

BCA Newsletter No 33

May 2018

Edited by David Rose



Editorial

The king (or at least the BCA chairman) is dead: long live the king.

As noted in the last issue of the newsletter, Andy Eavis will be stepping down at the end of three consecutive terms of sterling service at the AGM next month.

Fortunately for us, he already has a nominated successor, who because he is the only candidate, is therefore deemed to be elected unopposed.

This individual is Les Williams, the current chair of the Wessex Cave Club – the country's largest. He plans to continue in this role. Active for decades as a cave explorer from Mendip to Mulu, for many of you Les will need no introduction. He has also played a key role in organizing the annual Hidden Earth conferences for several years, a job that means he is well abreast of developments not only in exploratory caving, but cave science and other offshoots of the sport.

My own acquaintance with Les makes me certain he will prove to be worthy successor to Andy, and that he will supply the constant hard work and consensual leadership style the job requires. I hope when he asks that members will give him the support he will very clearly need. Thank you Les for stepping up. I guess that despite your many other cave-related and other commitments, you must have felt you still had some further energy and time!

With the AGM and the new reign of King Les looming, this edition of the newsletter is relatively brief. No doubt for some that will come as a relief. It also contains nothing about access to Ogof Draenen!

BCA AGM

As noted above, the BCA Annual General Meeting is imminent. It is to be held on Sunday, June 3rd at 10.30 am at The Dean Field Studies Centre, Parkend Forest of Dean, GL15 4JA.

Further details are available at this link

http://british-caving.org.uk/wiki3/doku.php?id=general_meetings:2018_agm

including the minutes of the 2017 AGM and this year's agenda.

As well as reports from officers and elections, this includes several important motions for debate, which as usual must command a majority in both BCA 'houses' in order to be passed – from both individual members, and from clubs and other caving bodies.

Three of the most intriguing have been proposed by the BCA's CROW Liaison officer, Tim Allen. The first suggests the establishment of a working group, to establish future BCA 'vision and strategy'. Pointing out that the organisation has found it difficult to fill vacant posts, it states the BCA needs to attract new, younger blood, by setting out a clearer, proactive mission. The motion says the proposed working group should 'outline a strategy to achieve this vision and make recommendations for any changes to the organisations structure and constitution. The group should be made up of a majority of younger cavers from the constituent bodies, regions and membership under an established convener agreed by council.' It should report its conclusions to the 2020 AGM.

Tim's second motion recommends the appointment a suitable technical adviser to examine ways of using technology to permit remote access participation in BCA meetings – a means of broadening the 'pool' of cavers able to get involved without undertaking lengthy journeys. In the same vein is a proposal to allow electronic voting – already used with considerable success in last year's ballot that succeeded in getting big majorities in favour of several changes to the BCA constitution.

ATTRACTING YOUNG CAVERS AND AGE LIMITS

A further motion for the BCA AGM comes from David Botcherby and incoming chairman Les Williams. This is aimed at making the BCA more effective at attracting young cavers – a pressing need, since as most of us seem to be only too well aware, the average age of both BCA members and active cavers is increasing.

The motion suggests replacing the current Youth and Development officer with a Youth and Development standing committee, whose job would be 'to represent the interests of all young cavers, including both student cavers, and those under the age of 18 (such as those in scout teams). Aims of the committee will include (but are not limited to): assisting the formation of new university clubs and scout caving teams; improving access for under 18s; liaising with university unions and guilds; and generally improving the lot of younger cavers.'

As the father of a keen and capable 14-year old caver son, I can only applaud the aims of this motion. It is also encouraging to note that one of my own biggest frustrations in this context appears to be getting resolved – namely, the onerous minimum age restrictions applied on some of the best caves in southern England, ie Mendip, which happens to be my nearest caving area.

The BEC has already decided that the former age limit of 18 will no longer operate, subject to the agreement of trip leaders, to St Cuthbert's Swallet, provided that the parent or legal guardian of the youth in question is also going underground. Meanwhile, having received what appears to have been very questionable advice some months ago from a person who is not a qualified lawyer to the effect that all under 18s must be barred, the Charterhouse Caving Company, which manages access to systems including GB, Longwood, Rhino Rift and Charterhouse, has asked the BCA to obtain updated, independent legal advice on whether it can restore its former system of allowing 16 -18 year olds to descend the caves, subject to a signed waiver. I hope the new advice will enable the CCC to restore its previous, more permissive attitude. The fact is, we will not attract and maintain the interest of teenage cavers in the south if they are denied entry to many of the region's finest systems. Of course, there will always be Mendip's longest cave, Swildon's Hole, where no age restrictions apply, but while this is a wonderful cave with many possible trip options, its novelty does wear off.

CHAIRMAN'S PIECE

And so, for what will be the final time as BCA Chairman, Andy Eavis writes:

I would like to start this piece by saying it will be my last newsletter as Chairman of the British Caving Association. I will be retiring on 3rd June after 9 years in the post. Time flies when you're enjoying yourself!

As I said at the recent council meeting on April 14th, there is a lot of work done within the British Caving Association which ordinary cavers have no idea about. This work is often stressful and is done by a small number of unpaid volunteers. I think British cavers owe them a lot.

If you are in doubt about the value of having a national caving organisation, please look on the BCA website and read my report entitled '*Why we need a national body*'. I don't think anybody has seriously suggested that getting rid of one unified national body for British caving would be a good thing. What we must do is make the one we have stronger and more modern.

I have been exploring caves for well over 50 years. I have enjoyed the experience immensely, and have enjoyed the company of my fellow cavers. However, one or two incidents that have occurred in the last few years have shaken my belief in this wonderful band of cave explorers. There is currently a number of people who inadvertently are upsetting others with mental and sometimes physical bullying techniques. Please can people stand back and look at themselves and remember that we are here to enjoy caves and caving, and to enable future generations to enjoy caves, rather than to be unpleasant and awkward between ourselves.

There are certain issues going on within British caving which are, in my opinion unacceptable. The internet and everything that there is to do with it has brought a lot of very good things into our lives and the dissemination of information can be very

positive. It can also be very negative and destructive. It is easy to use a keyboard to create immense unpleasantness which simply wouldn't happen face to face or over the telephone. Please can people think before typing.

On the other side, there are cavers who are taking life too seriously. It's not easy to get out of that situation but many accusations are incredibly implausible and should not be taken seriously. However, don't trust lawyers! Please can people think before they type and think what machine they are typing on. If people are going to make threats by using the Freedom of Information Act (usually idle threats), don't give people ammunition. Using a personal computer in your name to another private computer should not be a problem.

Moving on, there are an enormous number of positives. At the forthcoming AGM there will be some adjustments which I think will improve the British Caving Association and make it stronger going forward.

I will be standing down as Chairman, but I plan to keep an involvement, and a revamp of the constitution is something I could be involved with. I would also be interested in continuing an involvement on the CROW committee.

I have recently met with Ric and Pat Halliwell and the time line for constitutional adjustments will be to give a brief outline of the programme at the forthcoming AGM and ask for suggestions from anybody for constitutional and structural changes to the British Caving Association system. This application for suggestions will close before the autumn Council meeting when first ideas as to what to do with constitutional adjustments will take place. It could be minor, or it could be much more wide reaching. It's up to people to make suggestions and to stand for the constitutional revamp committee.

It's all very well for certain individuals to suggest sweeping changes and additions for the future, but we must remember that the British Caving Association is totally dependent on its unpaid volunteers. People who are very keen on making suggestions, often critical suggestions should follow up with working to help with the situation. Constructive criticism rather than destructive criticism is what is needed, in conjunction with selfless hard work on behalf others, other than protecting self-interest.

Training, I think, is getting into a better shape, although it is unfortunate that some people don't understand the new system. The conventional position of Training Officer was voted out at the last AGM, and there is now a Recreational Training Officer who will be named and properly designated at the next AGM.

I have now attended several meetings of QMC and the Recreational Training Committee meetings and know that there are a number of good, caring, competent and fair people involved in British cave training and it gives me a great deal of confidence going forward that we will improve a good system even more.

At the AGM there will be a motion that BCA to appoint or employ a Technical Advisor with a specific mandate to introduce an audio/visual technology solution which allows council members with remote access to meetings. This access should allow

members to participate on a similar level to those attending in person. The working system should be in place within one year. This is something definitely worth looking at. It is hard for people from remote regions such as Scotland or Devon and Cornwall to attend Alverchuch just south of Birmingham, the central location currently used for BCA council meetings.

Another suggestion is the use of electronic voting which was proposed at the last BCA AGM and has gone into constitutional changes. There is, in my opinion, absolutely no reason why we shouldn't use electronic voting for our membership to increase the involvement and awareness of our members. This would also obviate the need for or proxy voting at meetings, which in some ways is desirable to increase individual involvement, is always open to abuse by individuals collecting votes to use in a block manner.

Getting a new set up under a new leader to investigate the CROW Act should, I believe, within the next year produce results. This should once and for all sort out this anomaly, but we do have to be very mindful of cave conservation. We should improve *Access and Conservation* to all caves, not only caves on CROW land but other caves as well. Systems for fair access control for caves with long term conservation for maximum visitation should be worked on. I believe the BCA has a major part to play in this. Concreting up the cave entrances in my personal opinion should be only a very last resort. Proper access control, in some cases, via gates and possibly in some cases specific core leaders is a much better option.

For me, the forthcoming AGM will be a mixed pleasure, but I do intend moving forward to continue an involvement.

I would like to finish this piece by thanking my fellow BCA helpers, particularly Robin Weare and Nick Williams.

I wish the future Chairman of the British Caving Association every success and I hope he has as much enjoyment and satisfaction from it as I have had.

GENERAL DON'T PANIC RECOMMENDATION

OK this is really about the General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR which comes into force on the 25th May. Its aim is to give us control over our personal data, which is a good thing. The bad news is that it applies to caving clubs so there'll be a bit of work to implement it.

The Information Commissioners isn't going to sue your club on day one if not fully compliant. There are many, many organisation out there that aren't ready for this. However it is better to crack on with it rather than ignore it. To help, I have written an article that concentrates on the practical step a typical caving club needs to take to implement GDPR. You can read it on the BCA website at http://british-caving.org.uk/wiki3/doku.php?id=it_working_group:gdpr_for_caving_clubs

David Cooke

BCA PRIVACY NOTICE

By now you are probably fed up with companies inviting you to read their Privacy Notice all brought about by the new General Data Protection Regulation. Well, without apology, here is another one. If you would like to know about your personal data rights and how BCA handles them please have a read. The Privacy Notice can be found at british-caving.org.uk/privacy_notice

BCA SUPPORTS MEND OUR MOUNTAINS

Our fraternal colleagues over at the British Mountaineering Council, who unaccountably like to spend their time going up not down, have been running a Mend Our Mountains campaign – details at their website:

<https://www.thebmc.co.uk/shaff-mend-our-mountains-goes-live>

The campaign has an ambitious fund-raising target - £1 million. At the last council meeting, the BCA agreed to donate £1,000 from the fund allocated to our own CROW campaign – in which the BMC has proven to be a valuable ally.

NEW BCA POLICY STATEMENT ON CROW

As readers will be well aware, the BCA has for several years been running a campaign, backed by a 62 per cent majority in a members' referendum, to get the government and its various quangos (such as Natural England and Natural Resources Wales) to recognise that the 'right to roam' provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 apply to caves, and the current policy adopted by these bodies and the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs – that cavers may only enter caves on open access land as far as the limit of daylight – is neither lawful nor an accurate reflection of the intention of Parliament when it passed the Act. This position is reflected by a legal opinion from my sister, Dinah Rose QC, who is a public and administrative law expert.

Tim Allen will be standing down from the job he has performed with extraordinary energy and diligence running this campaign as CROW Liaison officer in October, and I have signalled my willingness to replace him, supported by a BCA CROW committee. Meanwhile, on 6 February, the BCA's Conservation and Access Committee approved the following, extremely helpful statement summarising our policy:

1. The British Caving Association holds the opinion that the CRoW Act already permits access for recreational caving. (Note: this view has been verified by the legal opinion of Dinah Rose QC and supported by many external organisations and individuals as well as its own members).

2. The access principles of the CRoW Act are in accord with BCA's own principles of improving access to caves. The BCA encourages caving bodies who have control of access to caves on 'access land' to renegotiate access agreements to reflect the rights provided by the CRoW Act.

3. The conservation of caves is important. The BCA Conservation Code applies to all caves regardless of the land designation. The BCA agrees with the CRoW guiding principle of the least restrictive option to meet the conservation or safety need.

4. The BCA believe that any particular conservation concerns on CRoW 'access land' can be adequately dealt with by those means already set out in the legislation. The BCA recognise that many of the concerns raised prior to the introduction of the Act never materialised and access to caves should be no different.

5. The BCA will support cavers in their work to develop access to caves on CRoW access land.

Meanwhile, as Tim reports, Environment Secretary Michael Gove has made what may be encouraging noises in a speech outlining his vision for the countryside post-Brexit, saying: 'The more the public, and especially school children, get to visit, understand and appreciate our countryside the more I believe they will appreciate support and champion our farmers..... So public access is a public good.'

Whoever does end up succeeding Tim as CROW Liaison Officer should, I think, pursue a meeting with Mr Gove as a matter of urgency, especially since several parliamentarians, notably Brexit Secretary David Davis, have already backed the BCA campaign.

BCA SAFEGUARDING OFFICER

Thank you Chris Boardman for stepping up as BCA Safeguarding Office for children and vulnerable adults. A caver active for 30 years in regions including the Yorkshire Dales, the Vercors and Mulu, Chris is also a school safety coordinator, and is this plugged into current thinking in this vital area, with regular contact from the police and the various organisations that cover the field.

'I am very much in favour of short, pithy advice to members and clubs, which treats members with respect and gives them sensible, manageable procedures. I am certain that we can continue to keep children and vulnerable adults safe, whilst not imposing an onerous process,' Chris writes.

'I think I would suggest writing a new edition of the BCA advice, while it also makes sense for BCA to have a person that clubs could consult, either for advice (for example, if improving club accommodation), or in the unfortunate event of a

suggestion of abuse. The policy should provide a contact point for clubs to reach out to, and indeed a suggested process to follow if there is a concern.'

APPEAL FOR ARTICLES

This newsletter is rather shorter than my first two. Of course, part of the reason (as mentioned above) is that there is nothing about the perennial space filler, Ogoof Draenen. (Yes, I am being facetious.) But it's also because no. one, apart from Andy Eavis, has sent me any articles. If you want to read more, please make contributions. You can email me on: david [at] davidroseuk.com

The End