



Editorial

I've been working on a book, to be called *The World Beneath the World*, which I hope will be published in 2020. The idea is to present a favourable image of our sport and to produce something which will appeal to both caving and non-caving readers: to convey some of the wonder, excitement and fascination we derive from the underworld, which keeps many of us involved for decades.

It will include some history, so as part of my research, I've been going through old issues of *Descent*, the magazine which Chris Howes has now been editing with skill and distinction for close to thirty years. Recently I happened to find some articles from the 1990s describing exploration in Ogof Draenen. One or two of them were written by the late Nigel Rogers, more commonly known as Nig, who died suddenly this year; one or two others mentioned him. It wasn't the fact he'd spent a lot of time pushing new passages in this great cave, still Wales's longest, that surprised me. As Martin Laverty's obituary of Nig later in this newsletter makes clear, his commitment to and record of new cave exploration was remarkable. What astonished me was reading about some of the company he kept while doing it.

It's no secret that in the long, bitter disputes over access to Draenen and its several entrances, Nig took an entrenched position. He was in favour of multiple entrances, and therefore found himself in conflict with the trustees of the Pwll Du Cave Management Group, which manages access to the cave and is responsible for upholding an agreement with the landowner, Pwll Du Conservation Ltd. This says cavers may only use the original entrance. Nig sometimes said harsh things about those who disagreed with him. His opponents, it must be said, were equally vehement when they talked about Nig. Hence my surprise: back in the day, in that glad, confident morning when Ogof Draenen was still being explored at a rapid rate, Nig was apparently on friendly terms with those he came to see as his enemies. They went on trips together, and wrote them up in the magazine.

Elsewhere in this newsletter I report the latest Draenen developments: the sealing this month of the newest, fourth entrance, Twll Du, by contractors working for Cadw, the Welsh heritage body, with reinforced concrete. But that isn't what I want to focus on here.

The sad fact is, it doesn't matter what side you take in the Ogof Draenen 'wars'. As many cavers not directly involved will, I suspect, agree, they have become so toxic, so contaminated by personal venom, they may soon cause real damage to the image of caving as a whole. They have already led, indirectly, to two police investigations. (For details see the later report.) There have, allegedly, been personal threats, bullying, and criminal damage. I am told the mental health and physical well-being of several people has been affected as a result.

I do not pretend there is any easy solution to this problem. I don't have a scheme in my pocket that might heal this horrible running sore. I also know from talking to both sides that the sense of grievance which is currently the only thing they have in common is genuine, and deeply felt. But you could have said the same thing about Northern Ireland 25 years ago, yet there, we have since enjoyed two decades of peace.

You might think it mad or disproportionate to compare arguments over a cave system with the Troubles. But I believe the Northern Ireland precedent does have some relevance. Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionists were able to stop the conflict and, in some cases, forge personal friendships, because they both found ways to put their hatred and grievances behind them.

Somehow, that has to happen at Ogot Draenen, or this struggle will continue until all its protagonists, not just Nig, have gone to their graves. And for peace to break out, someone is going to have to make the first move.

As a national newspaper journalist, I think we are fortunate that no one from the media has yet picked up this saga and publicized it. If they do, it won't be from me. But if this does happen, I fear it will negate some of the kudos and goodwill the caving community has rightly earned through the magnificent efforts made by British cavers to rescue the boys' football team in July from the flooded Tham Luang system in Thailand – not just the divers, who found the boys and dived them out, but the wider supporting network.

Cavers and caving are better than the rows over Ogot Draenen, and caving, I am convinced, can and often is a force for good – something that adds to the store of human knowledge, while enabling people overcome challenges, find fulfillment, and forge strong friendships. After this gloomy start to the newsletter, readers will need something more positive – hence the following article by Adele Ward, who after starting caving at the end of her thirties less than two years ago, has become one of the most active cavers in the north. As she reveals, the impact on her life has been dramatic.

Meanwhile, excellent accounts of aspects of the Thai rescue can be found both in *Descent* and on the Darkness Below <https://darknessbelow.co.uk> website. Diver Rick Stanton has already told his gripping story in a lecture at Hidden Earth, and Jason Mallinson is set to do so in the Petzl Underground session at the Kendal Mountain Festival on November 16th – for which tickets are available here: <http://www.mountainfest.co.uk/programme/event/petzl-underground-session1>

Still New To Caving? By Adele Ward





Above: Adele in Redmire Pot and one of her favourites – Mossdale Caverns. Photos by Ian Cummins.

New to caving? Well, after almost two years, it still feels new to me. But my enthusiasm only grows: put simply, the more I learn, and the more I immerse myself in this pastime, the more I realise how vast and astonishing it all really is. So what's caving done for me and to me as a person? To be frank, it's been revolutionary.

I'd always wondered what lay beneath the above ground, a curiosity bolstered by mining tales from my grandfather, and our many conversations we had about the life he experienced in them from a young age. Yet I didn't go underground until I was 39. I was a wife, a mum, a nurse. I had done some climbing, but until January 2017, no caving. Then I joined a group that included two of my climbing friends on a visit to Gaping Gill main chamber. We went in via Small Mammal Pot. Seeing the chamber was breathtaking. Exiting via Bar Pot seemed

harder. It made me feel scared, but also showed me something I hadn't been sure existed in me: I could work through a challenging and frightening situation and deal with it.

Some might say I bit off more than I could chew, but since that first trip, I've been caving about 150 times and mining – mainly in the Nenthead lead mine complex near where I live in Yarm, southwest of Middlesbrough - about 50 times. As a mental health nurse, I find the unusual becomes the norm, and not many things in my 'normal' life faze me. Caving, at least to start with, was different: there have been situations that on first glance that I haven't known how to react to. But that's where your friends matter, and I never have a met a bunch of folks so willing to help encourage and support a person's passion as cavers.

Joining a club initially seemed something to 'just do'. When I did, I realised I hadn't merely become a member of a bunch of people. Caving clubs are rare and precious things, because they bring together a gang of like-minded folks who don't get that glazed over look on their faces when I discuss caving, like many of my non-caving friends and family do when I try to mention it. They've also helped me 'get over my issues' with SRT trips (of which I was, to begin with, petrified). Caving is an odd sport, as you actually put your life in the hands of friends: trusting that ropes are correctly rigged, that your mates know what's within your limits - and that they won't get bored of my constant chatter.

The ability to be frank with people is a quality I very much appreciate, and this has been demonstrated to me in a variety of ways – for example, Ian admitting we are lost again ... or Leif holding my hand for a minute when I was feeling nervous of the big pitch in Simpson Pot, even though it was rigged. Whatever the problem, we have found solutions - that later became fond memories in the pub. I am very proud to say I am now the honorary secretary of The White Rose Cave and Pothole Club.

I'm sure all cavers are constantly asked by friends why we do it. It's not the bits that provoke lots of adrenalin that draw me to caving. It's the sharing of achievements with friends. Early on, I stumbled across Sid Perou's films, and these have become a source of much amusement and inspiration. Pippikin Pot springs to mind. I have watched this film a ridiculous number of times. Even the cave's name was somehow evocative to me. Ian Cummins had watched the same film, but never visited the hole – so we conceived a plot to head there ASAP. To say I was feeling rather excited the first time we completed the through trip to Mistral Hole would be an understatement. Every pitch, squeeze, traverse and formation we encountered had me clapping my hands with delight. 'Eek this is the Stemple Squeeze Ian – damn, I know what's on the other side.' Caving friends are there to help and with Ian 'spotting' me down the drop beyond the squeeze with words of encouragement I managed it. I could have jumped in the air and clicked my heels together once down, and possibly did.

The icing on the cake was speaking to the original explorers post-trip. Hearing their stories of the place led to the conclusion that we needed to go old school, and recreate a trip similar to them, rather than exiting via Mistral. Attempting the Stemple Squeeze heading out provoked an internal chuckle, making me question why on earth I thought this would be a good idea. But I made it: still superb fun.

Another huge highlight for me has been helping Ian dive in Redmire Pot. The first time I tackled this, it felt a challenge: it's tight, wet, and generally what I love about this sport. The last time, after many trips, I'd learnt all the obstacles by doing them time and again. A noted shift in my mentality - testing parts had come to hold delight through recognition. Learning a

cave's obstacles is a pleasurable experience. As you tackle them more easily, it dawns that you might be getting better. Caving has given me a personalized achievement schedule: pointers as to progress, and passing them is a fantastic feeling. Hearing descriptions of certain trips last year, they made me feel slightly ill. Completing them several times, then finding them easy going, is something not usually experienced in life.

So what else has caving done? I now have a spare bedroom filled with kit and books. Learning about the geology of caves and the working of mines means I'm never short of reading material. When I started caving, seeing an underground stream way appearing from round a corner, made me stop and wonder, 'where did that come from? Look at the space!' I started by purchasing a geology book aimed at children. I say with pride that nowadays, I can properly understand some of Tony Waltham's masterpiece, *Caves and Karst of the Yorkshire Dales*. I've really enjoyed getting to this point.

Meanwhile, caving has been good for my body, as well as my mind. I can say hand on heart I've visited a gym three times in my life, all of which I found boring. I liken gyms to running on a hamster wheel: exercise for its own sake. Lacking a focus leads to extra pounds. Not any more. Caving is, as readers will know, at times a strenuous sport. Having discovered it, I'm probably the healthiest I've been since before having the kids.

Speaking of kids, what a way to spend a family day out! My daughter caved before me with the school caving club, and she is annoyingly good at navigation, and ladder coiling. Being able to enjoy a passion with Elise is fundamental. She says she is basing her university choices on caving clubs. In hindsight, I wish I'd done the same at her age. Taking my 10-year-old son James to Dow Cave for his first caving trip felt like a privilege. My fingers are crossed – has he caught the bug?

Caving has also given me a voice. You might have gathered that I can talk, but previously, this has never translated into writing. I'm dyslexic, and have always shied away from writing stuff that may be read by more than a handful of people. But caving was such overwhelming instant fun to me that I wanted to tell everyone how much. I couldn't run round every caver, individually telling them, so I had to bite the bullet and post trip reports. This was only made possible by support from my husband and Ian, who tirelessly edited my ramblings into proper, written prose. Simon encouraged me to be honest with how I felt about my underground experiences. This gave me a voice I never knew I had.

What's next? Langcliffe Pot caught my attention early - why did I buy that damn black book? Langcliffe has got character and is a changing beast of a cave, it's incredible, it's magic - everything that holds my caving attention. I've never yet been past the Boireau Falls Chamber squeeze, and I keep putting it off. Yet the stories of friends, past explorers, have captivated me, and the potential of the place takes it to the next level. I'm still not sure if my frame will actually fit through the BF squeeze. Cleaning up all the wire and rubbish left down there would feel a bigger achievement.

What else have I learnt? Mud washes out, pebbles fall out of your hair, and water-proof make-up is best. Decent washing machines are far more robust than the cheaper ones. Caving harnesses are a pain in the arse. Fabric conditioner on wetsuits is good, but taking a bum bag underground is not. Caving people are generally quirky, but fabulous, brilliant, gifted and overall simply great. Finally, Sid Perou caving films rule. Meanwhile, I'm getting curious about another cave with an evocative name. Wish me luck: it's called Quaking Pot.

Hirlatzhöhle – W.U.G. Pot link breaks British expo depth record

Most cave exploration requires persistence, whether it's applied through digging, shaft-bashing, or diving. But in the entire history of the sport, there have been few if any efforts as long or as determined as the Dachstein project, led by Joel Corrigan on trips every year (and sometimes twice a year) for 20 years, and carried on for more than two decades before that by earlier generations of mainly British cavers. On September 6th, 2018, this long siege reached a very significant milestone when Joel, Tom Foord, Ian Holmes and Axel Hack (who took the photos published here) connected the far end of Wot U Got Pot to the mighty Hirlatzhöhle, so creating a system 1,560 metres deep (ninth deepest in the world) and 113 kilometres long. This beats the previous depth record for caves pushed by British expeditions, held by the Pozu del Xitu – Cueva Culiembro system in the Picos de Europa, by almost 300 metres.



Joel Corrigan (L), Tom Foord, Axel Hack and Ian Holmes at the point where they connected the W.U.G. Pot survey to the Hirlatz, and (below) a view of the vast passage where they made the link – Wadiland.



To my eternal regret and frustration, I caught a nasty virus that someone brought along to the expedition and gave to several members, and so had to pull out of a camping trip that would have enabled me to see the link for myself, at a depth of around 800 metres. But I experienced enough of W.U.G. Pot to know first-hand that these are tough, cold caves, in places close to freezing point, and with strong wind chill too. They take no prisoners.

Dachstein veterans say that most of W.U.G. is easy by Dachstein standards. On the main route down, there are none of the long, tight rifts, or heartbreaking, freezing wallows in freezing mud that are typical of the area. Nevertheless, it still took a decade of hard work to find and push the link. At the bottom of roughly 600 metres of pitches, the cave hits an upper level of the huge Hirlatz phreatic tunnels. But the way on through was impeded by steep, muddy ramps, chokes, a flat-out crawl that had to be dug and enlarged by capping, several awkward aid climbs, and then some even muddier, boot-grabbing ramps. Meanwhile a false lead in a desperate meander – its name, Forlorn Hope, tells you everything – absorbed a huge amount of energy and almost broke Ian Holmes through hypothermia. And anyone who has ever been underground with Ian knows that he is one hard, able caver.

Exploration on the Hirlatz side, led by the local Austrian Hallstat - Obertrauern caving club but with strong British input, has also been very demanding. Flooding means the system is usually done in winter, when merely reaching the entrance involves a tiring, lengthy climb up snow slopes. Getting into the further reaches of the system required the installation of fixed ladders up to 60 metres high, and to reach Wadiland, in the cave's western extremities, the diving of two 250 metre sumps, pioneered by Joel and Martin Groves over the course of several expeditions. Accompanied by Chris Jewell, in 2014 – when high water meant the two sumps became one, of more than 500 metres – Joel reached his furthest point in the Hirlatz at a well-marked survey station and a fixed rope which he and Chris left rigged on a bolt-climb. It was spotting these from W.U.G. Pot that enabled him to be certain that at long last, the long dreamt-of connection had become reality.

He was recording all this as it happened on a Go-Pro, and the soundtrack, which he played to me a few days later on his laptop in the Wiesberghaus mountain hut, conveys the excitement: 'I'm 99 per cent sure I've been up here before,' Joel says, as he walks across a rocky slope. 'Yes, yes, there's the rope – ha ha! Woo hoo! Oh my God boys this it, the culmination of a 20-year obsession. We've made the connection to the Hirlatz.' As he speaks and whoops, his voice echoes off the walls of the vast gallery. A moment later, he sets up the camera and faces it, recording his emotions: 'Making this connection has taken a team of adventurers ten years, summer and winter, it's been my personal quest for 20 years. I think it's going to take a while to sink in. I don't really know what to say. This is my life's work.' Then practical considerations intrude: 'Unfortunately, we've now got to get all the way back to camp' [a demanding trip of around five hours].

The potential for further extensions, and greater depth, is considerable. Pushing in other known caves currently being explored by the Dachstein project is well advanced, and these are up to 100 metres higher than W.U.G. Pot and almost certainly connected to it. And at depth, well beyond the underground camp, there is a big tunnel carrying most of the draught. It ends at an unclimbed aven, and is heading south, towards the far side of the massif – and a possible connection with Voodoo Canyon, the range's highest pothole. If that were ever achieved, the total depth of the Hirlatz would be more than 2,200 metres.

Of particular note is that Joel's expeditions have always been about as non-cliquey as they possibly could be, with a general invitation to hardened tigers, old farts like me, and student expo learners alike. They are also pretty cheap, and through them many well-known exploratory expedition cavers have learnt the necessary techniques. By any yardstick, the W.U.G. – Hirlatz connection is a magnificent achievement. Let's hope there are still more to come.

Some more shots by Axel Hack to whet our appetites are below. Readers interested in coming on the trip next year can find more details here:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/dachsteincaving/>



Shaft in the 700 metre entrance series.



Phreas deep inside the mountain.



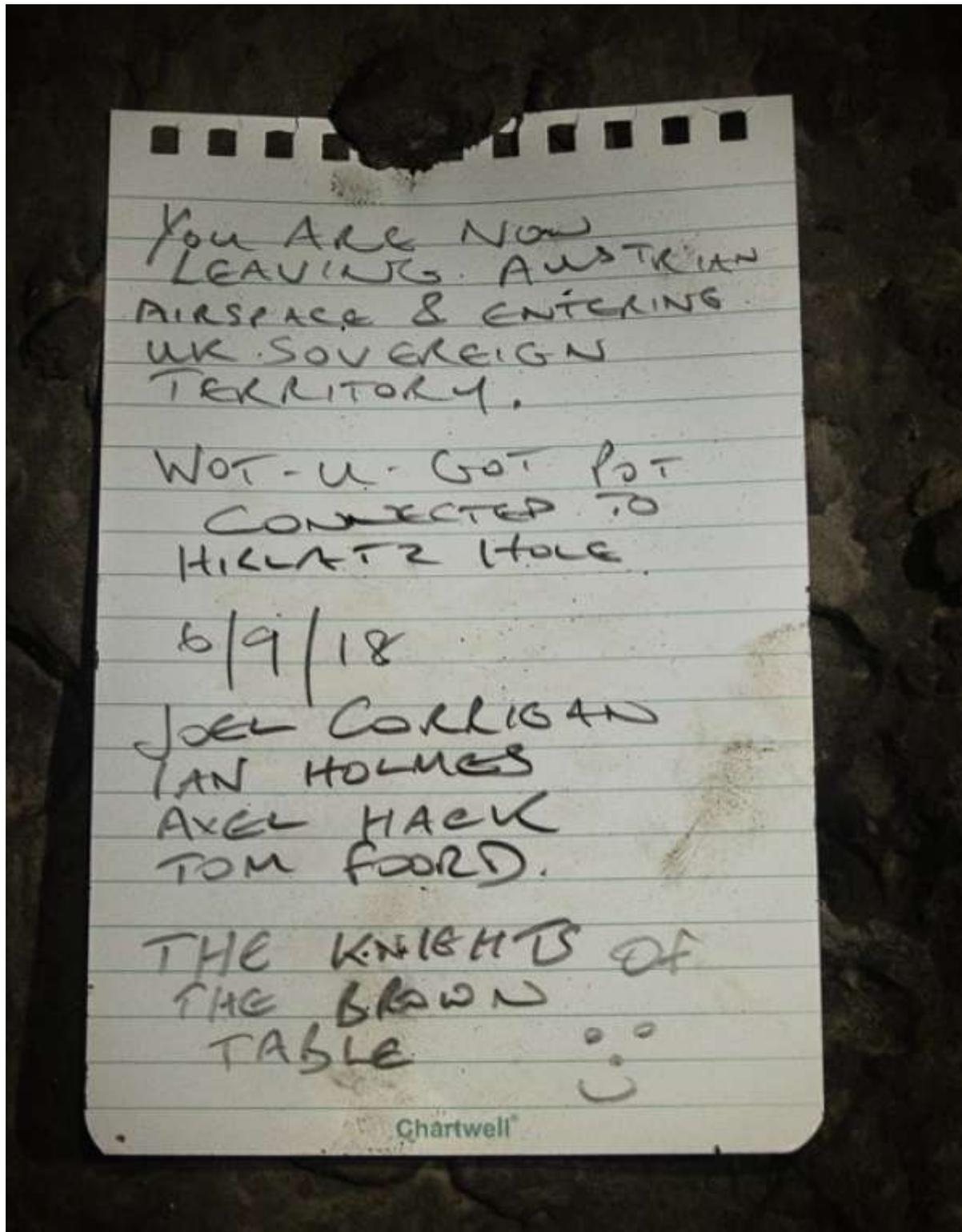
The Chutney Mines – an awkward crawl 700 metres down that had to be dug out and capped.



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Below the connection point.



Note left at the point where W.U.G. and the Hirlatz were joined.

Chairman's piece

Les Williams was elected BCA chairman unopposed at the 2018 AGM. Here he introduces himself.

As the new chairman of the British Caving Association I have been asked to write a piece for the newsletter.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Les Williams and I am a member of the Wessex Cave Club. I've been caving since 1982, and have caved throughout the UK, across Europe and around the world.

Quite a few of you will know me due to my association with Hidden Earth, but I have also been the Conservation and Access Officer for CSCC for many years, as well as being involved with the BCA since its formation, and before that, with the NCA.

It's important to me that BCA continues working for its members, and that we ensure the interests of the caving community are represented when dealing with external agencies.

Les Williams
BCA Chairman.

BCA rates unchanged

At the October council meeting, it was decided that BCA membership will stay the same next year as it has been in 2018. Details on the BCA website <http://british-caving.org.uk/wiki3/doku.php?id=membership:dim>

Nig(el John) Rogers, 1953 – 2018: an appreciation by Martin Laverty

I first met Nig when we were in Leeds in 1976. He was already a serious digger, notably, as he recalled on the UKcaving forum in 2012, at Crackpot Cave in Swaledale, 'an extremely promising digging site. However, as you discovered, it is also potentially very dangerous and would benefit from some serious shoring further in. I was very fortunate not to kill myself there in September 1975 and survived to tell the tale purely due to heroic efforts on the part of certain members of the CRO'. Crackpot is not far from his home in Middlesborough, where he grew up keen on team sports such as football, but also started exploring the abandoned alum mines along the coast of the N. York Moors. He became more involved in caving when studying history at Cardiff University from 1972. His year in Leeds was to train as a teacher, but had been delayed for a year because of his accident: his companion in the cave who made the callout had been Mary, his girlfriend from Cardiff University, who had

gone on to nurse in Sheffield. Qualified, he moved to Bacup, Lancashire, joined the Craven PC, married Mary, and spent a couple more years caving in the Dales.

The prospects of finding new cave systems in South Wales lured them away to Brynamman in 1980. Mary, now a district nurse, could drop Nig off for long walks over the Black Mountain, and the move soon produced a new cave in the upper Twrch valley: Ogof Diwedd yr Enfys. This is one of the most remote caves in Britain and was later to give him and Clive Gardener another close encounter with disaster when they emerged to meet a flood pulse that would have engulfed the entrance, let alone the tight, low ducks beyond. Having joined SWCC, much effort was put into exploring DYO and OFD, not to mention thoroughly researching prospects in the club library, and through long talks with the likes of Bill Little, who passed on a still unfulfilled interest in the potential of Sinc-y-Giedd, Mel Davies, and just about anyone he could find! Few shakeholes on the Black Mountain weren't investigated, especially on the western side. In 1989, first a long term dig near Pwll Swnd, which is typically near nowhere, coincided with the publication of Sebastião Salgado's photos of Brazilian gold miners toiling like ants. The dig, which became Serra Pelada, didn't go far, but the Grwp Ogofeydd Garimpeiros was born, named in homage to Selgado's photograph, as an informal digging group centered round Nig and his (fully licensed) explosives store. Then, on August Bank Holiday, another dig in a remote place went: I stole Nig's glory by entering the first fifty metres of Ogof y Garimpeiros, a small sink near another which a dye test showed linked from near the top of Carreg yr Ogof to Frwd Las, some 5km away and 240m lower.

Nig always liked to know what was going on and no area seemed unknown to him. We visited some remote spots on the Black Mountain, even taking Martyn Farr to dive in a cave high on Carreg yr Ogof, and surveyed parts of OFD, Pant y Llyn, Claisfer, Sinc-y-Giedd, and Ap Robert with him over the years. Bill Gascoine had helped Nig with dye testing, and it was in his discovery of Carno Adit that Nig pushed Southern Discomfort to the south and then the Precious Years to the north. An alliance with Oxford University Cave Club, which started with surveying Southern Discomfort for him, led to their discoveries in the Littoral Zone. Later, Nig started doing surveys for himself, but he became less interested in publishing his results, which is a pity as he could write well.

When Ogof Draenen went big in 1995, Nig was soon deeply involved. With Mary, he pushed north into Galeria Garimpeiros and Forever Changed and south to Going Somewhere: on one weekend in 1996 his leads at Y Gwter Vawr and Gone with the Winds/Gone in the Years both led to significant breakthroughs by OUCC.

Nig's last major exploration success was in 2004/5 when another remote cave was extended to well over a kilometer with several pitches, with much more length and at least 240m depth potential. Although surveyed, no details have been published, and it remains as Nig's legacy to his Garimpeiro friends.

Increasing problems with free access to caves became a preoccupation. This had started with the Brecon Beacons National Park attempting to codify digging access on the Black Mountain in the 1980s, but became toxic when Draenen gained new entrances and the PDCMG, in which Nig had involved the Garimpeiros from the start, became embroiled in trying to close them. The result was a rift between Nig and some of his former friends, a deep breach which had not healed by the time of his sudden, untimely death in August. Nig had helped open Drws Cefn, the third Draenen entrance, but agreed to gate it after it was connected to the system. The gate, whose construction Nig had organized, disappeared after

the PDCMG changed the lock without notice. Though Nig was not involved with opening the Twll Du entrance, he used it on some of his last caving trips, reliving his exhilarating explorations of some 20 years earlier in the company of some of his many friends, new and old, and also passing on his passion for exploration to a new generation. The result of the recent BCA ballot on CRoW rewarded much effort that he had put in behind the scenes.

Outside caving, Nig was a competent climber, followed many sports, enjoyed music, and read widely, especially on military history. Having largely given up teaching in favour of some revenue from sports photography, Nig spent much of his time surfing on the coasts of southwest Wales. He will be missed, not least from the UKcaving forum where his occasionally combative tone could (as in real life) raise hackles, but where he was often informative and supportive.

Prestigious Mulu Caves Project award

Congratulations to former BCA chairman Andy Eavis, who recently accepted the Merdeka Award - 'Malaysia's most prestigious award for excellence' - for the work that's been done in opening up the great caves of Mulu, a task in which he has been involved since the first Royal Geographical Society expedition in 1977 - 8. He has been a participant or leader in 13 of the 26 Mulu expeditions, most recently last year. The citation for the prize, which is worth about £55,000 and was awarded at a ceremony in Kuala Lumpur by the Sultan of Perak, Darul Muizzidin Shah, says it was given for Andy's 'outstanding contribution to the people of Malaysia,' and goes on to praise 'his pioneering work in the areas of geomorphology and cave survey through the Mulu Cave projects with the Royal Geographical Society Expedition and the discovery of the Sarawak Chamber, leading to extended research on rainforest habitats and ecosystem, and establishing international collaborations for scientific and nature expeditions.'

Dick Willis, another veteran of Mulu caving who survived a demanding through trip there earlier this year, reports that Andy has 'no intention of keeping any of [the money] himself because the Award represents an acknowledgement of the work of 174 cavers of various nationalities who have participated in 26 expeditions that have taken place in Mulu over the last four decades, and which have contributed hugely to the study and management of this stunning UNESCO world heritage site.' The money, he adds, 'is currently being held in a Malaysian account while any tax implications of moving it to Britain are explored and discussions take place between Andy and other key Mulu Caves Project personnel about various options for its use.'

This is, of course, another great achievement for British caving in what has clearly been a tremendous year. It is perhaps unfortunate that the citation mentions only Andy, because he wasn't in fact present on many of the expeditions, and the Project's success clearly owes a huge amount to the hard work of others in organising trips, collating the vast amount of survey data, and of course, challenging exploration. With so many involved, it might seem invidious to name anyone, but consistent, important contributors include Matt Kirby, Mark Brown, Tim Allen, Hugh St Lawrence, Dave Nixon and Dick Willis himself. I'm sure Andy

(who is abroad at the time of this writing) would be only too happy to acknowledge this, and I will report in a later edition how the Project decides to allocate the proceeds of this very valuable prize.

Twll Du blocked with reinforced concrete

In earlier editions of this newsletter, I have reported the controversial opening of Twll Du, a fourth entrance to Ogof Draenen, and the fact that it lies within the boundary of a scheduled historic monument, an old mine tramway. Earlier this year the Welsh heritage body Cadw issued a 'Stop Notice' preventing access, and made it clear that anyone using the entrance risked prosecution. Meanwhile, Gwent police began an investigation into how Twll Du was opened, since doing so also constituted a possible criminal offence.

At the end of September professional bat consultant Peter Smith, the biology officer for the Pwll Du Cave Management Group, which manages access to Ogof Draenen, submitted a report to Natural Resources Wales, Cadw, the Brecon Beacons National Park, and the landowner, Pwll Du Conservation Ltd. It revealed details of a survey he conducted showing that two protected species of bats had been roosting in Twll Du. However, it came too late to stop work that had already begun to block the entrance with reinforced concrete.

Dr Amelia Pannett, the Cadw officer who has been dealing with this, told me that Cadw and the landowner had conducted their own surveys and were satisfied bats had not been using Twll Du. She said: 'We did everything we could to ensure bats were not using the hole and our experts were satisfied that they weren't.'

This, however, may be problematic. If Twll Du was being used by bats, then blocking it may be an offence under wildlife law. The Gwent police have therefore begun a second investigation. A police spokesman told me: 'Gwent Police can confirm we received a report of criminal damage at Twll Du Cave in Blaenavon. It was reported a hole had been located within the cave's structure, which is registered as an ancient monument and is protected by Cadw. Following concerns to the cave's archaeology underneath, the hole has now been filled. Officers have subsequently received a report of a bat roost inside the cave. At this time, enquiries are ongoing into both allegations and the relevant surveys are being conducted to ensure the safety of any bats located.'

One of the questions the police will have to look into is whether Cadw was right to disregard the report by Dr Smith, even if, as is apparently accepted by all concerned, it was submitted at a late stage. I understand that a copy was shown to the contractors at the site before they poured any concrete, but that it was ignored. Another may be the decision by Cadw to go for a form of closure that, self-evidently, was extremely robust – and could not permit any bat access, as opposed to some form of vented structure or gate.

I am trying to report these facts in a neutral, unbiased way, acutely aware that almost anything concerning Ogof Draenen (see editorial) can swiftly descend into confrontation and recrimination. I hope I have succeeded. In any event, it is evident that this episode is not yet concluded.

BCA Crow campaign

Your editor is now also the convenor of the BCA Crow campaign group, which was set up by the AGM. I intend to focus mainly on policymakers: I think we need to establish whether we really have a chance of getting official recognition without legislation that Crow applies to caves, as my sister Dinah Rose's legal opinion states, and if we don't, consider a new strategy. In the second week of October I met with Julian Glover, a fellow journalist who is leading a review by Defra of National Parks and access to them. I made our case forcefully, and sent him supporting documents. Julian is an outdoors lover who has a house in the Peak District, so I offered to organise a trip for him down Giant's Hole. He says he's up for it. We'll see what transpires.

Nick Williams steps down as BCA secretary

I'm sad to report that Nick Williams, who has been fulfilling the herculean role of BCA secretary, stepped down earlier this month for reasons of ill health. I'm sure we all wish him the very best. Robin Weare, our treasurer, has kindly agreed to fill in until we can find a successor. Meanwhile, we do have a successor treasurer: the distinguished cave explorer and accountant Howard Jones is now Robin's deputy, and is set to take over after next year's AGM. Sadly, Claire Peacey, our administrator, has also had to resign for health reasons.

BCA: a vision for the future

Last summer's AGM decided the time had come to set up a working group to consider setting out a vision for the future of the BCA. This is still in an embryonic stage, but its convenor, Hellie Adams, is reaching out to cavers and caving clubs and other bodies in the search for ideas. Please get in touch with me or her if you want to contribute. In a related vein, the new Publications and Information boss, Jane Allen, came to the last BCA council meeting with a long list of proposals for making the BCA communicate better and helping us to spread a positive caving message. There will be more to report on all this soon.

The end.