

BCA Newsletter No 32

February 2018

Edited by David Rose



Editorial

Welcome to my second newsletter. It gives me no pleasure to have to begin with an apology: my first, Issue 31, contained a serious, though inadvertent, error. My report on the opening of Twll Du, the fourth entrance to the Ogof Draenen system in Wales, stated that it is located on open access land, as defined under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. While I believed this to be the case when I wrote the offending item, I was mistaken. In fact, Twll Du lies within the boundary of a scheduled ancient monument, the old mine tramway that winds around the hillside from Pwll Du quarry, a relic of the early 19th century iron industry. I will report on this and its implications in greater detail below, but the important point to get across at the outset is that for the foreseeable future, cavers should **not** use Twll Du, and if they do, they are at risk of criminal prosecution. At the time of writing, the entrance is covered by a metal grille, which is held in place by cable ties. There is also a sign indicating that its use is prohibited by Cadw, the Welsh government's historic environment and monuments agency. Please do **not** attempt to remove this or the grille, and do not try to enter or exit the Draenen system by Twll Du. As noted at the beginning of this paragraph, I apologise for not being aware of the position when I wrote my previous report.

Meanwhile, the BCA is approaching a crossroads: the retirement, after the AGM in June, of its two-term chairman, Andy Eavis. I will write a longer appreciation of the service he has given both to caving in general and the BCA in particular after he steps down – as shown most recently by the remarkable weekend of world class talks on caving that Andy organized – with help from several friends - at the Royal Geographical Society in London in December 2017. For now, I'd just like to note that finding the candidate to replace Andy with the right combination of skills, contacts, caving experience, available time and commitment is going to be extremely difficult. I dare say some members have possible candidates in mind – I know I do – and may be finding it difficult to persuade them to stand for this demanding, but unpaid post. So work on your friends that you think might be suitable; perhaps you might offer to share some of the load. Someone has to do it, and we need someone good!

Chairman's piece

As Dave notes in his editorial, I am coming to the end of my term as BCA chairman. I said I would do two, three-year terms, and the second term finishes at the AGM in June.

At the moment, there are many things going on within the BCA, most of which are constructive. One that isn't is the fact that we've not been able to get on with a new

computerised database for training, as the company which everybody believes would be best for the organisation has substantial financial problems. Until they sort that out, we are still on hold with improving the data collection and storage situation for training.

In addition, Graham Mollard has stepped down as Chairman of QMC. I should like to thank him for all the effort he has put in over the years and particularly for being the architect of the new system, with QMC handling professional training, and the BCA Training Officer handling recreational training. At the moment, Nigel Atkins is heading recreational training, and I thank him very much for that. Phil Baker has stepped into Graham's shoes, and is working towards the creation of a very business-like set-up with the focus and skill that anyone who knows him would expect. Thanks are due also to Mark Sims, who has become acting Equipment and Techniques Officer.

Since the last newsletter, we have had the Kendal Mountain Festival, where caving made its presence felt through the excellent Petzl underground session, put together by Tim Allen, and the world premiere of Paul Diffley's outstanding film *The Ario Dream* about exploration in the Picos de Europa by the Ario Caves Project. This won the 'People's Choice' film award at the festival, while Mark Burkey's photo of a descent of the entrance pitch of Calf Holes won the equivalent prize for a still photo. It was also featured in an article published by the *Sunday Times*.

At the beginning of December the BCA joined the BCRA at the Royal Geographical Society with a weekend of lectures for cavers and the general public. The talks were fantastic, and although the attendance figures were not as high as I might have hoped, all the sessions were filmed, and will ultimately be available online at the BCA archives. Sid Perou is working enthusiastically editing the 43 lectures.

Further new blood has arrived in the shape of Wendy Williams, who is stepping in as Membership Secretary. She seems to be tackling the job in a very efficient manner, and indeed, even appearing to enjoy it.

Controversies over access continue, and conservation and access must continue to be a major function of BCA. We will have to considerably up our resources in this field going forward, particularly when CROW has been shown to apply to caves. I think the next AGM could be quite a mile stone in this regard. On a similar note, the constitution revamp is underway, and a preliminary set of ideas will be presented to the AGM.

I should like to repeat two things mentioned in all my previous reports. First, we would very much like other people to get involved with the BCA Council. It is a very positive way of giving back to the activity we love. Second, it would be very good if more of our membership would agree to be contacted by email, so that we can communicate more widely. Have a happy spring.

Andy Eavis

No further need for permits on Langcliffe estate at Penyghent and Fountains Fell

Slowly but surely, the Council of Northern Caving Clubs seems to be doing itself out of what was once seen as one of its most important jobs – proving permits for cavers planning trips to the systems of the Yorkshire Dales.

The obligation to seek permits for caves on land on Fountains Fell owned by Rainscar House – including the significant though demanding Hammer Pot and Gingling Hole systems - has already been removed: all you need to do is make a courtesy call at the house. (See the CNCC website for details.)

Now the access agreement negotiated in the early 1970s for the caves on the Langcliffe estate, which straddles parts of both Fountains Fell and Penyghent, has lapsed. This covers two further caves of classic status: Dalehead Pot and the magnificent Penyghent Pot, which as the *Northern Caves* guidebook says, is arguably the finest stream pot in the Dales. (Its Friday 13th and Night of the Living Dead extensions attract rather less adulation, as anyone who has read the accounts of their exploration in *Adventures Underground*, the recent excellent book by Dave Haigh and John Cordingley, will find understandable.)

CNCC access officer Tim Allen says the old agreement contained details that were no longer applicable: the moors were then not CROW Act access land, as they are now, and were still used for shooting, with a full apparatus of gamekeepers etc. Thus far, the estate has shown little inclination to get into the detail of a new agreement, at one stage saying that if the CNCC wanted to pursue one, it would have to pay its land agent £76 an hour. Hence, the CNCC has decided to ‘opt out’.

The CNCC says: ‘These caves are all located on access land covered by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which at the very least enables access to the cave entrances on foot. Furthermore, the land has tax-exempt heritage status which we believe provides public access into the caves. The CNCC has not been made aware of any restrictions that should compromise access to these caves.

‘Groups are advised to use public footpaths from either Brackenbottom or Dale Head to reach the access land as shown on Ordnance Survey, observe the Countryside Code, be courteous to any farmers or gamekeepers you may meet, and to report to the CNCC if you encounter any access or conservation issues during your visit.’

For more information – including a Penyghent Pot topo guide which takes account of new resin anchors – visit the CNCC website, www.cncc.org.uk

New to Caving website

The BCA is now formally linked to the New to Caving website run by Tim and Jane Allen, who also host the UKcaving.com forum. This is a visually attractive and highly informative resource, which also contains links to clubs, instructors and all the other things a novice might need to take up the sport.

Of special note is a vivid account by Adele Ward from Redcar, who describes her first-ever trip, a visit to Small Mammal Pot, Bar Pot and Gaping Gill main chamber. She didn't find all of it easy, but concluded: 'What I have come to know and understand is that the cavers I have met no matter how experienced, extreme, notable, or skilled - all displayed the common factor of wanting to help me have the best experience I could. Where else do you meet people like that? I must say a passion had awoken in me.'

She wasn't joking. Adele has taken to caving with remarkable enthusiasm, becoming an active member of the White Rose Cave and Pothole Club. She has also become involved in original exploration. A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of joining her and Simon Beck on a highly enjoyable trip into Mossdale Caverns, where Simon has been working hard at a promising dig in Oubouros – as described in his gripping and extremely readable blog, <http://simonbeck.blogspot.co.uk>

From first trip to pushing in Mossdale in less than a year: I call that impressive. It's also reassuring. People sometimes lament that caving is dying out. Given that Adele is an apparently well-adjusted mother of two, and is sometimes joined underground by her equally capable teenage daughter, I'm convinced that the crucial thing in recruiting new blood is to get the message out - that caving is fun and sometimes fantastic. The New to Caving website can only help achieve that.

Lancaster University Speleological Society is reborn

Back in the 1980s, my friends and I – members of Oxford University Cave Club – regarded another university club as our fiercest rivals: Lancaster University Speleological Society. Like us, they were intent on exploring deep systems in the high Picos de Europa: LUSS near Tresviso in the Andara massif, ourselves above the Covadonga lakes in the range's Macizo de Cornion, further west. They achieved stunning success with Cueva del Agua, a magnificent resurgence system, and several pots on the mountains high above, among them Sima 56, for a time the deepest cave explored by a UK club at 1,169 metres. LUSS spawned many almost legendary cavers: Dave Checkley, Colin Boothroyd, Paul Ibberson and Howard Jones, to name but a few.

Hence, the club's closure about a decade ago came as quite a shock – especially given Lancaster's location, on the doorstep of the Dales. (It was one of a number of university clubs that closed in that period – depriving our sport of what had always been a critically important source of new blood.) It is, therefore, great news that it is now once again open for underground business, thanks in part to BCA Youth and development Officer Rostam Namaghi and his 11-member working group. Rostam reports that in getting the Lancaster club back up and running, the group has provided help with writing a constitution, insurance, funding, equipment, training and general advice. It was especially heartening to read an SRT training trip report in late January of a LUSS visit to Rowten Pot on UKcaving. Its author, a student named Remy HS, wrote: 'As a Dutch girl, coming from a country that is pretty much flat and not having done any SRT before this weekend, going down Rowten Pot was certainly an exciting yet slightly fear-inducing prospect.' But after emerging safely, she reported: 'We had a blast.' York University cavers helped with guiding and training.

‘It’s been an eye opening experience to see a club start from scratch and we are learning what the biggest stumbling blocks are,’ Rostam said in his report to the January BCA council meeting. ‘It’s not all what you would think: kit hasn’t been a major issue so far - by linking with other clubs, it has got over that, for now. I think there is a role for a BCA funded kit lending set up for new clubs, however there are issues with maintenance and storage.’

Rostam’s group has also been liaising with other uni clubs, the scouting movement, and several mountaineering clubs, where it has been looking at ways of getting caving sections established as a way of encouraging climbers to ‘dip their toes’ into the world underground. It has also been working with CHECC to produce a handbook.

Eurospeleo 2018

This year’s Eurospeleo forum will take place 23 – 26 August at Ebensee in the Salzkammergut lake district of Austria - close to many of the world’s greatest caves. Field trips – some lasting three days – to the systems of the local mountains will be available from 17 August.

These are no small attraction. On offer will be caves of varying difficulty in the Dachstein, Höllengebirge, Totes Gebirge, Salzkammergutberge, Tauogl, Untersberg and Waldviertel ranges. They will include visits to the giant Hirlatzhöhle, the Hochlecken-Grosshöhle, which has a 343 metre drop, what the organisers describe as the ‘never ending road’ into the Verborgene Höhle, and the Schönberg-Höhlensystem, ‘a magnet if you like it long and deep’. Somewhat less demanding will be trips to the Dachstein-Mammuthöhle, which ‘is also good for kids’.

Further details of both the trips and the conference from the website, <http://www.eurospeleo.at/index.html>

BCA seeks new insurance manager

The BCA secretary, Nick Williams, is looking for a volunteer to take over the role of Insurance Manager.

The primary part of the job is to take responsibility for negotiating with brokers to ensure adequate, affordable Public Liability cover is maintained. This entails regular contact through the year and a meeting lasting around half a day in December each year.

The job also includes dealing with insurance related enquiries from members and others. Most of these will actually be dealt with by the Membership Administrator and the more difficult ones can usually be referred to the brokers, who are very supportive. Maintenance of the FAQ is another responsibility.

Overall, the job takes 1 - 2 hours per month January - October and probably about 6-8 hours total in November and December. Regular attendance at BCA Council meetings is not

required but a short written report will need to be provided 4 times per year and occasional attendance would be desirable.

The post would suit somebody who has some experience of caving club administration but there is plenty of support in place to assist with technical issues so it is not necessary for the candidate to have an in-depth knowledge of insurance, legal matters or UK caving politics. This is a relatively small job in BCA's portfolio and so it provides a good opportunity for a new face to make a really valuable contribution to BCA without needing a huge commitment of time.

If you are interested, or have any questions, please drop Nick a line – his email address is nick.williams@hucklow.net

BCA ‘acting’ training officer’s report

Nigel Atkins, the BCA’s ‘acting’ training officer, has been doing a phenomenal job. This is a written version of his report to the BCA council meeting, which he delivered verbally in January 2018:

BCA Training Committee

Looking back at the last 12 months, myself and a small group of dedicated regional training officers have kept the training committee afloat with regular meetings and numerous conversations by phone and email. We have flown the flag for the BCA and introduced a fresh input into club training. A big thank you goes to Nick Williams who sets up these meetings on WebEx and ‘coaches’ us on how to keep us on line. Without Nick’s help in the last 12 months, we would not have been able to achieve this with such ease.

BCA Training Grants

We have had more applications for training grants than ever, since the word has been out that the training committee is looking after recreational cavers. We now have 5 approved training events for 2018 already confirmed. Having been involved with the training committee for decades, I can assure the BCA that the grants are taken very seriously and have supported very well organised and run training events all over the UK.

We have also spoken about BCA events to be set up by regional training officers in the future, and grants could support these. This way, more BCA members will get access to the workshops in all regions, and will get to meet BCA training committee members face to face and receive top level training.

BCA Positive Profile to Training

BCA has an opportunity here to launch training for the masses as it should be done. The BCA Training Officer should be the person to head this up and co-ordinate these training activities.

BCA Coaching Scheme – potential for

In the DCA, there are no clashes of opinions, just shared experience. Over the last 12 months I have shared the DCA scheme with caving clubs out of our region with a view of moving this forward nationally. There has not been any negativity at all to this, only positive

feedback. It is a coaching scheme for DCA cavers and concentrates on training the trainers as well as club members through workshops and training courses run by club members themselves assisted and mentored by myself, a BCA trainer and assessor for all the BCA schemes of which I have over 25 years of experience.

BCA Training Officer

For years, BCA Training Officer as a title is something to be proud of. It is not just a position, it is (or should be seen as) an honour to represent cavers in the UK.

The BCA training officer is and should be the 'go to person' to answer all of those enjoyable questions about what do we do, what do we use, how do we do this etc. We do this in DCA and most of the DCA member caving clubs work alongside with an agreed syllabus of training.

So, farewell then Twll Du

As stated above in my editorial, it transpires that Twll Du, the new, fourth entrance to Ogof Draenen lies within the boundaries of a scheduled historic monument, the old iron industry tramway that connected the Pwll Ddu quarry with forges and other installations. This has created something that may be unprecedented: a real risk that cavers who use this entrance could be prosecuted in the criminal courts, and face a hefty fine or even a spell of imprisonment.

For a thorough explanation of the law in this area and a wider discussion of its implications, please see an article just out in the Cambrian Caving Council's Wales Underground by the CCC access and conservation officer, Stuart France. It can be read here:

<http://linetop.co.uk/cambrian/jan2018.pdf>

As Stuart explains, the original 1979 historic monuments legislation has now been modified by the Historic Monument Wales) Act 2016. This means that being ignorant that a cave or possible entrance lies within a monument boundary is no longer a defence – although it is in England. Cadw, the Welsh agency which polices this, (Cadw means 'to keep' in Welsh), has used its powers to issue a 'Stop' notice at Twll Du. When this runs out, as it will after 28 days, it will post a permanent sign warning cavers that to use Twll Du may damage the tramway bank on which it lies – and this would be a criminal offence.

The police (that is, the actual persons in blue, not just Cadw) have already been involved, and a PC has been investigating who was responsible for digging their way out of Ogof Draenen via the avens which lie beneath Twll Du. That person or persons may still face prosecution for carrying out unauthorised 'works' at an historic monument. According to geologists with a knowledge of the system, Twll Du may well have been a natural shaft that was open at the time the tramway was built, and was blocked as a result of its construction. Be that as it may, it does not affect the legal position. For the foreseeable future, it is clear that cavers need to stay away from Twll Du. If access to it is ever to be restored, it would require consent from Cadw.

I had a chat with Amelia Pannett, the Cadw officer who has been dealing with the matter. She assured me that cavers – such as myself - who used Twll Du before its status was known

would not be prosecuted: ‘We’re not coming to hunt you down.’ Later she sent me an email: ‘Just a quick follow on from our conversation earlier – to clarify, while we will not be seeking to prosecute anyone who used the Twll Du entrance after it was excavated without knowing that they were in breach of the heritage legislation, there is still an active Police investigation into the actual digging of the entrance which could result in a prosecution.’ There was a meeting in January that included the police, Dr Pannett, the CCC and members of the Pwll Ddu Cave Management Group, which manages access to the original Draenen entrance under an agreement with the landowner. Afterwards, some Welsh cavers told me that they feared Cadw might try to justify closing the other two ‘unauthorised’ Draenen entrances, The Nunnery and Drws Cefn, on the grounds that cavers might use the tramway to access them, and so cause damage to it. The Nunnery and Drws Cefn lie on CROW Act access land, and the tramway is a public right of way, so any such move involving Cadw would be controversial, and open to possible legal challenge. However, Dr Pannett told me this was unlikely.

Either way, it seems unlikely that the ongoing argument over additional entrances to Ogof Draenen is over. Meanwhile, I leave you with the comments of Tim Long, who is one of the PDCMG trustees.

He told me that, contrary to a widespread view, the PDCMG does not have a ‘single entrance policy’ with regard to the Draenen system: ‘I think it would be best to avoid that divisive phrase.’

I asked him whether he thought it might be possible to negotiate a compromise with the landowner, PCL, that recognised caver access to The Nunnery and/or Drws Cefn. He replied: ‘As we have seen in the case of Twll Du, land owner discretion is not necessarily absolute in a sensitive area of historical significance. As such, land owner relations are paramount if continued free access (in whatever form) is to be maintained. While it may be possible to reach a compromise position with the land owner along the lines you have suggested, immediately after the public relations disaster that has been Twll Du may not be the best time to bring up the subject.

‘In my view, there needs to be a period of calm and stability on Gilwern Hill where everyone tries hard to put the greater good above their personal ambition. Then, when the land owner perceives cavers as acting responsibly and causing no problems, that would be the time to open discussions on compromise. The irony is that the people behind PCL are actually quite caver friendly and I think they would be open to reasonable discussions given the right climate, but it is a matter of common sense that one “catches more flies with honey than with vinegar”.’

The end