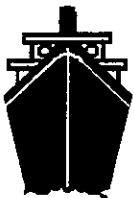


## A Belgian Long Weekend (5-7 March 1999)

(By Julie Hesketh)

On the promise of a cheap weekend abroad in a "castle" in the Ardennes with caves similar to Mendip, it took little persuasion for Tim Francis and myself to join the Wessex CC on a long weekend to Belgium. The fine mixture of incredibly cheap ferry deals and the lure of even cheaper Leffe Brun Beer seems to be making a trip to the Ardennes a regular Wessex CC meet.



Our ferry left Dover at 12.30 (although usually there would be room on an earlier ferry to get cavers to Belgium at a more sociable hour) where we met up with the rest of the Wessex team – 11 of us in all. An overnight drive down to the Ardennes was the usual sleepy, blurry haze of French petrol stations, mad drivers and obligatory wrong turnings before reaching the Belgian town of Dinant with its impressive limestone cliffs and its less impressive range of café's open at 6.30am for breakfast. After eventually finding a café au lait (but no tea.... what sort of country is this!!!!) we headed to our accommodation in the village of Assese. And boy, were we impressed. We stayed in a castle (circa 1760) reputedly built for Marie-Antoinette in private grounds. Sleeping accommodation was mattresses in the grand hall on the first floor (complete with walk-in fires (not lit, unfortunately) and original wall murals and ceiling decoration (incredible, though rather dilapidated)). Downstairs, a large dining room, this time with a roaring log fire, served as our living/dining/festering room. Excellent accommodation, though rather cold....

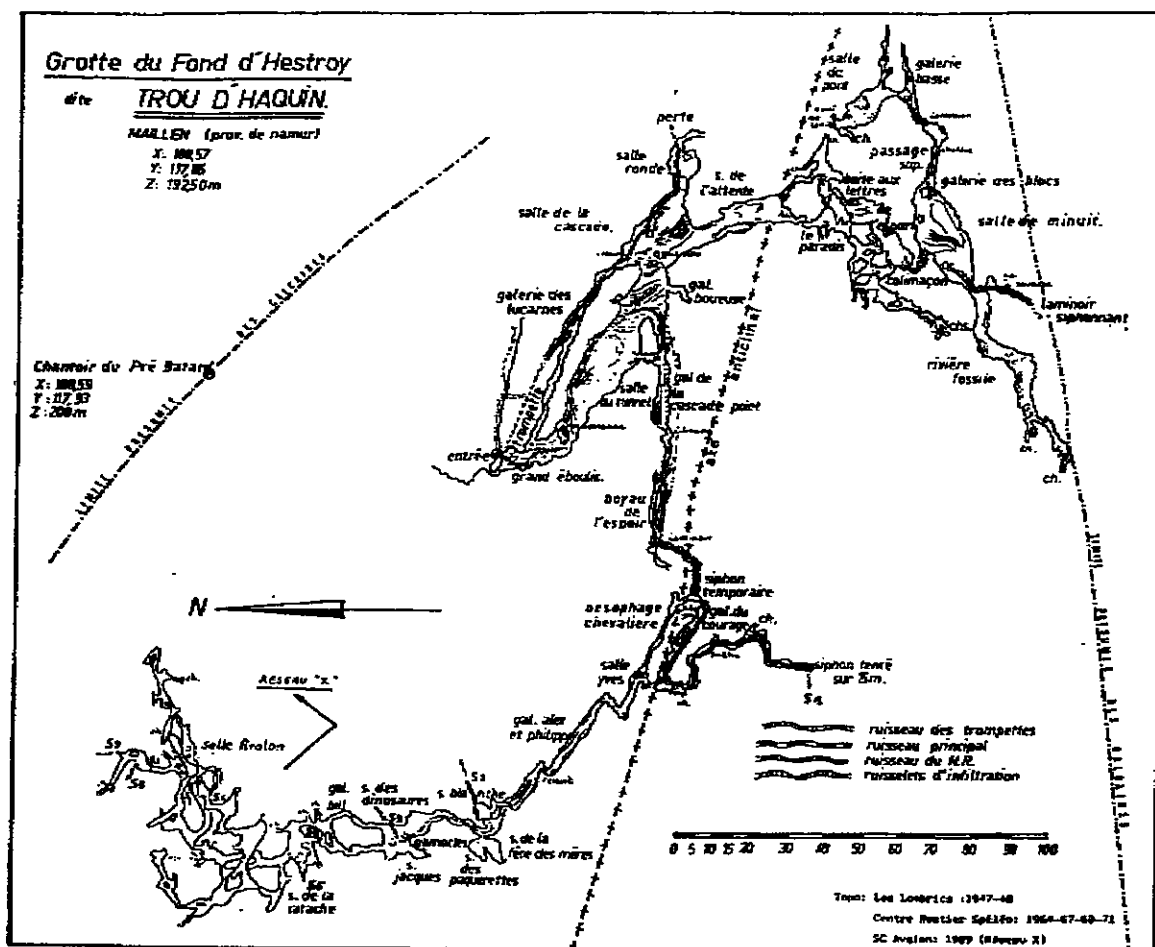
The caves of Belgium are all in the southern part of the country, in a narrow limestone strip running from east to west. The caves are focussed around 3 main centres: The Massif de Boine (which is home to the show-cave, the Grotte de Han), Rochefort and Mont-sur-Meuse, the area we visited. Access to most of the caves (around 80%) in Belgium is via a key system, administered by the UBS (Union Belge de Spéléologie) – rather like the "Mendip key" administered by the CSCC. All caves have the same lock and Belgian clubs hold a key. Unfortunately, without access to a key, caving opportunities are limited – but enough caves are open for a good weekend's caving.

Foregoing sleep for the opportunity to go caving on our arrival, 5 of us (Les Williams, Dave Cooke, Bean, Tim and myself) headed to one of Belgium's longest (1704m) and most well-visited caves, Trou d'Haquin. I was told (by Tim, who had caved in Belgium before in 1991 – see MCG newsletter 222) that the caves were "very Mendippy". In fact, they were a real home-from-home. Trou d'Haquin was a short walk along a muddy track and an excellent and fun introduction to Belgian caving – an easy trip, not surprisingly used as a novice trip. The entrance is an active swallet taking a large (larger-than-Swildons) size streamway. The gate had (luckily) been left open allowing us easy access. A second, dry entrance 20 feet upstream on the river bank was locked. An exciting, wet entrance series, following the thundering stream took us over and under huge, well worn, boulders into a large chamber with 2 options – the active streamway route or the fossil upper series. We took the dry option and split into 2 groups. Tim, Cookie and I explored to a small inlet sump with a bypass to a muddy dig. Continuing through the more obvious fossil passages, we eventually found a small slot, fondly named by the Wessex from their last visit to the cave as "the cow's c\*\*t" due to its incredible likeness (unbelievable – honest!) which led to a complex series of chambers, often well decorated, though worse for wear due to cave-traffic. Up and up we went, trying to find the others who had headed off in the opposite direction on a small round trip which we had been told was possible. After checking out various dodgy, loose climbs, we finally found the others who pointed us to the way they came so we could complete the round-trip. We had a quick nosey down the main streamway but in view of flood warnings and the flat-out crawl (which floods to the roof), we headed out to promises of local friendly bars with good Belgian beer.



More on Pages 6 & 7...

Carries on from Front Page...



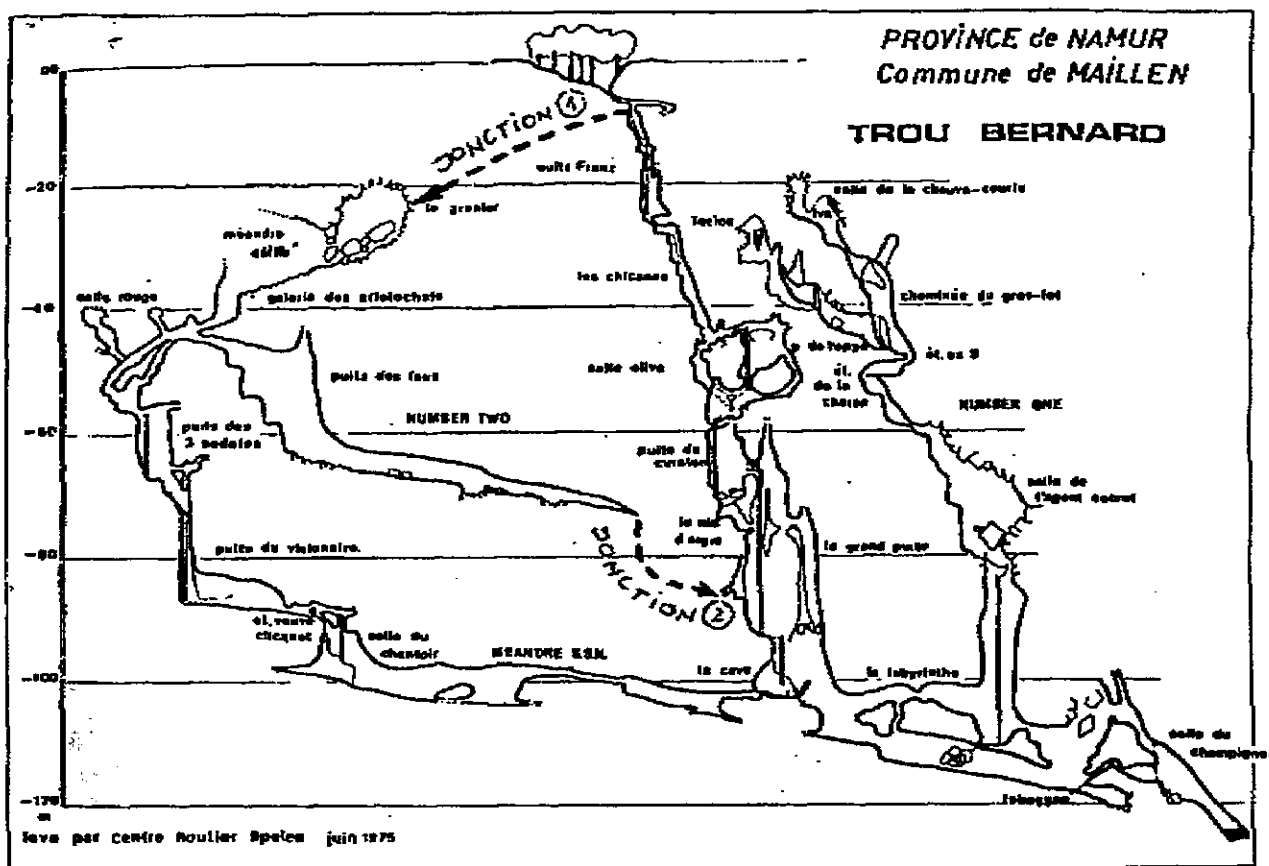
Once again, we weren't disappointed. We headed to the village of Crupet where we met up with the others who had the benefit of 4 hours sleep, a couple or 5 beers and a good lunch to wake them up. Spurred on by our tales of sporting caves, however, they headed off to Trou d'Haquin themselves for a look. Meanwhile, back in the bar, we got on most excellently with the landlady who was interested to hear about our clubs and donated a book (unfortunately to the Wessex) on caves in Belgium.

The evening's meal is worth a mention as Jean-Marie and Nadia who run the Castle, organised an indoor barbecue for us. This meant removing the log-burning stove and replacing it with a charcoal barbecue on which they cooked saussicon, pork steaks, baked tomatoes and potatoes until we could eat no more. Eventually, overcome by the need for sleep (24 hours later than usual) and a few more bottles of Leffe Brun, we headed to bed.

On Saturday morning, eggs, bacon and croissants were washed down with lashings of (splendid?) tea before Tim, myself and 3 of the Wessex set off to "bottom Belgium's deepest (140m) and toughest cave". This is one of the few caves with no access restrictions and is not gated. It is also one of the few Belgian caves which warrants the use of an SRT kit although easily possible on ladders. Again, the cave was situated in a clayey/muddy shakehole with obvious similarities to Mendip. A small sink a few feet away took a trickle of water which we met well into the cave. The first pitch is almost immediately inside the entrance, over an easy squeeze over a 45m pitch. A small squeeze led to a junction where we took the less obvious left hand tube, through a whalebone squeeze to the second pitch – the infamous "ciccanes". The Belgian guide to the cave alludes to "the thousands of cavers who have struggled through here". Admittedly, it may have been a bit on the narrow-side but for anyone who caves regularly on Mendip, it shouldn't be a problem (what hard tigers we are!) From here, there are many routes to the bottom of the cave but we took an 8m pitch (Puits de l'Oppo) to a small chamber where a vertical squeeze took us to Puits de Cureton (12m). A couple of easy climbs down took us to "le Nid d'Aigle" a kind of balcony, part way down the big 27m pitch. From here, a lovely freehang took us to a windy rift which met up with the base of the main "Grand Puits" – the 27m pitch.

We were relieved we had chosen to take the alternative route as there was a sizeable waterfall in the main shaft – not really suited to SRT. Things got a bit tight and meandery at the bottom with a fairly complicated series of passages leading to a final sump.

As with all tight, awkward SRT trips, the outward journey was sweeter than the inwards and a few more SRT kits came off on the way out than the way in! We were also held up by a party of Belgian cavers who had decided to take 2 complete novices on their first ever caving trip, down Trou Bernard – Belgium's most technical trip. God only knows how/if they got out!



Monday saw the already cold, damp weather take a turn for the worse with snow flurries over another fine cooked breakfast. We decided to head over to Jean-Marie and Nadia's other castle at Floreffe. The castle of Floreffe is being decorated and is a bit more luxurious than the castle we stayed in Assese – it had central heating where the freezing cold Assese castle had none. It is also built right on top of the Grottes de Floreffe – the entrance being a rather impressive wrought iron gate in the footings of the castle – it looked rather like it could easily be a wine cellar! Armed only with helmets and lamps, we had a potter around this ex-showcave. The cave itself was a bit worse for wear with some damage to the formations. This is the reason that the cave has been closed to visitors and there is some evidence of a small amount of regeneration to some of the active stal. To everyone's amusement, the castle's small, ginger cat followed us down the cave and stayed with us for the hour or so we were underground! A caver's castle, complete with its' own cave and a caving cat... how cool is that!!!!???

Unfortunately, time was moving on and so we were forced on Monday afternoon to start heading homewards. A leisurely drive to Calais got us back in London by 10.30pm – usual time for a weekend really. All in all, an excellent long weekend – one which I should organise for the MCG (though in better weather). A bargain too – about £60 including ferries, petrol, bed (well, cold mattress on the floor!), 2 breakfasts and 2 evening meals. And just like Mendip really – a home-from-home!

For more information on Caving in Belgium, good websites to check out are : The Union Belge de Spéleo (UBS): [www.speleo.be.ubs](http://www.speleo.be.ubs) In French but has a good links page at [www.speleo.be/index.htm](http://www.speleo.be/index.htm) The Speleoclub Avalon: [http://users.skynet.be/sky75112/avalonuk/cib\\_gen.htm](http://users.skynet.be/sky75112/avalonuk/cib_gen.htm) The best English language website which has full descriptions of over 20 Belgian caves and some surveys. Also a good links page