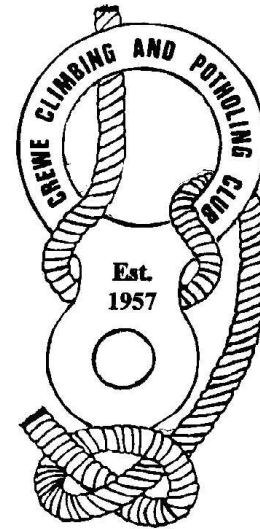


# C.C.P.C.

## Newsletter 85

### Autumn 2005

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#### **Fish Mine and Dwarf Mine, Near Prestatyn, North Wales. Wednesday, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2005**

This was a mid-week caving trip to an area I had last visited back in 1963, on a family holiday to Prestatyn. From our caravan by the sea, we could see an open, dark entrance, on a terrace crossing a green hillside, and Dad and I, with my older brother, set off to investigate. After a very long walk we eventually reached it, and I remember using a torch to explore about 100 metres of horizontal adit. Strangely enough, Ralph also has distant memories of visiting a mine on the same hillside, which, at the time, he thought was 'Fish Mine'.

For this modern visit, our intrepid group was made up of Ralph, John Shenton, Len Kirkham and I.

We followed the A55 towards Conwy, then turned off towards Prestatyn, on the A547. Our 'information' for the day was a sheet, with a series of vague lines representing roads and paths, to help us to find the mine entrances. Just before Meliden village, there is a large outcrop of Limestone on the right which is gashed with a series of semi-vertical, open vein-workings. These are the surface indications of Talargoch Mine, however, there is also a superb 'Cornish' engine house, and a complex of buildings with metal ore-trucks on display. Clearly there are major workings here.

About half a mile beyond Talargoch Mine, we turned right, uphill, and passed under a disused railway bridge to a three-way junction beyond. The correct route here is left, signed, 'no through road', but of course we drove all over the hillside before we managed to discover that! The lane terminates at a disused limestone quarry, with limited parking, and a steep path continuing uphill, into the woodland beyond.

The day was baking hot, so we carried all our kit and the bags of rope, and plodded up through the wood to a major path junction, where we turned left onto the Offa's Dyke National Trail. (Turning right would have taken us to Chepstow, in Monmouthshire!) Crossing the top of the quarry, the path led on and on across the hillside, branching left at another junction, and eventually began to descend into woodland again. Having descended quite some distance we reached a walk-in adit entrance, right next to the path, which local children told us was 'Fish Cave'.

Fish Mine: The adit, about 2 metres high and 1.5 metres wide, with a few centimetres of water over most of the floor, leads easily for about 200 metres to a junction. Straight ahead reaches a blind fore-field after about 50 metres. Left at the junction, the adit runs almost straight for about 200 metres to a sharp right-turn, with a backfilled spur straight ahead. A short distance further along the adit, there is a small 'window', about 1 metre above the floor, in the right wall. Squirming through leads directly into the base of a soaring shaft, with calcited walls indicating that this is often much wetter than it was when we visited. Continuing along the adit, there is a short section with deeper water, which appears to have a flooded stope hidden under the waterlogged timber and other debris which has collected there. We were able to pass this section by traversing along the wall. A little further, the adit forms the base level of a stope about 8 to 10 metres high, with numerous timber stemples in place between the walls. Just beyond this stope, the adit was flooded across its whole width, and for at least the next 20 metres. The water was too deep to wade through, and the sight of a semi-inflated dinghy at the far side convinced us that we were not going any further.

Back in daylight, we headed up-hill to locate Dwarf Mine, which was reputed to link through to Fish Mine.

Dwarf Mine: The adit entrance was located in the woodland fringe at the back of a flat, open, grassy area, which showed evidence of mining debris.

The adit entrance was partly blocked by run-in soil, but it was easy to squirm in over the top, into a narrow passage, about 1 metre high. After about 30 metres it is necessary to crawl up another run-in slope of earth and leaves, into the base of an open stope to daylight, about 15 metres above.

Just for fun, we went back out, found the higher opening, and rigged and descended the stope pitch :– about 15 metres. Trees were used for belays, however 'P'-bolts would make a much better hang, and a rebelay would eliminate a nasty rub-point part way down.

From the bottom, a flat out crawl down the other side of the soil run-in, leads back into the adit, which continues, barely more than 1 metre high for about 50 metres to a junction, where it is possible to stand up. Right at the junction, the adit, now at least 1.5 metres high, and 1 metre wide, continues for about 150 metres, with several minor stopes above. About 10 metres before the end, it is necessary to crawl over rubble, which gradually reduces the passage height until further progress is very difficult. There seems to be a shaft base, or the foot of a run-in stope (partly open), just beyond the furthest point reached, and this would make an easy dig. Bat droppings are evident at a number of points along the adit, usually immediately under small recesses in the roof, however no bats were seen on our visit.

Back at the junction, left leads the top of the first internal pitch, after only a few metres. There is an initial 'P'-bolt at the junction, then a 'spit' in the wall near the pitch-head, and a final 'spit' over the pitch, which is an enlarged rift, about 4 metres long and 2 metres wide. The pitch is only about 6 metres deep, and an archway at the base leads directly to the head of the next pitch. Care is needed here to avoid dislodging loose material, as there is no protection for anyone below.

Pitch 2 is a superb, calcited shaft, about 2 metres square, which drops about 12 metres. There is a 'P'-bolt as back-up, and a pair of 'P'-bolts for a 'Y'-hang over the pitch. There is a small quantity of timber calcited into the debris at the foot of the pitch.

Pitch 3 follows almost immediately, through a low archway, with loose debris held back from the edge by a low wall of 'deads'. This is another fine shaft, like Pitch 2, however there is only a single 'eye-bolt', far out on the right wall, for the abseil rope. There is an old piton in the wall at the foot of Pitch 2, and two other old pitons in the wall at the top of Pitch 3, however none of these are good enough to be relied on, and we used the tail of the rope on Pitch 2 to back-up the 'eye-bolt'. The pitch is about 12 metres, and at the base is a low crawl through into the adit level of Fish Mine.

[Note: All pitch lengths are estimates only.]

Len and I descended the three pitches and walked out through Fish Mine, then walked back up the hill. After de-rigging the Stope Entrance, we re-entered Dwarf Mine to assist Ralph and John as they de-rigged the internal pitches.

Despite the horrendous traffic jam on the way home, this was an excellent day. The pitches are well worth doing, but would be much safer if further 'P'-bolts were installed. There might be a shorter, or better, approach route than the one we used. Incidentally, neither of the mines visited matched the ones visited by Ralph, or me, many years ago.

**Steve Knox. 14<sup>th</sup> July 2005**

#### **Talargoch Mine.Prestatyn**

Barely a stone's throw from the above mine described by Steve. It can be found on the disused railway line immediately behind the garage on the main road. I managed to squeeze my 4x4 in just beyond the bridge over which passes the old line, vehicles with less ground clearance are best parking elsewhere. About 50-80 meters east of the bridge a small insignificant entrance can be found at ground level, If you go as far as the partly walled-up entrances you have gone too far. A short crawl leads to an easy climb in three short stages to the upper entrance, which is also accessible from the track. For some strange reason this area has its fair share of eco-hangers both on the surface and underground. A short crawl leads to a 3-dimensional maze of worked out pipe veins. I'm pretty sure all levels can be accessed without ropes by simply trying various routes until you reach the one you want.

However at the highest level we got to a traverse rope is useful as the step down and across a deep hole (leading to the lower levels) is awkward as is the short climb up into a blind coffin level. The return from the coffin level would be quite exciting without a rope. I'm pretty certain there are levels above this that we didn't enter.

Len was of the opinion that this section of hillside was worked from the mid 17 hundreds to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both systems could be explored in a single day (unless there's a lot we missed! **Ralph J.**

#### **Rob Farmer.**



Rob's dad John visited our July meeting to present us with a cheque for £2,500.00 left to us by Rob. The money was not left for any particular purpose but it was felt that "something rather permanent" would be nice.

So far there have been two suggestions (below) but any other suggestions would be welcome.

1. Purchase of a mine/cave that could be used as an educational/training venue.
2. Setting up of a "Rob Farmer Memorial Fund" that would provide grants to club members towards the cost of getting qualified for introducing novices to caving. (Level one)

Both these suggestions take into account the fact that Rob was our training officer in the years leading up to his death.

Emma produced a son by the name of Ben.
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### **Hunger Hill.**

The "English Nature" part of this project is now complete thanks mainly to Len supported by John Shenton and many others. As you know this part of the work was grant aided and the results are very impressive! Further work is being considered as the inner reaches are inaccessible to all but a few "thinnies" and rescue would be impossible, This will not be grant aided as only the entrance – not the cave, comes under the SSSI scheme.

At least two of "The Dodgers" have now reached to top of Deep Space to find the rock in a poor condition. Plans are afoot to sort this pitch out in the near future.

Dave Webb has given me a CD of photographs taken throughout the project, if anyone wants a copy let me know. Ralph

### **Bits n Bobs.**

Len, usually in the company of John Shenton (and others), continues his work for various agencies in the Manifold area.

### **Forthcoming AGM.**

Anyone with any proposals for the AGM must submit them ASAP. There are some suggestions for you to think about- the precise wording is available by request.

1. *It seems likely that there will be changes to the insurance scheme – The DCA scheme may disappear leaving us with only one option. ALL classes of members will need to insure as ay present but there may be reductions for non-active members, temps and those joining partway through the year.*
2. Since we no longer climb (as a club) it is suggested that **our name reverts to the original "Crewe Cave & Pothole Club"**.
3. **All new members must join as associates with the option to take up full voting membership after 12 months.**
4. **Honorary members (life members) who do not pay insurance will be classed as "friends" and cannot take part in club activities.**  
*(This is to satisfy conditions of insurance but may change to bring it in line with any conditions in the new insurance scheme)*

5. *We have been having problems in getting “quorate” meetings due to many members joining as associates (who don't have voting rights anyway!) yet our constitution includes them for meetings to be quorate. **Suggestion is that we only include the VOTING membership for a meeting to be quorate.***
6. *Once the insurance matter is settled we “**Move the AGM back to the first Monday in January**” (starting Jan 07)*

### **Penarth Mine.**

The location of this old slate mine is about 1 km south of the A5 running from Llangollen to Corwen. Take a left turn in the village of Llidiart y Parc and park on the right after about 50m on a patch of grass sufficient for 2 cars. Just beyond the next cottage a footpath runs southwest to the obvious waste mound on the horizon (106424) a distance of about 1.5 km. On reaching the waste heap walk up the left hand side (steep) then, on reaching the old buildings, traverse round to the right hand side of the heap to a path that leads to quarry ABOVE the mine workings. Make sure you use the larger left hand opening or you're in for a shock! (All lower entrance are blocked)

The mine is quite extensive. We managed to cover only a fraction of it due to taking ages to find the entrance and to finding a complex network of passages not shown on the mine plan, these could do with surveying. The parts we visited were “dry and dusty” even by Len's standards but we did avoid a few sections over wellie-deep! A boiler suit, helmet, light and wellies are all that is required but a powerful light would be distinct advantages as some sections are LARGE. We only found one pitch of around 20m but suspect this can be by-passed

Len was in his element finding various machines in an advanced state of decay both above and below ground and a return visit is planned if only to photograph the “archaeological remains” which include an (almost) complete brake wheel as described in the “Mow Cop Tunnels and Tramways” video. Well worth a visit with no apparent access restrictions.

### **DCRO Exercise Sept 17 th.**

The September 17 affair is a training exercise, followed by an open committee meeting (to which all team members are invited), followed by a pie and pea supper social event.

The format of the training exercise depends on the number of people attending, but it is meant to include several different sessions including boulder shifting, dejamming techniques, quad-pod and would probably be best run as a "circus" or "round robin".

The venue for the day is Castleton, with the exercise in Pindale and the meeting and social in the village hall - but these venues are still to be confirmed. Overnight accommodation or camping can be arranged nearby if needed.

A good turn out would be nice, and I would greatly appreciate surface support, to help to run the event, and anybody who would like to take on any particular sessions.

**Cheers, Alan**

PS. The "pie and pea" supper has been financed by Margaret who, following her epic in Knotlow, made a generous donation to DCRO AND a further "donation" to cover drinks for those involved. All the rescuers we managed to contact donated their "free drink" to the above event!.

Alan can be contacted on 01663 746476, 07971 261605,  
alan.brentnall@btinternet.com

**Romania.**

Fresh from his visit to Romania Brian is trying to tempt people into a visit for caving (& mountaineering/cheap booze/etc) Have a look at the following sites.

<http://www.showcaves.com/english/ro/index.html>

<http://www.omnimap.com/cgi-bin/omni/graphic.pl?images/for-hike/65-23713.jpg>

<http://www.padis.ro/news.htm>

**Tom Buxton.**

Tom, who owns Roylege Farm, died recently. Tom has allowed Len & co more or less unrestricted access to his land for many years. Many of you have enjoyed the delights of the underground workings there, the situation in the future is uncertain.

Incidentally Tom allowed CCPC to dig there in the 70s but the dig was abandoned. Much to Len's surprise he found the inscription "CCPC was 'ere" (or words to that effect) when he finally broke into the system some years later.

**Doomed to Failure!**

Yet another Meregill trip ended in failure! After a glorious couple of weeks a rigging team was sorted for Sat 13 Aug with a derigging team planned for the Sunday. Needless to say for once the forecasters were right. On Saturday the heavens opened so both teams (9 in total) arranged to meet for a combined trip on the Sunday. Jim and Brian (with Ellie and Brian's nephew) also appeared in Inglesport with LLC-Alum in mind, a good turn out for a club trip. Unfortunately another team (of 4) beat us to it so we joined the queue.

After about an hours wait Jen and Ralph decided to opt out and head for Alum leaving the others in the Aven crawl.

One of the other team had abandoned the Meregill trip so we took him to Alum where we joined Jim, Brian & co. On our way back we met the others who had also abandoned Meregill in favour of Sunset as a member of the other group had got "hung up" on the second pitch! To round off a less than pwerfect day it took Jen and I almost 5 hours to get home due problems on the M6. I suppose the only solution is to book it again, or maybe book something else and then do Meregill, that way the weather may be less inclement!

**NVQ in Safe Cracking.**

Fancy a new career? Apparently Nigel is now running courses in safe cracking with his first two clients (Len and Lionel) passing with flying colours! Puzzled? You'll have to get it from one of the horses' mouths!

### **Meets.**

Sept 3 OFD.

Sept 3&4 DCC open day at Alderley Edge. We need a DCRO presence. Any willing volunteers contact Ralph

Sept 10 DCRO Street collection, Castleton

Sept 17 DCRO training followed by "pie n pea"

Sept 24 Long Rake

Oct 1 Marble Steps

Oct 6 DCRO Cas Care

Oct 14 DCRO General Meeting Anchor Inn

Oct 16 Rumbling Hole

Nov 6 Cow Pot

Nov 12. DCRO training Whitehall

Nov 20 Simpsons/Swinsto

A reminder that this is only a fraction of "what's on". Contact the usual sources to find out if and when anything else is happening.

Anyone with requests/suggestions for 2006? - now is the time to submit them.

### **Digging Potential in Jasper !**

During our cave-free holiday in the Canadian Rocky Mountains Annie and I visited an area of Jasper National Park, called the Maligne Valley. There is a single road in, running for about thirty miles from Jasper to the nearest end of Maligne Lake, and flanked on each side by peaks between 9,000 and 11,000 feet high.

About seven miles in, the road passes over the lower end of Maligne Canyon, then continues to climb steadily until it reaches the shore of Medicine Lake, about thirteen miles further on. This two mile long lake is intriguing. It receives enormous quantities of melt water from the winter snows which cover the surrounding peaks, and from the Maligne River which is the link from Maligne Lake, further up the valley. Maligne Lake itself is fed by substantial glacial melt from the Brazeau Icefield and its associated glaciers. The odd thing is that there is only a small surface outlet to Medicine Lake, operating only when the lake is brim full. Apparently the lake sits on Limestone bedrock, and during late summer droughts, or during deep winter freezes, when there is no flow into the lake, the water drains away completely into huge lake-bed sink-holes !

When we visited (August 2005) the lake was about half full after an unusually wet Spring and early Summer, so the sinks were not visible.

As we drove back towards Jasper we stopped at Maligne Canyon, and followed the path and board-walk into the canyon. The trail led steeply downwards, with viewpoints over the narrow lime-stone gorge, following a small river as it cascaded down towards the main valley, a couple of hundred metres below. After descending a considerable distance, a roaring sound below marked the point where a huge resurgence, beneath an overhang at river level, returned the Medicine Lake waters to daylight. There were several other smaller resurgences at river level, in the following short section of canyon, but it was the low, choked archway, about thirty metres above the river which caught my attention.

The main resurgence was discharging about the same amount of water as the River Derwent carries through Matlock during an average wet Autumn, and the dry arch on the slope above was at least four metres wide and a metre high, although partly obscured by loose scree and dead branches. It looked suspiciously like an old, abandoned resurgence.

An information board explained that the underground complex of channels, bringing the water over thirteen miles, was not yet understood, and was probably not large enough for man to enter ! I couldn't help wondering if there were Canadian cavers in the area, and how much digging had actually been done. Perhaps, with such spectacular scenery all around, there is little interest in the hidden world below.  
Steve Knox. 17<sup>th</sup> August 2005

### **Owl Hole.**

Fairly easy to find if you look in C of D or recent Descents. It lies in a MASSIVE shakehole not far from High Edge Raceway (Buxton) The "best" passages lie about 6m off the deck in a passage on the left (looking into the hole). There was a rather rickety builders ladder there when we arrived that now has one rung less thanks to Tim. Steve managed to free climb from the top of the ladder into the entrance, personally I don't think I would have made it without the rope (so be warned). Just inside the entrance is a gate requiring two sets of moles to open (or the correct sized spanners) Packed full of "pretties" that are well worth a look before they get damaged that they inevitably will since many are in vulnerable locations. A 6m ladder and lifeline are required to reach the main chamber – there is a climb down through a calcited passage to the present digging site.  
A further passage on the RHS of the shakehole is well worth a look but the obvious hole in the floor is disappointing.

### **Tian Xing 2003. Caving in China.**

This article was written just after the expedition. Ralph lent me his old Psion to help me collect material during my trip in the hope of getting something he could publish. It was held back from the newsletter till now as I wrote an article for Descent based on the same material and one of the their conditions is that the article appears in Descent first. For a long time it looked like the main article would appear in either Descent, or Caves and Caving. As this is now not going to happen you finally get to read it in the Crewe CPC Newsletter.

CCPC member Matt Ryan has been caving and living in China off and on since 2001. On one of his infrequent visits to the UK in the Summer of 2003 we discussed my coming out to China for a Hong Meigui Cave Exploration Society expedition. Matt recommended the Tian Xing expedition in September and October as an ideal one to go on. The previous year they had explored Qikeng Dong, currently the deepest cave in China at -920m. For this year they had planned further exploration in another large system, Dong Ba, in the hope of connecting it to Qikeng Dong. There was also a deep open shaft, Da Keng, which had been explored to only -80m. From the end of the rope stones fell free for six seconds before hitting anything. A long way down!

### **Preperation**

I could only spare four or five weeks away, so I had a choice of September, or October. September would be warmer than the UK, October would be similar to a UK October. As September was too near for me to get organised in time I chose October. I joked that all the exploration would be done in September and I'd spend my time de-rigging caves. This almost turned out to be the case, but not quite. I had a few things to do before going out. I had been warned that the mud in these caves tended to eat SRT equipment. While exploring Qikeng Dong in 2002 everybody wore out at least one Petzl Croll jammer and Stop top bobbin. I had seen Matt's photographs of Crolls where the metal body had been worn razor blade thin, so I decided to stock up on a couple of spare jammers and some bars for my rack. I wasn't sure if there would be



power available for battery charging. Chinese carbide is apparently of very poor quality, when you can find it at all, so I decided to join the 21<sup>st</sup> century and change to LED lighting and AA batteries. My first attempt was a home made set up and an abject failure. CCPC members who caved with me in September 2003 will remember my blundering around in the dark for much of the time and borrowing their back up lamps to get out. A few days before traveling out I paid a visit to Hitch and Hike and came out with a shiny new Petzl Duo, fitted with an 8 up LED module. I had no time to test this before leaving Britain, but it performed admirably and has become my main caving light ever since. As it turned out there was power available, but LED's are so convenient and lightweight that I haven't regretted the conversion.

### **Getting there**

Ralph kindly gave me a lift to Manchester Airport for the first stage of my trip out. Shortly before I left, Erin Lynch had asked me to bring out 25Kg of dehydrated food for underground camps. This was kindly donated by Andy Eavis of the Ghar Parau foundation. The extra weight put me above the baggage allowance, as well as being difficult to haul around, but it was nothing like the 90Kg of gear that Matt took out on one trip. With a little repacking of my carry on bag to drop the weight I was checked in with no excess baggage charges. The first stage of the trip was a flight to Dubai, then a change of planes to Hong Kong and a short stop at Bangkok. Most of the passengers left at Bangkok, so I had a row of four seats to stretch out on and sleep. I arrived at the new airport in Hong Kong late in the evening. It is an hours journey from there to Kowloon, where I would have to find accommodation late at night in an unfamiliar city. I decided to sleep in the arrivals hall instead. This turned out to be a good decision. Usually in these sorts of buildings the seats are designed to be impossible for an adult to sleep on. Kowloon airport was a welcome exception and I got a reasonable few hours kip.

The following morning I took out Matt's sheet of instructions on how to get from Hong Kong to Shenzhen airport, where my flight for Chongqing was due to take off at 11. The first stage was a bus into Kowloon. I then had to find a ferry terminal for the trip to Shenzhen and the airport. Matt had warned me that the ferry terminal was cunningly disguised as a shopping centre, so I fell in behind a group of people carrying heavy luggage and all heading in the same direction. They lead me to the right place and I bought a ticket for a jetfoil boat. This was a fast and fascinating trip through the islands of Hong Kong territory. Although Hong Kong is now part of the Peoples Republic it is administered separately and there are customs and immigration formalities to go through as you leave Hong Kong and again, 50 yards latter, as you enter the rest of China. The most paperwork to fill out was for SARS. After the outbreak the previous year they were still very vigilant for signs of the disease in travelers. There are infra red cameras that measure your temperature as you stand in line and if it is high then you are dragged off for more tests. At the airport I boarded the plane for the hour and a half flight to Chongqing.

At the Chongqing arrivals hall I was met by Matt and his girlfriend Apple. They announced that they were planning to get married the following Summer. We traveled by bus and taxi to the centre of Chongqing and the bus station, overlooking the Yangtse river. From here the Yangtse travels through the Three Gorges and river trips are popular with tourists. You can travel by boat all the way to Shanghai on the coast if you wish. Chongqing is a large city, even by Chinese standards and has been almost completely rebuilt in the last twenty years. It couldn't be described as pretty, as it is built entirely out of grey concrete. In the Summer it is notorious for being very hot,

but we arrived in the drizzle. Here we said goodbye to Apple as she was traveling to Chengdu to study. Matt and I boarded the bus for the four hour journey to Wulong. The road to Wulong runs part way up the side of a limestone gorge and seemed to be simultaneously under construction and falling away down to the river below. On the other bank a new railway line was being built, with rows of identical concrete viaduct piers springing up. All along the gorge cave entrances are visible. Most of them are unexplored by cavers. I started to appreciate just how much potential China has, with half the worlds karst and only two decades exposure to modern caving.

At Wulong we hauled my luggage across town to the Guang Ming Hotel, a cheap but cheerful place to spend the night. The following day our shopping list included: A new computer mouse for Erin, some oranges for everyone and a duvet for me. The duvet saved me having to carry out a sleeping bag. We then boarded a bus for the small town of Jiang Kou. There I had to register with the local police, a formality that was soon over and we stopped off at a restaurant for a bite to eat before the bus left for Tian Xing at two pm. Here I had my first experience of being a foreigner in a small Chinese town. It turns out that you are the entertainment and we soon attracted an appreciative crowd, watching everything we did. This didn't seem to happen so much in big cities, or small villages for some reason.

The bus to Tian Xing was packed as it ground its way up the 3000 feet or so altitude gain. The concrete soon ran out and the road from then on was graded. Part way up the road was being rebuilt and had been churned to liquid mud. The driver took several goes to get it round one tight, steep corner, even with snow chains fitted to the back wheels. We arrived in Tian Xing and I meet Duncan (Collis, ex TSG) and Illya Boiku from Russia. The other three team members were underground on a five day camp. Da Keng, the partially explored surface shaft with the six second drop, had gone big.

### **Da Keng**

The next day was a bit of a fester for me to get over jet lag. Illya sorted out the internet connection after fiddling with the phone wire and I was able to send out some "I got here" emails from one of the laptops. The following day the team returned from their camp. Erin was first out and Duncan and I took the survey data from her and entered it into the Survex program on a laptop. We were able to produce a line survey and vital statistics on the cave before the others surfaced. 658m deep and 2,586m of passage length. Not bad! We went down to the entrance to meet Brian (Judd, UK) and Vladimir (Yurkuns, another Russian, but living in Shanghai and fluent in Mandarin). We were able to inform them that they had just explored the second deepest cave in China.

The following day we planned a photographic trip to record the 284m deep entrance shaft of Da Keng. I had been placed in charge of the photography as this was how I then made my living. My explanation that I had no experience of cave photography cut no ice, so I had to make the best job I could. The expedition had a small supply of very powerful flash bulbs. These were the size of normal domestic light bulbs and give off an intense light lasting over a second that is capable of illuminating a large chamber, passage, or shaft. These days there is only one company that makes flash bulbs this big and the only people who buy them are either cavers, or scientists trying to do weird things like photograph rocket sledges traveling by at twice the speed of sound. Before leaving England I had built some holder/firer units for the bulbs. An Edison bulb holder attaches to a piece of wood with a wire running to a connector that

is touched to a 9V battery to set off the bulb. Matt made up some reflectors from tin foil and cardboard and we were ready to go. We had planned an evening trip so that daylight coming down the shaft wouldn't complicate the exposure. However as the evening approached it became clear that we were not going underground. Vladimir and Ilya were leaving the next day and a farewell party was soon in swing, starting with a vodka toast.

The following evening the photo trip took place. I stationed Matt 80m up the shaft from the base and Brian another 100m above Matt. Duncan was about 8m from me at the base of the shaft. I had three cameras with me. Unfortunately two of them developed faults, so only the pictures from my own digital camera came out. Lucky, as I only decided to take it underground at the last minute. We had two way radios with us and when I gave the command to fire the whole shaft was filled with light. The bulbs were changed for another two exposures and we were done. The cave had been detackled to the base of the 284m shaft, including the rope from the 200m deep pitch that immediately follows the 284. As I climbed out Duncan derigged the rope behind us and tied it all together ready for hauling. The climb out showed up my lack of fitness. I hadn't taken enough water and food with me and I was overdressed in Dragon oversuit and furry. The caves here are slightly warmer than the UK and I arrived at the surface exhausted and badly dehydrated. The following day the whole team were involved in hauling the 700m or so of rope out of the cave.

### **Postmans Holes**

The local postman had told us of some cave entrances near his home and a few days previously Brian had gone with him to have a look. They turned out to be a 40 minute walk away, so Matt, Brian and I returned with shaft bashing gear to have a look. We soon had a crowd of children and adults to watch us work and as an old man scythed away at the vegetation around the shaft I drilled a couple of bolt holes. I was concerned for the old farmer as he braced himself over the unexplored shaft, slashing away at the undergrowth. After entertaining the children with the hole in the bum of my borrowed boilersuit, I swung out into the shaft on my first bit of original exploration in China. Twenty metres down I landed on a jammed boulder bridge in the shaft. The walls around were of badly corroded flowstone with no obvious way to rebelay for the next drop. I suffered a rare attack of the heebee geebees, feeling alone on a ledge over an unknown drop, but soon got over it. Eventually I placed a bolt in the base of the bridge, after finding that it was well calcited together and to the walls underneath. Another 20m and a rebelay saw me on the bottom, but, as is so often the case, there was no way on. Brian and Matt joined me and after surveying and photographing we returned to the surface and back to TianXing at dusk.

### **Tourist Stuff**

The following day Brian was starting back for the UK. We went with him down the hill to Jiang Kou. There we got in touch with Mr Li of Waibang Tourism. They run a show cave, Furong Dong and have been good friends to the expedition in years past. A dam had been built in the last year and the valleys behind flooded. This had affected the local water table, flooding the bottom of the deepest caves in the area, Dong Ba and Qikeng Dong. Mr Li was in charge of the tourist aspects of the new lake. We were shocked to hear that Mr Li was in hospital, but from his bed he arranged a boat trip for us on the lake. We misunderstood his instructions and went to the show cave. Once this had been sorted out we ended up with a trip round the cave too! The show cave has some spectacular formations and has been developed very well, putting many British show cave to shame. However, they have a lot more money to spend

than the shoe string budget of most British tourist caves. After the cave we descended to the lake side to meet a speed boat arranged to pick us up. This took us to the main tourist dock and a boat trip up the Furong Jiang. This is a spectacular limestone gorge with colonies of rare Black Leaf Monkeys. Before the lake was created the gorge was much less accessible and these monkeys like their privacy. As soon as they were spotted in the trees the boat stopped and sounded its horn at them to get them to move. Many of the passengers joined in by shouting at them. The gorge had many cave entrances, including a spectacular resurgence with several cumecs of water emerging and falling 40m to the lake. We believe it has not been explored, but getting to it will involve either a 40m wet bolt climb up a cliff and starting from a boat, or a 300m abseil down, ending in a huge swing to in to regain the rock. It was planned to explore this in 2004, but the team were kept fully occupied by the area near Tian Xing, so this cave is still unexplored. The boat had an entertainments officer. She persuaded Matt to duet with her in a Chinese version of Frere Jaque. The boys also gave a rendition of On Ilkley Moor Ba't 'At to the great appreciation of the other passengers. We returned to Jiang Kou and spent the night at a hotel before seeing Brian onto a minibus for Wulong and ourselves returning to Tian Xing the following day.

### **More Shaft Bashing**

Matt and I explored a couple of shafts along the same side of the valley as Da Keng. It was hoped that we could find one that dropped into the horizontal part of the system. The first of these didn't have a local name, so was called Ilya's cave, after its discoverer. A sloping chamber, just below the surface and full of cave crickets, lead to a 30m shaft, with no way on from the base. The following day Matt and I returned to explore another shaft, Di Shu Tang. I rigged 30m down this to find the bottom of the shaft flooded. I managed to place the Bosch drill and battery pack on a ledge, but the radio got a bit damp and gave up the ghost. A quick dip in the pool showed that the bottom rapidly sloped till it was deeper than I was tall. Unfortunately I could find no way on from here and returned, very wet to the surface.

The food we were eating was very spicy. The cooks motto in the area seems to be, "if in doubt shovel in some more fried chillies, salt and MSG". After two weeks in China my stomach finally revolted at its unaccustomed diet and I didn't eat, or do anything much else, for three days. At the end of this I was able to eat the local food again, but couldn't shovel it down with the relish that everyone else was. I can however recommend a China caving expedition to anyone wanting to lose some weight. Move over Dr Atkins!

When I had recovered Matt and I went for a walk to see what in the way of new holes we could find. One place we came across was a huge open shaft in the hillside. Matt could descend part way down, but the slippery rock suggested a rope for the next stage. On our return we discovered from the GPS location that it was called Sui Lin Ao Kou and it was believed that the China Caves Project had partly explored it some years before, but we didn't have enough records to know for sure. After this trip Matt left for Chengdu and some time with Apple, so it was Erin, Duncan and I that returned to Sui Lin Ao Kou. We found that the shaft ended in a large chamber blocked by boulders. At the left hand side of the chamber we climbed up into a network of passages running behind the chamber, eventually coming back out into the chamber again towards the middle.

### **Liu Chi Ao Kou**

Our landlord, Dai Hung, mentioned that he knew of some caves on his land, but that

he didn't think we would be interested as the entrances were so small. He did say that one of them had a strong draught coming out. This awakened our interest and we went with him to take a look. The first, Liu Jia Wan Dong, was a horizontal hands and knees passage into one of the limestone cones in the area. This was very well hidden in the bushes and we would never have found it on our own. The passage ended at a pitch which we dropped from a natural belay and one spit. This landed around 4m down. The next pitch of 5m was rigged with some ingenious rebelay by Erin, but was blocked at the bottom. A couple of small passages lead off which soon terminated. As we came out Duncan shouted down to us to get ourselves over to the other cave the landlord had shown him while we were surveying. This cave, Liu Chi Ao Kou, had a strong breeze blowing out, was in a new area and was higher than any other entrance yet explored. There were two entrances, the higher in loose chossy rock, the lower in good solid limestone. We decided to look at the lower entrance first. A short 4m pitch dropped into a small chamber with two crawls leading out, a high level one and a low level. Duncan and Erin explored and surveyed the high level crawl, while I went down the low level route. This soon opened out into another small chamber with a rift leading out and a small stream way in the base. The rift deepened, requiring bridging across. One of the unpleasant long legged red and black venomous centipedes was spotted here, giving the name Long Leggedy Thing to this part of the cave. The rift continued to a corner, and then to the first pitch. On the next trip this was passed as two 8m pitches. Another 4m pitch was met later on, all the while the cave dimensions were small, a 0.5 to 2m wide rift typically. On the third trip Erin and I explored it through a number of breakdown chambers till we were stopped by a massive 2.6m deep pitch, with no gear to get down. On the last day Erin and Duncan passed this major(!) obstacle, now named "The 260" after its height in centimeters and followed the passage till it broke out into the side of a large main passage, heading off in each direction. At this point the cave was 867m long and 106m deep. This cave is totally different in character from others in the area, which gain depth quickly. It has a lot of potential and was a priority for the 2004 expedition as the entrance is considerably higher than the Qikeng Dong.

The final bit of caving was to remove the ropes from Dong Ba. This large, deep system had been rigged at the start of the expedition in the hopes of connecting it with Qikeng Dong. The entrance series can take a lot of water, flooding catastrophically and developing a hanging sump that can remain for days. The horizontal passages at the base are now affected by the water level of the Furong Jiang Dam. A camp set up at the base of the pitches at the start of the expedition was abandoned due to rising water levels and no return had been made as the weather never seemed stable enough. We had around 800m of rope to remove from a series of pitches down to the Quarry, where the camping gear had been stashed. A lot of this also had to come out. The derig was done in two trips, the first of fifteen hours duration, the second of eleven. For several months after I returned from China I found the amount of prussiking needed to get out of Peak District and Dales caves trivially easy by comparison. We then had the task of washing, checking and packing this rope and all our other gear for the journey home. This task was eventually finished at 2:30am, ready for a 06:30 start.

### **Getting Back**

The bus driver had been warned beforehand of the amount of gear we had and this was loaded onto the roof, under the seats and in the boot of the vehicle. At Wulong we gave some of the gear to the long-suffering Mr Li to look after till next year. The following day was another early start for the bus to Chongqing. On the way to the bus station one of the wheels on the trolley disintegrated and we were left having to flag

down a motor tricycle taxi to take our gear the last 200 yards to the bus station to catch it in time. Once in Chongqing Matt was dispatched with instructions to buy a new wheel for the trolley while the rest of us hired a van to move us and the gear from the bus to the railway station. Here we had to get 49 bags of gear onto the train for the 25 hour trip to Liuzhou. Forty nine bags is excessive by any reasonable standards for four people and we got into an argument with the carriage attendant as to where all this was going to go and how much we would be charged for excess baggage. Eventually, after a lot of arguing and shouting, a compromise was reached we would move it down from carriage two to carriage fourteen. After doing this the train staffs attitude changed completely and they let us upgrade our tickets from hard seat to hard sleeper and even insisted that we have a meal with them in the restaurant car. Sleeper train is a marvelous way to travel. You lie in your pit and watch China go by.

The next day, after a very relaxing trip, we changed trains for the four hour journey to Guilin. Here we got into another argument with one of the station staff over getting the luggage out of the station, but eventually all the gear was out, taxied across town and lugged up the four flights of stairs to Erin and Duncan's apartment at the Guilin Karst Institute. Matt and I said goodbye and set off on the one hour bus journey to Matt's home in Yangshou. I spent an extra day here, rather than in Hong Kong, as it is such a beautiful place. The town is surrounded by the sort of limestone tower karst that you see in traditional Chinese paintings, yet don't believe can be real. It is a big tourist destination, both for the Chinese and for foreign visitors, yet is relatively unspoiled. We spent our time here, eating at the Karst Cafe, owned by a friend of Matt's, cycling around the area, even a little spot of climbing. Matt saw me off on a sleeper bus to Shenzhen. From here it was a packed, rush hour bus journey across the city to the border with Hong Kong. I spent the day doing tourist stuff on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon before my evening flight out and the long journey back home. Many thanks to Ann Austin for picking up a rather jet lagged and smelly me from Manchester Airport.

### **What Happened Next...**

A return was made to Tian Xing in 2004. I couldn't go this time as I had spent all my money trekking in Ladakh. Liu Chi Ao Kou continues to gain depth, but is very tight and hard going caving compared with others in the area It now has 3,485m of passage.

On the web you can read about this and other China expeditions by the Hong Meigui group on their web site <http://www.hongmeigui.net> . This includes photographs and surveys and gives a good feel for what caving in China is all about. Regular updates on China caving expeditions appear in the caving press. My photographs from the expedition can be seen at <http://www.photojenic.co.uk/home-page/china-03.html> . Meggaflash flash bulbs have a web site with some great photos at <http://www.meggaflash.com> . **Jenny Drake**

### **Moel Verna Slate Mine (nr Corwen)**

From Glyndyfrdwy take the steep minor road heading southeast from Tyn y celyn. (Avoid the minor road from the PO in Glyndyfrdwy). After 3 km park just before the road ends at Plasnewydd. The road continues as a track to a quarry and the "air shaft" can be found above this (1248 3972) surrounded by the remains of a fence. Bolt belay about 5m south of the hole and a large tree provides a belay for the main 13m drop to the floor of the air shaft. The route into the main workings is through the

grill, the passage over the boulders does not appear on the survey (but is worth a look) and the third leads to a collapse.

Follow the route through the grill to a junction and turn right. Climb through the stopping and continue to where the passage widens. Turn right and you're in! From here all the passages are ENORMOUS with interesting artefacts "uphill" (to the left). There appear to be no access restrictions- equipment required 25m rope, sling-have a good day!

**Stop Press.**

Bron gave birth to a son, Sun Aug 28 07.53 Kiwi time. 6lb 3 oz both doing well, suspect Kev is "hungover"!