

# CHELSEA SPELAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY



*Tham Xe Bang Fai*

*Access And Conservation*

*Reservoir Hole - March/April*

*Ogof Craig A'R Ffynnon*

*Cae Coch Sulphur Mine*

*Charterhouse - The cold wet version*

*A weekend trip in the  
Forest of Dean*



# Chelsea Spelæological Society Newsletter

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Whip Scorpion - Photo by Frank Longwill

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The views expressed in the Newsletter are those of the author of the article and do not necessarily represent the views of the Society. Photos and illustrations not accredited are by the editor.

## Membership

Please send all subscriptions to:

Gary Jones, 6 West Down, Bookham, Leatherhead,  
Surrey KT23 4LJ

Current rates are:

**Full** £25

**Joint** £33

**PLUS your BCA subscription per person of £6 for non cavers and £17 for cavers.**

Members who have BCA membership via another club need not pay twice but should include their BCA number and membership club with their payment.

**Associate** £21 (BCA Non Caver already included)

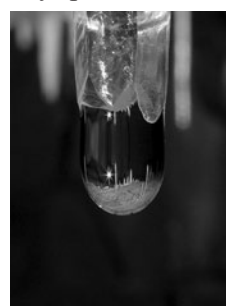
**Provisional** £20

Provisional members made into Full members this year have to pay the Full member rate.

**New members** wishing to join should send a cheque payable to **Chelsea Spelæological Society** along with

their membership application form to the Secretary. Members who are renewing a subscription should sent the payment to the Treasurer. The committee will normally consider voting provisional members up to full membership after 6 months by which time they should have become known.

Provisional membership can be extended for another 6 months, but only once, if a Provisional Member has been unable to become known socially and as an active caver within the club. Please contact the Treasurer with any queries.



**Cover Photo** - Inner Worlds

Photo by John Stevens

## WHISKY TASTING EVENING REPORT

by *Stuart France*

We whiled away another pleasant winter's evening this February with a dozen or so bottles for the dozen or so members and friends to sample. Remember that the coming summer and autumn is the time to prepare for the next tasting session by keeping back a couple of inches in reserve of something a little different you have bought during the year – so you can bring it along to share in February 2015. Remember, whisky does not go off in the bottle. It is better to bring small amounts rather than full bottles as this creates variety on the night.

New whiskies tested this year included Ardmore, Kilkerran and Basil Haydens, while some old favourites appeared once again like Balvenie and Springbank.



Photo - Stuart France

# Editorial

Thanks for a great response this month. Please send in your best photos for the front and back cover of future journals.

Please send all material to:

*Steve-Sharp-Photography@virginmedia.com*

Or put on a CD and send to:

*Steve Sharp*  
*43 The Crescent*  
*Sea Mills*  
*Bristol*  
*BS9 2JT*

Send your text for your article in Microsoft Word format or email.

Covert photos, surveys and other images to decent sized .jpeg, .tif, .psd files

You could alternatively zip your work and send in as a .rar file using [www.mailbigfile.com](http://www.mailbigfile.com) (Free version) (use the classic uploader)

*Steve Sharp*

## *Daren Diggers On Tour*



Charles Bailey

Please send in a *selfie* wearing a Daren Diggers or Whitewalls T Shirt taken in a remote location.

# Tham Xe Bang Fai

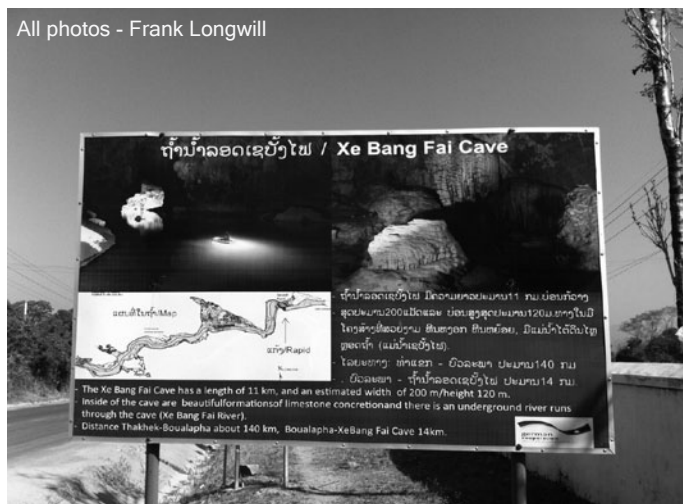
By Frank Longwill

Xe Bang Fai cave... A long recorded but rarely visited site. A 14km long underground river flowing through a gigantic cavern over 100x100m in places. Home of the world's largest spiders. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/12/photogalleries/greater-mekong-new-species-photos/photo6.html> Alien egg formations and the worlds biggest gour pools..... First explored in 1905 by some French... [http://www.explo-laos.com/History/Xe\\_Bang\\_Fai.html](http://www.explo-laos.com/History/Xe_Bang_Fai.html) Mentioned in the travel guide books but described as very difficult to get to without an expensive tour or fluent Lao. A couple of caving expeditions have visited and surveyed the cave. Next month a French team are due to continue the exploration..... In 2011 the Thakhek tourist office told me I couldn't visit because they were working to open the cave for tourism. ...

In Jan 2014 I returned to Laos as part of a Thai/Laos sport climbing tour. It was time for another attempt on Xe Bang Fai. I head down to the tourist office to enquire about the cave.

It's open. The guy in the office tells me the locals in the village will be able to take me in on a boat. Local people will be able to help. The trip is finally on. Well possibly. Laos's tourist info can be patchy or false but any way things are looking good. I photograph a map in the tourist office. It's a poor quality image. However I can still see the 14km gap in the blue Xe Bang Fai river and the names of nearby villages. How easy it will be to find I have no real idea. The trip is on but success is not certain. I arrange a moped for the next day. It's a long way so I opt for the expensive Honda. That evening I download some more 1:100000 maps from the explo Laos site. Fail to make an early start but the venture is boosted by a road sign with pictures and a survey of Tham Xe Bang Fai.

A reasonable indicator that the mission may succeed...



The road from Thakhek passes through beautiful tower



karst. It's a truly fantastic sight. Virgin jungle smothers the inaccessible karsts.

There is something quite magical about these towers most of which have not been visited by humans. 65 or so scenic kilometers later I reach the turn off for the Vietnam border. This being Laos I wasn't expecting another road sign. True to form there isn't one. I Check my maps and it's definitely right. I had passed this point 2 years ago doing the backpacker classic Thakhek loop. Now the exploration begins.... A few km down the road and I pull in for a beer. This will ease the strain of the long bike ride. The locals are curious of the strange tall farang but friendly. They speak in Lao so I have no idea what they are saying....

Check my maps again. The turn off should be about 20km short of the border. Signage status unknown. Beautiful limestone cliffs and countryside slide by as the km posts countdown to the frontier.

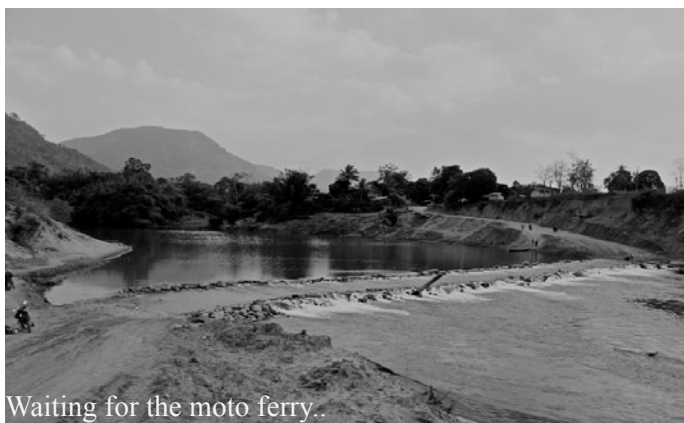
100km later the second sign appears. It indicates that the cave is 65km down a wide dirt road. It also tells me that I am entering the Him Nam No national park. Relieved I check my watch and decide no time for a break. I want to get there before dark. Finding a Laotian village on dirt tracks in the dark could be tricky.

The dirt road is a welcome break from the somewhat boring riding along the highway. As I enter the national park area the karsts twist themselves into more outlandish shapes and the excitement rises.

The road starts to get interesting at a second river ford. The first river ford had been little more than a puddle.... Some workers were hanging about near it. They seemed to be part of a crew building concrete bridges over the numerous rivers and streams that the road crossed. The watercourses were a shadow of their wet season relatives. Often they were spanned by wonky wooden bridges. Crossing wonky bridges is always good for a laugh....

A causeway of stones has been built across the river but the middle section is flooded. Ford crossing sense kicks in and I watch a local cross. The bike skits about on wet stones and he dabs his feet to keep balance but it's a goer.

I pause to allow some trucks through and cross getting just one wet foot. At a village some locals wave me over and I drink a beer with them. The Laotian are particularly fond of drinking with visitors. My pronunciation of Tham Xe Bang Fai is now accurate enough to generate excited gestures in the direction I am heading. Things are looking good. Then the third ford looms into view.... It's the resurgence river Xe Bang Fai.



Waiting for the moto ferry..

Moto ferry.....concentration required.

Crossing it requires use of a canoe moto ferry... I watch the locals ride their bikes into a dugout canoe ... this looks sketchy. My turn comes up. I cautiously drive the bike into the boat. Things almost go wrong as I accidently twist the throttle the wrong way and the bike starts to run away. The boatman is on it and grabs the brake. The boat heads off. Things start wobbling. The locals indicate that I should keep my feet up on the sides of the boat. As the boat leans I push my foot into the lean to keep the bike upright. The thought of the bike, me and my camera focuses my mind on the task. It's actually quite easy but is definitely one of those tasks that totally focuses ones mind. On the other side I just hit the throttle and drive off. This bit is fun. I pay the boatman and some locals start chatting to me and invite me for beer.

This is typical Laotian behavior. You are trying to go somewhere and they invite you for beer. Anyway we drive a short distance and pull in at a little wooden shack. Beers are produced in traditional fashion. A glass

circulates the group with each person pouring the next person's drink. We can't communicate very well as I don't speak Laos. One of the guys speaks some broken English. A couple of them seem to be teachers. Beers 2 and 3 are quickly introduced. Explain I can't stay long as I have to find accommodation. One of the guys says he will take me to a place I can stay. Another beer is consumed. This is Laos and these guys will sit here drinking all night. I get up to leave. I fill my petrol tank from the barrel of fuel the guy is selling and get ready to go. Two of the Laos guys get on bikes and we start to head off. As we drive away from the village my guides loose interest in me and return to their friends and drinks. I think they just wanted to get really drunk....

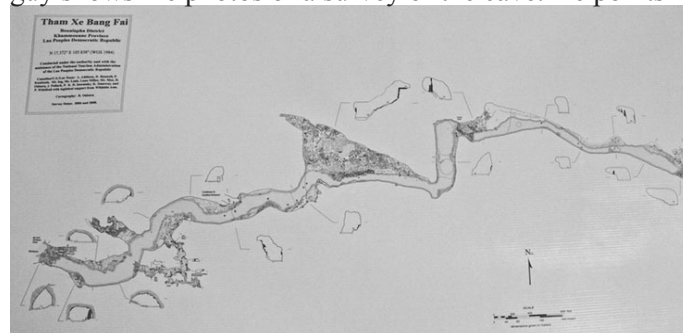
Half an hour down the road I reach a bigger, better-constructed dirt road and a largish village. This is, in theory, Boulaphala. My destination should be 14km away. Its now dark. I settle for an overpriced dingy room and eat some overpriced food. The hotel owner seems to confirm we are in Boulaphala. The shower comes from a bucket but is welcome after a long dusty day on the bike.

As I settle down for the night I study my maps to try and work out where I am in relation to the cave. I have one map that shows Boulaphala but not the cave. The second map doesn't show Boulaphala but does show the cave. I recognize a village name that I passed through. It's shown on both maps. This enable me to extrapolate Boulaphala's location on to the map showing the cave. The village of Ban Nong Pin and gateway to the cave should be close.

Wake up and grab a coffee from the hotel. The owner offers me breakfast. I gesture to the street pointing at her prices and saying expensive. She gives me 20k back..... then comes and claims it back. I head out to find some breakfast. I didn't pay any more for my coffee ...

After the overpriced room and food it's a relief to find some nice folk that don't overcharge the Farang. I enjoy a noodle soup and grab some fruit from the market. Return to the hotel and grab my moped. Time to find the cave.

I spot a local government office. Should be a reliable source. Two shell casings decorate the doorway. It's a hit. Turns out to be the department of natural resources. The guy shows me photos of a survey of the cave. He points



east. This agrees with my map.

Confirm with a moto rider, a Laos tractor and a village and cows that the route is correct. The cows didn't contribute to the info but upped the rusticity of the village. The rough dirt road snakes through fields and jungle. It traverses rickety bridges over wet season rivers. A flash of turquoise bird enhances rice fields flanked by jungle-clad hills.

Small but jagged karst start to appear, covered in



masses of tropical growth...It feels cavey.

Arrive at Ban Nong Pin...the 3rd sign in nearly 200km confirms my destination. Result...

I cruise into the village looking for some accommodation. A guy calls me over. In broken English he explains that they can take me to the cave tomorrow morning at 6am. He passes me on to a woman who shows me accommodation. I choose homestay over the village hostel. It's clear that they have got ready for tourists however there are just none here. It has been a bit of a mission to get here, probably too much for the average traveller. The journey has however been really good. The jungle and karst mountains surrounding me are fantastic. The scale of the limestone here is phenomenal, literally hundreds of kilometers of towering limestone. Regularly huge cave entrances appear high up in cliff faces. The barely explored karsts and virgin jungle that clings to them are delightful and amazing places with a lot of untouched land on view. The Laos villages and agriculture have a really nice rustic feel.

Anyway it's still early so I grab my bike and head out on a flat singletrack trail towards the cave. The huge mass of karst draws close to my left. Ahead of me I can see the river heading for cliffs. A little further and I reach a sign for the cave. Electricity cables leave their poles and burrow into the ground heading towards the cave. A foot trail disappears into the trees. Below me a herd of water buffalo ford the wide river. 30 minutes of foot trail in the jungle later I am at the huge entrance. It's a truly impressive sight and worth the effort. Feeling pleased with myself I head back to the village and lunch with the homestay family. After a quick post lunch siesta I head out to explore the village and surroundings.

A crowd of people are watching a guy with a chainsaw prepare some building stilts. I sit down and hang out. Its all friendly smile and we exchange tobacco. I struggle with the Laos tobacco, my coughing and spluttering providing entertainment for the villagers.



After hanging out at the timber yard for a bit I head out on moto for an explore. Pass a second small village then a wide plain. Low impenetrable karst to my right, barely penetrable jungle covered hills to the front and right. A shot and then 2 more.... I pause; it was close but probably just a hunter. I start to head back and I encounter a funeral procession. The coffin wrapped in white on a trailer pulled by a Lao tractor. I stop the bike and stand aside as it approaches. The villagers are friendly. They insist I take a picture so I oblige. There's a collection for the family so I donate some Laos change and a bit of English money, much to the amusement of the mourners. They head off



towards the jungle and I return to my homestay.

The evening is spent drinking a couple of beers with my homestay family. The beers cost 35 pence. Their home consists of a well-made wooden house on stilts. One large room serves as living quarters. A small second room houses the fire and kitchen. We have no language in common so I show them photos from my trip. Despite the lack of linguistic communication it's a nice evening with



both parties interested in the others life.

As we retire I notice that my host isn't sleeping with his wife. He is in the opposite corner. The reason for this soon becomes apparent. He snores like a trooper. Fortunately the family's lovely manner and hospitality prevent me from strangling him during the night.

6 am. A quick coffee in the kitchen and I head out to find my guide. To my relief they are up and getting together an inflatable canoe for the trip. We head up to the cave. The guides don't seem to be expert canoe inflators. They seem unable to disconnect the pump and get the cap back on quickly enough to prevent the air escaping. They gesture at the half inflated canoe seeking my approval. I reject it and help get it inflated correctly. Their expertise is further demonstrated when they suggest I board the canoe while it's resting on a sharp rock. This risks puncturing the boat so I reposition it and me and one of the guys climb aboard. I am at the front so I assume it's my responsibility to watch out for sharp submerged rocks that will puncture the raft. As we paddle up the enormous passage and the daylight fades I feel vulnerable. The guide's lack of expertise adds to this. The



amateur guides certainly add adventure to the excursion.

The daylight fades and our lights become our world. The Laos lights are actually quite good. They look like some sort of European MTB light. The organisation that sponsored the cave's development for tourism must have provided them. After 2 kms of spectacular passage we pull into the shore. A large rapid marks our turnaround point. We climb out and admire giant formations and the

2nd rapid Xe Bang Fai, Laos



continuing passage.

As we head back I feel a little disappointed. I am only seeing a fraction of the cave. For a normal human this would have been a satisfying excursion. I, however, could happily spend all week exploring this place. I persuade my guide to pull in again and clamber up a slope. A huge stal boss guards an enormous side passage. The passage is calling me. My guide has however remained with the boat. The Laos lights don't have a great battery life. He has already changed to the second battery. I have my own light and could stay all day. Without speaking Laos I won't be able to convince him to stay longer and share my light. This is supposed to be a tourist excursion not a full on caving trip. The stal boss looks like the one National geographic featured in their article on the cave. I decide that given the circumstances I am happy and rejoin the guide and boat.

Eventually daylight reappears and we exit the cave. Visiting this incredible cave has been a mission but well worth it.

Back at the homestay the family give me a blessing before I leave. This involves them tying some threads round my hand whilst resting my hand on a hardboiled egg and some sticky rice. I then eat the egg. The villagers here worship the forest and cave spirits. I decide to keep the band of threads till they fall off. This should provide forest spirit protection.

Heading back for Thakhek I pause for food as I rejoin the highway...a fascinating trip into Laos... The Him Nam No reserve is a mind-blowing mass of untamed karst and jungle. The lack of visitors gives a certain extra quality to the experience. The uncertainties give travel in this area a more exploratory feel. I was ticket no 5 on the boat trip into the cave... that would suggest I was the 5th tourist to visit. That justifies the effort. I have been welcomed and accommodated with exceptional warmth. The cave was awesome ...The fanatic in me wants more from the cave but that needs more time / a proper expedition, next year??



Frank Longwill

# ACCESS AND CONSERVATION NEWS

*by Stuart France*

There are a significant number of new faces on Cambrian Caving Council this year with five first-timers elected at the March AGM. Besides myself based in South Wales as Conservation Officer, Martyn Farr is now Chairman and needs no introduction. Fraser Stephens from Brynmawr Caving Club joins as Legal & Insurance Officer. He is an experienced charity professional having worked with Oxfam, MSF and Save The Children, and on the legal side of smaller charities too.

The North Wales team is Dave Tyson, Secretary of Wirral Caving Club, who is the new CCC Secretary and Ian Adams, Secretary of UCET, who is now Treasurer. Dave has an IT background and Ian works as an accountant. Both these clubs are active in the North Wales mining scene as well as caving up in the north generally.

The Cambrian Committee is completed by Richard Hill undertaking sterling work with training; Vince Alkins continuing with equipment and fixed aids; Brendan Marris in cave registry; and not forgetting web manager Barry Hill.

The guiding principle shared by the new team is to prioritise access. Indeed, Cambrian's own constitution says that access should be maintained and improved whenever the opportunity presents itself whilst encouraging cave conservation. This is similar to the way equivalent BCA documents are worded.

But there is a body of opinion that feels conservation has become the tail wagging the caving dog. Widely trodden floors in OFD 2 are cited as an example of bad stuff resulting from new access routes, but in reality this is an example (albeit quite understandable) of a management issue from decades ago in not placing tapes nor any other conservation measures besides a gate to prevent such damage. In recent times a counter-example is Llygad Llchwyr 2 which has ungated access. This was taped before becoming widely known about, and so there has been relatively little damage at all there. If we do not have any access then there is no need to think about cave conservation. In the absence of straightforward access all we will have is cave preservation where nobody gets to go anywhere and nothing new ever gets discovered.

Caving has been left behind in the Welsh Government review of the operation of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) in Wales. We have some catching up to do, and it has been left late in the day. Other national bodies like the British Mountaineering Council are well ahead of cavers in seeking wider definitions of CROW "Access Land" to suit rock climbing interests (see [www.thebmc.co.uk/openwales](http://www.thebmc.co.uk/openwales)) and the BMC has lobbied the Welsh Sport Minister at Gogarth, a 500ft sea cliff on Anglesey, since the coast is their main access improvement target. Dave leads this task for Cambrian, and both he and Stuart are meeting the BMC at Plas-y-Brenin in late April for their advice.

An interesting and thoughtful article by Tim Allen on how the CROW Act is and could be operated and interpreted appeared in the most recent edition of *Descent*. This follows up on an article at the end of 2013 looking at the proportion of caves in Yorkshire which are on CROW Access Land and the impact any change in CROW Act interpretation would have. A CROW thread has started up on UKcaving recently, and readers might like to follow up these information sources and the discussion.

The new Cambrian members from North Wales, along with everyone active there, are very keen to see the underground access agreement begun by the late Elsie Little with the former Forestry Commission Wales, which is now part of Natural Resources Wales, brought to fruition. North Wales has not been represented on Cambrian before. It is intended to hold the next Cambrian AGM in North Wales, again a first, and then take it to different regions in Wales plus the Forest of Dean to bring about a fairer geographic pattern for all those wishing to attend it.

Soon after starting as Cambrian Access/Conservation Officer, I found out that the draft FCW access agreement was unworkable and unworkable as it stood in mid-March. This is in the form of a lengthy, onerous and legalistic contract – the very opposite of a gentlemen's agreement. I have now re-drafted it to inject realism reflecting what cavers can actually deliver to further NRW's aims and to take administrative effort off their hands, but it is still a weighty formal contract.

Cambrian should get a response from NRW in early May to our redraft of 7 April, itself completed only four weeks after the Cambrian AGM. Having prepared the ground carefully with NRW's land agent, it is anticipated that NRW will accept this amended contract, but that significant risks will remain in it. This brings Cambrian to consider placing this contract inside a 'legal wrapper' to minimise personal liability.

This wrapper could be a non-profit company limited by guarantee which is a similar legal device to the Charterhouse Caving Company, Cambrian Mines Trust, Welsh Mines Preservation Society, Mountain Bothies Association, and other clubs who run property or events like winch meets. This limits operator liability in the event that insurance fails to cover the eventualities. How



Cambrian member clubs can participate in an underground access management company, should they not wish to distance themselves fully from whatever liability will nevertheless remain, is an open question and I would like to receive ideas please during May from member clubs.

You might think there is little risk of things going so badly wrong as to be sued. But in the present climate opportunistic claimants are a commodity for some legal firms, and courts will bend over backwards to assist them. The summons is only the start of a long and unpleasant process that is very costly in money and stress even if you win outright or just end up goring your opponent significantly. So we must recognize and manage our risks as an access control body, and not stick our heads in the sand concerning civil law as practiced today.

The NRW access contract has involved me in holding meetings, much research and negotiation since the March AGM. Besides the NRW land agent, I have also met with Outdoor Education Providers (OEPs) in North Wales who use a few mines for professionally-led visits, with some mining history bodies in Ceredigion, and discussions with key people in organisations that operate inside limited-guarantee companies on how best to do that.

The dozen or so underground sites on NRW's initial list to be authorised for caver access now includes Parc Lead Mine in the Gwydyr Forest, the Rhiwbach slate mine at Penmachno along with a couple of other smaller mines in the north. In mid-Wales there are some other large and interesting slate mines included near Corris and Abergynolwyn. The most southerly site will be the Roman Lead Mines at Draethen. This site list is a Schedule to the main contract and so can easily be amended later.

All of these sites will need visits and assessments leading to site management plans for each location being agreed with NRW. We will need to make inspections from time to time also and keep written records. I need volunteers to help with work on the ground please, in a sort of adopt-a-cave-or-mine-in-our-area scheme. We also need understanding and trust between OEPs and cavers since the former may leave the few sites that they regularly visit rigged with their own ropes and other private equipment for their clients' use.

I know clubs will be disappointed with this ongoing delay, but this is because the contract that I inherited was definitely not 'almost on the point of signing' as some people thought. But in the long run things should turn out for the best since we should now create a proper legal framework for operating access control, and it will be an appropriate system for all Cambrian's future access agreements.

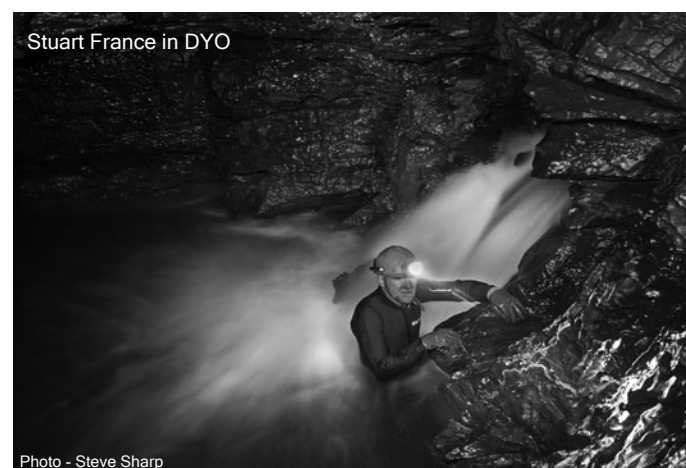
The NRW work has consumed almost all my efforts over

the past six weeks in this new post and I hope the NRW jigsaw will be almost organised, if not all the pieces locked together, in two months time when there will be another newsletter.

The other matter I have dealt with at short notice is Section 2 of the A465 dualling scheme, which is the Clydach Gorge section. This went to Public Inquiry. Some late-breaking Alternative Proposals (APs) emerged there, the most significant of which was AP5 which basically is a proposal not to dual the gorge at all. Under AP5 the section from Gilwern Saleyard to Brynmawr would remain 3-lane as it is now. On your behalf I sent a letter setting out a case of why AP5 should be adopted on conservation and cost grounds, and also undermining the evidence base for the RP (the government's Recommended Proposal) which is for a full dual carriageway.

As to other landowners, I am trying to open a dialogue with Welsh Water, where a paper licence application for Ogof Carno access was said to have been submitted during 2013 by the former Cambrian officers, but there is no paperwork at all in the files that I have inherited nor any trail of negotiations. Nothing has seemingly ever been documented either for other sites at which Cambrian has had an operational interest, including Green Bridge Cave and Ogof Capel and some digs on forestry land. So there is catching up to do across the board, not just on CROW. Your committee will endeavour in the coming months to deliver the best possible outcomes for all of these so cavers and mine explorers can more freely pursue their interests.

All of the Cambrian officers would like to receive feedback, aspirations and inspirations from member clubs and individuals. For me, my [ccc@linetop.co.uk](mailto:ccc@linetop.co.uk) email address is best, but since access-conservation issues are complex it might be better to speak or meet up. The best time to reach me at home is 8-10pm on 01874 730527 or try 07740 871845. Both of these numbers take messages, so leave clear details if you would like me to call you at a more convenient time.



Stuart France in DYO

Photo - Steve Sharp

# Reservoir Hole March/April.

by Nick Chipchase

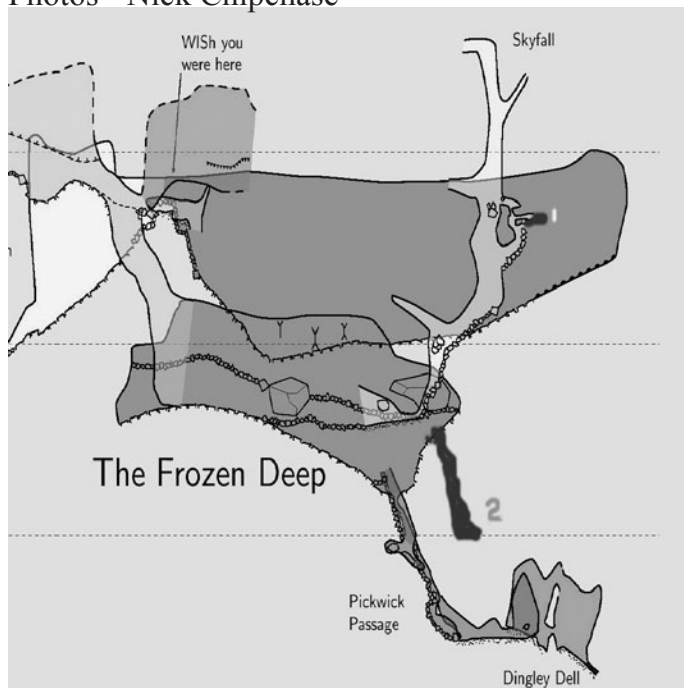
There have been five digging trips since the last report with attention centered at Magic Smoke Dig and Skyfall. MSD is now about ten metres down below the skip pulley, placing the bottom some fifteen metres above sump level. Digging is still within the silt but lately some bigger boulders have been encountered. The chamber wall continues to bell outwards. The dig penetrates ever deeper into the history of The Frozen Deep. This would encompass at least two glaciations and three inter glacial periods. The silt was probably deposited in a phreatic phase when the chamber was below the water table.

Skyfall continues to look promising with the stalagmite overlying mud and boulders. Both digs present problems as MSD now needs a team of three or more and Skyfall more in the way of physical attrition. At least there are no disposal problems at MSD.

The winter months saw both a stal. dating survey and a biology survey. Both came up with interesting preliminary results. Further work needs to be done on the dating and a nice layered piece of stal. was removed from Skyfall for Joyce and Don to collect when next in the UK. Some work has also continued at The Silo which continues to look "interesting".

A number of visitor's trips have taken place since April 1st. I have taken one, making sure I took some photos of my group to post up on Facebook. I think my group were fairly impressed with the cave.

Photos - Nick Chipchase



*Breaking boulders in MSD*



*Peter Glanvill a long way down in Magic Smoke Dig*



*My visitors group in The Frozen Deep*

# OGOF CRAIG A'R FFYNNON by Stuart France

Many more breeze-block size rocks have fallen on to the cone of debris just below the cave entrance over the winter. These rocks may have come from the land above the cave, but those near the lip of the entrance seem to have vanished and perhaps someone has just chucked them down. My photos below do not seem to show much else has changed near the cave entrance itself. Can you spot any differences? Nevertheless, MLCMAC advises against access at the moment.



*Rich and Woody in OCAF entrance*  
Photo - Matt Emmett

Talk to Richard Dewsnap about breeze blocks landing on helmets. He was hit on the head by one recently in a cave dig which smashed up his helmet and the foam cradle inside it. No damage to the owner, but a new helmet necessitated. Richard says he was quite relieved to have got hit on the head because the rock would have broken his arm or shoulder had it dropped a few inches to either side. So that's alright then. Old helmet will be exhibited at Whitewalls in due course. Other headbangers in the club should not take this as a challenge to their own ingenuity.

## Extracts from the Forum

*Aggy Overdue Party Wednesday 23rd April 2014*

*We had a call out at approx. 11pm on Tuesday 22nd April, 9 students from Leeds University overdue on an Inner Circle trip. Two students were able to return to the surface at approx. 2am and let us know that the remaining 7 in the party had become exhausted at the far end of Southern Streamway after missing the turning to Main Passage and ending up in Southern Stream Passage, it turned out that they were at the top of the climbs into Biza passage. A team was dispatched underground 3am, followed by another team later.*

*All cavers were returned to the surface by 16.30 Wednesday 23rd. All are well after some rest.*

*The Whitewalls rescue store was critical in getting an efficient response to the initial call out.*

# CAE COCH SULPHUR

This is one of the underground sites on the NRW access agreement being negotiated by Cambrian Caving Council. It is only a small mine, and so one unlikely to have been visited by many CSS members, but it is an interesting and odd place, well worth a visit if you are in North Wales after the access scheme is up and running.

The mine is on the west side of the Conwy valley just north of the village of Trefriw at grid ref SH775653 above the Trefriw Wells Spa Hotel. A sketch plan of the mine at 1:2,500 is available on the [aditnow.co.uk](http://aditnow.co.uk) website. The mine is perhaps Roman in origin and is referred to in 1607 documents of the then landowner. As is typical of the area, the mine waxed and waned in its economic fortunes with various mine companies being formed and liquidated. Output peaked in the 19th century, and production ended in 1942. The mine's history is at the [subbrit.org.uk](http://subbrit.org.uk) website.

The main entrance is on a steep escarpment, closer to the top than the bottom, but harder to find from the top after parking at the cattle grid between Rhibo farm and Blaen-y-Wern cottage on a narrow tarmac road high above and north of Trefriw. From the bottom, park near the obvious locked forestry road entrance 200m north of the Spa Hotel. Go up a couple of zigzags on forest road then left on a more level forest road for 500m. Two stone walls appear on the right which are the side walls of a very large incline that was once used to lower ore but mainly building stone from a large quarry which is out of sight towards the top of the escarpment.

Having climbed steeply up to the ruined winding house at the top of the large incline, turn right and follow a tramway to the mine entrance which looks a bit like the Little Neath River Cave resurgence, with long dangling creepers and a jungle feeling, but of course no water emerges here hardly. You can now just walk straight into the colourful main mine chambers - no crawling. Well above the main mine here, on more level private ground, are some other trial adits not explored by the author.

## *Cae Coch - Main Entrance*



## *Winding gear at old incline*

Conservation measures like taping will be needed before the mine can be made available for general visits. There are colourful and vulnerable formations including iridescent pools with rainbow coloured crust, bright yellow flowstone-like floors which is actually a soft material, straws with a rubbery texture that bends - known as snottites. At present, in theory, mine access is prohibited by forestry

# ***MINE*** by Stuart France



Photos - Stuart France



*Winding gear at top of new incline*

byelaws, although it is clear from reports on the web, that the mine is occasionally visited and explorers have even posted some photos of themselves in action.

Back at the winding house at the top of the incline, you can cross a small stream beside a ruined bridge and continue along the tram road south into the stone quarry. Here are more

old mine buildings, including a ruined room with fireplace, former tool store, explosives magazine, railway lines almost completely covered now in creepers, and upturned wagons quietly rusting away. Back at the bottom of the incline is a tower-shaped building that was the electricity substation for the incline in its final years. There is a lower mine entrance, more of a small resurgence, near to the bottom forestry road where red-coloured water emerges from a pool and a low rock slit. Perhaps this issue gave rise to the name Cae Coch which means Red Field.

*Send in your trip report with pictures, the CSS Journal is a great place to tell your story. Old or new we'd love to read about it.*

The UK's National Caving Conference  
BCRA Leek High School Staffordshire  
**Hidden Earth 2014**  
26-28 September  
Photo:- Steve Sharp  
The Waterfalls ~ Lower Main Stream passage  
Agen Allwedd  
[www.hidden-earth.org.uk](http://www.hidden-earth.org.uk)

# *Charterhouse.....The cold wet version*

## *by Gary Kiely*

My caving over the last couple of years has been sporadic... as I've been doing other things, so a new year promise to myself to get underground more, meant I would have to badger Sharpie for a Sunday trip in Mendip. I figured as newsletter editor he could be easily bribed with a trip report.

I have always had the inclination that the big Welsh caves were Saturday trips and something on Mendip was good for a Sunday. I can only blame Mr John Cooper for instilling this in my mind as I have spent so many happy Sundays in various parts of Swildon's with him. However I forgot one vital element of Mendip caving .....Knarleyness.

It was a cold January morning, and the weeks leading up to the trip had been soggy to say the least. I was already warming up my hands under my armpits before we got to the Charterhouse entrance. Steve went in first, leaving me in charge of the door which I somehow managed to shut on one of my fingers. I could feel the bruise growing and growing so I decided to keep my gloves on and not look at it, I don't like blood, especially if it's mine.

The first rift took me by surprise, I had thought that Steve had made a meal out of it and was keen for him to clear it, only for me to make a meal of it with desert, coffee and mints. We took a look at the old original chamber and came back out and through the little gate, a little squeezey but nothing to panic about. After a short while it was exit stage right and we instantly transformed from Gullivers to Hobbits in The Citadel, which was uncannily like GB Main Chamber. We had a slow mooch around. The chamber is generally very impressive with the roar of the stream reverberating on every glistening surface. We approached the bottom of the chamber and got back to normal Mendip stance, of stooping and crawling. Shortly after we arrived at a boulder choke that went on and on and on. I believe this had been completely dug out and cemented up for stabilisation. I lost count of how many times I wondered if the people who dug this choke had time for the things of the brighter world that we take for granted, like day jobs, family, and pets. It must have been a life's dedication / obsession / addiction. Things started going downhill dramatically, both in depth and conversation. Why is it that the most bizarre conversations happen underground? Is it the thought that nobody can hear you scream? Or worryingly is it the people I choose to cave with.... I digress!

The caving was pleasant if not a bit soggy and after a while I forgot how deep I was going and thought it was quite easy. The good caving angel on my shoulder woke up and whispered in my ear "remember how easy this is going down, it will not be so for the home journey". I will not hide the fact that I am not the caver I used to be, and my time on the bright side has taught me caution and to listen to my gut and my caving angel. I was not tired at this point but I suppose I foresaw that this cave could be a bastard to get out of if you were tired. I mentioned to Steve that this was a great trip and even if I turned around now it would still have been a great trip. If you have ever caved with Sharpie you will know he is not attuned to such subtleties. "We're nearly



at the Narrows, and the cave changes dramatically from here in you will love it" was not the answer I was hoping for, in fact it was probably not even related to anything I had said earlier. .. Oh well.... We got to the Narrows and Steve worked his way through slowly but steady. I started to make my way through and was struggling to say the least. As I was lying in the base of the rift using my feet before me for feeling out the Gary sized parts of the rift, the water was quickly building up around my face and pouring down my neck. Thankfully I came to a wider, taller section, enough to stand and turn around. That was it, I was done, I shouted to Steve who was now out of the Narrows, to tell him I was turning round. He crawled back in to the Narrows and shouted "it's shorter to finish the crawl than to go back and you've done the worst bit" So I buried myself in the base of the rift and timed my breathing out, to match with my big pushes (sounds like a maternity ward) and finally got out. I turned back and looked at the rift in disgust and uttered something like "that was just mean".

Steve was sorting out the ladder for the pitch as I tried to do a Davina work out for warm up exercises without knocking Steve head first down the pitch. Steve led the way down the pitch, it was very lively and I was glad to be down and out of the water and able to stomp on a bit. It is true that the character of the cave changes at this pitch. Most of the rock had some form of calcite on it, with colours from deep orange to glistening white at the Frozen Cascade. It was quality stream way until it rudely became

Dragon Pitch



Photo - Pete Hann

The Timeline



Photo - Pete Hann

Portal Pool



Photo - Pete Hann

narrower and lower and forced us into a low narrow duck with about 4 inches of airspace oh and a dog leg in the middle .... Just for fun! Steve had laid in the water just before this convincing himself that this was the right way. I waited and prayed that he wouldn't go through.

No such luck, I had to brave the muddy water and follow through in Steve's wake. In the middle of this duck all I thought was I want some stomping passage to race through and warm up. I got a muddy, stooey, slippery passage before it opened up again into proper stream way and ended up in the sump pool. We took a wander up an inclined side passage where there was lots of pipework and sandbags and followed the left hand wall and a cascading flowstone road to bring us to the top of the Frozen Cascade. This reminded me of parts of Craig a Ffynnon.

It was good to get a sense of direction from here. We returned to the junction with all the sandbags and pipework and Steve got on his belly and slithered along the passage to Portal Pool. I kept guard at the junction to make sure no cave dwellers stole our lunch. A temporary bit of confusion for Steve as he thought he should be able to crawl through it, thinking that Portal Pool was much further on. When we returned to the main stream way we started the syphon going which is a very clever contraption. The moment the water came out of the pipe the air was filled with the stench of rotten eggs, so pungent was the smell that no human could have produced that..... Even Steve Sharp!

We started making our way back and made fairly good speed as I was getting chilly, I think it's a myth that fat is a good insulator because today it wasn't working. We scooted up the ladder and

I left Steve to pull up the ladder and sort it all out. I realised I was not being my most helpful today as I never helped with the rigging or de rigging of the ladder or the carrying of the bag, but I had the cold grumpies so that was that. Steve went through the Narrows and I followed, It seemed a bit easier on the way out and I was happier to be done with the main hurdle for me. I was looking forward to the climb out through the choke. I am sure the survey shows this wrong, it felt like a jagged spiral staircase that goes about five stories but it got my heart rate up and I was thankful for that.

Citadel... tick, Splatter Chamber ...tick and then turned left into snugness again and felt nearer to God, the pearly gates were in sight and my head said "its ok son you're out". But NO! ..... while we were in the cave some bugger came in in and added 2 inches of cement to the inside of the tube, because I know I did not eat 15 mars bars and 12 large pork pies while I was down there!! No just one fruit loaf that said low fat all over the packet!! God only knows what I did wrong in that tube but it was tighter than the Narrows, it was actually hurting my rib cage and restricting my breathing. Steve found my grunting and whinging very amusing as he headed out the final rift. Had I managed to catch him in the rift he would have finished the cave minus a wellie. Daylight was a welcome site but the cold was ready to embrace me when we got out. I was feeling pleased with myself for the trip I had done until back at Steve's place when he showed me how little of the cave we actually did. Charterhouse and I have unfinished business. I'll be back.

# *A Weekend Trip in the*



Slaughter Stream Cave - HSCC Group photo at end of Coal Seam Passage

We camped this time at a small site – Heather Dean, Maryland, Nr. Trelleck not too far from Monmouth NP25 4QN the site has one loo and one hot shower and is pretty quiet. The weather forecast was showers with sunny periods but wetter on Sunday. Susie & I arrived at about 8pm and we put our tent up just managing this before it got too dark. Saturday we all (Phil, Sue, Dave, Ros, Ralph, Gavin, Susie & myself) went to Slaughter Stream Cave and we parked on the verge by the field gate and got changed with some Duke of Edinburgh Award hiking youngsters watching us interestingly. Once kitted up we walked down the sloping field, past the ancient hay turning machine which has been there for donkey's years to the Big Sink entrance which was pretty dry. After unlocking the gate we descended down the three short fixed ladders and then one at a time down the long fixed ladder made from bolted together cable ladder rack into Mouse Aven. There is then a crawl through a scaffolded choke, which has been repaired after a collapse there about 3 years ago. Then there is a short 2m climb

down followed by a 3.5 m abseil (or ladder off the P hanger) into Balcony Chamber where you can all gather. This is at the top of the 12 metre (10m ladder required) pitch or there is a parallel SRT pitch. Once we were all safely down this lovely pitch there is some zig zag rift passage and a little 1.5m climb up and down before dropping into the water of main stream passage at Cross Junction. We went up stream for a little bit then decided to go down stream towards Sump 1 which is on the left; just before this on the right there is the beginning of a sandy/muddy crawl into some dry passage called the Dryslade Series. After a fair distance of crawling and walking there is a right fork and then shortly afterwards a right turn up into Coal Seam Passage, a familiar route to us. Next time we may fork left and visit Kuwait Passage with its helictites a few 1000 metres the other way we think! Coal Stream Passage is mostly walking passage and has some nice whirlpool holes which are quite fun for the shorter cavers to climb out of. At the end of this we climb up and pop out into a cross rift passage (see group



# *Forest of Dean* by Andy Watson 26th & 27th April 2014

Photos-Andy Watson



Slaughter Stream Cave - HSCC Gavin past the 3 Deserts section



Clearwell Caves FoD formation and deads

photo) from here you turn left and shortly climb up into a larger passage called The Chunnel. Going left and then right you can go through the three Deserts low sandy crawls with lovely beach ripple sandy formations that are taped off, this passage runs for over 1000m (see photo of Gavin). At a point around 360m after the Deserts the passage splits in an area of breakdown and left leads to the crystallised broken down dog's skeleton and right leads to a large chamber and passage [Susie put her head into this crawl but then David and myself recognised the left route as being where we went last time – something for next visit Dave!]. We turned around a short distance after the dog's skeleton and headed back to the Chunnel. We briefly visited some of Kiln Passage and then continued along the Chunnel past the other animal bones in the dry Graveyard Passage which continues past some stalagmite formations known as the Gnome Garden. By following this over the first active stream way (this downstream route is taped and we think it leads to the main stream waterfall pitch of some 10-12metres) and to the next bit of

stream it is possible to carefully free climb down albeit whilst getting wet down to the flat floor of the aven and follow the stream back through some wet crawls to Cross Junction then back out of the cave via the 12m pitch, one awkward 3.5 metre climb (always use life line here as an uncontrolled fall off is likely to be serious here and you could be very unlucky and fall even further down the 12m pitch too!). Up the four fixed ladders from Mouse Aven and out into sunshine some four and half hours after entering the cave system. A really good trip; thanks to Dave & Phil. On Sunday Susie and I visited Clearwell Caves near Coleford which is The Royal Forrest of Dean's Iron Mining Museum which is well worth a visit if you are in the area.

*Andy Watson MNRC/CSS/HSCC*

## CSS Meets List 2014- 2015

This year's Meets List includes details of other events that CSS members may wish to participate in. Apart from Hidden Earth, rescue practices held by SMWCRT, and the NAMHO conference and associated field trips are listed as members may be interested in these events.

17/5 - **SMWCRT Rescue Practice**  
at Ogof Draenen.

24/5 - **Late May Bank Holiday.**  
Cwmystwyth Mines. Drive over from Whitewalls to explore this fascinating mine complex which has worked lead, copper and zinc during its lifetime. Organiser: Paul Tarrant

13/6 - **Camping on Gower.**  
A weekend of walking, and exploration of some of Gower's caves. Last time we stayed at an excellent campsite near Oxwich Bay and we went kayaking. Maybe we will see Gonzo reprise his skills with the fishing rod!  
Organiser: Paul Tarrant

21/6 - **Summer BBQ at Whitewalls.**  
NB This date has been brought forward due to the Glastonbury Festival and an event in the Forest of Dean clashing with the traditional weekend for the BBQ.

19/7 - **CSS Mendip BBQ.**  
Staying at the Shepton Mallet hut at Priddy. Caves to be confirmed. Jacky and Lee have



The Antlers - Photo-Alison Moody

*Lee Hawkswell celebrates his 50th Birthday in Daren Cilau.*

*By Paul Tarrant-Meets Secretary*

kindly offered to organise the food.

25/7 - **NAMHO Conference**  
Bangor University. Mine exploration seminars with field trips to North Wales mines.

23/8 - **August Bank Holiday at Whitewalls.**  
Trips to DYO and OFD.

13/9 - **North Wales walking and mine exploration.**  
Limited places available at Stuart France's mountaineering hut. Camping available nearby. Contact Stuart for details.

26/9 - **Hidden Earth Leek.**

4/10 - **SMWCRT rescue practice** 'Wargames' at Penwyllt.

1/11 - **Bonfire Party at Whitewalls.**  
Bats and fireworks.

6/12 - **Curry evening.**  
Whitewalls. Caving in the local caves or a trip over to OFD to participate in the SMWCRT rescue practice in OFD.

24/1/15- **Annual Dinner**  
and AGM on the Sunday

21/2/15 - **Whisky Evening**

## *CNWC - Daren Cilau*

*By John Cooper*

Saturday 22nd March 2014. Lee Hawkswell's birthday trip. John Cooper, Lee Hawkswell, Gary Jones, Ali Moody, Duncan Price, Mike Read, Chris Seal, John Stevens, Mandy and Matt Voysey. With CS arriving a little late the first 6 set off into the cave at 10.30 and waited about 20 minutes in Busman's for the other 4. All progressed together as far as the Antlers before the Voysey's detoured through Urchin Oxbow whilst the rest went directly to the Kitchen. From Urchin Oxbow MR and JS used Man in the Roof to reach the Big Chamber Nowhere Near the Entrance whilst the rest went up Epocalypse. The Voysey's then detoured to Valentine's Chamber to collect a couple of bags of rubbish whilst the rest went directly along Jigsaw Passage to the old cave and the entrance crawl. Various bags/containers of rubbish were portered out through the entrance crawl to exit after a 4½ / 5 hour trip. A very pleasant day out.

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## Cottage Bookings

09/05/2014 Orpheus CC ( 6 bunks)  
06/06/2014 Gay Outdoor CCG (6 bunks)  
05/09/2014 York CC (4 bunks)  
17/10/2014 Bristol EC ( 10 bunks)



Tired and exhausted! - Daren Cilau exit - Photo Alison Moody



*Happy 50th Birthday  
To Lee Hawkswell*

*Photography - Alison Moody*

