

*Walks Around the Caves and Karst of the Mendip Hills, A Field Guide.* by Andy Farrant. 1999. B.C.R.A. Cave Studies Series No. 8. 40pp. Price £2.50. ISBN 0 900265 21 3

This A5 booklet is a concise field guide to the major karst features over central Mendip in particular and includes almost fifty caves. It is the latest publication in a series inspired and edited by Bryan Ellis, the first of which appeared in 1987. Earlier guides have covered the Carboniferous Limestone uplands in other major caving regions of the country and the Mendip publication fills a gap that Bryan himself, as a well-known local caver, had long wished to complete. Sadly, his untimely death earlier this year cruelly deprived him of the undoubted pleasure he would have gained from this welcome addition to the literature on speleological subjects.

Mendip's distinctive geology and geomorphology are highlighted in a nine-page introduction to six well-chosen excursions. The former takes up nearly a quarter of the guide and a similar proportion of its illustrations, including clear maps, stratigraphical columns and the classic cross-section from Burrington to Wedmore through the Blackdown pericline. Since the line of section shown on the British Geological Survey's special 1:25 000 map of Cheddar, sheet ST 45, is much the same, this source might have been cited to enhance the guide's value. After all, Cheddar is a classic area visited by many studying subjects that do not require caving. The clear and concise coverage of the area's complex stratigraphy and structures deserves a wider market among such field studies groups.

Those who do not venture underground, as well as visiting cavers, may also have found a corresponding section to illustrate the typical profiles of swallet caves down-dip to water-table levels and the looping passages at resurgence caves helpful. Such a diagram could have depicted typical vadose invasion shafts, neptunian dykes and "suffusion dolines" which increasingly and intriguingly appear to be associated with former Mesozoic cover rocks and "valley fills". For good measure, it could have included the latter and indicated subsequent stages in the lowering of base level which controlled the development of Mendip's caves. This would have been the perfect complement to the three maps illustrating the evolution of the present day landscape on page 9. These show the gradual exhumation of the Palaeozoic basement as the Jurassic scarp retreated eastwards during the last million years or so and give an excellent rationale for the six walks.

The first excursion around Cheddar Gorge sets a good standard with a map depicting eight sites and accompanying descriptions of each one. The former could have portrayed better hachuring for the cliffs, but the latter contain a wealth of well-balanced information reflecting the author's extensive local knowledge, wide interests and whimsical humour. He is also willing to take a stance on highly controversial local issues by stating that, if limestone quarrying continues unchecked, an ancient landscape could be "leveled" (*sic*) in only a few hundred years. A slight detour en route would have included the archaeologically important Totty Pot; but, understandably, it would have been all too easy to stray off the chosen path.

Blackrock Gate offers a possible link to the second walk around the southern slopes of Blackdown and includes all the swallet caves between Charterhouse and Tynings Farm. Their descriptions provide cavers especially with up-to-date summaries of recent research in this intensively studied area, including that undertaken by the author. What a pity that the Dolomitic Conglomerate filled Triassic wadi exposed on the valley sides of Velvet Bottom below Timber Hole is overlooked, however.

Burrington Combe sites are also comprehensively covered by the third excursion; an 11 km walk which conveniently includes the "Plume of Feathers" but avoids mention of the UBSS

Hut! This account will be an invaluable and popular guide for many whose first introduction to caving and cave studies is in this area. The accompanying map, on the other hand, unfortunately names the area's key feature as Burrington "Coombe" (*sic*).

Excursions 4 and 5 respectively cover Mendip's longest swallet caves around Priddy and those associated with, and neighbouring, the underground River Axe which rises at Wookey Hole. It is appropriate that both occupy the heart of the guide and that the site descriptions well match the claim that: "The Priddy area contains many superb karst features". Whether the water from Five Buddles Sink goes, somehow, to the Rodney Stoke rising needs much more evidence than exists to date and the possibility of it feeding the Cheddar drainage seems more likely. The inaccurate caption to the plate on page 30 adds to the confusion hereabouts, for the photograph is of Thomas Willcox by the former Waldegrave Minery on the Chewton estates. Also, the original is in Wells Museum from where a copy was obtained by the late A.E. Mc R. Pearce for his collection. These mistakes, however, are the only factual slips of any substance; ones which escaped the otherwise thorough work undertaken to get this well constructed guide into print following the death of Bryan Ellis.

The walk from Priddy to see the impressive Cross Swallet might have been made even more worthwhile by mentioning the neighbouring basin around Brimble Pit seen to the west. Also, in recommending a possible link-up with the Wookey Hole and Ebbor Gorge walk in this area, an opportunity to include Ramspit was missed. The sites included on the latter, nevertheless, satisfy a wide range of interests, although the conserved archaeological site and possible old resurgence of Kids Hole in Ebbor fails to get a mention. Also, your reviewer has always thought that the ephemeral stream nearby rises at the bottom of the rocky staircase he calls The Narrows rather than at the top. He also lives at Glencot, Wookey Hole, and not "Glencott"! These little slips, however, do not detract from an otherwise excellent account of a circuit along which so much can be seen.

The sixth and last excursion around Stoke St. Michael and Beacon Hill almost covers the entire groundwater catchments of the Ashwick Grove and St. Dunstan's Well risings, save for the swallet sites in the village of Oakhill to the west of the chosen walk. Tantalisingly, too, the impressive tufa springs of Whiteholes, now with much improved access, lie just a little further to the east. Such is the price to pay on any walk, however, and the author has preferred, with some justification, to include Moon's Hill Quarry on a route over Beacon Hill from the "Waggon and Horses". Given the earlier explanation of Mendip's cave development gradually evolving with the eastwards scarp retreat of the former Jurassic cover, it is appropriate that the final site listed is Stoke Lane Slocker; described as of "relatively recent origin".

With the publication of this guide Dr. Andy Farrant, who started as a locally educated enthusiast, becomes the newest recruit to a long line of "home-grown" pundits and experts in his chosen subject. He has shown cave and karst lovers one of the best ways to get to know the area on walks covering almost 60 km of the Mendip countryside.

Jim Hanwell