

Little General to the Vestibule.
(By Tony Gamble)

Paul Holdcroft, Tony Reynolds and I got off to a late start, and by the time we got into the cave there was a Sherpa party ahead of us. The particular party would not let us pass, even though we were carrying the tackle! So we had plenty of time to admire the handiwork of Liam and his mates. We found the Meanders a piece of cake and were highly impressed by the size of the place when we eventually emerged from the bottom of Aldo's into the Grand Gallery. The delays and hanging about had sapped some of our enthusiasm, but the sights of the Bourgin Hall cheered us up and the walk to the Little General soon warmed us up too. We soon located the tackle left by Liam and it was not long before we had the pitch rigged and were down it. We fixed a rope by the Cascade of the Tyrolienne, but found that the one in place already was quite enough for us to descend. As we moved on and into the Great Rubble Heap we had some difficulty in finding the best route through the vast boulders, some of them much bigger than a house. The size of the place was unbelievable. Eventually we got to Camp1, recognisable by a pile of stones surmounted by a bowl of spent carbide. Camp1 was surprisingly clean, not at all as bad as we had been led to believe from previous accounts. Here we dumped our sleeping gear and decided to have a meal. I thought that Tony had the food, but when I asked him for it he thought that I had it! No food! We decided to push on and passed through the magnificent Hall of the Thirteen almost forgetting our worries about hunger. We were soon at the Balcony pitch. The two bolts here gave a very bad hang, and we had to have a rubbing point at the top. Paul was by now feeling very cold and hungry and decided to go back to Camp1 and wait for us. Tony and I went down the Balcony and then fixed handlines for the slippery slopes following. When we came to the Vestibule there was a traverse rope in to the left, so we fixed our own in a slightly different place and traversed around to the left and down. We had the tackle for Abelle Cascade, but because we were in dry grotts decided to call it a day as we had been underground for at least eight hours and the surface was a long way off. Leaving the tackle at the start of the Canals, we refilled our lamps with water and carbide and started the climb out to Camp1. Here we met some of the Sherpa teams and managed to scrounge a bite to eat before continuing on up the cave. The journey out was uneventful until we arrived at Aldo's where we got blocked again by a shattered Sherpa who was taking about an hour a pitch! Eventually we managed to pass and surfaced in the early morning hours. We got back to base camp at about three o'clock in the morning. Here we regained contact with Paul who cooked some soup for us. We felt that we had earned it!

The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men....

Up to this point things had gone according to the original plan. The cave was equipped as far as the Vestibule and the Sherpa teams had ferried all the gear for the rest of the cave as far as Camp1. In addition, most of the important camping equipment and food, both personal and communal had been dumped at Camp1 too. The 'Bottoming' team consisting of Andy Bennett, Ian Edwards, Lionel Howarth and Dudley Kitching, set off into the cave as planned and dropped down rapidly through the tired ranks of ascending workers. Unfortunately, in their haste, they raced through the Hall of the Thirteen and did not see the tackle dump at Camp1. Arriving at the Canals, they could not find the tackle, and, realising their horrible mistake, had to climb back up a vertical height equivalent to that in Penyghent Pot on the return to Camp1 to collect it. Dud was still tired from his drive down so stayed there whilst the others ferried all the gear down to the other side of the Canals. Here, they decided that they had to stop and retreated to Camp1. Meanwhile, various bottoming parties were on their way down expecting the cave to be rigged.