one word to summarize the Netherlands as a whole, the odds are that 'delta' would suit best. And as I originate from this country where caves are purely the stuff of far away fancies, there should be no surprise that the Midlands beckoned as a cornucopian caving country at my arrival. The temporary stay in Bristol seemed the excellent excuse to venture forth into this arcane world of spelaeology, to doff a helmet and spelunk myself to new depths. And thus I ended up in the throngs at Fresh, scribbled down my details, and one and half weeks later crabbed about through the sewers of Redcliffe Caves. What fun caving.

At that time, naively as it may sound, it still hadn't really dawned that actual caving is most definitely *not* what the tourists do. This must be that kind of lesson one undergoes with certain awkwardness at the discovery that all earlier preconceived ideas of caving were strutting on faulty foundations. And with the lesson learned, you remain wondering why no one had previously bothered to inform you what real caving is all about.

I lost that naivety on caving when joining one of these impromptu Sunday trips the active core of the UBSS sets up. Five of the more experienced members consisting of Lou, Ian, Pete, Paul and Jacky together with three definite rookies accumulated on Sunday 18 October before the tackle store door. Of course I arrived with no equipment, no spare clothes on my back, not even Wellies which had safely remained in the Netherlands. However, what I did bring (as any true tourist should have done) was a camera albeit a cruddy one.

After stocking up on chocolate and now wearing a sweater that dimly reeked of old beets, I crouched in one of the two cars that set off to head for Burrington Combe, cavers' playground. To avoid underground congestion the group split up in teams of four and I grouped up with Pete, Jacky and Paul who took me to the craggy entrance of Pierre's Pot, delicately enshrouded between boulders. This was my crucible. If hoisting yourself in the confines of an overall for the first time was daunting enough in itself, I sure hope none of my team noticed the stricken look terrorizing my face at surveying the surgical cut before my feet. Surely *real* caves would scoff at this effort, this pigmy, this scratch in the surface. Real caves, they'd pride themselves in opening voluptuously to lure in their admiring spectators. Or at the very least provide a modest yawn. And yet, this was a cave. The plaque above the entrance said so accordingly. For better or worse, the plaque called it a Pot, which seemed luridly fitting to me that particular moment. Whatever would crawl down in there would simmer until the mountain had worn away.

It was at this point that I began to suspect this experience would be very different in the respect to my previous endeavours with caves. And so it was. And it was excellent.

For nearly two and half hours, Pierre's Pot was deftly explored and combed for connecting passageways. We had a peek at the infamous slot to the lower section of the cave and we left it at that. Working ourselves as far as we could into Pierre's Pot, Paul found a challenging tunnel which he dubbed "the Mouth" at the very end. Pete discovered an alternative route from the other side (which was soon dubbed "the Gullet" as it was decidedly narrower). I can recommend this Shimmy of Regurgitation to anyone with a like for a pleasurable scramble.

Near five o'clock we emerged from Pierre's Pot, a cave that had brought quality entertainment, and found the other team waiting for us. Lou had had a dose of

arachnophobia and I received the impression that the two beginners of that team had not exactly enjoyed their shake-off of discovering what true caving is about.

A stop at the Plume of Feathers concluded the Sunday afternoon and we drove back to Bristol with the final rays of sunlight. In one respect Ian was wrong by saying “you arrived with nothing, so with nothing you shall leave” as we parted ways: I had gratefully left some naivety behind and took back home an experience and a camera without pictures taken as I had completely forgotten about it.

Bjinse Dankert

My First Swildon's Short Round Trip™

Bonfire Night, with Ian, Andrew, Ed Hodge and Lisa.

The Swildon's short round trip was the probably the most daunting thing I have done with UBSS, since the first time I went down a cave (it was Swildon's, coincidentally). The very fact that going back through the mud sump and the troubles once they had refilled was deemed “awful” and often “impossible” meant that once you got to sump 1, it was either: Do it; or wait for a very, very long time.

Sumps are a very scary thing, especially for the uninitiated, I'm sure you agree. This is why, on that Wednesday evening, I was cacking myself.

Off to a good start – no light for Lisa, leading to a bout of apologising from her that lasted well into the cave. Also, only one welly for Andrew, leading to a startled cry from him on learning that the spare pair by the barn had a big leak in them.

I should point out that the trip had a subtext – which was to try to teach Lisa and I (now with at least 1 year's caving under our belts) the route of the short round trip. However, in my nervous state it took another trip round with Ian for me to get the route finding, which was tested on a *third trip* (masochist! I hear you cry) with Ed Hodge, Tom VdW and Andy (with the Landy). No erring from the route at all!

Back to the cave. We got to the top of the waterfall pitch in record time and the rigging was taught to Lisa. Below the pitch I was told to “go ahead” and assured that I would be told when we got to the climb-up. After passing this point and having to backtrack (cheers, guys) we were led up into Tratman's Temple, which is rather pretty – lots of straws – and on to the first mud sump. “No need to bail” was the joyous cry and we did the first duck. I wasn't *too* worried about the duck but in retrospect I realise that they are much worse than the sump. The going slow is the worst part, as you feel the freezing water creep down your neck and round your ears. However, it's very invigorating once you are through.

Cold and damp, we set off for the troubles. Passing shatter pot (which, according to the song, is “sh*t”) we went straight on and under to the bottom of Greasy Chimney. A tricky climb due to it being greasy and a chimney, with little in the way of footholds, I rather

enjoyed it. A bit of walking and crawling past some odd mud structures in the floor and we arrived at the first of the troubles, which *did* need bailing. On with the siphon!

While the water was emptying, Ian, Ed and I set off for a look down Blue Pencil passage. I found this pretty awful, scrotty and tight, and I baulked at the right-angle bend near the bottom, so I didn't get to see sumps 3 and 4. I reckon I might have been able to do it if it weren't for my heightened emotional state, brought on by the ever-looming sump.

Returning to the bailing chamber I discovered that Andrew and Lisa had decided that extra manual bailing was a good idea, which explains the increased water flow down Blue Pencil on my way up. Thumbs Up!

Through the ducks then, including the thin one that you have to do on your side, and on to birthday squeeze which I should have found easy, but messed up. After a stern talking to by Ian I was through. I would like to mention that if you have a light with a cable and belt battery, make sure that it's well out of the way and untangled when doing a duck, because having to mess around with your battery because it's gotten caught is annoying, especial when immersed in a foot of water. On your back. With 3 inches left to breath in. *Annoying.*

Through the boulders and down the "A-team" slide, re-christened by us as we sang the A-team song whilst sliding down. And also that Mr. T pitched up to lend moral support*. Once we'd all had a chortle at the Wookey Hole road sign ("Oh, the mirth!") it was off up the stream. At this point my anxiety had reached a high point and I was wondered why the hell I caved anyway.

And there it was, The Sump. 2 feet of cold, cold water without anywhere to breathe and some impatient, pub-ready cavers making up the rest of the party. Now or never, I thought. Ed went first and I was next. Knees on the floor, hand on the taught rope and my face inches from the water, I took deep breaths and went for it.

It was cold, but no colder than the ducks, and it was dark but only because I had my eyes shut tight, and it was everything else I thought it would be. But it was the most exhilarating thing I have EVER done. A cheer went up from Ed as I emerged and I was stood there soaked and shaking (the cold and the adrenalin playing equal parts) but feeling amazing. Then, before I knew it everyone was through and we were running out of the cave, with cries of "The Hunter's, NOW!" echoing up the 20.

The Swildon's short round trip is a brilliant trip, really varied and exciting, and in my limited opinion, one of the best trips on Mendip. In this time of closed caves, it is good to have such a trip open to everyone, and if you're bored of going to the sump and back, it opens up a whole new area of the cave for you to enjoy.

*Might never have happened

Paul Savage

Lancaster Hole to Wretched Rabbit

We woke up to the smell of cooking breakfast and condensation running down the walls as the rain was beating down outside. This seems to be what Yorkshire caving is all about! But the cup of tea in bed (thanks Lisa) made the morning that much better. Wondering in to the room of smoke, otherwise known as the kitchen, you find Eddy at his usual place tied to the stove, making huge amounts of breakfast. Having forced all the lazy students out of bed and gorged ourselves with fried breakfast we got ready and made our way over to the cave. When we arrived we found that someone had forgotten to pick up a light, so after a bit of rearrangement of head gear and backup lights, and changing in the strong wind and rain, we set off.

Steve was rigging for our group which included (slightly dizzy) Lou, Ian and two new cavers; Jo and myself (Ness). At the entrance we found about six other cavers, clad in yellow suits, sitting around on the rocks, and as we waited for Steve to rig another four or so joined them. As they were such a large group they let us go down first, which was slightly daunting for us new cavers. Jo went down first with Ian helping at the top, to find Steve (although she didn't know that it was Steve) waiting at the re-belay to give advice. We all managed the first pitch with no problems; it was excellent descending into the dark seeing just Jo's light at the bottom (much better than the Union!). There were a few more pitches with traverses to go down. "Oh, it's a long way down" was my reaction as I lowered myself over the edge of one of these, hearing the faint sound of Steve whistling at the bottom, probably not the best thing to do if you're scared of heights (like Lou, but she was fine). The third pitch was the last SRT of the day, much to our delight (no prusiking out!) as we removed our SRT kits and had a chocolate break.

We carried on into the cave, it was mainly large muddy rooms – quite slippery at times – watching out for the drops between boulders! The Yorkshire caves are much better decorated than the Mendips, the ceiling covered in straws along with some interestingly coloured curtains in places, well recommended to all those other new cavers who couldn't go this time. There was a great squeeze through a crack in the rock that was wider at the top, where Lou's quote of the day "can you take my SRT kit?" originated from. Having had to let Lou stand on my knee to get up high enough I went for the climbing up the wall and then going into the crack technique that seemed to work quite well. As Lou got out of the crack her light, that had been getting progressively dimmer all trip decided to fail, unfortunately she was the one that had lent her backup out to save the forgotten light. Once everyone was through, Steve checked out the light to find that it was totally broken. While wondering what to do, who could we hear in the distance but Andy and the other group that we were crossing over with. After a little more musical hats everyone had a light again and we carried on. There was a fixed ladder that we had to go down, quite amusing watching people lower themselves into a hole trying to find where to put their feet, until its your turn and you realise that it's a lovely rusty and fairly long ladder! At this point Steve's light decided to die to a dim glow (we were having such good luck!) so I followed close so that he had some chance of seeing. This took us down to the streamway and into a excellent muddy crawl, the highlight of any caving trip but not with an SRT kit dangling around your legs getting in the way. After that there was a walk through the freezing cold stream which filled your wellies and made you feel like you were properly caving now. As we rounded the corner the banks were lined with the yellow

people dangling their feet in the stream, quite a shock in a cave....well quite a shock anywhere really!

After that the really fun started, the way out to Wretched Rabbit. This was a small passageway with a little water flowing in the bottom. The sides were all wavy like ripples and it curved round corners in ox-bows. At points there were pebbles stuck in cracks up the walls, which is always a reassuring issue! Running through it was a bit like being in a computer game, leaning over to fit round the corners, and then things like a stalactite jump out at you! As it was quite tight and bendy you often couldn't see the people in front or behind you so thought you were lost, apart from Lou's voice in front and Jo's behind!

Coming to the end of this was a few climbs. The first, and largest, was actually the easiest as there were plenty of hand and foot holds. As I reached the top I saw Lou walking up Steve...Knee-hands-shoulder-push up....and there was a rope, followed by "can you pass me my SRT kit". Unfortunately, Steve then climbed up so I had to go for the climb most the way and then have a pull of the rope to get me over the top. The last one had been rigged with a ladder and as I started to climb we heard "F***, F***!!" rumbling from Ian below. This time Jo had tried the same trick as Lou but with slightly less grace, kicking Ian in the teeth, ooops! But we all made it out in one piece, although quite tired. A silly girl also managed to fall in the river on the way out, but we won't mention that! As we trekked back over the hills my light was getting dimmer and ended up totally going out. So we were left with Steve and his dim light, Lou on her dull back-up and me with no light. Ian, being real helpful had run up the hill in his mountain goat style, leaving the rest of us girls relying on Jo for light. The silly girl also managed to sink into knee deep mud quite a few times as well on the way back, I think we'll blame that on the lack of light!

Overall the cave was great as there was a bit of everything (apart from prusiking, Yay!). From a beginners point of view it was really tiring as that was the longest I'd ever been caving for, we had to miss lunch (shock horror if you know about my appetite!) and had to walk a reasonable distance to get back to the cars. But definitely worth every bruise and made the beer go down especially well that night!

Ness

SRT refreshing, first step

Ok, I am back to SRT in Hunters Hole and everything is as I remember, in other words, all is hundred of times more difficult with cold hands/fingers. Specially adjusting harness and maillon, or descending to the cave in a ladder with ice cover.

The first rebelay was at the scary high of?around 2.50m above safe ground. I know, it was but I decided to treat it as if it was at 250m. Practice is practice! ..and argh!, there's no enough rope for a hard lock, let's do just a soft one, short cowstail to the knot, long cowstail to the loop, put all my weight IN THE SHORT COWSTAIL, undo the stop?what!, the lock of my stop's crab is open! shi..!, what a luck to notice it! I closed it, undo

the stop and attached my hand jammer to the rope, used this last one and foot loop to climb and happily unattach my short cowstail to transfer my weight to?to?to?NOTHING GOD'S SAKE!

How easy you can commit involuntary suicide (accident)! I have heard about cases where? but that's another story and in my case an instinctive check put my sight on my stop before unclipping the crab. Two self-lessons in one: Always check that the stop's crab is locked and the rope is on the stop when it is supposed to be.

First rebelay passed and the second presented the same problem: lack of rope to make a full lock on the stop? I was blaming rigger Ian when I realized that the rope was stuck on a salient rock?self-lesson #2: before blaming, please have a look of what is below.

So, after three instructive hours Jo, Nessa, Andrew, Ian and me ended the trip, pints of Butcombe Bitter inclusive at the famous Hunter's Lodge. This was in a Thursday night with clear sky and amazing moon.

Second step

Circular trip Wretched Rabbit - Lancaster Hole

Saturday on Yorkshire and with wind, rain, and cold temperature the weather forecast can not be wrong this time (at least the predict sunshine). Lancaster system revisited to make a circular trip. Well, let me see if I have an idea of it. You make your first minutes after entering Wretched Rabbit (New cave on Steve's survey) jumping like one. On the curly stream way, in principle there's no chance to be lost if you follow down the "obvious way" (which usually means: follow the water taking care not falling in a blind pitch). On that way we arrived to "The river". The strength of the flow decided us for the "Four ways" option, crossing over the river, crawl, ladder, chamber of the white stalactites, all this included. By the way, in this last one I saw again those nice stalactites that for my imagination they have the shape of a couple of ballet dancers. Just details like this or walking trough "The Minarets" passage make this trip memorable. But there was more! There's the chamber where you need to stand and watch a "rock rafter". This to identify, just further ahead to its right the connection between two passages when you are doing the opposite trip.

We, Andrew, Ju, Paul, Sally and me, succeeded meeting the team making the Lancaster Hole - Wretched Rabbit trip, that is, Steve, Ian, Lou, Nessa, Jo if I remember well. The end of the trip consisted on three pitches, just prusiking and with nice views of the cave. Two of these views on Fall Pot were extremely beautiful. From a top position I witnessed a party of five cavers uniformed with yellow oversuits and carbides on their "caravan" winding way among the rocks. While we followed the rope-quick-way, they took the climbing way. However, eventually they reach us at the final Stake pot.

The other beautiful view consisted on cavers all around, bottom, top, on the rocks, on the ropes, using the several pots and ropes hanging there, standing on the ledges at different levels. Yes, it was crowded.

Third step. Sunday

Nuke LaLoosh (Tim Robbins) in "Bull Durham" movie.-- "A good friend of mine used to say, 'This is a very simple game. You throw the ball, you catch the ball, you hit the ball. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, sometimes it rains.' Think about that for a while."

Sometimes you are caving, sometimes you rig or de-rig, and sometimes it rains.

Jose-Luis

A CAVE FOR THE CONNOISSEUR

There is something about Map 5 in Mendip Underground, something that inspires men and women to strong words and heroic deeds, something that can draw forth both oaths and tears from the hearty souls propping up the Hunter's bar, something that can make you wish you'd stayed at home playing cribbage with your granny.

Of course, there are the nice caves, Swildon's, Eastwater, the bread and butter of Mendip caving. But Map 5 also has a dark side – the sh*t-infested mantrap of Priddy Green Sink; the miserable little hole that is Pinetree Pot; and Welsh's Green Swallet.

Andrew and Juliet have a plan to do all the caves on Map 5. What this says about their mental health you can decide for yourselves, but since they've both been caving for a long time, they've done all of the 'nice' caves, and the only ones left to do are either very difficult to get into (requiring bolt croppers and a dark night...), or are so horrible that trips to them get put off and put off until the excuses run out and there's no way of avoiding them.

A couple of weeks ago, Andrew suggested that we go down Welsh's Green. Overtaken by the usual gormless enthusiasm that follows any suggestion of a caving trip anywhere, I said yes. I had a pretty good idea of what to expect, having made enquiries in the Hunter's last week -- my query elicited a worrying response from J-Rat: a snigger, a devious smile, and "Oh yes. Oh, you'll like that one." This from the man who spent 14 years digging Wigmore Swallet, producing a cave that most people wish he'd spent another 14 years digging, just to make it a little bit bigger.

Chris from Burrington wanted to go caving as well, and wasn't put off by my description of how unpleasant it was likely to be, so she came along as well. A couple of others sensibly came up with last minute excuses to jack, so we were a team of three.

The guidebook description for Welsh's Green reels you in very subtly: "only example of selenite crystals on Mendip", "unique in being formed in blue Lias limestone" and passes gently over the minor difficulties that might be encountered: "muddiest cave on Mendip", for instance....

After Andrew and I picked up ladders and ropes from the tackle store (I watched Clive rather wistfully as he packed rope for a beginners' SRT trip down Hunter's Hole), we met Chris on the Wells-Rookham road, where we programmed the GPS with the coordinates of the entrance (no chance of finding it in the dark night without that), changed and stomped off up the hill.

There's one bit in the guidebook where it suggests you "follow the stream or path down through Welsh's Green Woods". "Stream or path" would suggest that you have a choice between following the stream or following the path, you might think, eh? Actually, the stream is the path and the path is the stream, so "stream or path" really just refers to your choice in what you call it.... We found the cave entrance after only a few minutes crashing around in the undergrowth, looking at unlikely little holes: "If that's it, I'm not bloody going down there!", Andrew was heard to say at one point. The entrance is an excavated shaft capped with a rusty old bit of corrugated iron. A quick ladder rig and we were at the bottom, where a narrow slot and a climb drops to a crawl. Sixty metres of wet, uncomfortable, blasted passage -- you could crawl on hands and knees in the big bits, and had to lie on your side in the water in the smaller bits. Eventually this reaches an open chamber where the stream drops in a waterfall about eight metres and there's another ladder pitch. In the waterfall, of course.

The bottom of the ladder pitch is the last place in the cave where you can stand up. From here on in, it's all crawling. The way on is a wet flat out crawl leading out of the bottom of the chamber. Guess where the stream goes. Yup, right along the same passage you have to go along. The whole of the rest of the cave is like this, and there really isn't anywhere you can get out of the water. Most pleasant. The crawl leads through more blasted passage until you drop a few feet into natural passage. This is the 'breakthrough' where the diggers (after 60 years -- really, don't ask) broke through into "caveable passage". "Caveable passage"? Oh yeah. Right. Pull the other one, it has bells on.

The first thing you notice is the mud. Actually, that's the second, third and fourth thing you notice as well. It's very pretty blue mud. You could probably make a lot of money mining it and selling face packs to advertising executives in Soho if you were so inclined. All along the natural passage are blue mud banks, with compacted parts near the bottom where the mud is close to becoming rock. Very attractive.

The passage/stream heads off downhill, and for the first ten minutes of so, it's pretty good fun. All hands and knees crawling, with trenches in the mud where people have passed this way before, laying down tracks in the floor. The passage winds around under a flat bedding plane roof and where the mud has been cleared from the floor by the stream, the rock is pale bluey white limestone with lovely cracking features. (Charlie asked me to collect him a sample of the floor, not top of my list of priorities at that point -- if he wants samples from this cave, he can get them himself! I'd suggest he does it in the summer....)

There are a few places where the roof comes lower and squeezing in the water is required. This isn't much fun the first time, and is less fun the second, third, fourth and fifth times, and much less fun than that even on the way back.

After some indeterminate time of crawling and squeezing and cold, you come to a particularly unpleasant squeeze. Andrew claims he wouldn't be able to get through anything much tighter than it. It's just plain unpleasant, awkward, wet and sharp. Ouch. Once through though and round a couple of corners, you come to the selenite crystals. The Main Attraction! Initially, I was a little unimpressed -- small, grubby needles in the mud. "Is that it? We came all this bloody way for some grubby little flakes?!" Looking around a bit more though, we started spotting bigger ones, shining in our lights. There were some clear crystal needles about 8mm across and 10-12cm long, which were pretty impressive (by Mendip standards!).

This would have been a natural point to turn round, but we're made of sterner stuff, so pressed on.

Memorable bits further on included a squeeze down into a narrow wet canal where you had to thrutch through the water on your side, and a couple of dams, built to hold back silt from the digs further on.

Eventually we reached a point where things looked even more nasty than before and I went ahead to see what it was like. A very low passage half filled with water went to a tight squeeze with a load of bang wire coiled up in it. The passage looked like it turned a corner at the squeeze and I couldn't see beyond. The squeeze looked tight, but doable, and it didn't look like it would be too hard to reverse if I needed to, so I had a go. Bang wire out of the way, on my back, thrutch, thrutch, thrutch. Ow. Got my chest through, wriggled round the corner, forcing my hips through the squeeze. Yay! Through!

OK, what have we got here then? Uh-oh. That looks tight. A couple of metres of wriggling through a tube and I reached a place where two slabs in the ceiling sloped down to make a very tight spot in the passage. A gap between the slabs looked to be of an inviting size for my head, and the passage definitely opened up beyond, so I gave it a try. On my back again. Bang. Oops. Can't get my helmet in. OK, take it off and hold it above your head. Oh man, this is going to be horrible. Head right in the water, ears in the water, nose squashed against the roof. Wriggled my head through the gappy bit. OK, going well. Eh, hang on. This is getting a bit tighter! A prow of rock in the roof was sloping down into my chest and a lump on the floor was sloping up into my back. Eek! Getting pinched. Try pushing a little more. Oh bum. I'm stuck. At this point, I decided this would be a really bad place to die, and it was time for the pub. I tried wriggling back the way I'd come, but was pretty firmly wedged.

Sometimes, when caving, you get that falling feeling in your belly. You think, "Oh bugger. Have I cocked up again?" and wish you'd stayed at home playing cribbage with your granny. This was one of those times. The last squeeze I'd come through was probably too tight for Andrew, so I wasn't going to be able to get someone to come and pull me out. I'd been lying in freezing cold water for more than an hour and I knew I'd only last a little while if I couldn't get moving. Definitely a 'moment'.

I thrashed around for a bit, then found a lump of rock back along the passage to hook my toes around. Inch by inch, I pulled myself out of the squeeze with my foot until my chest was more or less clear, then wriggled for freedom! There was no room to turn round, so I had to reverse the squeeze round the corner. Remember that bang wire? Well, I think this corner should now be called "Bang Wire Wedgie Corner". It was too awkward to sort out the wire before I started back through the squeeze, so I ended up with it wrapped around my legs. One strand went between my legs and made me speak with a higher and higher voice as I got further through the squeeze. My plaintive cries of "Can you see my feet? Am I coming the right way?" must have sounded pretty funny!

Eventually I got far enough through to disentangle myself, and we started out for the surface. Andrew had been nice enough to jury-rig a dam to hold back some of the water while I'd been trying to bury myself. By this time, I was certainly on the verges of hypothermia, as I was wearing my patented Warmbac 'teabag' oversuit, complete with gigantic hole in the arse, detached cuffs and special anti-waterproofing treatment. Chris wasn't much better (waiting for me couldn't have been much of a laugh), but Andrew was fairly toasty in his yellow PVC.

The journey out was less memorable, mostly because I was engaged in some pretty serious full-body shivering for a lot of it. The squeezes were nasty, the stream was wet, the mud was muddy, and the crawling was painful (stones inside kneepads, or in Andrew's case, inside oversuit, which made it a bit difficult to dislodge!). Climbing the second ladder pitch in the waterfall was crap -- close eyes to prevent contact lenses being washed away and just go as fast as you can! Some very swift tackle packing and some dodgy unprotected ladder climbing out of the entrance shaft (balancing the risk of falling against the risk of freezing to death, going fast won) saw us back on the surface in short order, where we ran back to the cars. I was almost back to normal temperature by the time we got there.

A quick change and a quick drive and we were in the Hunter's, in front of the fire with beer and pasta. Aaaaahhhh. Lovely.

One day, I might go back to Welsh's Green and try that squeeze at the end again. Definitely in the summer, so there's no cold water. Alternatively, I might rip that page out of Mendip Underground and throw it away. Truly a cave for the connoisseur.

Ian Ross

Ten Good Reasons To Get Lost In A Cave!

Strictly speaking there are no good reasons to get lost in a cave. There are no good reasons to endure nigh on hypothermia, no good reasons to suffer almost extreme humiliation and no good reasons to dabble with the nasty side of psychosis.

Or so I thought.

As you might be aware a recent caving adventure in Wales ended in disarray when a party of three got ever-so-slightly lost in the top series of OFD. I was one of that three and this is my story.

The caving trip, like many, started underground. It was dark and we needed light, but, as fortune would have it, we were wearing torches on our heads.

Our preparation involved tea drinking, putting on clothes and the extensive exploration of a large collection of faffing. (Thank God for the faffing or we could have been dead!)

Cwmddor to Top is a good long trip. With many twists and turns and ups and downs the possibility of losing ones self is firm to good.

Of course we had our lives in the hands of experience and no small amount at that! I had done it no times before, Frank (names have been changed for protection) had done it backwards and Eugene was a true proficient, having done "navigating-it" once before.

It wasn't long before we got lost, a bit of a boulder choke and a cross roads and Bobs yer Uncle. Thank God for good old fashioned luck though eh! Just as tragedy threatened, a pair of girls came a'giggling round the corner and sent us on down the right path.

Funny how the big passage isn't always the wrong passage!

From then on we had more fun than you can boil. What with jumping in pools of freezing water and banging shins on hard rock we were in heaven. The stream way looked like it was carved out of zebra with its beautiful white and black stripes and the passage walls, sculpted by millions of years of water, reminded the boys of voluptuous ladies.

It was all like a dreamy dream, until Maypole inlet. Two things dear cavers! Never tell me it's bigger than it really is, always tell me it's smaller, other wise I won't like it and I'll want to go home. Climbing out of the streamway was scary monsters! A kick start to the vertigo and I was in Terror City. But with some gentle coaxing and bribery I learned how to hold on with hands, something I will never forget, no more flapping like a bird eh!...Phew!

After this, we thought we were on our way out, we didn't mean to go misplacing ourselves but in the underworld, trouble is just a heart beat away. I don't think it's appropriate to spill all the guts on the turmoil we suffered, suffice to say more things were lost than the way! Extreme circumstances call for extreme measures and disco dancing without a disco is no walk in the park, brother!

So what possible reasons could there be for turning this situation from the gas guzzling Granada Ghia it appears into the superfly Sierra XR4i it wants to be?

Bring on the cavalry, oh yes! Here come 10 very good reasons to tolerate adversity and they all come bearing muscle!

Cave Rescue! God Damn!

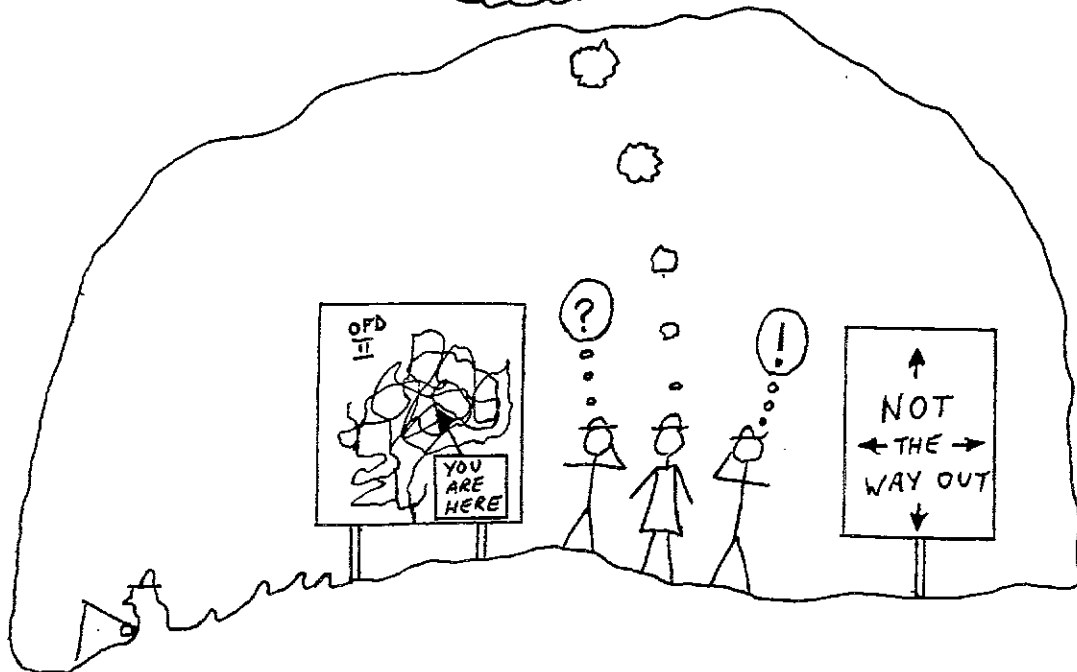
Now, I'm no stranger to fantasy rescue situations, I've seen knights on horses rescue damsels from castles and I have a good idea what a fireman can do with his pole, but this was something else. I swear there were ten of these stunners, stripped naked to the waist displaying what can only be

Show me which way to go, Gnome
I'm tired and I want to go to bed
I feel sure I've seen that mudbank
and that boulder before
But it's doing in my head

Wherever I may roam
O'er sand or mud or stone
These bloody passages, they all look
just the same to me
Show me the way to go home

Show me which way to go, Gnome
I'm tired and I want to go to bed
They told my friends to stop their drinking
'bout an hour ago
And they havn't yet been fed

Wherever I may roam
O'er sand or mud or stone
Oh I hope the dear old Rescue
hears me singing this song
Show me the way to go home



described as gorgeousness. They were moving in slow motion and get this, each one was carrying a puppy! I was a hop skip and a jump away from Heaven with a big old capital H. Not a beard or a belly in sight, Gillete City Mac 5 baby!suffice to say more things were gained than phone numbers!

So, there is two options here, either this actually happened or being stranded in a cave for hours allows for some serious loss of marbles and some serious over indulgence in the old fantasy rescue situation, either way I'm selling the story to Womans Weekly and they will be auditioning for male models in January!

Lou Crowe

(What was in that tea you drank before setting off Lou? – Ed)

CAPTION COMPETITION



1. Who are the characters in this charming photo?
2. What mystery substance is involved?
3. Write an amusing caption and I will print the top 5 next edition

– sorry I am too skint to offer a proper prize but the glory of seeing your caption printed should be enough

(MIS)QUOTES OF THE TERM

A few of the rather peculiar phrases overheard by my sources. Names have been left out but suffice to say a fair few originate from Yorkshire a few weekends ago which narrows it down slightly. Any reasonable explanations will be accepted by this esteemed publication and full apologies printed next edition.....Hmmm, Nah!

Caver 1: "I can't spread my legs"

Caver 2: "That's unusual!"

"My new sleeping bag has built in salad cream stains"

"I've already been down on my hands and knees twice for you today"

"Just put it in your mouth and suck it – you don't have to bite it...you don't have to swallow either"

Fresher: "Take me!"...(pause)..."That's in!"

Caver 1: "Are you ready for me yet?"

Caver 2: "Step one leg across and make yourself comfortable"

Caver 1: "Is this good for you?"

"I'm so relaxed I can't take it any other way"

"I remember the first time I went commando in the Hunter's"

"UBSS is full of girls who love to go down" (one for the t-shirt perhaps?)

and finally – I'm informed this occurred during a rescue situation:

"...then it broke but she didn't even notice when she slipped down onto my six inch length"

good grief

County Clare is not the only place in Ireland!

Graham Mullan (& Andrew Atkinson)

Last year at the SUI (Speleological Union of Ireland) Symposium, with the new edition of *The Caves of Co. Clare* well under way, I found myself talking with the Chairman, Paul Butler about the lack of decent, recent, accounts of caving areas in much of the rest of Ireland. Much of the country was still best covered by Jack Coleman's *Caves of Ireland* published in 1965 and only for Co. Cork was there a more up to date book and that was Tony Oldham's somewhat unsatisfactory *Caves of Cork*. I found myself, therefore, drawn into a project to produce a new and more comprehensive description of the caves of the southern half of the country.

This October, with the new *Caves of County Clare and South Galway* safely delivered, we decided that if we were to be involved in such a project we really ought to find out something about these caves and so arranged to spend some time looking around and gathering data. Linda and I, Andrew and Juliet were all going to the SUI bash this year, but could not go at the same time. So, the week beforehand saw Linda and I in Cork and the week after saw Andrew and Juliet in Co. Kerry.

Counties Cork and Tipperary

When we arrived in Cork, on the 18th October, it hadn't rained for weeks and so not only did we get to see caves new to us, we even managed to get involved in some new exploration. We teamed up with Mark O'Donohue and Sean Walsh and our first trip was into Mammoth Cave, Doneraile. This is a rift maze of passages dug by archaeologists in the distant past and extended by Cork cavers in the 1970's. We wandered around for some time, including making at least one interconnection that wasn't on the 1970s survey and sent Sean down one crawl that turned out to be completely unexplored as it was usually full of water. Mark and Sean went back and surveyed it before the water levels came up again and it proved to be XX m long and ending in a sand choke which was dug without success. There are another couple of leads in this cave that might benefit from a little digging.

Our next trip with Mark and Sean was to Ovens Cave, near Cork City. This was somewhat different in that it was being filmed for Irish kids TV. The program went quite well, Mark is a real star, but the show was stolen by Dougal, his dog, who probably got more screen time than either him or the ditsy blonde presenter.

A final trip with Mark was to the Mitchelstown Old Cave, otherwise known as the Desmond Cave. The Main Chamber in this place is an amazing place. It is 120 m long and canted over at about 35°, with much stal. However, as at Mammoth Cave, the water levels were really low and the bottom 12 m or so of the chamber which are usually flooded were completely dry. We could not reach the bottom, having no tackle with us, but again Mark & Sean came back later and descended. This time, all they found however was a mud floor. We also looked at some phreatic tubes that had obviously been entered before but did seem to extend further than shown on the survey. This is a really nice cave and deserves a much closer investigation.

It will amaze those that know us to learn that Linda and I actually caved *every day* that we were in Cork, visiting Gortmore East Cave and the unbelievably basic (and currently closed) Killavullen Show Cave as well as getting GPS fixes for a couple of minor sites.



Linda in Killavullen "Show" Cave, Killavullen Co. Cork.

At the end of a week of glorious sunshine we packed up on the Friday and set off for Roscommon and the annual SUI Symposium.

Counties Roscommon and Sligo.

The Symposium was great fun, amongst other things, we held an "official" Irish launch for *The Caves of Clare and South Galway*, Andy and Juliet managed a couple of caving trips in Co. Sligo and Linda and I wombled around with Dave Drew and Co. looking at the possibilities of Roscommon as a new caving area (see the forthcoming *Proceedings*). After this Linda and I returned to Bristol and Juliet and Andrew set off for Co. Kerry.

County Kerry

I had furnished Andrew with as much information about the Kerry caves as I could but I couldn't give him the weather that we had in Cork and unfortunately for him and Juliet it pissed it down for most of the time they were there. Oh well.

A (relatively) major Kerry system is the Ballymacgellicot caves. These were discovered by the Society in 1964 and a report was published in *Proceedings* by John and Rita Squire. However they had not properly surveyed them. Juliet had agreed to allow Andrew a day's surveying and in this time they managed to carry out a grade 5 survey of about half of the system. Hopefully we can finish this task during the summer trip next year. The also managed a visit to the other major cave of the area, Crag Cave, getting permission to go beyond the Show Cave. In the log, Andrew writes:

Good little trip beyond the show cave. Afraid that we cannot really write much of a description as the survey seemed to bear little resemblance to the real cave. Also as the cave is mainly controlled by a bedding plane (non geologists point of view) this meant that there are lots of connections between the caveable parts of the passages. Not sure we even found the '84 series. Took photos but the digital is annoying me because of its lack of ability to focus in low light, one of the cave entrance shots also had to be binned for the same reason. Owner very nice and would not let us pay for the tea and cake, plus kept offering us more. However, they did not seem to know much about the cave. Lisa (Owner) had never been beyond the show cave. The cave appeared to have lots of survey stations (white bits of plastic with numbers on) I wonder if there is a good survey somewhere?

They also managed to check out a number of minor sites, noting grid references by GPS and brief details as follows:

Clashaphuca Quarry: Quarry shallow or filled in and overgrown. Very wet at N end, possibly flow under the vegetation, sewage definitely. Photo from South end looking North and the GPS location is on the west side. From the North end a gully leads off to what could be rubbish filled entrances??

Lisodigue Cave: On the road from Drehidasillagh to church Hill the road bends left then immediately right, park by the farm buildings. Cave is about 50m on the left from the right hand bend. Use the gate after the buildings following the tack upslope towards the left hand fence. Entrance with tree in it badly fenced off. 2m climb down to entrance chamber. Crawls can be seen going off. We had been denied permission to enter so stopped.

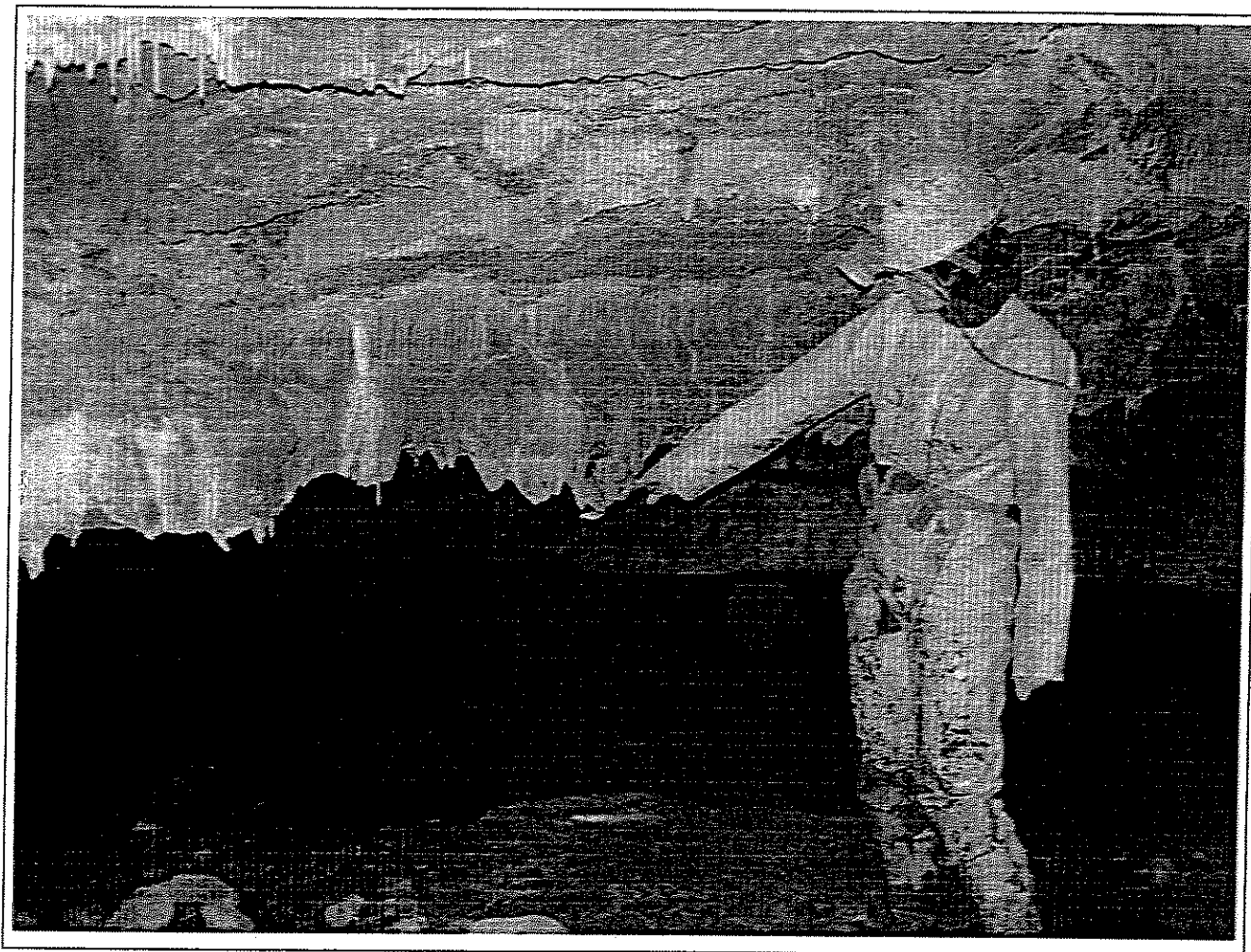
Small Resurgence: A resurgence found when looking for Toravane, Flowing out into what appeared to be a small tidal inlet. Water is flowing from 2 points about 3m apart. First appeared to be welling up from cobbles in the bed the other was from a small crack with no visible cavity.

Souterrain/Cave: After escaping the bulls charging us, walked to within 1m of the location given Q 8075 1225 to find ourselves in the middle of a flat field. Searched to no avail, then found the farmer who told us as far as he knew the fields (including some forts) had been flattened 30 years ago, he had been there 15 years, and knew of no caves, he was happy for us to search and pointed us in the direction of Torvane, which we had looked for earlier.

Torvane (a sink): From the bridge walking beside the river that then sunk. The sink is percolating through the rock and shows no prospect of caveable passage. Below this the bed was concreted and then at a crossing became a pool. No sign of water rising. Gave up at this point, as it shows little prospect of producing caveable passage.

Firochs: First 3 depressions from the road (N86) where looked at, lots of rubbish (mainly builders) in the holes, no sign of a stream from the top. The GPS location is taken on the SW side of the depression closest to the road.

Fortlands: Owner of the house was happy to show us the cave (as was the owner of the house next door to show us the fort) Cave about 5 m long, (2 branches of 2m plus the entrance) had been dug out by Lawrance Dunne. Showed signs of natural passage, and the infill that remained looked natural



Juliet indicating a survey station in Poul Dermot, Ballymacgellicot Caves, Co. Kerry

Crag Cave (JK's): Found 2 entrances location was good, but the heavens opened so we retreated. Found land owner, he was happy for us to cross his lands (remember to shut the gates) so we may go back later.

Blocky Cave & Rift Cave: Highly likely, that the map of the Crag area in *Irish Speleology* 15 is wrong. The quarries are shown as up (North) the road from Crag show cave. No sign of any quarries. The location sends you up the side road with Crag quarry cave marked up it. At the correct location for Rift there is defiantly what appears to be an old quarry (with a kiln??) and within 2 m of the location (by GPS) we found under some trees what looks like an entrance blocked with trees. Blocky cave according to the location was 50m away (not bad for 2 caves connected by 5m of passage) on the other side of the road was what could have been a filled and grassed quarry (photo) and next to the road was a mass of brambles. Does not look optimistic, I suspect it is gone. Best chance is to try and enter Rift.

Ballybeggan Pot & Ballybeggan Cave: The grid reference puts it on the **South** side of the race course wall and as luck would have it about 90m away, right in the middle of a patch of gorse. The Engineering manager showed lots of interest and told us about subsidence at the bottom of the factory (goblin vacuum cleaners) but said that the place had been built in 1963. 99% sure this was just a bad grid reference, but it is included because it wasted an hour in the rain and I did not actually go into the gorse.

North of the race course, the farmer's son showed us Ballybeggan Pot, now used as a well, (suspect it has been since the castle days) possibly a better description would be to include the fact that it is in the courtyard of a castle ruin that is now been used as a farmyard. For access contact J.P.Daly on 066 7137078. Also said that he believed that the Ballybeggan Cave entrance is behind the house under the tree. There is also a small shake hole in the garden to the left of the tree. This is where the son lives.

Gentleman's Cave: (Originally reported as being next to the Gent's Toilet) There are now at least 4 gents at the Trallee racecourse. The grid reference puts it just in front of one of the stands, the groundsman had no recollection of a cave, and the area was extensively concreted over. The groundsman did say that they had dug into a cavity when building/repairing the southern wall, but it had been filled in.

China 2003 September BILL MINERS

Summary

This year I bravely went where I had been before ... in 2002 Oct I was on a trip in that found the deepest and second deepest potholes in China (see 2002 Autumn UBSS newsletter). This year I went back with some of the same people to join the two caves together. We did not manage to do this, but did find many shallower caves and a super new cave (an almost unbroken) vertical shaft that became the new second deepest cave.

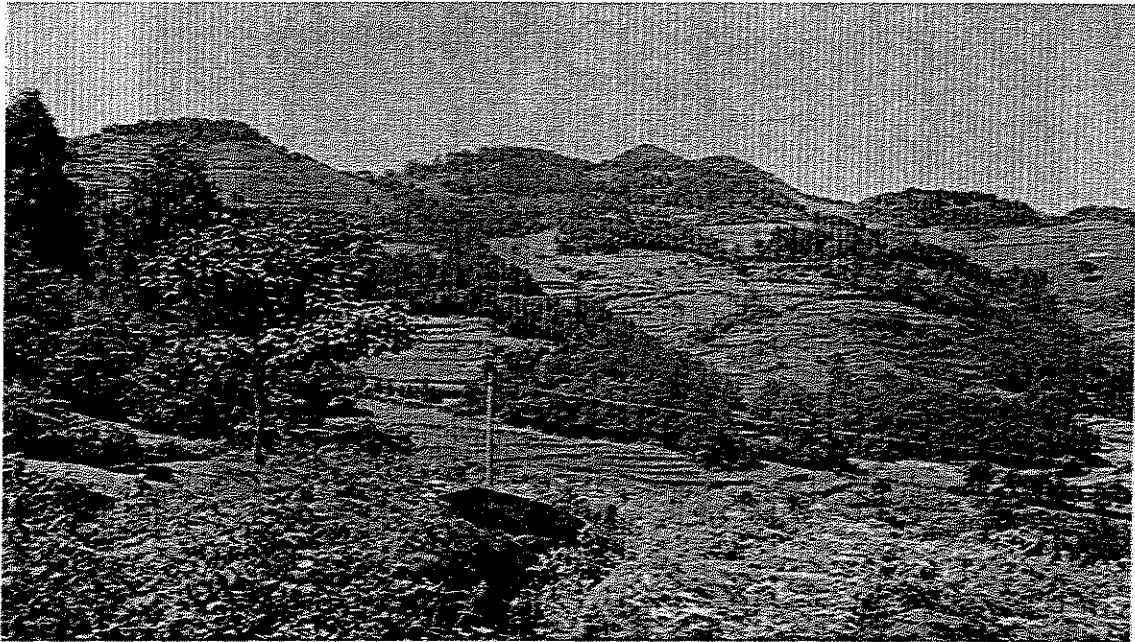
I was the only UBSS member on the expedition which was organised by a club called Hong Meigui, Chinese for Red Rose. This club was set up by Erin Lynch, she and friends (all ex UK university cavers) spend all year in China and anyone (who can cave) is welcomed to go out and join in their year round series of expeditions to different parts of China. It is an excellent way to get out to remote areas and explore new caves as once you get out there (expensive air fare!) they have all the rope etc already there and the trips are run really cheap as Erin and friends have the knowledge and lingo to get around.

So last September Fly to Hong Kong, meet up with Duncan (there renewing his visa), overnight bus (Duncan asked by attendant to wear plastic bags over his socks!). Arrive Guilin where Erin and Duncan have a flat at the Karst Institute. Meet up with Mat and Brian then series of train journeys lugging unfeasible amounts of rope and food on and off trains heading North to Chong Qing. Then lorry up into the mountains (at one point having a JCB in front of us clearing the way) through magnificent scenery to the village of Tian Xing where we were last year. We hired a series of rooms for the total rate of 300 yuan a month (that's about 30 quid) the family moved out and slept in the stairwell. Beer was a yuan a bottle, and the food was negotiated at 2 yuan per person per meal ... sounds super cheap ... but in the end turned out to mean we got marrow and potato soup with rice three times a day! Enough for super tough locals working in the fields all day. But us namby pamby western bodies needed more to go caving ... during the course of the month gradually food cost went up and meat content increased! At one point a peasant turned up with a sleepy badger on a string -- how cute, then our landlord served it up for dinner .. I passed on that meal.

Anyway to more important things caving ... Dong Ba (cave of the flat lands) 2002 Autumn myself and James had got down to 600 m and broke into a super decorated huge fossil passage which we surveyed for many hours before getting to the limit of tiredness and having to turn back with the passage still storming on in front of us. I then left the expo .. but subsequent trips that year pushed on making Dong Ba the second deepest pothole in China and only tens of metres from its neighbour Qi Keng Dong (Misty wind cave the deepest pothole in China -920 m) -- which we had also explored in the Autumn of 2002. This year we were going to connect the two ...

Rigging into Dong Ba took a series of daily trips and after about a week we had rigged to the fossil passage and four of us went in with camping stuff. To my delight we camped right at the point where James and I had turned back in 2002 (less pleasurable was the fine layer of mud that now covered the whole area, it had not been there last year).

I had spent a whole year wondering what was in the blackness beyond this point. The next morning



Local Scenery



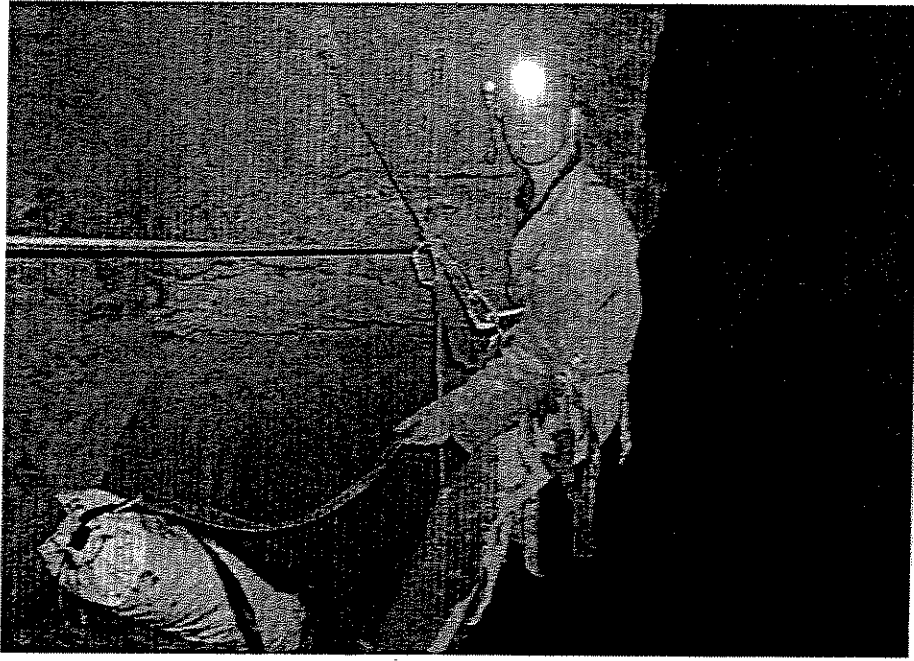
Typical local light load
(not sure about your rope
coiling there – Ed)



Expedition Members



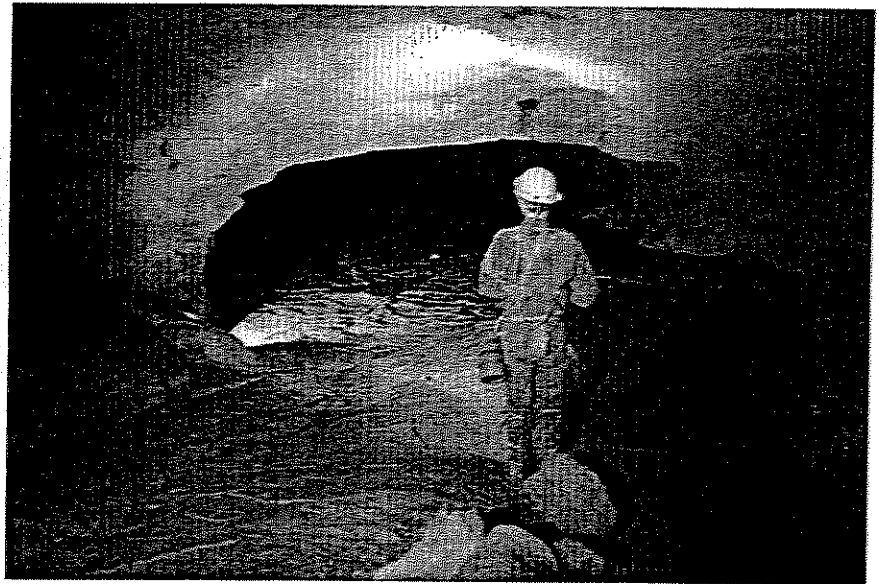
Extreme gardening



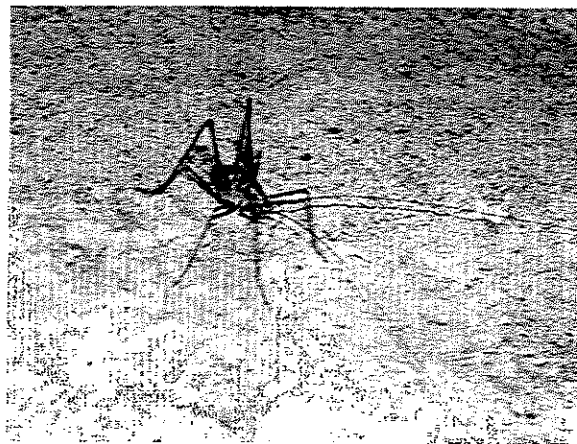
A man who's very happy with his rigging! (Brian in Da Keng)



Down climb in Dong Ba



Bill and cracked mud in Dong Ba



Supper?
(cave cricket)

it was fantastic to get up and push on deeper into the cave. The day was spent exploring, beautiful cave, surveying a number of leads deciding which were worthy of return with rope or could be discounted. Back to camp ... sleep .. zzzzzz

Next morning Brian and I decide that we would head out to collect more rope. But found that a passage that had been ankle deep water on the way in was now waist deep ... Oh er er .. thinks ... "if it can do this in 36 hours then .." back to camp drag Erin and Duncan out of their pits and a decision to pull the camp back to the other side of the wet passage. That done we all head out

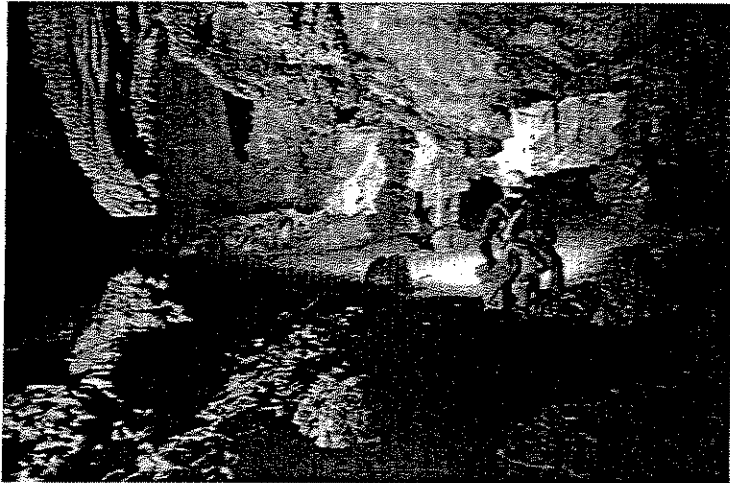
Back on the surface time was spent establishing how a new local dam was altering the water table at depth ... but in the meantime it was easy to wander off into the surrounding valleys asking farmers to point out entrances, often knarled old gents would lead you off into the hills setting a cracking pace and hacking the bush away with machetes ... you could enter a cave, rig 100 m or so hit a stream way, survey a km or so and still make it back to the village in time for tea and medals (well beer and rice).... then it rained and some ducks near the entrance to Dong Ba sumped oh well we were still having lots of fun with the shallower caves. I have vivid memories of holding the tape in one narrow passage as bats streamed past on their way out in the evening.

Towards the end of the month I was there the expo made a return to a cave called Da Keng ... in 2002 this had been descended to 100 m down a vertical shaft and Harvey had reported stones still fell for 6 seconds!! This year we found that this vertical shaft went down 280 m to a 20 m ledge the next day Brian took a 200 m rope and after attaching it abseiled down a 160 m freehang and could still not see the bottom of the shaft!! Eventually Da Keng reached a depth of 658 m, edging out Dong Ba for title of second deepest Chinese cave by 2 m!

Another humorous incident was the cow rescue ... a villager arrived one morning and wanted us to rescue his cow that had fallen down a shaft .. turns out a 60 m rubble slope then a 90 m pitch ... surprising amount of cow left at the bottom (all held together by tough skin, but rather flat)... the villager had to be persuaded that it would NOT be ok to tie the cow to our expensive rope and let them haul up the carcass as it would have rather trashed the rope .. what happened was two cavers (Mat and Ilya (one of the two Russians on the trip)) went down the shaft with knives to hack up the body in situ and pass cuts back up in a basket attached to wire cable. For this we got half the meat off the cow!!

The future

No doubt Hong Meigui will return to Tian Xing in Autumn 2004 ... more entrances are known about in the area including some promising ones found at the end of the 2003 trip. These new entrances are the magical 1000 m above the know cave development level. It is a great area and marvellous way to see really rural China. So you ... yes YOU reading this article ... get in touch with Hong Meigui through their website (www.hongmeigui.net) and get out there.



Pretties in Dong Ba

The gravel choke at end of
Yun Feng Tuo



Days out with the family in Slovenia

In July, I attended the Karstological School in Postojna, hosted by the Slovenian Academy of Sciences. Despite the name, this is really a European-level cave science conference with delegates giving lectures and poster presentations. My wife (Galya) and daughter (Antonia) came with me to enjoy a short holiday in one of the world's great caving regions.

We started with Skocjanska Jama, which has to be my favourite show cave. After descending a large fossil gallery, the tourist route meets the main river cave and crosses it on a bridge 40m above the River Reka. The trail then follows a path cut into the cave wall back to daylight at a huge collapse doline. I took a headtorch with me and shining my light up onto a steep mudbank above the path, I saw a cave cricket looking back at me. Antonia was the first to see bats.

Trevor Shaw (a former editor of our Proceedings) then joined us with a key to the nearby Mariniceva Jama. This is an upstream section of the same River Reka, formerly a show cave, but the low-level path has been damaged by floods and partially buried under log jams. A large passage leads upstream to Mahorciceva Jama, but the bridge over the river to exit the cave is now unsafe, so we returned the way we came and had a picnic with alpine swifts swooping overhead to their nest in the cave roof.

To complete the day, Trevor then took us to the limit of daylight (and a locked gate) in Planinska Jama, a major river cave where we admired the cloud layer in the entrance passage as the subterranean and surface air masses mixed. Apparently, a local caving club runs adventure trips in the cave for tourists – presumably with inflatable boats, since the river occupies the full width of the passage in places.

A new day and a trip to Pivka Jama, part of the Postojna cave system. The cave is in the grounds of a campsite where (for a small fee) we swam in their open-air pool while lizards scampered along the walls. The tourist route is a through trip to Crna Jama, the latter part being particularly interesting because burning tapers had been used for lighting in previous centuries. This has coated the stalactites and stalagmites with black soot which modern white calcite has only partially overgrown. The resulting black and white patchwork is quite beautiful.

The conference itself was 1½ days of lectures plus two field excursions. The Slovenes are very proud of their poljes, so we saw a lot of them. Poljes (large closed depressions) don't really excite me, but such excursions are a great way to see the countryside and (if you are a child) to hunt grasshoppers. We were also taken to the Trebnje stone forest, discovered during construction of an industrial site and now (sadly) mostly back-filled.

The most famous cave in Slovenia is Postojnska Jama, a great cave but commercial to the nth degree. We took local advice and made an early morning visit when the crowds are a manageable 100-200. An underground miniature railway took us 2km through the cave to a station where we were separated into groups by language. There then followed a circular tour, past speleothems too numerous to mention, back to the train. On the way, we passed a holding tank containing several proteus, a blind de-pigmented cave salamander. These animals are caught in Pivka Jama (see above) and then displayed in Postojnska for a couple of months before being returned to the wild. During this time they do not eat, but this is not a problem since they can go for several years without food and live for a century.

We also visited the Proteus speleobiological station, a commercial venture housed in part of the entrance complex of Postojnska Jama. Cave-adapted species are mostly very small and the lighting must necessarily be very dim. Combined with cool cave temperatures, this is not a user-friendly zoo. We loved it, but we were alone with our guide while hundreds of tourists milled around outside.

In total, we must have seen 10km of high quality cave with no need of caving equipment, so it was a unanimous decision to spend our last day on the beach at Koper.

Charlie Self

I'm a Caving Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!

In Search of Mega-Dong –The CSS Expedition to China.

Andy Farrant

It was almost midnight. John and I were two kilometres into Hai Tang Dong and romping down a huge virgin passage in places almost 60 m wide. Slender forests of white stal columns appeared out of the darkness, growing out of a pristine unblemished sandy floor, unseen by anyone until now. This was caving at its orgasmic best. My 15 year caving jinx was over. It was also the last day of the expedition....

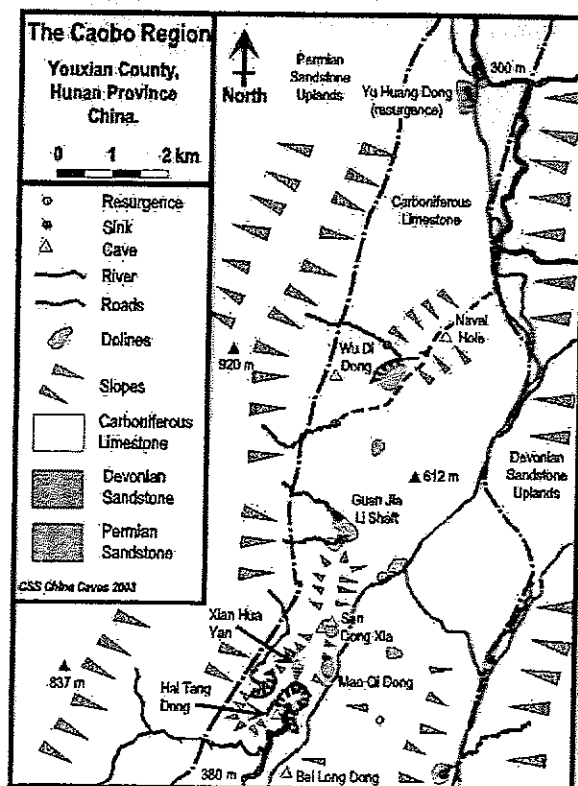
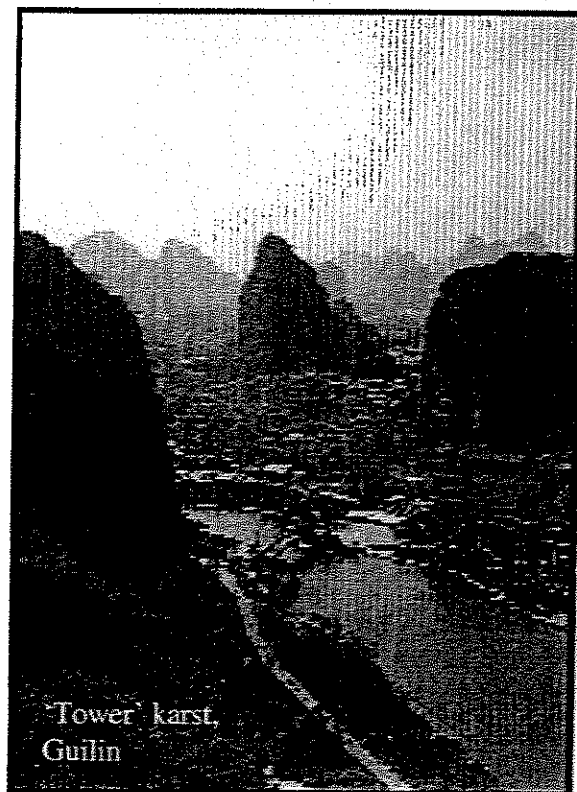
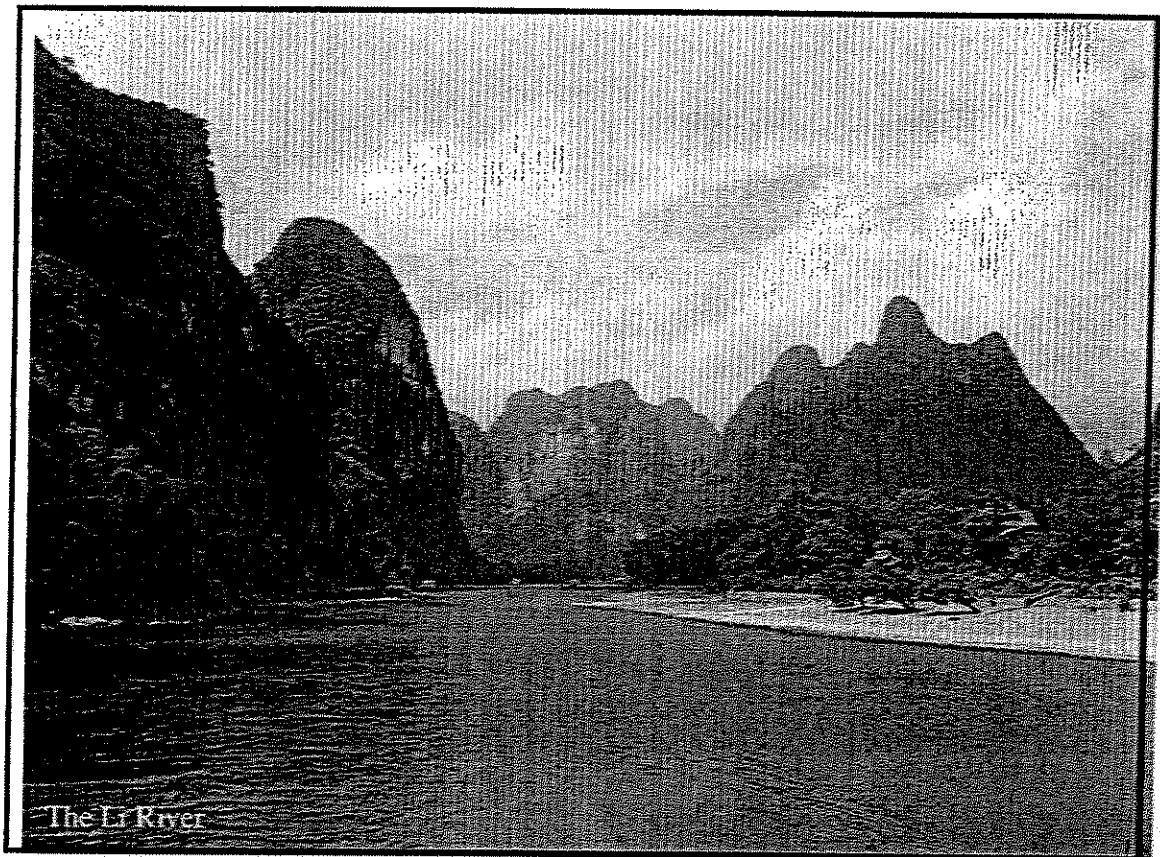
It had taken 18 months of waiting and organising to get to this point. The journey to this remote, awe-inspiring place had started in a rather less awe-inspiring setting. It was at the 2001 BCRA conference in Buxton that Mel Reid had suggested a trip to China. As a student, China had been a mythical place to me, a karst geomorphologist's heaven, but somewhere out of reach, seen only in slide shows and magazines. So, given the opportunity, I didn't take much persuading. The expedition was organised through the China Caves Project, set up by Andy Eavis and the Karst Research Institute in Guilin. They selected an area in Hunan Province, deep in central China and quite away from the areas usually frequented by UK expeditions.

In late August, Mel, myself and two other members of the Chelsea Spelaeological Society, John Stevens and John Newton arrived in Guilin, a city set in some of the finest tower karst in the world and home of the Karst Research Institute. Here we met the two Chinese guys who were organising the trip; Zanghai and Mr Huang, and a reporter from Beijing, Yidien, who spent most of her time taking photographs. We also met up with Erin Lynch and Duncan Collis, who are both based in Guilin, just before they set off to Yunnan Province (with Bill Miners). A few days were spent here sorting kit and

getting acclimatised to the Chinese way of life, food (excellent if you like eel, frogs, grilled pigs dick and rotten eggs, all served with copious quantities of chillies) and the incredible amount of bureaucracy, official receptions and banquets that seem to go with any trip to China. We were also treated to a boat trip down the Li River, through some of the most awesome karst scenery in the world.

Guilin is about 18 hrs drive from the expedition area in Hunan Province. We were supplied with a minibus and driver. Sitting in the front seat of the minibus for the journey to Caobo was not a good option. You have a first class view of all the lorries, buses and cars careering towards you at high speed on the wrong side of the road, not to mention the huge potholes, random motor bikes and ever-present cyclists that appear out of nowhere. There don't seem to be any rules for driving in China, but at least I had a seat belt. Our arrival in Caobo was marked by the now obligatory official banquet with the local communist party leaders, tourism officials (Mr Gou and his daughter Gou Chi) and various hangers on, guides and sherpas. Our base was a luxurious (by Chinese standards) official-looking residence with en-suite showers (when there was water and/or electricity) and an amazing cook, Zhang Fu Wen who produced some fantastic, if sometimes bizarre, Chinese dishes. Bless her, she even tried cooking us chips!

Caobo lies on a narrow belt of Upper Carboniferous Limestone surrounded by sandstone uplands of Permian and Devonian age (see map). Water draining off these uplands sinks in the Caobo area and rises at a large resurgence 8 km to the north, which is where we started our recce on day one. A short walk from the road led down into a huge 'tienkien' or collapse doline at the base





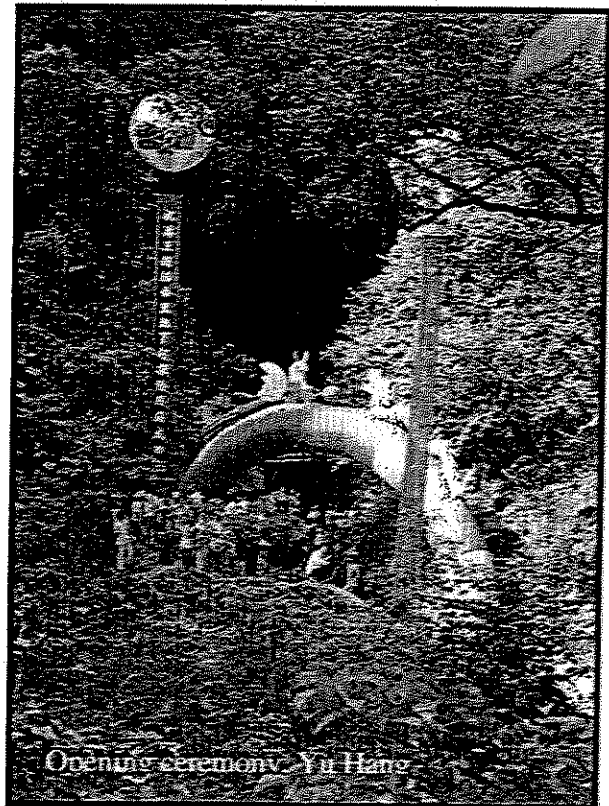
John Stevens with the reception! Yu Hang



Media Scrum; Yu Hang



The Presentation; Yu Hang



Opening ceremony; Yu Hang

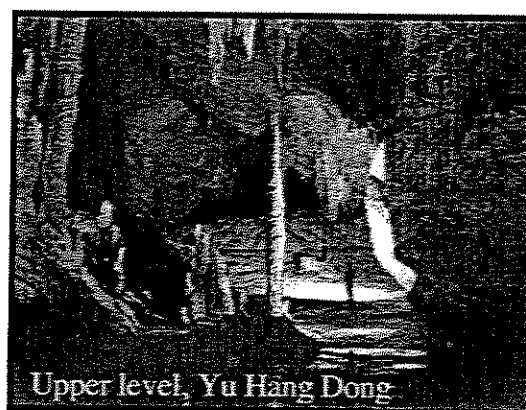
of which we could hear rushing water. A Wookey sized river emerged from boulders, but what attracted our attention was the huge gaping entrance in the background. This was supposed to be a surface reconnaissance so we didn't have any gear save lights and helmets. No matter... 20 minutes later we had splashed our way almost a kilometre upstream, barefoot and in shorts and t-shirts, accompanied by some locals with no caving gear whatsoever. We decided to return the following day to start surveying.

Twenty-four hours later we returned. I knew something was afoot the minute we arrived. A huge banner had been strung across the road welcoming the 'Joint Sino-UK caving expedition to You County'. A line of immaculately dressed school-kids lined one side of the road, saluting and standing to attention. It took us a moment to realise they were doing it for us. From here things got even more surreal. A TV crew arrived and started filming us, so we gave up any plans to get changed by the road. Mel wasn't keen for her knickers to appear on Chinese TV! We needn't have worried. Two minutes later we were staring in disbelief into the base of the entrance doline. Huge balloons, inflatable chickens and banners had been strung out across the cave entrance and a crowd of several hundred people were waiting expectantly for us!. Several more TV crews and press photographers clamoured to get the best pictures as we arrived at the entrance. Any thought of trying to get changed had vanished. In the entrance more school kids were lined up with huge bouquets of flowers for us. A multi-deck sound system with microphones and speakers had been installed for local politicians to give speeches, but best of all were nine rather stunning young women dressed immaculately in national costume. I never get this kind of reception when going down Goatchurch!

It took over an hour to give seemingly endless TV interviews, listen to incomprehensible speeches and to be decked with sashes and flowers before we could even think about getting underground. At last we thought, a

sanctuary away from the mass media. Oh, how naive we were! Forgoing any attempt to get changed we just pulled on our boiler suits over our clothes and kitted up. To our horror, most of the crowd decided to follow us in. Most were barefoot and just wearing jeans and t-shirts. A few of them had some rather pitiful lights, but most hung round us or the TV crews who at least had a light each. For some it seemed to be a family outing, complete with grandparents, for others it was a good excuse not to go to school. We started surveying, but it got a bit tricky. I don't recall anything in the surveying handbooks about what to do if a TV crew gets in the way of a compass reading! Luckily after a few hours surveying, the novelty wore off and most somehow managed to get back to daylight in one piece.

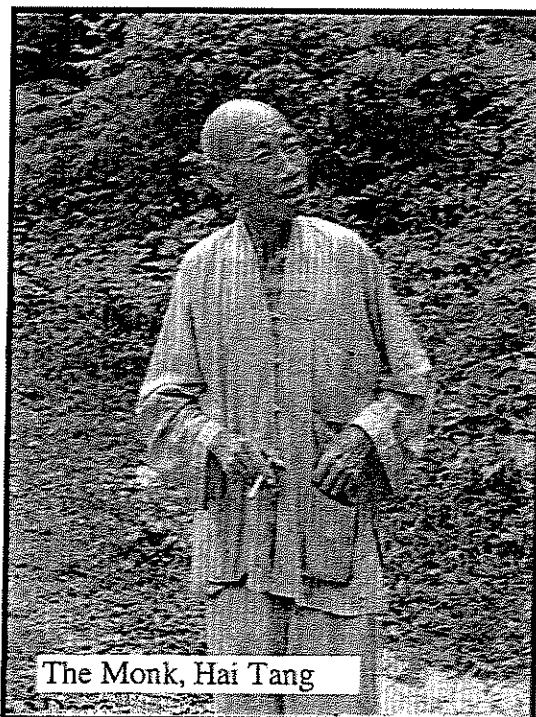
We managed to survey about 1.4 km of passage in the resurgence, Yu Hang Dong, which as it turned out was well known to the locals. The streamway ended in a rather dodgy looking sump with some rather bemused yellow catfish. An impressively large high-level passage with some spectacular formations alas ended in a huge stal choke with no way on. However, we still had over 6 km to go to the sink. Somewhere in between lay a huge streamway.



A few kilometres south of the resurgence we were told of a 'bottomless' cave, which sounded promising, so we agreed to have a look the a few days later. This lay directly over the postulated streamway 200 m below. Unfortunately our guide, Mr Liao,

omitted to tell us that it was a good hours hard slog up the mountain in 34°C heat. We arrived at the roadside in our bus only to find a couple of film crews, (including one from Central Chinese TV's 'Discovery' Channel led by a slimy guy, nick-named Mr Perm, because of his arty hair style), Yidien, a group from the local tourism office including Gou Chi who seemed to have adopted us, and some intrigued locals already waiting for us. We were obviously still big news! Once loaded up we set off with umpteen tackle bags and rucksacks up the hill. An hour later we were dripping with sweat and gasping, but following some of the rather attractive young female TV presenters (all dressed immaculately with high heeled shoes and make up) took our mind off the climb. What they thought of the whole affair is anyone's guess – they were looking distinctly less immaculate by the time we got to the cave! John and Mel rigged the pitch while I had to deal with the media. The first pitch was about 20 m which led to a second 20 m pitch (and a very large hissing toad which gave John Stevens a bit of a shock). Beyond a shorter climb led to a squeeze and the top of a 50 m pitch. By this time the drill was dying so a return to the surface was made, made more exciting by a severe rope rub on the second pitch!

Given the logistics of bottoming Bottomless Cave, we turned our attention to the large stream sink about 2 km north of the Caobo. This lay at the end of an impressive blind valley, complete with a small temple and a solitary monk. Above the sink lay a huge entrance which just screamed to be explored. A river of cold air streamed out of the entrance, rippling the thin cloud layer forming at the interface with the warmer air above. Zillions of small frogs cavorted in the cool dampness of the entrance. This was Hai Tang Dong; the main stream sink in the area. Mr Liao had explored part of it and surveyed it for several kilometres with a bamboo pole!



The Monk, Hai Tang

Just inside the entrance the streamway was met. Although it was dry when we visited the cave, it soon became obvious that it flooded spectacularly in the wet season. Following the passage downstream, debris ranging from large logs and bamboo, to shoes, handbags and sunglasses littered the streamway. A short choke was passed and we continued on, surveying as we went; a job made easier by John's Disto – a laser range finder which made surveying more like an underground version of Laser Quest! Much amusement was had by zapping the TV crew (yep, they were still following us...).

By the end of the first day we had surveyed almost a kilometre and the passage was still wide open. Another 800 odd metres was added the next day, in the large, shoe strewn streamway we christened Imelda Marcos's Secret Wardrobe. In places fantastically convoluted chert bands spiralled over the walls, and promising leads tantalised us overhead. At one point the roof disappeared into a black void, the laser Disto giving up at 30-40 m height. We also saw evidence of wildlife. Mel and John N got a nasty shock when they saw two points of light running at them out of the gloom. Two seconds later a small UFO (unidentified furry object) ran past at high speed, the light from the caving lamps reflecting off its eyes. A few hours later I got an even nastier fright when I inadvertently trod on a rather perturbed bright green snake. Luckily it turned out to be harmless. Another few hundred metres of passage was added the following day in spectacularly convoluted and vertically dipping rock before we were stopped by a large pool. Beyond we could see daylight. This pool was passed a few days later to the base of a daylight shaft we had visited a few days previously. A few short climbs further on and we arrived at the inevitable sump pool, about 3 km from the sink, but still over 5 km short of the resurgence. Large logs jammed in the roof 20 m above our heads gave testament to the huge floods that fill the cave in the wet season, not to mention making us feel distinctly uneasy.



Hai Tang Dong

With the stream passage sumped, we turned our attention to the high level leads. At one

point a large high level passage could be seen leaving the main streamway. The usual posse arrived to follow us in (two TV crews, Gou Chi and others). John Stevens set about rigging the climb, which turned out to be mainly loose mud and choss. An hour later, across a loose exposed traverse 30 m above the floor, and up a hairy 15 m climb, he was in new passage. Mel followed him up, along with Mr Huang and Mr Liao. The camera crew then followed, with no SRT kit, no lifeline, and carrying their camera and lights, climbing up the rope John had left. Given that one of Mel's hand-holds had given way, causing her to fall before being arrested by the rope, the TV crew did well to avoid falling 30 m to the floor.



Stone Flower Passage

Stone Flower passage as it was named proved to be about 200 m long with an abundance of superb crystal gours, flowstone and pristine white columns, which glistened as if covered in glitter.

Meanwhile, John Newton and I checked out some high level leads on the way out including the huge hole above the loose choke. On arriving there we realised the choke was even looser than previously thought. Fresh boulders littered the trail we had made on the way in. More bits fell every now and again, so we decided that we would prefer not to be Chinese boulder pancakes, so we left it for another party with less respect for boulders. At least one lead looked promising but needed tackle so we left it for another day.

We decided to have a day off looking at the local showcave, Bai Long Dong. This was very impressive with lots of coloured lights and the media guys loved it. For reasons unknown to us we were presented with a live chicken at the exit, something I never got when visiting Cheddar Caves. It tasted pretty good the following evening too! We were hoping to return to Hai Tang Dong within the next few days to check out the high-level leads. However Zanghai had other ideas and he had arranged for us to have a look at 'Peach Valley Cave'. For the sake of international relations we agreed, but soon wished we hadn't. The cave was a resurgence to the south of Caobo which the locals, under the direction of Zanghai, had been trying to pump out. Apparently a local farmer knew of a well decorated cave in the area, but wanted to charge several thousand Yuan to show where the entrance was. So, in typical Chinese style, they decided to pump out the nearby resurgence instead. We arrived at the entrance (with the now familiar media pack in tow) to find a huge array of generators, pumps and pipes trying to pump the water out. We knew at once this was a non-starter. In reality, all they were doing was filling the cave with diesel fumes, with little effect on the sump.

Things went from bad to worse. I was then asked to give an interview for the TV crews about cave formation. I agreed, thinking an hour dealing with Mr Perm and his cronies would be better than watching 20 Chinese guys fail to drain a sump. So I was whisked away to Yu Hang Dong to give a few interviews (dressed in my best DIY boiler-suit!), after which I thought I'd be taken back to the others at Peach Valley Cave. Nope. The Chinese are very good at not telling you what is going on, and they had other plans. I was taken to a nearby house where we given a huge meal and then taken up to the Bai Long Dong showcave again. To my horror, nine bus loads of Chinese news reporters turned up. I found out later there was a Tourism Festival in the area, and they had come to see the showcave, and they thought

I'd be good news fodder. Nice of 'em to tell me....

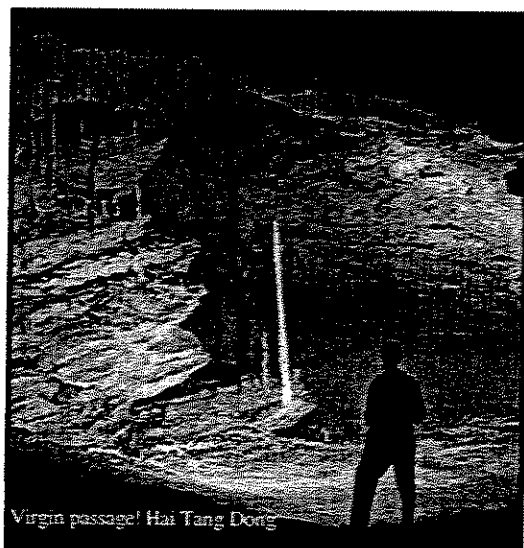
So, Mr Huang and I had to spend two hours going round the showcave (for the second time) giving yet more interviews. At last I thought, now back to Peach Valley. Nope, wrong again! Mr Perm and his TV crew drove me back through Caobo and carried on going. I had no idea where I was been taken. An hour later and we were still driving. Eventually we pitched up at the end of a small track when Gou Chi, Yidien and the usual suspects turned up. We were taken up the hill and yep, another showcave. No coloured lights here, just a string of bulbs on a bit of wire looped over stals. The path was in even better condition. The proprietor had built various bridges and steps out of bamboo which were now black, rotten and distinctly creaky, and sprouting some interesting fungi. It was more like an Indiana Jones movie. The electrics were amazing. To turn the lights on, a leather glove was used to connect the live wires together! I eventually got back to Caobo (after a detour for another meal to meet yet more local officials) about 9pm, 10 hours later than I thought. They never did drain Peach Valley Cave.



The last day dawned. After the Peach Valley fiasco, we were determined to push the lead John N and I had seen in Hai Tang Dong. But

Zanghai had asked us to wait for the local Tourism minister. So we had to wait until he and the TV crew turned up (2 hours late), so we didn't get going until after midday. Arghhhh. At least the TV crew left so it was just us in the cave. A short trip saw us to the base of a climb just off the streamway. John Stevens set about rigging it and after a while he shouted down for us to follow. The passage ascended steeply up dip at an angle approaching 40°, and kept on going up and up. Eventually John shouted something about a going passage, so I thought 'sod vertigo and just go for it'. Mel and John elected to stay behind.

The climb was reminiscent of a steeper and larger version of parts of Eastwater (Hunan - the 'Mendip' of China!!), with loose choss and mud for handholds. I didn't dare stop to look back or wait for John Newton (sorry!) until I got to flat ground 70 m above the streamway. It was only then I stood up and realised I was in a huge gurt big ginormous passage - there is a Cave God! Left or right John said. Right was south, downstream, so right we went. The void stretched off into the blackness and it was all I could do not to run. A slender stalagmite 4 m high appeared out of the dark, and then some more, until a whole forest of superb stals adorned the whole passage. The going was easy - a soft flat sandy floor. Fantastic. Caving didn't get much better than this!



Virgin passage! Hai Tang Dong

Ahead the passage opened up even bigger. The Disto was reading 25-30 m to each wall and the same to the roof. This was getting silly. A huge slope opened out in front of us, descending over 20 m to a huge chamber. Fragments of dark grey graphitic schist littered the floor, effectively lubricating the boulder pile and making ascending the slope interesting. Eventually we reached a short climb which needed tackle. Above the passage continued 20 m wide. We had to turn back, surveying as we went. We still had to check the northern lead!

Back at the top of the climb, the northern continuation just carried on, huge, big and bouldery. Several large collapse cones were ascended to a final chamber where the temperature rose markedly. Must be near the surface. We surveyed back out, aware that it was getting late. By the time we got back to the climb, we had surveyed over 900 m of passage. Getting down was easier than getting up, and we eventually met Mel, John and Mr Huang on the road. It was hard to leave knowing there was a 20 m wide passage just waiting to be explored.

In total we surveyed about 8 km of passage, of which about 6 km was in Hai Tang Dong. There is still much potential in the area for new discoveries, especially in the bit between Hai Tang Dong and the resurgence. The CSS is planning another trip to China in late August/September 2004, to an area nearer Guilin with huge potential. The maps of the area show fantastic tower karst and several major river sinks. Members of other clubs including UBSS are welcome to join the expedition, so if you fancy a trip to China next year, give me a bell! No previous expedition experience is necessary.

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Postscript

Erin Lynch and Duncan Collis returned to Caobo in November. The passage we found on the last day ended soon after at a pitch back to the main streamway, but they found another 500 m in various side passages. The 50 m pitch in Wu Di Dong (Bottomless Cave) was descended to a choke which was dug, to a further bit of small passage, but it has yet to reach the streamway. It turned out that we were on Hunan TV news every night for about two weeks (Hunan's population is c. 70 million!) and Mr Perm's TV crew were filming us to make a documentary for the Chinese version of the Discovery Channel. According to Mr Huang, viewing figures are around 200 million. I wish I had taken a smarter boiler suit....