

Mendip Caving Group

NEWS

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BITS FROM THE BURREN - 1992

by Tony Knibbs

CULLAUN TWO - 13th JULY

The weather having decided to remain fair, we set about our first caving trip of the holiday. Cullaun Two had been selected on the basis of not being notably flood-prone, technically straightforward yet offering a route diversion. A stream passage of 1300m forms the backbone of the system with a high level alternative offering a more sporting trip to the sump. Geoff Beale, Pat Beale and Pete Harvey set off down the stream passage while Tony and Denise Knibbs, Martin and Yvonne Rowe and Joan Goddard took the high level option which is described here.

We entered the system by the 3m drop into C2 (UBSS reference) sink and briefly followed the main passage for 10m, turning sharp right along a crawl at floor level. Now heading towards C2A entrance, a narrower crawl - Year Passage - was followed to the left before reaching C2A. The crawl continued at uncomfortable dimensions for what seemed like forever, but was only 250m really, and progress was made in a dense, sweaty fog as the gentle air current overtook us. Things eventually became easier and a further 200m of rift passage brought us to a 2m drop into the main streamway.

We headed upstream for 30m to reach Dome Chamber and climbed up a few metres to the right in search of the Old Streamway. We eventually located the Old Streamway, after a couple of false starts, which offered a mix of low stooping over a boot-trapping floor trench, easy walking, or hands-and-knees crawling. After some 600m a steeply sloping descent of 3m brought us down to the Main Streamway near Pool Chamber. The high stream rift now provided easy going with interesting formations - especially on the flat roof - and prominent chert ledges at stream level. About 300m ahead a noisy waterfall announced a wet 10m rope pitch and a further 50m reached the froth-covered pool of Sump One.

The return to the surface was a restful affair, Main Streamway continuing as a generously dimensioned high rift almost as far as the entrance. Of all the decorative calcite, the Bloody Guts formation - a red, cream and grey monstrosity - evoked most comment. We surfaced after a trip of four hours.

DOOLIN CAVE (through trip) - 15th JULY

Having obtained permission at St. Catherine's Farm, a party of seven (PB was left in charge of the world in general) crawled into ST. CATHERINE'S ONE from the shakehole entrance. Some 50m on hands and knees and a short squeeze brought us slowly into roomier passage, eventually following a small stream augmented by two inlets on the left. Roomy passage with well-marked incised bedding along the walls offered quick progress, with only occasional stooping, to Beautiful Grotto where the stream from the Smithy Complex comes in on the left, over half a kilometre into the system.

Cameras clicked to record the attractive formations in the grotto, then we set off again, initially over breakdown blocks, to eventually regain the stream. After some 600m of very roomy rift passage, we briefly left the stream to clamber over and amongst huge fallen blocks in the Great Oxbow. The stream was soon rejoined, now flowing quietly along in the aptly named Great Canyon.

Variety being the spice of life, after some 500m the passage character changed and the Second Bedding Cave had us stooping for a while. A major inlet on the right - Aran View Passage - provided a brown and smelly landmark bringing in the contents of some distant farmyard. Still, the pale pink eels seemed happy to live in this turgid brown gunge which we now paddled or wallowed in for the next 800m.

The stooping gave way to easy walking again and we passed beneath the Aille Cascade some 400m further on, entering from the roof on the right. First Bedding Cave soon forced more stooping progress and waist-deep wading to reach the daylight coming in from FISHERSTREET POT which we had previously laddered for the 15m exit climb. The stream continued for a further 200m as a virtual hands-and-knees crawl to reach an evil-looking, froth-speckled sump.

Brief fun and games was had as TK's ammo box fell, lid-open, into the water in the wading section of the stream; the camera was out and in action, but the contents included car keys. Duly recovered, it later came adrift of its careless owner - a fact only noticed at Fisherstreet Pot. TK explored the grotty passage to the sump at high speed, in case it had been taken by the stream - an unwelcome diversion. Ironically, the wayward box was found happily bobbing along a fair way back upstream of the pot.

Apart from the muck coming in from Aran View, we rated this trip very highly. It had taken us three and a half hours to cover 3km.

FAUNAROOSKA CAVE - 17th JULY

The main (open) entrance to Faunarooska is shakehole F1 which enters the upper section of the 1.5km long streamway. A party of six, TK, JG, GB, PB, MR and YR, entered the cave at midday to explore the 1km long section from F1.

Only a few metres into the cave the main streamway was met and the initially narrow and sinuous nature of the passage continued, passing below the "skylight" entrance of Heads Pots after 50m, for several hundred metres. Progress was somewhat energetic following the twists and turns of the streamway but the effort was amply rewarded by the many and varied calcite formations, all in excellent condition. Along the route, Chert Bridge was an obvious feature, but First and Second Cascades were passed unnoticed.

A sudden, welcome change in passage cross-section occurred after maybe 650m when the narrow rift opened abruptly into a large tunnel-like passage. Easy walking quickly brought us to the slot on the right where the stream departs down Wet Pitch (35m) to a sump. However, we ignored the tempting sound of falling water and forged ahead up over moonmilk flows into Dry Series where the going levelled off as we followed ledges at the top of Roof Traverse, an 8m high rift. The 22m deep Dry Pitch was seen but not descended, our interest having been earlier deflected to the possibility of descending part-way along the Traverse to see some pretties. We never found them.

Faunarooska is obviously a cave in which haste is made slowly; we took four hours for the whole trip. A welcome bonus was filling our helmets with mushrooms as we crossed the pasture back to the cars. The omelettes were good that night!

POULNAGOLLUM / POULELVA CAVE SYSTEM - 19th JULY

At 12km total length this system is a must on any itinerary; ours was no exception. On this visit, the first of two, we divided into two groups: GB, PB, JG and PH entering POULNAGOLLUM POT and going downstream, TK, DK, MR and YR descending POULELVA POT and exploring upstream to exit Poulmagollum Pot. This description deals with the upstream trip.

Poulelva Pot entrance is a roomy and quite awe-inspiring 25m daylight shaft which we descended opposite a substantial cascade, finding adequate natural and bolt belay points. Ignoring the descending stream, we entered an upslope passage, dropped into a rift and turned left only to find ourselves back at the shaft. This was to be the only navigational error of the trip!

Repeating the route but turning right in the rift brought us down to a crawl to the left into a pleasant mud-floored hands-and-knees crawl. Passing incoming streams from the left, we entered the 3m high rifts of Craven Canyon which gave easy walking for 100m. Two more inlets were passed, crossing the rift floor from left to right, and then more crawling ensued as we easily (surprisingly) negotiated the Maze to reach Main Streamway 100m beyond. The first couple of hundred metres upstream were of easy going in roomy passage which eventually degenerated into a wide bedding plane where crawling flat-out over cobbles in the stream was enjoyed for 150m. Upright once more, we soon passed the end of Cotter's Gallery inlet on the right, whose stream tumbled over a white flowstone floor into the main watercourse. A further 600m of easy going brought us to the Main Junction where the more inviting route ahead - Branch Passage Gallery tributary - had to be avoided by turning left up the more constricted Main Streamway.

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We soon found ourselves in the classic, roomy rift passage for which Poulmagollum is noted, following its amazing twists and turns - sometimes the upper and lower parts being out of phase with each other. Adding to this, wide and low bedding planes had developed to the right or left at floor level, taking with them the stream. Two fine cascades were passed en route, both entering on our right and the first very well decorated, as we pushed on a further 800m upstream towards Poulmagollum Pot entrance, previously laddered.

Daylight was reached after a most enjoyable 2.3km through-trip lasting nearly four hours.

POLLDEREEN (not POLLDUBH) - 22nd JULY

For reasons unknown, we had Polldubh on our listed itinerary but our visit turned out to be something well worth missing - DK and PH wisely did so! The day was bright and warm as we parked the car along a small track on the west of Slieve Elva. Wetsuited and map in hand, TK, JG, MR and YR set off across a pleasant pasture with a few clints and wild flowers for company.

Within a few minutes it was obvious that this pasture had no worthwhile perforation. So we moved towards a plantation of fir trees, whose edge was thought to be the shale margin. Then it happened. Already warm in our wetsuits, we were set upon by clouds of flies of incredible tenacity. The next 30 minutes involved non-stop cursing and futile gestures towards the flies, but did produce a reasonable-looking hole vaguely matching the description of Polldubh North entrance sink. Whatever it was, it promised an escape from the flies!

Tethering a 10m ladder to a handy fir tree we descended a 5m wet fluted shaft to meet a small stream which we followed along a 5m high rift for about 50m. Then we met the solid stalagmite choke; a frog might have followed the stream under it, or a ferret the constricted space over it. But we turned back deciding, after probing every nook and cranny, that it must be Polldereen, ie. not Polldubh.

Out with the flies once more, we continued our search for the sink, then tried our luck with the downstream entrance; we thrashed around in endless armpit-deep holes in the clints and nameless boggy hollows before admitting defeat in all directions. Hot, tired and still suffering a suseit of flies, JG hit on a marvellous idea - let's all go swimming in the sea! In 30 minutes we were in the Atlantic breakers at Fanore Beach, still warm in our wetsuits as we admired the outline of Slieve Elva from a safe distance and wondered why we hadn't done this in the first place.

POULMAGOLLUM (Branch Passage Gallery) - 24th JULY

Leaving PH to hunt the wild mushrooms, TK, DK, JG, MR and YR descended the 10m pothole entrance of Poulmagollum for the final trip of the holiday. The aim was to descend downstream via Branch Passage Gallery to Main Junction then return up the Main Streamway.

Taking the low passage to the right at the bottom of the shakehole, we entered GUNMAN'S CAVE and soon met a small stream inlet on the left. Leaving the roomy passage of Gunman's Cave, we followed the narrow inlet which became a flat-out crawl in a rock-floored elliptical, flattened tube - Muddy Link - for 45m. The crawl opened dramatically into the roomy rift of Branch Gallery. Ahead was a caver's paradise - easy going in a well-decorated 10m high passage with a babbling stream at one's feet. Occasional scrambles over fallen boulders and splashing about in deep pools added to the fun. And many were the halts to photograph the superb surroundings as we made our leisurely way along the 1km of streamway towards Poulmagollum main stream at Main Junction.

A couple of hundred metres before the junction, the stream dived into a small hole, cascading noisily into a lower passage, and we continued for about 10m further in dry passage to the head of a 7m pitch back into the stream. A bolt belay and natural rock spike ensured a good ladder hang and lifeline security for this idyllic descent between clean-washed walls. We could not resist making a swift detour upstream to see the incoming cascade before going on downstream along a gently meandering high rift down to Main Junction.

Moving upstream now in Poulmagollum Main Streamway provided more easy going and we decided to seek daylight via Gunman's Cave, TK climbing 6m up to winding rift at a guesstimated point and maintaining this level for maybe 100m until the inlet was found. Duly discovered, this large, moonmilk-floored passage was followed upstream for about 200m to emerge in the shakehole by the same passage we had entered four hours earlier.

Not a lot of effort was required to complete this delightful 2km circuit which fittingly brought a happy ending to our underground exploits.

POSTSCRIPT

Before departing for Ireland, an article in Descent had carried some disquieting comments on the deterioration of relationships between cavers and landowners on Co.Clare. However, our own experiences did not support this allegation. Permission was asked, and readily granted, where this was necessary, and the atmosphere remained friendly and helpful throughout.

We learned, however, that the proposal to create a show cave of Poll-an-Ionain had set a number of Irish cavers at loggerheads with local people. It seemed that this had probably (wrongly) raised the spectre of more widespread discontent. *Motto: Beware of false prophets.*