

## CAVE NOTES: CO. CLARE AND CO. GALWAY, IRELAND

by

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### ABSTRACT

This report gives details on caving sites in the Coolagh River Valley, Co. Clare, visited by members of the Society during September 2015. Surveys and descriptions of sections between the main sink and south entrance were produced, paving the way for future work in the cave. Work in Pigeon Hole Wood, Co. Galway, continuing from previous years, is included.

### INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of the 2015 expedition was the resurveying of Coolagh River Cave in the north west Burren. The cave is fed by many sinks, two of the most significant are documented here. The main sink, Polldonough, is fed by Coolagh River which resurges from Upper Coolagh Valley Cave 800 m upstream and has one of the largest catchments on the Burren, making it of significant hydrological interest as well as being one of the most popular sporting caves in the region (Mullan, 2003). Over twenty sinks and streams feed into the system and the Main Drain ultimately takes all of this flow. Earlier work on the caves of the Coolagh River Valley (Self, 1978) uses the tags B1-20 to identify the various sinkholes and entrances in the area. Although only information on B7, B9 and B9a is presented here, the naming convention is preserved here for consistency. The original survey estimates the length system at about 5.3 km. Presented here is the first part of the detailed resurvey of the system.

Additionally, the caves of the Cong area were revisited with the aim of surveying possible continuations in Pigeon Hole and Wolves Hole in Pigeon Hole Wood. These continuations had first been noted in the surveys produced in September 2013, but were left incomplete. However, the inclusion in our models of data of the sumps, courtesy of Martyn Farr, has led to renewed efforts to produce a more detailed survey of the terminal region of Pigeon Hole.

### CO. CLARE

#### COOLAGH RIVER CAVE

Alternative name: Polldonough.

Total Length (estimated): 5285 m. Total length surveyed: 1565 m

Surveyed Depth: 25 m.

#### Flood warning

The Coolagh River Cave is highly susceptible to flooding and responds quickly to rainfall. It is strongly advised no trips should be planned if rain is predicted, and unnecessarily long trips be avoided. All sections of the cave can and will flood to the roof in wet weather.

## Access

It is recommended to park near to the main entrance, where the road passes between two cottages, after a significant dip. There is limited parking space for two cars, and a courtesy call should be made to either cottage to confirm parking arrangements and inform the landowner of plans to visit the cave.

Polldonough: B7 ITM: 0512504 0701445, Altitude: 163m)

The B7 entrance can be reached from the parking spot by first walking back down to the dip in the road. A gap in the trees on the north side of the road gives access to the stream entering Coolagh River Passage. The entrance is in a bowl underneath a sycamore tree north of the river sink. The stream can be followed directly into the sink if preferred, and is joined by the main route after 5 m of waist deep water in stooping passage.



**Figure1.**  
*Coolagh River  
Passage.*  
Photo. J. Podesta

Polldonough South: B9 ITM: 0512338, 0701097, Altitude: 146m) and B9a ITM: 0512292, 0701051, Altitude: 149m)

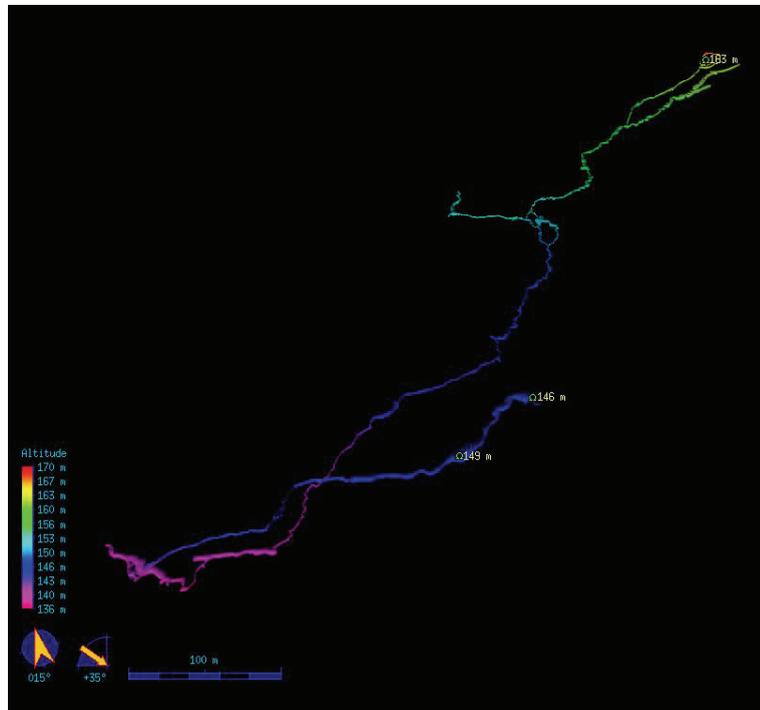
The south entrance is found by walking west down the road in the opposite direction and then turning left at a set of crossroads. This road is followed past a farmhouse for 200 m before going through a gate into the field on the left of the road. A courtesy call should also be made to inform this landowner of the caving plans. On the opposite side of the field a dip with the remains of a drystone wall can be seen. The alternative south entrance (B9a) is marked by a circular fence on the other side of the wall. By walking east from here the river can be found cutting through the field. Following the river downstream arrives at B9 main entrance. This is a low wet bedding plane, with a pebble floor and containing much litter and flood debris, which links with B9a after 50 m allowing this section to be completely avoided. B9a was first opened by flooding in 1967 (Self, 1978).

## Polldonough (B7) to Polldonough South (B9a)

The section of the cave surveyed in September 2015 links the main stream sink entrance (B7) with the south entrance (B9) and represents 1565 m of the estimated 5285 m of the Coolagh River Cave (Mullan 2003).

Entering the cave through the dry entrance away from the stream an inlet which quickly becomes too tight to follow is passed on the right, approximately 3 m before the stream flowing from the alternative entrance is joined. Continuing downstream, Coolagh River Passage rapidly becomes relatively straight upright walking passage with the stream following the shallow incline. The water varies from ankle to waist deep for 80 m until a junction is reached. The left hand route follows a small tributary upstream through meandering passage which gradually lowers to a crawl ending in a duck filled with surface debris, suggesting the existence of another sink just east of the B7 entrance.

The downstream passage becomes wider and begins to meander tightly until the beginning of the First Bedding Cave is reached, at which point the way becomes more constricted and a flat out crawl through a short bedding plane is reached. The bedding plane carries the stream from Coolagh River Passage and a small tributary joins to the far left. The obvious left hand route downstream takes most of the water, whilst to the right is the northernmost of the three main entrances to the West Series. As the bedding cave continues it begins to transform back into stooping stream passage, though again tightly meandering, and eventually takes on a T-shape with bedding at eye level. Passing the southern most offshoot to the West



**Figure 2.** *Oblique view screen capture from 3d (lox) file of the current extent of the new survey of the Coolagh River Cave.*

Series, the water eventually leaves the passage and flows into the floor level bedding. Shortly after this, an obvious route in the eye level bedding enters to the left. Following this continues the through-trip to B9. A short distance of crawling in a floor meander leads to a drop; the Four Foot Pot. If the eye level bedding route is not taken, the Four Foot Pot is bypassed and rejoins the main route roughly 10 m after the climb.

Several connections are possible from the main passage to the large bedding which links to Column Chamber. It is potentially easier to enter the cave via the South entrance to avoid missing the link from the main stream passage. Travelling approximately 100 m through relatively narrow stream passage from where the bypass rejoins the passage one of the links can be found at chest height in the right-hand wall. A crawl is followed round to the left through a shallow pool of water, past two unsurveyed side passages, into the bedding plane. This can be followed until it eventually opens into Gour Passage. However the connection to Column Chamber is made through one of several, short crawling routes of varying size on the left of the bedding plane beforehand. Two tight, unsurveyed crawls additionally leave the bedding plane, one making a visible connection to column chamber following a stream inlet, the other on the opposite side, possibly another link back to the stream passage

Column Chamber is exited via a 1.5 m climb into the top half of the hourglass shaped passage which joins at the top of the mud slope, known as Double Passage. The bottom of the hourglass can be followed as a low crawl in a minor stream with a gravel floor, however the top route is usually taken because climbing from the lower passage to the upper passage at any point along double passage can be troublesome. The upper passage is a easy stooping traverse which continues past several minor oxbows for roughly 400 m before the before the upper and lower routes become one. A rescue drum is located in an incomplete oxbow visible from the main passage, however the contents are unverified. Just after leaving Double Passage one arrives in the low entrance crawl of the B9 entrance. From here, light from the B9a entrance should be visible on the right in daytime; crawling behind a pair of boulders accesses a short clamber up a grassy chute to the surface.

## CO. GALWAY

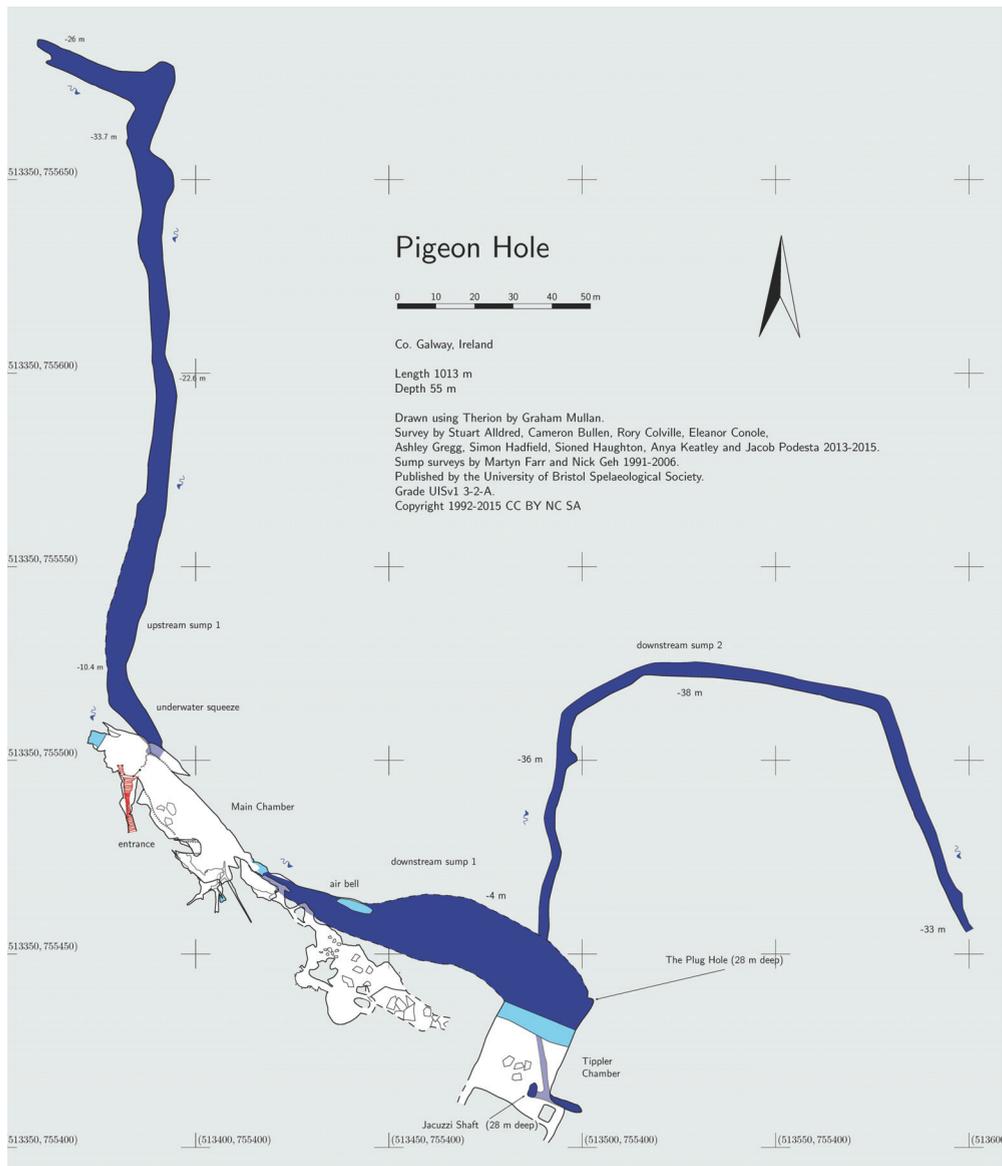
### PIGEON HOLE WOOD

Unfortunately, owing to the contrast between the exceptionally dry conditions encountered in 2013 (Podesta, 2014) and the more typical water levels met in 2015, the possible continuation in Wolves Hole was inaccessible during our visit. The Pigeon Hole extensions were still accessible, though the high water levels significantly reduced the length of the dry passage that could be visited. Nonetheless, a detailed survey of the boulder chamber was produced to complement the pre-existing survey.

## CONCLUSIONS

Significant progress was made in the creation of a detailed modern survey of the Coolagh River Cave, providing and excellent grounding for future work. Over 1.5 km of passage was surveyed and accurate locations data was obtained for three of the cave's known entrances. This takes us closer to the ultimate objective of including an up to date survey of the cave in the republication of *The Caves of County Clare and South Galway* (Mullan, 2003), scheduled for the society's centenary in 2019 and including the cave in the 3d models of the area's caves which may be found in the survey archive on the Society's website at [http://www.ubss.org.uk/cave\\_survey\\_archive.php#CoClare](http://www.ubss.org.uk/cave_survey_archive.php#CoClare).

Due to the focus of joining the B7 and B9 entrances in the survey, several offshoots of the current surveyed areas have yet to be completed. The most significant of these is the



**Figure 3.** *Compilation survey of Pigeon Hole. Data from UBSS visits in 2013 and 2015. Sump data by courtesy of M.J. Farr.*

southern half of the West Series. As a result, future objectives in this cave include the addition of the West Series to this survey, as well as several more minor routes, to the standard allowed by modern equipment. Surveying should next begin from Polldonough North to the Main Drain to eventually link the three major entrances of the cave.

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