

REPORT OF THE 1983 C.C.P.C.GOUFFRE BERGER EXPEDITION

Summary

This report outlines the main events of the 1983 Crewe Climbing and Potholing Club Expedition to the Gouffre Berger. Excerpts from the expedition log and photographs are used to record some of the experiences obtained. Appendices are provided to guide future expedition organisers in planning, obtaining permission, and organising a similar trip. Expedition statistics, equipment lists, and other useful information are also provided. The expedition objectives were as follows:-

1. To mark the Club's 25th. Anniversary by a descent of the Gouffre Berger.
2. To provide an up-to-date written and photographic record of the descent.
3. To organise a collaborative expedition with several British and foreign caving clubs to promote friendly relations between clubs.

Introduction

The eternal beauty and grandeur of the Hall of the Thirteen attracts cavers to the Gouffre Berger like moths to a candle. In the winter of 1981 this irresistible force, advancing age, and the desire to celebrate the club's twenty-fifth anniversary drove John Gillett to write to the Mayor of Engins for permission to descend. The Mayor, with Gallic aplomb, ignored the letter as was his usual opening gambit for such requests, but undeterred, John wrote to several prominent French cavers to enlist support in convincing the Mayor of our existence and credibility. A further letter couched in impeccable and slightly dry French produced a prompt reply. The Mayor was unable to grant permission for 1982 as the cave was fully booked, but promised first choice of the 1983 bookings. A preliminary reservation was made, after some discussion at a club meeting to agree dates, and the 1983 C.C.P.C. Gouffre Berger Expedition was on!

Good news travels fast and club members were soon clamouring for further details, so a meeting was arranged to gather opinions, support, and ideas for organising the venture. From this point onwards a diary of meetings and events was kept, and most of the ensuing saga has been drawn from this.

Preliminary Manoeuvres

Sufficient information was gleaned from journals and discussions with other cavers about previous expeditions to the Gouffre Berger to enable John Gillett, Ralph Johnson, Paul Holdcroft and Tony Gamble to make a preliminary assessment of what would be involved in the descent before the first formal expedition meeting was convened. This eventually took place on 26th. May 1982 at the 'Bleeding Wolf', Kidsgrove where John, Ralph, Paul, and Tony were supported by club members Terry Ball, Liam Kealy, Tony Reynolds and Alan Scragg. Boyd and Jenny Potts of the Orpheus club also attended to give advice and as potential expedition members. The advantages of enlisting the help of other clubs had been discussed previously, and it had been agreed that friends should be contacted to provide extra effort and expertise.

This first meeting raised many questions about equipment, telephones, costs, provisions, and expedition organisation. John and Ralph agreed to be responsible for organisation, Paul and Tony for tackle, and Terry for telephones. After some discussion, it was decided to use 11mm. 'Bluewater' rope for tackling, and to budget for about thirty members on this basis. The choice of rope diameter, affecting costs and tackle burden, was one of the most critical decisions taken. Full of enthusiasm, the participants drove off into the night fully aware of the magnitude of the task in hand.