

MCG NEWS

Newsletter of the Mendip Caving Group



Departure Lounge, Upper Flood (by Charlie Allison)

Number 340
February 2007

www.m-c-g.org.uk

Founded 1954

Advance Notice of Annual General Meeting 24/03/07

The AGM of the Mendip Caving Group will be held at the Hunters Lodge Inn on Saturday 24th March 2007 at 10.30am.

Nominations for Office and proposals to change the Constitution and Rules must be submitted in writing by first class post to the Hon. Secretary's home address (3 Rosemary Cottages, Rosemary Gardens, Mortlake, London SW147HD) with the signatures of full members proposing and seconding at least 25 days before the meeting (27th Feb). A nomination for Office must be accompanied by a signed agreement to stand for election by the nominee. Nominations are sought for all posts. **Tim Francis, MCG Secretary.**

Annual Dinner 24th March 2007

The 2007 Annual Dinner will be held on 24th March at Lyncombe Lodge, Churchill, from 7.30pm - midnight. Tickets will be £23.50. The dinner will be followed by a presentation on the recent discoveries in Upper Flood. Not to be missed!



Cheques and menu choices (see page 7) to Linda Milne by 12th March 2007



Please note that all accommodation at the Lodge is already fully booked.

There will be a coach picking up from Wells, The Hunters and the

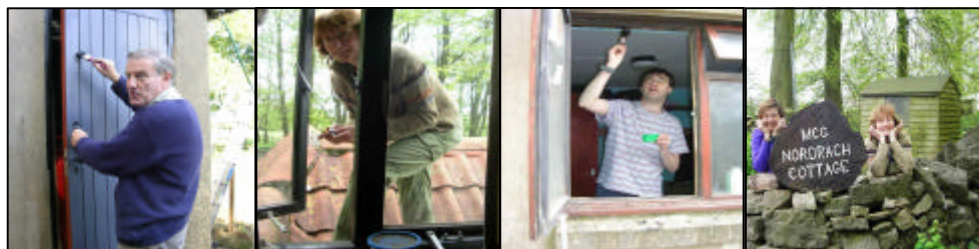
Cottage work weekend 3rd and 4th March 2007

Yes folks. It's that time of year again. There is plenty to do around the cottage to keep it habitable, so it would be good to see lots of members helping with maintenance and repairs, as well as cleaning and decorating.

The cottage is our major asset and, quite simply, has to be maintained. The alternative is to pay to have the work done by contractors.

In the past year, several major projects have been completed by just a handful of members. They have completed the Library extension and replaced the hot water system for example. The generosity of these members in giving up their time to work on the cottage has saved the Group a small fortune. Now it's your turn!

Please come along even if it is only for an hour or two. As a "reward" we may be prepared to ply you with (small) quantities of beer and food (see page 6).



From the editor



Well, I've managed to catch up with myself as far as issue months go, but only just (I thought I was going to have two January issues). With no more significant breakthroughs I thought things had calmed down a bit, but then came the media reports. With Upper Flood making headline news (almost literally) I felt I just had to include a précis of the TV and magazine reports in this issue as they are so significant. As a result, yet again, I don't have room for some of the snippets you kindly sent me... next issue I promise.

Yvonne

In this issue

- 1 Group notices
- 2-3 Upper Flood
- 3 BCA news
- 3 MCG doings
- 4-6 Box Mines trip
- 7 Annual Dinner
- 8 Group information

Supplement - Constitution and rules



BBC Points West, Charterhouse

On 14/12/06, BBC Points West broadcast a short (1 minute!) item on the breakthrough in Upper Flood, which went something like this:

Will Glennon (BBC): Would you believe what lies beneath our feet?...Well a few months ago cavers found miles of undiscovered caves underneath the Somerset hills.

Alex Lovell (BBC): But don't think about nipping down to see them; or if you do, you have to get there by crawling on you hands and knees for 6 hours - not my kind of thing, but Fiona Lambdin's been exploring.

Fiona Lambdin (BBC): 2.5km of secret passages lie under here undiscovered for thousands of years. Until just a few months ago. This caver, Mike Richardson, was part of the first expedition.

And this is where it all starts; the mouth that leads to the underground world.

Mike Richardson (MCG): ...about 700m most of which is crawling or stooping. Quite a lot of water; then there's a large boulder choke which we managed to get through in August which has got some pretty tight squeezes. If you're any larger than me then you're not going to get through.

Fiona: It's a 6 hour struggle but it's worth it.

Mike: From being very small it suddenly becomes very large. There's lots of formations - stalactites and stalagmites - and a lot of the walls are covered in flow-stone where water has flowed down depositing calcite. And then right down at the bottom of the cave there's some really amazing calcite formations; huge crystals dinner-plate sized pillars of calcite growing out of the water. Never seen anything like them before, anywhere.

Fiona: And this really is a huge discovery! It's the largest network of caves to be found in the Mendips for over 50 years. And the tunnel stretches underground from where I'm standing here right back to those trees over there.

Les Davies (Mendip Warden): To put it into context, we know an awful lot about what is going on in outer space but we don't know what's going on beneath our feet right this moment. To have a breakthrough like this is absolutely incredible - how much else is there?

Fiona: Well the cavers are convinced: there's so much more.

Will: Amazing. Great pictures, those caves there.

Alex: There's always more to discover. Like the weather. D'you like that?



Mendip Times: Cavers' Historic Find

Upper Flood continues to feature in the local media. There is a well-written two-page spread in the January 2007 issue of Mendip Times, on the September breakthrough (curiously dated as August?). Dave Irwin interviews Tim Francis, one of the principal explorers, about "the most important cave discovery in more than 50 years".

Dave first discusses the cave's discovery in 1968 and the subsequent exploration, before asking Tim to describe the breakthrough, accompanied by photos of Porkpie Passage and the streamway. On a sadder note, Dave remembers Malcolm Cotter's involvement and perseverance with the dig up to his untimely death in 2006.

He sums up the discovery as "a brilliant effort by all concerned and a feather in the cap of the Mendip Caving Group."

You can download Mendip Times at <http://www.worldwidemedia.co.uk/mendiptimes/mendiptimes.swf> until early February, or visit <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/mendip-caving-group/> and look under Files for Mendip Times.



More Upper Flood exposure in the media?

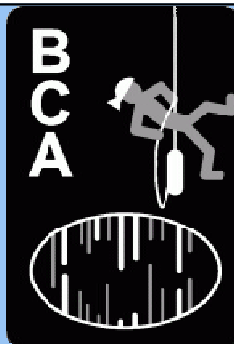
Upper Flood will be featured in a forthcoming edition of Speleology, and Descent are rumoured to be very interested in the latest photos of Netherland by Mark Shinwell. Not to be outdone, the BBC have hinted that they would like the diggers to obtain some video footage of a new discovery as it happens and may provide the video equipment including helmet cams.

Mendip Rescue Organisation visit to Upper Flood extensions

On 7th January, Alison Moody and Richard Marlow (of MRO) were given a tour of Upper Flood. They were taken to almost all of the cave except the Neverland Extension. They agreed on the boulder choke being quite a challenge for a rescue. However, having been through the cave, they now feel confident that they could find their way around in the event of a rescue and could function mostly without the need of leaders. They felt a guide line put through the choke would be very useful to help speed up the process of getting rescue people through more quickly. They thought the content of the rescue dump was good but suggested that a small 2-man tent would be a big bonus for keeping a casualty warm.

BCA news

The **BCA AGM 2007** will take place on Saturday, 24th March 2007, at the Baptist Church Hall, Alvechurch, starting at 10.30am. An agenda will be sent to all Group and Direct Individual Members of BCA to reach them by 10th February.



The latest BCA Newsletter (No.7 Dec 2006) is now available online at <http://www.british-caving.org.uk/?page=100>

or by following the links from the MCG Yahoo Group: <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/mendip-caving-group/links/>

MCG doings



Congratulations to Louisa Minahan and Tim Francis on the birth of daughter Felicity. She arrived on 18/12/06 and weighed 8lb 8oz.

Welcome back to Joan Dowley who has rejoined as an Associate member.

Welcome back to Richard Carey who has rejoined as a Full Member. Richard is also an Upper Flood leader.

Mark Ward, Simon Stevens and Graham Old have resigned.

An up-to-date address list with all changes will be included in the March newsletter.

The March members' weekend is to be a work weekend (to include the fitting of a phone bell and a leaflet holder in the lounge).

MRO have been able to purchase a traction splint by combining the MCG donation received following Malcolm's death with other donations.

A Trip To Box Mine

by Andrew Brander

The Miners. Geoff Beale, Brenda Wybrow, Joan Goddard, JP Burch, Bob Templeman and Andrew Brander (all MCG), Leslie & Jane (guests), and Chris Davies (manager of the Dark Places website www.darkplaces.co.uk and our knowledgeable Leader) met up at the Quarryman's Arms, Box on Saturday 2nd December for a trip down Box Mine.

Andy arrived late and only just changed in time before everyone set off. On the way to the mine, Geoff realised he needed to put his walking boots on instead of his wellies, so went back to his car. Geoff was confident he could find his way and catch us up, but as we walked on, down a winding path through the woods, the route to the entrance did not seem at all obvious. After a short wait for Geoff and JP, Andy went back to find them - they had got lost, but were not far away.

The Composition of Bath Stone. In 670 c. Saint Aldhelm is reputed to have thrown down his glove at Box and said "Dig here and you shall find great treasure". Bath Stone is a golden coloured, granular limestone deposited during the Jurassic era as part of the Great Oolitic period (about 195,000,000 to 135,000,000 years ago). The grains are fragments of calcium carbonate which became coated with lime as they rolled about on the sea bed. When the grains are magnified, small shell or rock fragments can be seen at their centres. At the time it was formed the great continent of Pangea was breaking up and Britain was situated roughly where the Sahara Desert is today, but as it moved northwards the Jurassic seas produced a variety of limestones, sandstones and clays. Over a period of time the Jurassic rocks in Britain have been tilted into a gentle south-eastward slope. These rocks make really good building stone and they have been worked at a number of places across Britain - ranging from Purbeck and Portland in the south through Bath and Box, to Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire, Collyweston and the North Yorkshire Moors. As Bath stone is a sedimentary rock it has a natural layering or bedding and due to the gentle nature of its tilt very few vertical breaks or joints. Bath Stone weathers at a rate of around 3 to 4 mm per 100 years but more in severe exposures or on the edges of stonework.

The Working Method. Bath Stone is classed as freestone - this means that it can be sawn or squared up in any direction, independently of its joints. It is fairly soft underground, allowing it to be easily worked. However for it to wear well when used for building work the stone must be laid on its bed - the same way up as it was underground. When the rock is removed from underground it is important to stack it on the surface the correct way up. Newly mined 'Green blocks' have to weather on the surface to allow the natural moisture in the rock (known as Quarry Sap) to dry out and the blocks to harden.

The basic hand working technique involved:

1. A breach (cut) would be made in the top of the stone at roof level, to a depth of approximately 5 feet - using a series of long hand picks.
2. Sawyers, using saws up to 6 feet long, then cut out the first central stone known as the wrist stone
3. After the wrist stone was removed the sawyer would then cut down the back of the stone - the back cut
4. The blocks would be 'broken' from the bottom bed by wedges
5. Care would have to be taken to ensure enough material (i.e. pillars) was left in place to support the roof.

History. Bath stone has been mined since Roman times as they were prolific users of the stone in their buildings. The stone was also used in the construction of Longleat house in 1568. However, the earliest recorded date found in the mines in the area is carved in Firs Mine, Combe Down - 1725. In 1810 the Kennet and Avon Canal was opened. Not only was a lot of stone used in construction of the canal, but it allowed access for the fast removal of stone. Cranes were used in underground quarries from about 1825 further easing the mining operation. In 1841 Box Railway Tunnel was completed by Brunel. This was the first real indication of the extent of the vast quantities of stone and based on that knowledge the mining industry in this area rapidly expanded. The main companies involved in this commercialisation were Pictors, Nobles and Stones.

Box is probably the best known of the Bath Stone Mines, mainly due to its sheer size; it is the largest stone mine in the country with many miles of interconnecting passages. Initially, the mines evolved in a haphazard manner and pass over the top of Box Tunnel with 3 airshafts going through the mine. An early problem was that the mines often met up underground which must have been very annoying for the rival companies. The principal entrances into Box Mine were Eastgate, Northgate, Westgate, Bridgegate, Backdoor, Clift and what is now called Jack's Workings, named after a stone quarrier. All these entrances were adits or levels and entered into the side of the hill or cliff face. Subsequently a more structured approach was taken and the mines developed in a pattern like the veins in a leaf. This enabled more stone to be removed and also allowed better use of carts;

allowing them to run in straight lines from the working face to the entrance. This even made it practical to use small steam locomotives for haulage. Apparently, the engine was named 'Thunder' by the quarrymen and the roof of some of the passages can still be seen to have a line of soot running down the middle caused by this engine. Prior to World War II the mines were largely hand worked, machine working only coming in due to the labour shortage after the war.

In recent times the mines have been used for mushroom growing, ammunitions store, aircraft manufacture and various government functions (RAF Rudloe Manor is on top).

The Trip. The Box mines are open to the public, but gated and locked to keep casual wanderers out - and to ensure that the mine is looked after. Litter, graffiti and fires have been a problem in recent years and nearly got the mines closed down. We entered via Jack's Entrance at the Southern end of the mines, known as the Lower Hill Series. The entrance is somewhere in the woods on Quarry Hill near the west entrance of Box Tunnel (not sure I could find it again!).

There was a choice of two cart-sized tracks at the entrance, which was strange, as the entrance was not big enough for a cart! We took the left track (thereafter I could not tell you where we went, except roughly from the survey). It's a bit like Milton Keynes, where all the roundabouts look the same. We soon came to our first point of interest - a small hole in the ceiling. This was where a crane had been installed to move blocks of stone and you could clearly see the arc in the roof where the end of the arm rotated (but sadly no crane). Then we came to a boulder fall that we had to climb through and slowed some members of the party down (lots of groaning and expletives!). We stopped by an interesting drawing of a horse (probably authentic miners) and a drawing of a white ghost and castle (more like modern spray-painted graffiti).

We wandered through lots more passage with a few squeezes, boulder climbs and then even more passage and more passage. We saw some X-rated drawings and a real crane (very exciting!). There were lots of rope marks, some as much as 15cm deep on the stone pillars. The oldest writing we saw was from 1870 and around it sketches of an (evil?) chicken, a crane and a bicycle on a tree!

We reached an area called Cathedral and saw a headtorch light ahead of us - but it was only Geoff who had apparently taken a rather muddy shortcut. The Cathedral (so called because of its sheer massive size) was started at Box Field Quarry in 1829 and was worked by Job Pictor. It measures 190 feet long, 100 feet high and 25 feet wide at its centre. In the roof of this chamber there is a large hole about six feet across. All the stone removed from this chamber was hauled through this hole to the surface between the years 1830 to 1850. The roof above the Cathedral is only fifteen feet thick and worryingly a row of cottages are partially sited on top!

We saw several miners' work-benches made out of large slabs of stone. These had a single cut along their length into which the saw was placed upside-down for sharpening. Apparently the saws lasted a long time and





could be easily sharpened because the stone was so soft.

We walked on and Brenda developed back ache, so she rested with Leslie while the rest of us took a short extension to see the 'Robots'. We walked on and met 3 lads, who we chatted to for around 20 minutes (extending our short trip rather a lot). We eventually carried on and saw an empty (wartime) communications duct, 'Lounge' (Sofa, TV, Remote control etc), 'Dalek' and 'Robots', all made of ex military bricks. Brenda and Leslie were getting 'only mildly worried' by the time we got back.

We passed several uncovered, unwallled and completely unprotected wells on the route round the mine - some so deep that it was hard to lean far enough out to see the bottom. Near Cliff Entrance (where all the tunnels meet) there was greater evidence of industrialisation and you could still see the spaces in the ground where the sleepers from the rail tracks had been - all now removed or rotted. We passed someone's 'beer collection' (sadly rotted and just the remains of 4 wooden barrels left), a brick arch and a water tank used to refill the engines.

As we walked around it was interesting to note the size of some of the natural rifts in the mine. It was impossible to tell if any of these extended across the floor, as the floor was often full of 'deads' and other debris. In fact it was entirely possible that the real floor in most of the mine was many feet below the floor we were actually walking on.

Our exit was via the Back Door. This involved a short crawl over sticks and leaves, through a 'Cat Flap' (yes, just like a real cat flap, propped up by a stick - only man-sized) and out of the gate. Geoff came last and was tasked with closing the cat flap after he had got through, but somehow managed to close it on his leg - requiring a quick rescue by Chris. From the Back Door the route is along the cliff face, up onto Love Lane and back to the pub. Coffee seemed to be the main tippie and then it was into the cars and for most, back to the cottage for the [reportedly wonderful] Christmas meal - I am sorry I missed it....

Horses were used until 1958 in Cliff Quarry, but work in the area almost entirely ceased with the closure of Cliff Quarry in 1968. However, mining is still carried out by the Bath Stone Group (www.bath-stone.co.uk) at Limpley Stoke, in a reopened mine, where they extract 18,000 tonnes of stone a year. It is possible to arrange visits to see this operational mine - maybe something for a future trip....

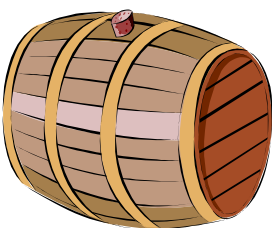
There are more pictures of the box mine trip at <http://gallery.brander.me.uk/boxmine>

Thanks to Geoff for organising the trip and to Chris for taking us on a great tour.

An invitation to Martin Rowe's 50th birthday bash

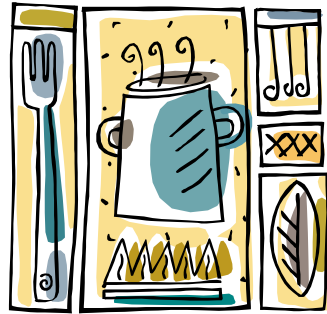
You are invited to join me at the MCG Cottage on Saturday evening, 3rd March 2007 to celebrate my 50th birthday.

Beer (and possibly wine) and nibbles will be provided



**MENDIP CAVING GROUP
ANNUAL DINNER**

**24 March 2007
Lyncombe Lodge Hotel,
Churchill
7.30pm - midnight**



DINNER WILL BE FOLLOWED BY A PRESENTATION ON UPPER FLOOD

Raffle

Menu

*Cream of Roast Capsicum and Tomato Soup with Herb Croutons
Parasol of Honeydew Melon presented with Fresh Strawberries
Smoked Salmon and Dill Pancake Gateau with Cracked Pepper Mascarpone
Chicken and Herb Terrine with Tomato Salsa*

-- 0 --

*Poached Salmon on Asparagus with a Lemon and Chive Beurre Blanc
Braised Rump of Beef on Mash Potatoes with a Bacon and Onion Sauce
Oven Roasted Chicken Supreme on a Mushroom Compote with a Red Wine Sauce
Roasted Vegetable Coulbiac on Dauphanoise Potatoes Drizzled with Herb Oil*

-- 0 --

*Vanilla and Raspberry Crème Brulee
Sticky Toffee Pudding with Toffee Sauce
Citrus Cheesecake with Double Cream*

-- 0 --

Freshly brewed Coffee and Mints



£23.50

**As usual there will be a coach picking up from Wells, The Hunters and the Cottage.
Don't forget to book your seats in advance if possible.**

Cheques and menu choices to Linda Milne by 12th March 2007, please.