

MCG NEWS

AUGUST 1984 No.172

NEWSLETTER OF THE MENDIP CAVING GROUP

MCG - Abroad at Elphin

by Ian McKechnie

At the 1983 AGM our newly-elected Meet Secretary asked for suggestions for the forthcoming programme. "Inchnadamph" said an anonymous voice in a back row. Geoff Barton duly tried to write that down. History does not record whether he succeeded with his first job.

And so it came about, that Good Friday afternoon 21st April 1984, that the MCG arrived at Elphin.

'The MCG', for the purposes of this article, comprise (? compromised, comprisoned) the Meet Secretary (still en-nobled in office), Roy Kempston, Dik Houseago, John and Helen Miriam, and me.

'Elphin', for those not familiar with the NW Scottish district of Assynt, is a small village about 10 miles of Ullapool, in which may be found the headquarters of the Grampian Speleological Group.

'Scottish weather', for the illumination of those who do not regularly

encounter it, was present in large quantities that first night: high winds and heavy rain. It seemed the hut must blow away before morning.

It didn't. What's more the weather had improved a little by Saturday afternoon when GB, IM, RK and DH took a walk up Stac Pollaidh (that's Stac Polly to me and you).

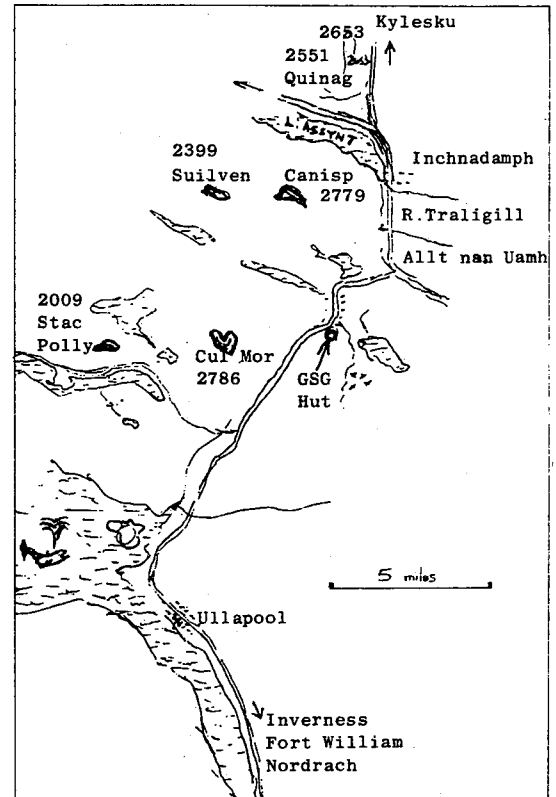
From the car-park beside Loch Lurgain, a path leads across rough grass and heather, around the back of this small but impressive sandstone outcrop. The summit ridge is reached by a scramble to a col. The route along the ridge wanders past pinnacles and pillars of rock, made more eerie that day by everchanging sheets of mist and drizzle alternating with sunshine.

Sitting down that evening with "Caves of Scotland", published by that gentleman-caver Tony Oldham, we decided to spend our next day (Sunday 23rd) exploring the major caves of the Elphin basin. GB, IM, RK, JM and DH left the hut at about 1.30pm, up the hill behind Elphin, with caving gear packed in rucsacks. This avoided a 1km walk over the moor in wet-suits. The caves are on two main streamways, which appear from the map as if they must join underground.

Uamh Pol Eoghainn sinks into a small stream through a tight rift, with a 15ft climb down the waterfall into a rocky chamber. To the left of a large, unstable, vertical flake, we climbed down two dry rifts, totalling about 30ft, to rejoin a small water flow. Following this for about 20ft brought us to the main stream again, with a murky sump to the right and a noisy cascade to the left.

Returning to the foot of the entrance pitch, IM went behind the waterfall to follow the stream down two vertical showerbaths of about 20ft each. In a small chamber at the bottom, the waterfall neatly filled a narrow letter-box, which IM found the courage to fight through only because GB's lamp was the other side. This then led to the noisy cascade found previously, and gave an alternative route for the return to the surface.

Walking down the surface stream for about 300m, finds another sink, in an 'unnamed cave'. DH disappeared down this rabbit hole of an entrance - and rapidly re-emerged feet first, ejecting one GB who was following him. "Scotland Underground", a timely new publication by Grampian-member Alan Jeffreys,



awards this cave a length of 20ft, so IM went down and removed rocks and gravel from the floor to reach a point within sight of the sump, and a good 19ft 11.75 inches from the entrance. [Ed: contributors please note, this word-processor doesn't believe in fractions.]

Over the moors again, for just 100m, to look for a "large boat-shaped depression". Depressions varying in shape from HMS Invincible to an SAS inflatable were examined, and eventually we found the entrance to Elphin Hole in the bottom of a badly-crushed coracle.

A muddy hole with delicately suspended rocks was carefully bypassed into a 25ft climb down a soft, crumbling rift, and into a rocky streamway. This was dark and peaty, and blocked in places with piles of large, freshly-fallen boulders. After about 150ft, the stream disappeared into a too-tight squeeze, and we climbed up and into a banged high-level bypass. Beyond this, the cave soon ended in a frothy sump. Upwards was a tight, muddy, high-level

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bedding plane which IM attempted to penetrate, and succeeded only in getting half-way back to the main passage before giving up. Then back to the surface, and five mins. sun-bathing before the rest of the party emerged.

The final cave of the day was another 100m down the now-dry stream-bed to another, lengthier stream, which was followed for about 200m to its sink. This is a large, roony cavern in the hillside, Uamh an Tartair. After the

wide entrance tunnel, the streamway narrows down to a succession of small, wet chambers for about 100ft, then opens suddenly into a vast, day-lit depression known as Uamh Mor (Big Hole)

Several slippery climbs led to other chambers just below the surface. At the lower end, the stream disappeared into a deeply resonating cavity - about 0.5Hz. Despite this body-shaking roar, we went in to find a 15ft cascade which was traversed to rejoin the stream further down. The stream soon ended in a sump, the walls of which were lined with fresh foam to a height of 20ft - a sign of recent high water! We sprayed down the face to remove the foam, then climbed over the top into another foamy terminal passage. IM tried unsuccessfully to climb over this one, then GB remembered the survey. This sump was in fact a 30ft crawl, followed by a 20ft pitch, which sometimes sumps! Oh well, we had done the best we could, and after convincing ourselves that the water level was falling, we returned to the surface, to wash down our gear and ourselves in a deep pool, and dry off in the evening sun.

Canisp and Suilven are two peaks worthy of a visit. Unless you are fitter than we, however, I wouldn't recommend them both in one day starting from Elphin. We did, and returned to the hut at 10.30pm, happy but weary. Quinag, further north, gave us a relatively easy day out, with pleasant views over the new Kylesku bridge, and south to Canisp, Suilven, Cul Mor and Stac Pollaidh.



MFET SECRETARY IN THE 'ELPHIN' POSITION

By Thursday 26th, we were feeling pangs of guilt about our neglect of the caving scene. There were two more areas to choose from, both near Inchnadamph: Traligill and Allt nan Uamh. We chose Allt nan Uamh, and planned to visit the two main caves in this valley.

About 1 hour's walk from the road, then a climb up a large outcrop on the right of the valley, led to four or five short bone-caves, which we investigated briefly. Then a half-mile walk up a side valley to the right, brought us into a dry, peaty stream-bed, and a deep, rocky depression forming the entrance to Uamh an Claonite. A tight boulder ruckle led down to a clear, strong stream.

Claonite is described in "Scotland Underground" as "the most sporting stream cave in Scotland". This is easy to believe. It provides in its one mile of passages a wide variety of caving, both wet and dry. Following the stream from the entrance, the floor soon drops away to an impressive 15ft cascade, with a deep pool below. The passage opened into large boulder-strewn caverns, before closing down again to sump 1.

Through up to 100ft long, sump 1 has a bypass, a "low aqueous creep over boulders leading to a flat-out sloping crawl in water". This itself can sump in wet conditions, but only came up to nose-level on our visit. We emerged from the crawl into one of a network of

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dome-roofed chambers, connected by low arches, mirrored in a floor of clear water. A higher chamber to the right, known as the igloo for its shape, marked the entrance to the dry series, while ahead the stream continued through Claonite 2.

A long, gentle streamway reminiscent of Swildons 2 led to a free-climbable 8ft cascade, and two 10ft waterfalls, then the aptly-named cavity wall rift, a high, narrow passage with black limestone to the left, light to the right. This ended in a water rift, descending steeply for 30ft to more level streamway, and eventually sump 2.

Ascending to the right into dry, high level, banded bedding planes, led eventually to sump 3, where a waterproof survey was attached to the line with clothes-pegs. Thoughtful, are the GSG. Retracing our steps to the high point of the passage, a steep, muddy crawl led up to the left into East Block series. About 30 minutes of convoluted crawling and squeezing was rewarded with a large, decorated chamber, leading on to a maze of stooping passages, sand-floored, and finally to the infinitely improbable Infinite Improbability Inlet.

A swift return brought us to daylight after 4hrs underground. Our Surface Support Party, Helen Miriam, was still writing outside, and bashfully averted her eyes as we threw off our clothes to soak up the warm evening sun.

It was too late to do any more caves, so after a pleasant walk back down the valley, we felt obliged to visit the Inchnadamph Hotel to fill the water-containers, a necessary chore when staying at the GSG hut. (Of course we

had at least a pint while they were filling.)

Friday, our last day in Assynt, was the hottest yet, and we had promised to take Helen up a mountain. Cul Mor was the closest to the hut, and at 2786ft just about counts as a mountain, so by lunch-time we were sun-bathing on the summit, enjoying the delightful views available from all the summits in this area, and suffering the less delightful view of an overheated GB in rucsack and underpants.

Friday evening we enjoyed hospitality on an estate some 40 miles drive away (though only about 20 miles had we chosen to walk). After a tour of the estate, in the back of a pick-up truck, we dined off the brothers of the salmon and deer we had been watching 30 minutes earlier. Then, next morning, away to Skye for our second week.

Assynt is to be recommended for a holiday, both for the walking and the caving. It is a long way to go for less than a week, but there is plenty to do if you do stay for a week or more. We could easily have spent another two or three days' good caving in the Allt nan Uamh and Traligill valleys. Ben Mor Assynt, the only nearby 'Munroe' over 3000ft, looked very tempting, too.

The Grampian hut is adequate though basic (car essential, since all water has to be carried at least 1 mile), but would have been rather less attractive in bad weather. (But then perhaps we are pampered on Mendip.) A wet suit is essential in all the caves we visited, even in relatively dry conditions. A good week, good food thanks to Helen, good camping, interesting caving, and some superb walking.