C.C.P.C.
Newsletter 88.
Spring 2006.

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Box Stone Mines, Wiltshire

This trip had been ‘on the cards’ for me for several months, but something had always managed to get in the way, although Darren and Neil Conde did manage a trip some time ago.
Our party comprised: Ralph Johnson, Len Kirkham, John Preston, John Shenton and myself.
The trip down the M6 and M5 was frustratingly slow, but eventually we got onto the A4 eastbound through Box. After passing the huge entrance to Box railway tunnel, we reached the village of Box Hill where we turned off, right, onto minor roads, which led up a wooded valley to the top of the hill. ‘Mendip Underground’ (published 1987) suggests parking on open ground near the crossroads at ST86 838.691, but we couldn’t see any open ground so we parked on a little pull-in, opposite cottages at the crossroads.
There are well over 15 miles of passages in the complex, with nine original entrances, although usually there are only two or three open today (there are several sites on the internet which give the current access details). It seems that the stone has been quarried since Roman times, for building purposes, with production reaching a peak in the 19th century. Many of the important buildings of Bath are constructed of stone from here or from one of the neighbouring underground quarries. During the Second World War parts of the northern complex were requisitioned for use by the War Department as bombproof stores, and they are still in use by the Royal Navy today. The last quarry workings, operated by the Bath and Portland Stone Company, closed in about 1968, since when many entrances have been blocked by land-owners.
We took copies of the astonishing survey produced by members of Shepton Mallet Caving Club between 1990 and 1998 (eight years !!), which covers three A3 sheets, and which looks as if a large number of spiders have fallen into black ink before racing about all over the paper. We would have been wasting our time without this, and might still be down there !
[‘Mendip Underground’ (published 1987) lists Cotham Speleological Society as producing the original survey, and this was still stated on one of the web-sites checked.]
Even with the survey, route finding would have been difficult, however the A3 notes page which accompanies it include a ‘suggested tour’ of just over 2 Kilometres, which supposedly takes about 2 hours, and we were happy to follow this route, with a few extensions to take in notable underground features.
Walking back down the road (Love Lane), we could see into an overgrown quarry on the left, with a tennis court, and the end of formal gardens at the rear of a large house. Eventually there was a way into

the quarry, and we followed a pathway back, along the foot of the cliff face, to an open, crawling height entrance, at the bottom of an earth slope: **The Backdoor**.
Without simply copying the description from the survey notes, it would be impossible to describe our route in sufficient detail for others to follow, and even with the notes we had some difficulties. [We took a copy of the survey (and notes) with us, with the planned route highlighted.]
Once through the short crawl, we entered passages which were generally well over walking height, with flat roofs and floors, and with vertical walls. Had there not been debris, from roof collapses and from quarrying, littering the passages, and in many places filling them to near the roof, then we could almost have used a vehicle to explore ! There were passages heading off in all directions, with many junctions, and routes back to where we had started; a complete labyrinth.
The following extract is the first paragraph of the route description, and will give an idea of the difficulties of route finding, over even short distances:

Enter via the Backdoor. The short entrance crawl soon opens into a large passage. (Immediately on the left is a route through an unstable fall which leads towards the northern part of the mine). Bear right (south) along the large passage and keep left at the fork which is reached after about 20m. Immediately after the fork turn left and climb up through a small opening over deads. Follow the left route until confronted by a pillar straight ahead. Turn right and drop down a rock step to enter a straight passage OXO 1 which is followed for 60m over two falls. At the end of the second fall the way veers right and crosses another fall. Some 20m beyond, a wall is painted with 'Muffers Rule'. Continue straight on ignoring the major turnings to right and left. The passage soon enlarges into the impressive Cathedral chamber. Warning: do not fall into the well on the right.

At first I was surprised at the quantity of graffiti painted onto the walls at most junctions, but it soon became clear that previous explorers and surveyors (perhaps even the quarrymen themselves ?) had needed to mark their route to avoid becoming hopelessly confused in the maze of similar looking passageways. Some of the markings were easy to follow, including a new-looking stencilled set, and named particular long-distance routes, however, without the survey and description, we would have wasted a huge amount of time just getting as far as **Cathedral** chamber.
The chamber is about 60 metres long, 8 metres wide and around 30 metres high, with a circular shaft to daylight high above. In many places deep grooves have been worn into the corners of the walls and roof where stone from surrounding passages was hauled by cable into this chamber, then direct to the surface through the opening. Sadly, the chamber is spoiled by a slope of rubbish which must have been dumped through the surface opening.
We headed south along a muddy passage, then branched left to an area with higher workings reached by a series of uneven steps. From the upper level it was possible to examine the way the workers had removed the good quality stone layer. First the quarryman, or 'picker', cut a 25 cm. high horizontal groove below the ceiling, for 1 to 1.5 m. back into the wall and the full width of the heading, up to 8 metres. Next a vertical channel was cut back for about 2 metres into the face, to make one side of the block. The saw was then used to cut down the other side of the block from the top groove, and bars or wedges were driven in underneath to break the block free at the back and base. The stone was then pulled out, and the two broken faces were trimmed to shape with an axe. The space created made it easier to work on the next block.
There was evidence of the removed blocks everywhere in the fine stone of the walls, but the ceiling was of much coarser and darker stone, and was untouched.
We turned back to our planned route, heading south along large passages marked '**EG**' and '**AO**', with falls of roof material at intervals. The quarry workers had set dozens of short, timber supports at 45 degrees, between the top of the walls and the roof, and had driven timber wedges vertically upwards into cracks in the flat ceiling, but these had decayed to the consistency of wet cardboard. We were doubtful about their effectiveness even when new.
After crossing one particularly long stretch of collapsed roof, we turned right, off the main route, through a series of complex junctions to an end working with an original crane, still in place, just as the workers had left it. The wall here carried a particularly good set of pencil calculations, where the

men had worked out the cubic capacity of the stone blocks they were sending out, as this determined the amount of money they had earned. Back at the junction with the main circuit, we turned right along the well-trodden **B12** route, heading eastwards past numerous side passages and small roof-falls. We had already heard faint rumbling sounds several times, and a short way along this passage we came to a substantial block-work wall on the right, which was the side of a vertical air shaft for the railway tunnel passing through the hill, below the mine. The tunnel was driven in 1841, for Brunel's Great Western Railway main line, and during the work, the extent of the fine stone layer was realised for the first time, leading to a major increase in extraction.

25 metres further we passed a deep, open well, just off the line of the passage, with a length of early 'bellied' rail used as a safety barrier, and then the base of a blocked shaft, which originally sloped up to the surface. More complex intersections, and a change to a more northerly direction, brought us to an open area at **Box 17** junction, easily identified by its subterranean army of red-brick robots, each almost 1 metre high, standing silently in the darkness in concentric circles. Other 'robots' were on distant guard duty, perched on nearby piles of rubble – all very bizarre.

East from the 'robots' along **B Passage**, then sharp left, along a passage to the north-west, with concrete supporting pillars, eventually brought us to the **Delta-Rectangle shafts.** The first of these seems to be quite recent, being about 2 metres in diameter, constructed with a concrete ring lining, and with a grilled opening to daylight about 30 metres above. John Preston and I explored a considerable length of **W.O. Passage**, running north-west from here, and noted the soot deposit running along the centre-line of the roof, from the days when the steam locomotive 'Thunder' was used to haul wagons out to **Clift Entrance**. As we returned to the others, we spotted the narrow entrance to a steep flight of steps, cut into the rock, which led up to the foot of the other **Delta-Rectangle shaft**. This shaft was clearly much older. It was unlined, with a vertical iron ladder stretching upwards for about 15 metres to the underside of a corrugated iron lid. On the way back down the steps, Len stopped to prod at an interesting patch of black gunge, however he rapidly lost interest when I suggested that the various bones visible would reconstruct into the skeleton of a rat !

Our route went south, then sharply right (westwards) at a major crossroads to eventually re-join the **B12 Passage** where we turned right (northwards)**.** We passed through several significant junctions, **Box 14, Box 13,** and **Box 12**, all fortunately well labelled, then turned sharply back to the left at **Box 11** junction, along **B11 Passage**, heading due south.

Are you confused yet ? – we were; and the next section is described as 'complex' in the notes !! I like the part which reads:

'Turn right within the fall and follow the larger route to a second and rather unstable fall. This is best avoided by taking the passage over deads to the right ……'

Lots more twists and turns, including ending up at the top of a difficult 2 metre drop down a blank wall, eventually brought us back to **Cathedral** chamber, on the opposite side. All we had left was to retrace the short section we had passed through on our way in from the entrance, and even that part was so complex that the survey and notes were used to confirm our route. Our trip had lasted for about 3 hours in total.

Back outside, looking across the fields as we walked back to the cars, it was hard to believe just how much open space was hidden away under our feet. A distant row of cottages is built partly across the void of **Cathedral** chamber, with only 4 metres of rock between the two ! At the cars we found grumpy messages had been left under the wipers, telling us that we were parked on private ground, and forbidding us to do it ever again !

Despite the parking problem, this is certainly a place that is worth several visits for anyone interested in mining history and archaeology, even though there is a sameness about many of the passages, and a dusty stillness which can be oppressive.

There is no SRT or other vertical gear needed, but take extra lights, a copy of the survey and notes, and be prepared to get lost.

Steve Knox 2nd January 2006

Results of Block Hall rope test.

You may recall Jenny and Alan B removing a section of rope from Block Hall that had been in situ since June 02.(3 ½ years) I sent the rope off to Bob Meyhue (BCA) for testing, amazingly the3 samples of rope broke on the 5th, 6th, and 6th drop test! Bob's only comment was that the rope was extremely stiff and its "knotability" was poor.

Exploring the Welsh Slate Labyrinths, Part 6

Cwm Penmachno. Tuesday, 20th December 2005
- with Tim Campbell, Ralph Johnson, and Miles Moulding.

We met up with Miles, close to his home in Penmachno, then drove down Cwm Penmachno valley to park at the bottom of the slate tips on the edge of Glenaber Terrace. Miles was to act as our guide, although he was the first to admit that he had only limited knowledge of the sites.

Rhiwbach Slate Quarry [Adit: SH 747473]

Passing between the rows of cottages, we went through a five-bar gate and headed south-west, along a footpath, towards the right-hand boundary of a forestry block on the hillside above. The ground was saturated, and we had steady drizzle and light hill fog to contend with, as we plodded up alongside the forestry fence. Eventually we reached an open area at the forest edge, where slate waste tips spilled down to the fence line, and from the flat top of these we followed a cutting back to the adit portal.

The opening is about 2.5 metres wide, by 2 metres high, with a steady flow of water running out under the substantial grill of welded steel girders, which is set just inside the portal. There is a small access gate set into the bottom of the barrier, but this is pad-locked, so we were forced to enter by wriggling through a space between the metal-work and the rock wall. Once inside, the adit can be seen stretching away into the darkness, a rail track along the centre line, and shallow running water covering much of the floor. After a short distance we came across a four-wheeled truck, standing abandoned on the rails, and still easily moved along. Miles and I spent some time here with cameras, setting off multiple flashes, while Ralph and Tim waited ahead.

Moving on, there are a number of places where the slate has been 'tried' on either side of the passage, resulting in small chambers or short cross-passages with blind headings, and there is a line of ready-cut blocks of slate left along the side of the rail-track, ready for removal. Eventually the workers must have found rock that was worth working in quantity, as large voids have been excavated on the left of the adit. The first is accessed through a 'window', and now contains a large, deep lake, as all workings below adit level have filled with water. The same lake-chamber could be reached again, a little further on, on the left, close to the remains of a tipper-truck body, and by passing round the end of the lake we reached the top of a completely collapsed incline, with the remains of shattered timbers. There were further chambers beyond the incline, and in two places the route passed along narrow ledges above more flooded voids, their blue-green waters stretching down beyond the range of our lights. [These narrow terraces have been 'protected' by fixed hand-lines attached to stainless bolts.] Back in the main drainage adit, by the tipper truck, we could see how straight the level was, as daylight was clearly visible at the portal. There were several possible routes on the right of the adit in this area, usually still with rails and sleepers in place. I followed one for a considerable distance, passing black, flow-stone formations on the walls, and two nests of gleaming white cave-pearls on the floor, to a point where the rails suddenly curved over into a small, descending passage, brim-full of blue water. Just before this flooded ending there was a branch on the left which lead to a blind working face. Heading back towards the main adit, I noticed a small opening on the left, which was probably a ventilation link to a working below, as a short way in it turned down to a deep-water surface.

Back in the main adit, another major branch-passage on the right, linked the base of a series of rising chambers and trials on the left, before eventually reaching a dead end. Several of the chambers had lengths of chain hanging down the walls, possibly from the locations being worked by the quarry-men before they packed up for the last time.

Our route onwards was through the largest of these rising chambers, easily identified, as it is divided into two by a substantial built-wall, about 3 metres high and 2 metres thick. Rather than climbing over the wall from the front section of the chamber, an opening on the left, just a few metres further along the passage, led easily back into the rear section of the chamber, behind the wall. The purpose of the wall remains a mystery. At first, the rear wall of the chamber seems to be blind, but, by climbing half-way up the slope, another horizontal adit can be found, tucked away behind a buttress on the right.
The new passage, level and easy walking-height, curved round past an area of roof and right wall supported by timbers. Ahead we could hear rushing water, and only a short distance further we came out, at right angles, into a major passage sloping down from left to right. This passage was square in cross-section, and sloped at about 30 to 40 degrees down to an area of standing water, about 20 metres lower down, where it appeared to level out. Looking up the slope, the passage ran apparently straight for as far as we could see, maintaining the same angle, and with a considerable stream rushing down it towards it. Climbing steadily, we passed several side levels on the right, with rail tracks and sleepers, but did little more than just look into these. On the left there were a number of places where it seemed possible to enter a parallel passage, but we kept straight on uphill, to a grill of steel girders which partially blocked the way. Ahead again, we could see day-light showing through a boulder pile, held back by another set of steel girders, and after an easy squirm we were out.
Surprise, surprise, outside it was still raining and foggy !
The exit is in the base of a daylight quarry, with a huge, railway-tunnel size opening to the right, which has been blocked by a mass of welded steel beams, although once again there is a small, pad-locked access gate. This opening is probably the entrance to the main haulage incline.

Out of the quarry, we headed south-west across the top of the slate waste-tips, and through the remains of mill buildings, to a prominent chimney. The remains of an incline led steeply uphill from a ruined engine-house, to the track-bed of the Maen-offeren tramway. Turning right along this, we had an easy walk for about a kilometre to a short branch tramway on the right which led to Cwt-y-Bugail Slate Quarry.

Cwt-y-Bugail Slate Quarry [Adit: SH 733470]
The branch track from the Maen-offeren tramway led to major mill remains, with slate tips rising steeply on the left, behind the ruined buildings. We climbed up the tips to an extensive area of waste-runs, and after wandering around in the fog we located the two open quarries, or ‘Twlls’, which make up the main access routes to the underground workings.
A slope of slate waste led down into the top of the South Twll, but instead of continuing down ‘Working 1’ (South), we turned left into the horizontal Level B passage, with rails still in place. Just inside, the passage forked, with the left branch leading along terraces near the top of two massive voids, ‘Workings 2 and 3’ (South), linked by a service passage, before ending at a vertical drop into ‘Working 4’ (South), lit by daylight from a huge open window above. The right branch led horizontally through into the base of the North Twll, at Floor B Level, where it linked with a number of track-ways serving different parts of the quarry.
At the northern end of the North Twll, rubble slopes ran far down into the gloom of two huge, parallel voids. I slithered down the slope into the left-hand chamber, ‘Working 3’ (North), to reach the Floor C Level, where railway tracks ran out from under the debris into shallow water. Ahead, a service passage ran left to the darkness of ‘Working 4’ (North), through deeper water, and also right, past an abandoned truck, to the bottom of the other daylight void ‘Working 2’ (North). The passage continued ahead, through deeper water, but I headed back up into the North Twll quarry.
We returned through the tunnel to the South Twll quarry and followed a semi-collapsed incline downwards, against the west wall of ‘Working 1’ (South). Halfway down, the incline had fallen away completely, making further descent difficult without kitting up and rigging it as a pitch, but we were able to get into the Level C passage, just above us in the left wall. The passage led through into the base of the worked void, ‘Working 2’ (South), then through again into the base of ‘Working 3’ (South).

A narrow opening in the floor here linked to the top of the 'Working 3' (South) void on Level D, but would have needed rigging as a pitch. The passage straight ahead, across the chamber, led to a high opening into the lowest section of 'Working 4' (South). We could not get any further this way, so decided that we had seen enough for the day, and returned to the surface.

All that remained was for us to slip and slither down several horrendous slopes of slate waste, onto a saturated stretch of boggy moor-land, where we wandered about in the fog and rain, jumping streams and sinking knee-deep in the mire. Eventually the ruined chimney, passed earlier in the day, loomed out of the murk, exactly where we expected it to be (!), and from there it was all downhill (lots of it) back to the Jeep. This was another excellent day in unknown territory. Good, easy fun.
Steve Knox. 25th December 2005

17th January 2006 : Unspoiled Places

This week I was very fortunate to be invited to join a group on a 'one-off' visit to a normally closed site. The name, and location, are unimportant, as this place is on privately owned ground, the entrance is very securely locked, and there is absolutely no access to recreational cavers. We were there legally, with the knowledge, and approval, of the owner, as a result of conservation work, being carried out by group members.

After descending the narrow, entrance shaft, the onward route was barely more than flat-out, initially through standing water, for a considerable distance. I was far from happy, as I dislike small passages almost as much as I dislike lying in ice-cold water ! Fortunately the crawl entered a larger, walking-height, passage, with several ways upwards into high cavities, and the main route stretching ahead like a railway tunnel. Immediately it became obvious that this was a special place.

In many places, the dark rock walls sparkled with tiny crystals, and pristine white flowstone deposits gleamed in the darkness. Water, dripping and dribbling from the roof and walls, had created intricate, lacy patterns, which spread like untouched bridal veils over the rock surfaces, and even over the mud of the floor.

We moved on, almost subdued by the beauty of the place, taking great care to step round, and over, even the least significant of the formations, well aware of the immediate damage we could cause if careless with our muddy boots, suits and gloves. More cavities were visible above, and we passed a number of deep holes at the side of the passage floor, some brim-full of crystal clear water, but others dropping away to lower levels. At one place we could see into the side of a major shaft, which soared up, out of site, and which dropped away for a huge distance below. Eventually the main passage closed down, at a blind alcove festooned with glistening calcite deposits, and with a sparkling floor covered with amazing nests of cave pearls, the best I have ever seen.

Turning back, we found a climbable route downwards, and explored two lower levels. The formations were, if anything, even better, with many being brightly coloured by a wide range of minerals, and lots more cave pearls. One delicately lemon-coloured alcove would have been called the 'custard grotto' in any show-cave, and another was decorated in pools and dribbles of 'chocolate sauce'. Many of the deposits looked as soft as poured cream, but were of course completely solid. The range of colours was amazing.

In two places we crossed very deep water, where cavities had filled to the top, and we found another place where we could look out into the deep shaft, still with crystals and formations everywhere. Eventually we had to head back towards the entrance, and the horrible crawl, and then there was just the shaft back to the surface.

I have to admit that I have always been in favour of 'access', the more liberal the better, but this visit was a real wake-up call for me, and has made me reconsider some of my ideas.

I remember visiting Giants Hole in 1966, before the entrance series was blasted, and being impressed by the formations, which seemed 'better than the show caves' to me at the time. I have colour slides from the Upper Series, which show gleaming white stalactites and stalagmites in untouched grottos,

which are either severely damaged today, or, at best, rather shabby. Pearl Chamber in Knotlow Mine actually had nests of cave pearls which we used to point out to first time visitors, but no longer.
There is no doubt that every time we enter a mine or cave we have an effect on the cave environment, at least partially detrimental, but that is true for just about everything we do in the natural world. Purists would say that true conservation can only be achieved by staying out altogether ! I can't help feeling that complete exclusion is like keeping a work of art in a bank vault – totally pointless !!
In some mountain and wilderness areas, there is a 'sanctuary' concept, where the authorities strive to achieve the minimum of intrusion, keeping access to those with a genuine reason to be there, which does not include recreation alone ! I believe that sanctuary zones are also being established in many important ocean sites, to limit the effects of recreational sub-aqua on fragile environments. It may be, that we have to accept the need to keep certain underground sites 'closed', in order to preserve the very features that we are so keen to see. It doesn't take much imagination to see how easily the site, described above, could be destroyed by 'too many' visitors, or too much access.
Considering the location described above; one possibility might be to carry out a very careful survey of the site, and to make a film and photographic record of the features, passages and formations. Such work could include a geological and historical survey, and would make frequent visits unnecessary in the future. A single, permitted visit every year would allow the situation underground to be monitored, and would enable simple maintenance work to be carried out to preserve existing access routes and water flow. Any agreement will require very careful negotiation with the current owner. It is worth remembering that, to many owners, having an underground site is a nuisance, with insurance implications when access is allowed. As cavers we have no right of access to such places.
Thanks, to those involved, for a superb trip. My only regret is that, having heard of the wet crawl, I left my camera in the car !!
Steve Knox. 18th January 2006

28th January 2006 : SRT Training at Ingleborough Hall, Clapham.

During the weekend of 28th and 29th January, three courses were arranged to allow individuals to learn, develop, or consolidate their SRT skills. I was a member of the 'Basic' course, being held on Saturday, 28th, in parallel with an 'Advanced' course.
Everyone assembled in the library at 9.00 am., where we met our instructors and had a short introductory talk, before moving off to the classroom block where we separated into two groups.
The 'Basic' Course:
Inside, Classroom :-

1. We kitted up in our own SRT gear, and spent some time examining and discussing different hanging locations for individual items, and in adjusting lengths of cows-tails and foot loops.
2. Duncan, our instructor, assisted by Ralph, demonstrated the rigging of a basic traverse line, leading to a 'Y-hang', using bolts in the wall. This was to allow us to practise safe use of cows-tails.
3. We were shown, and practised, the safe use of a 'Stop' and Friction Krab.

Outside, SRT Tower :-

4. Duncan demonstrated safe approach to the pitch head, with good cows-tail practice, then threading the 'Stop', and a controlled abseil, with safeguards to avoid 'plummet' by novices (tension from below, or slip-knot at head height from the ground). We all had plenty of time to practise this.
5. Demonstration of SRT ascent (one foot in foot-loop, or both feet with trapped rope), with safe exit at pitch-head using cows-tails. Plenty of practice by everyone.
6. Descent, passing a free-hanging re-belay.
7. Ascent, passing a free-hanging re-belay.

Outside, Beech Tree :-

8. Ascent, changing to descent while free-hanging.

9. Descent, changing to ascent while free-hanging.
10. Passing a mid-rope knot, while free-hanging, both while ascending and descending.

Throughout the day we had the opportunity to discuss every action and technique, and to practise at each step. Individual safety was continually emphasised, and I felt that the standard of instruction could not have been better. Overall this was an excellent day, and I would recommend it to anyone wanting to boost their skill-level and personal confidence.
Steve Knox. 30th January 2006

The River Manifold, Derbyshire.

Over the years I've often seen the bed of the River Manifold absolutely dry, with the water flowing through subterranean routes beneath the valley floor, and at other times in full flow, but on this occasion I was fortunate enough to see the change from one state to the other.
Annie and I set off walking along the old railway track, heading upstream from Weags Bridge towards Wetton Mill. The main riverbed was completely dry, and there was no flow from the Weags Bridge Resurgence [NGR 100 540] in the north bank. Water entering from Ladyside Brook had actually flowed 'upstream' for a few metres before forming a shallow pool and sinking into the riverbed. Whenever we could see into the riverbed, it was dry, but when we reached the bridge, immediately before the Wetton Road, we were amazed to see the river in full flow, racing beneath !!
We turned back, and at the first access point from the track, we could see that the previously 'empty' river was now frothy, brown and full. I assume that the Wetton Road Sink [NGR 0991 5562], on the river bend, had been taking the river, but had been overwhelmed as we passed by. Hurrying on, we reached dry riverbed again below Thor's Cave, so the flood-front was still upstream of us. I scrambled down into the dry riverbed and started to walk upstream. Some distance ahead I could see moving water, and hear a muted roar, but it didn't seem to be getting any closer, so I thought the river must be pouring into another sink. It wasn't !
I suddenly realised that a frothy edge, followed by a brown flood, was pouring over the bouldery surface towards me, at a little more than walking speed, slowing as it filled each hollow, then picking up speed as it moved onwards. Back on the bank, I kept level with the water-front, as far as the junction with Ladyside Brook, where the flood joined the growing pool in the river-bed. Further downstream, Weags Bridge Resurgence was flowing strongly into the dry channel, well ahead of the flood front.
I waited at the bend, just upstream of the Weags Bridge car-park, and heard the flow before it came into view, travelling quite quickly, until slowed as it filled the deep hollow on the outside edge of the bend. Once it was moving again, I hurried down to the weir, level with the car-park, and watched the flow pour over the rock-step and onwards. Amazingly, within two minutes of the front passing, the river was filled from bank to bank (at least four metres wide) and about one metre deep, with fast-flowing brown water.
I watched the flow race through the archway of Weags Bridge and onwards towards its confluence with the River Hamps, and couldn't help thinking how little warning there would have been for anyone exploring any of the sinks in the river bed down-stream from Wetton Mill. It had only taken about forty minutes for the water to overwhelm every sink between Wetton Road Sink and Weags Bridge. All sinks further upstream would have already filled.
During the previous two weeks there had been little rain, but then Saturday night had been very wet. Sunday was bright with just a couple of very light showers, and, finding the river-bed dry, the conditions would probably have seemed reasonable for a trip underground. It would be interesting to know how long the river continued to run on the surface, before reverting to its hidden pathways below the valley floor.
Steve Knox.Sunday, 12th February 2006 :

Cleaning Eagle Street Springwater Well-shaft, Buxton

In early February I got a call to see if CCPC were interested in "looking at an old well in Buxton". Silly question really since most of us have spent the best part of our lives down dark wet holes of various sorts and wells seem to be coming a bit of a speciality as our fame (or should that be infamy) spreads across the country! Many folks are buying old properties with a view to renovation and they often encounter mysterious holes of unknown depth when ripping up kitchen floors or laying patios. A couple of days after the call on our way back home from inspecting a job on an old blue-john mine for The National Trust we paid the site a flying visit. A quick look and we were hooked- although not prepared for an SRT trip we managed to assemble enough gear to inspect the shaft to see what we were letting ourselves in for! Apparently in the late nineteen century, despite its name the Spa Hotel did not have a thermal spring. Not wishing to be upstaged they called upon the services of a local water diviner. Steve Knox takes up the story

The shaft is located beneath the floor of an old laundry building (now partially converted into apartments) in Eagle Street, close to the main market square in Buxton. The shaft is square in section, 1.9 metres by 1.85 metres, and is 21 metres deep, from the laundry floor level, ending in a rectangular chamber, 6.9 metres long and 3.8 metres wide. Apparently the shaft was sunk in 1892, to locate a spring 'doused' by 'Mr. Mullins' as being seventy feet below Eagle Street. To sink such a shaft through solid rock must have been an expensive undertaking, so someone clearly had enormous confidence in his prediction! Amazingly, at 21 metres depth (seventy feet) there is a substantial spring of ice-cold water. Sometime later, a bore-hole was driven, for a further 80 metres, through the base of the shaft to reach the deep water layer far beneath Buxton, and this bore-hole is linked to the surface through a major pipe which runs up the inside of the well-shaft, supported by girders. An old, metal ladder-way is in place for the upper two thirds of the shaft, but is unsafe, so access has been by SRT for all personnel.

The current intention is to extract spring-water from the bore for sale commercially, and it has been necessary to check the integrity of the seal between the base of the pipework and the floor of the chamber.

20th February 2006: Ralph Johnson, Steve Knox, Darren Conde.

Setting up the commercial pump, power source, and delivery pipes, and the powered winch. Before any pumping commenced, the water level in the shaft was at the point where the shaft walls start to 'bell out' into the chamber at the foot of the shaft. As pumping lowered the water, there was a steady flow into the chamber from one point in the bricked-up bedding, which is at the junction between the chamber walls and the roof of the chamber. Pumping was discontinued after the water-level had been dropped by about 2 metres.

21st February 2006: Ralph Johnson, Len Kirkham, John Shenton.

I wasn't present, but pumping removed most of the water, and revealed the full dimensions of the chamber, and the extent of silt deposition. Water was not entering from the level of the bricked-up bedding, but a substantial welling-up of water was noted in the floor, at the end of the short passage.

22nd February 2006: Andy Banner, Ralph Johnson, Steve Knox, John Shenton, Dave Webb.

Water-level had returned to the same level as when the shaft was entered on 20th February. Pumping lowered the water level to the lowest point reached on 21st February, and a considerable quantity of fine silt was 'liquified' by agitation and was successfully pumped out of the shaft.

Features noted:

a) *The roof of the chamber appears to be natural, and seems to be the flat 'roof' of an open bedding plane intersected when the shaft was originally sunk. The bedding plane (if that is what it is) has been sealed with brickwork and cement, all round the perimeter of the chamber, at roof level. [– was this to keep water in, or out ??]*
b) *The silt appears to enter the chamber, with a minor flow of water, from a low, partly bricked-up opening, almost opposite the short passage. The silt has a black substance in it, and as it was exposed, there was a distinct smell of fuel or diesel oil.*

c) *Above the silt entry point, just below the roof, there is a triangular area of brickwork, with a void visible beyond, through a small hole.*
d) *At the end of the short passage there is an area of brickwork and cement, reaching from the roof-level bedding plane to the silt at floor level.*
e) *There is a substantial influx of water from the floor of the passage, close to the end. [- was the passage driven to find the point where water was rising into the joint ??]*
f) *The brickwork in the walls at opposite ends of the chamber suggests there could be an open, water-filled, joint beyond, which is discharging water into the chamber once pumping lowers the water level.*
g) *An inscription, in three lines, is cut into the chamber wall: WO FB 1892*
h) *An inscription is cut into the shaft wall just above the chamber: J Mullins 1892*

27th February 2006: Ralph Johnson, Steve Knox, John Shenton.
We pumped out the chamber (again) and removed the remaining silt deposits down to a floor of hard packed rubble. Due to the size and type of pump, the water could not be totally cleared, and there will be a very thin layer of fine silt remaining.
28th February 2006: Len Kirkham, Steve Knox, John Shenton.
We pumped out the chamber (again) and cleaned the walls, pipe-work, seal and plinth, then removed all debris and rubbish to the surface.

Steve Knox.

Having completed our agreed task we were then asked to come up with a scheme for improving the pipe seal so, after a couple of brainstorming sessions, we were back in action armed with carpentry tools, a couple of sheets of ¾" ply, various other lengths of timber, nails screws etc a concrete mixer and yes- our own labourer to do the donkey work. The winch (Len insists on calling it a stow) which was on site for drawing out sludge now came into play for lowering the quick- setting concrete down the shaft since we were unable to find a contractor willing to pipe concrete to that depth. Within a couple of hours the job was finished, much quicker than anticipated. Twenty four hours later we were back on site to remove the shuttering, retrieve the pump and pipe work and generally tidy up. We just hope the spa water doesn't glow in the dark!
Ralph J

"Holidays" 2006

A reminder that Jen is looking for folks to join her on a 2 week visit to China in May where you are virtually guaranteed to explore NEW cave systems.
Likewise in July she is planning a "quickie" in Northern Spain.
If you are interested you know what to do!
YSS are looking for experienced cavers to join them on a Gouffre Berger trip this coming summer.

Ade's bear epic.

This winter saw Ade (Pedley) on his repeat visit to Greenland where he managed to do the first winter ascent of "Gunnbjornsfjelde". The peak is 3693 m, the highest peak in the Arctic Circle. He made two ascents, and was the first and last to stand on the summit.
Ascents,now comes the exciting bit!

The Polar bear incident happened on the last night, and destroyed three out of the five tents, me and another guy were very lucky, as it ripped the end out of our Tent with us in it asleep, so we had to stay up all night with improvised Molotov cocktails, as we had all decided to not take a rifle on this particular trip because what are the chances of meeting a Polar bear so high up , and so far away from the sea in Winter.
Ade Pedley.

Ade has a TSA XL "as new" o/suit for sale at £50. Ring him if interested. (no teeth marks!)

Fatality in Astonhill Swallet.

Sadly Dave Biggs (Pegasus CC and DCRO) was killed by a rogue boulder while digging in the above cave (near Pikehall) on Sat 25 March. Several CCPC members were involved in the recovery of Dave's body.

Bits 'n' Bobs.

A small group of members continue work in the Ashbourne area on behalf of Staffs. Wildlife Trust. At present there is no access but once the work is completed this should prove to be an interesting area with lots of potential.

Work will shortly begin on the shaft entrance on Nickergrove Mine with a view to making it "novice friendly" This is being financed by BCA via PICA.

Darren (aided and abetted by Neil) is exploring "caverns measureless to man". Their findings "somewhere in N Wales" will eventually be disclosed in a later edition of the newsletter!

Meets

4 April DCRO store (Buxton Fire Station) Multipod 19.30
8 April DCRO AGM Anchor Inn Tideswell. 1400
8 April Agen Allwedd
23 April Gaping G (Henslers) plus something for newcomers.
29 April DCRO bag-pack Morrisons Buxton. (Can YOU do an hour or so?)
29 April Milwr Tunnel. N Wales
1 May Bank holiday- NO MEETING
8 May CCPC meeting
6 May Great Orme Copper Mines N Wales.
20 May Rumbling Hole Yorks. (plus something for novices).
27 May DCRO street collection Bakewell.
27 May GG winch meet – all week.
5 June CCPC meeting
10 June Black Shiver (plus something for lesser mortals!)

As usual this list does not include the many ad-hoc trips arranged informally nor the multitude of mid-week activities. If you want to find out what's happening pick up the phone!