

COUNCIL OF SOUTHERN CAVING CLUBS

NEWSLETTER

February 2024



**Conservation work, Wookey Hole
Before and after photo:
Wayne Starsmore**

Upcoming General Meeting

Tuesday 13th February 2024 from 19:00 via Zoom

Draft minutes from the November 2023 AGM and previous meetings are available on the [CSCC website](#) along with the agenda for the upcoming meeting and officers reports. The Agenda is listed under "GM Tuesday 13 February 2024", and the minutes of the November meeting are under "GM Monday 13 November 2023"

Please follow the below link to join the meeting on Zoom:

<https://bristol-ac-uk.zoom.us/j/91912086717?pwd=cms1UkxWWG9kaGRST1hQeU4vY0tMQT09>

Remember that only nominated club representatives may vote, but anyone can attend as an observer and join the discussion. As ever, please follow the usual online meeting etiquette and ensure your microphone is muted when you are not speaking.

Mendip Caving Group Celebrates 70 Years



Nordrach Cottage

Notable anniversaries are a good way to renew acquaintances and catch up on what your former and current caving mates have been doing. For younger cavers, it's a chance to strengthen bonds with those who laid and reinforced the foundations of the caving world we all enjoy.

Bill Chadwick, secretary of the Mendip Caving Group writes:

"To celebrate the 70th anniversary of the MCG, we are holding a formal dinner at Wookey Hole caves, on the evening of Saturday 27th April 2024. If you have an association with the MCG and would like to book a place at the dinner, there is still time to do so, using the '70th' page on our web site. <https://www.mendipcavinggroup.org.uk/70th-anniversary/>

"There are set to be quite a few veteran MCG cavers on Mendip that weekend, so there should be a good opportunity for meeting up with old friends. As well as the dinner, we are planning some daytime events the same weekend."



Wealden Cave and Mine Society - a Profile



Wealden Cave and Mine Society (WCMS) was established in 1967. Membership was largely drawn from the Sussex and Surrey region, and this is still the focus of many of the club's activities, although our now much-expanded membership, about 180 at the last count, includes many cavers from across the south of the country.

In the Southeast, WCMS runs open day events each summer in the sand caves in Reigate, Surrey, under a licence from the local council. These old sand mines and cellars are a few of several subterranean sites of the area that have kept members busy since the 1960s. WCMS has also invested a good deal of effort and money into protecting and studying the old mine-workings in the Upper Greensand of East Surrey. This includes surveying, conservation, archival research, keeping the sites as secure and safe as practically possible, and working with other parties such as the Historical Royal Palaces Agency, National Trust, local authorities and various relevant landowners.



Some of the Reigate Caves team at the end of a busy day

Our primary caving region for many years was Somerset, and from 1970 we had exclusive use of an unusual caving hut, which was simply called “The Cabin”, not far from Longwood Swallet. This continued for some 50 years, but ultimately, with landowner family changes, this came to an end.

Since 1984, in anticipation of the day when we would have to move on, the club has accumulated funds with the aim of acquiring our own base somewhere. In 2010, we signed a lease agreement with South Wales Caving Club to restore and occupy Penwyllt Inn, more commonly known as “The Stump”. The bulk of our building fund was used in the restoration of this 1860s cottage, and we are justifiably proud of the result of the work we have had done here. Our membership numbers have grown significantly since 2010, largely a result of cavers joining who have discovered how good a base it is for caving in South Wales, combined with our welcoming nature as a club.



“The Stump”, properly known as Penwyllt Inn, the WCMS cottage on a sunny day!

Naturally, our main caving focus has changed from Somerset to Wales, but we have retained our strong involvement in the Southeast. The Reigate Caves provide a very welcome contribution to funds which we use for a number of important projects, both in Surrey and elsewhere.

Peter Burgess (WCMS)

Pen Park Hole Access Information

Pen Park Hole is located under a small public park in Southmead, north Bristol. The land is owned by the city council and the cave has been designated a SSSI by Natural England. The cave is gated and locked – as would be expected for a site so close to domestic housing – and access is administered by a consortium of three caving clubs, the BEC, UBSS and WCC.



Adrian Fawcett in East Passage. Photo: Steve Sharp

Each club appoints two wardens for the cave and every trip must be accompanied by a warden. It is the warden's job to ensure that no damage is done either to the cave or to cavers' relations with its neighbours and the council. Cavers should travel to and from the site changed, the cave is very muddy, so be prepared!

There are no formal restrictions on who may visit the cave but the warden has full discretion in this regard, especially as to the extent of any given visit. Trips are limited to six people including the warden.

Parties intending to go beyond the head of the main pitch must supply their own tackle. A full descent requires 30 m of ladder, long slings to belay to the in situ bolts and suitable lifeline. Descending to the ledge requires 10 m of ladder and suitable equipment for using the traverse line to the west ledge.

Visits may be arranged by contacting the secretary at secretary@penparkhole.org.uk who will liaise with wardens as to their availability and ensure that the keys are accessible on the day.

Graham Mullan, UBSS

Conservation & Access News – February 2024

Swildon's Changing Barn

The work to replace the floor in the Swildon's Changing Barn has been completed and the barn is now available for use. Details are published elsewhere in this newsletter.

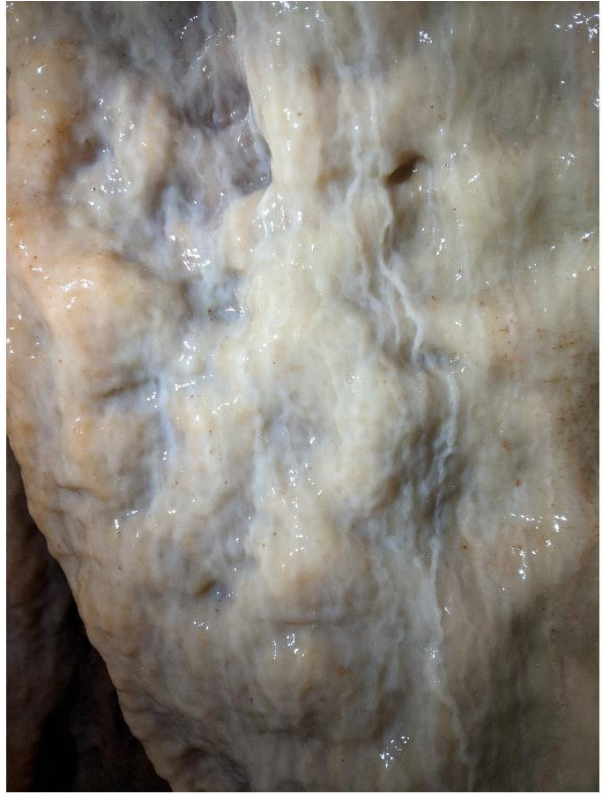
Longleat

We have made some very positive and significant progress with Longleat to regain access to their caves in Cheddar Gorge. In November, Longleat allowed Mendip Cave Rescue to perform a rescue practice in Reservoir Hole. We then took the Cheddar showcave manager (Fenia) and the Facilities Manager (Paul) on a trip to show them the Frozen Deep in Reservoir hole (Thanks to Tom Chapman, Martin Grass and Mak Kellaway for help with this). Subsequently Martin and I had a further meeting with them and met Longleat's new Chief Operating Officer (Nick). They were all very positive about moving forward to restore caver access. They explained that they need the support of the Longleat Estates team and had a meeting with them arranged for January. I had an informal meeting with Paul mid-January. He informed me that the Longleat Estates Team meeting went well and the Estates Director is "on-board". The next step is for the Estates Director to get the blessing of Lord Bath. A meeting is planned for the end of February for this. Assuming Lord Bath has no objections then we should be in a position to start negotiating an access agreement. Cheddar's management would like to see this in place by the end of the year, although I'd hope to have it in place for the summer. We have also arranged a further visit for Paul into Reservoir Hole, towards the end of February, to show him some of the harder to reach places in the cave.

Wookey Hole Cave

The access agreement with Wookey has run smoothly over the past four months and it is proving to be a popular caving location. Since the last CSCC meeting (Nov 2023) there have been 14 trips, consisting of some 67 cavers.

A trip in December reported some unfortunate mud contamination on a number of the formations just below the rope climb down towards the Land of Hope and Glory. This proved an ideal opportunity to make use of the CSCC pressure washers and a successful clean-up operation was performed. See the photos below.



Hillier's Padlock

A report was received that the padlock on Hillier's cave wouldn't close. An inspection revealed the padlock had been forced open and was beyond repair. The padlock was replaced and the Fairy Cave Quarry Management Committee was informed.

GB Padlock

Another report was received that the CCC Ltd padlock on GB was not working. I thought I'd check out the report before reporting it to CCC Ltd and found the lock barrel was full of mud. It looked like someone had used a very muddy key to lock it and then the mud had dried inside the lock. I flushed it out with contact cleaner and applied some micro-graphite powder. It then worked fine.

Aveline's Hole

A report was received that the gate, protecting the archaeology, at the far end of the cave was insecure. An inspection revealed the padlock had been forced. The UBSS were informed and have subsequently replaced the padlock and chain.

CSCC Access Database

The all of the CCC Ltd entries in the CSCC Access Database have been updated and now refer the user to the CCC Ltd website for the latest access information. Also the Foxes Hole entry was updated.

Loxton Cavern

Graham Price very kindly sent me some background information on Loxton Cavern and the access agreement talks the local Parish Council. He has undertaken to circulate the full access agreement. Once we have this, I will arrange the leader familiarisation trips. Singing River Mine The Singing River Mine access agreement is now in full swing and is running smoothly. Since the last CSCC meeting there has been 4 trips involving some 37 cavers (one trip by the Wessex saw 19 cavers visiting the mine during the course of the day).

Future Priorities

In the coming months I will be concentrating on the following priorities:-

- 1) Continue negotiations with Longleat.
- 2) Progress the access and leadership arrangements for Loxton Cavern
- 3) Progress the items listed in this report.

If anyone has anything else they would like progressing then please let me know.

Wayne Starsmore
C&A Officer
CSCC

The Restoration of the Main's Barn Cavers' Changing Room, Priddy



We are pleased to report the completion of the restoration work to Main's Barn, Manor Farm, Priddy. This work was funded by a grant from The Mendip Hills Fund of the Somerset Community Foundation.



The work commenced in December, and took place over several weekends, involving volunteers from the caving community. Wayne Starsmore describes how the job unfolded.

“The existing floor was both rotten and dangerous, and four layers of flooring were removed including the original wooden floorboards. Two old water tanks also had to be removed. All this work revealed a fair number of rotten joists. These were replaced, and the remaining joists were strengthened. All the old nails had to be removed and new flooring sheets of good quality marine ply were cut to size. These were then screwed into place and the joints sealed with mastic. The entire area of new flooring was then given two thick coats of garage floor paint, each coat taking some seven days to fully dry. In the meantime, the staircase up to the changing rooms was re-engineered and strengthened.”

A special thank you is due to Alan Butcher for planning and overseeing the work. Others involved in the project include Darren Chapman, Brendan Hanley, Anthony Butcher, Pete Hann, Nigel Graham, Chris George, Simon Richardson, Dave King, Barry Wilkinson, Claire Starsmore, Wayne Starsmore, Pete Hellier, Aidan Harrison, Mark Easterling, Frank Tully, Dave Cundy, Merry Matthews, Elaine Oliver, and Zac Woodford.

To end this good news story, here is a little history of the barn, from the caver's perspective. Swildon's Hole entrance lies across the fields of Manor Farm, which is owned by the Main

family. Indeed, much of the cave lies below the farm. The history of exploration of Swildon's Hole is therefore very much tied up with the cooperative relationship between the Main family and cavers. The barn at Manor Farm on Priddy Green has been used by cavers for many decades. A fascinating glimpse into the 1950s caving scene can be found in the recollections of Malcolm Cotter of the Mendip Caving Group, who recalls paying one shilling a night to the farmer to stay in the barn while caving on a 36-hour weekend pass while serving in the Royal Air Force. There was a small fireplace, all cooking was done on paraffin stoves, and lighting was by candles. Water came from the continually flowing Priddy Fountain just across the road on the green. Milk and eggs were available from the farm. To discover more, I thoroughly recommend the Mendip Caving Group occasional publication No.5, where these recollections may be read in full.

http://mcgarchive.uk/sections/about/retrospective_05.html

Many of us will have memories of using this changing area. Linda Wilson recalls: "In the early 80s after a trip to sump one and back, a few of us were changing upstairs. A voice called out something from below that we didn't quite hear so one of my female companions wandered to the head of the stairs (naked). The teenage boy scout promptly fell down the stairs. None of them came up to change! We never did work out what they asked."

The following images capture the work at various stages from stripping out to completion.

Wayne Starsmore
C&A Officer
CSCC











BCA Representative's Report

The BCA Council meeting originally scheduled has been postponed until March, but in the meantime, the Chair, Russell Myers, has circulated his report to Council and has confirmed I can share this with CSCC.

Report from the Chair

Happy New Year everyone – perhaps a little late but it reminds me that we are in the second half of our administrative year with an AGM looming on Monday 3rd June. Following comments about tying up Sunday mornings, the Executive, recognising the flexibility of on-line meetings agreed to move the AGM to an evening during the week hence Monday 3rd June.

My point in emphasising this, is the timeline of milestones dictated by our Constitution along the way to the AGM, not least of which, midnight 10th March when nominations, proposals and other business should be in the hands of the Secretary.

My term of office as Chair expires at this AGM dictating that I should stand for re-election. I have given it some thought and decided I will not be standing for election. By the AGM, I will have undertaken 5 years of voluntary work for the BCA including my term as Secretary. I feel I have done enough and it is time to hand over the “reins” of the Association. To stand again, would mean a commitment to another three years; the time seems right and with the “troubled years” a distant memory, BCA is on a stable footing albeit struggling to attract volunteers to help run it. Even this situation may be turning a corner as there has been renewed interest to help with IT and dare I say it, the Treasurer's position. It is early days to confirm these but green shoots are appearing. I hope they blossom.

In the meantime, I will continue to do my best for BCA and the caving community at large and thank everyone who has helped both the Association and myself during the years I have been involved.

At this point I should remind other post holders their term of office will also expire at the 2024 AGM:

Secretary – Allan Richardson

(Treasurer – vacant)

Group Representative 1 – Jenny Potts

(Group Representative 2 – vacant)

Individual Representative 1 – Andy Eavis

(Individual Representative 2 – vacant)

Note regarding Working Groups and respective convenors plus other individual appointments. The 2021 AGM consolidated responsibility for these to the National Council and subject to approval at the first Council meeting after the AGM.

Regional Council and Constituent Body representatives are nominated by their respective regional/constituent body with a place on the National Council

R. Myers, BCA Chair. 28th January 2024

I was very sorry to learn of Russell's decision not to stand again, but entirely understand his reasons. He has done a huge amount to rid BCA of the toxic culture that saw so many retirements and resignations. BCA is now, through its various working groups, getting on with the jobs at hand, including the paramount one of keeping the insurance scheme up and running. The C&A group now meets regularly, as do the the others, and BCA is no longer fixated on navel-gazing at its own constitution. Yes, there is work to be done there, but none of it is urgent. What British caving needs is a strong representative body looking outwards rather than inwards in the years to come.

Linda Wilson

BCA Representative

Recollections: Mendip Mansions

How a temporary cavers' hut survived for more than 70 years

This is the story of an unremarkable caving hut. It is based on the recollections of the late Dr. Willie Stanton, and the personal experiences of the author.

In those heady, optimistic, but austere post-war years of the late 1940s and 1950s, young cavers were busy across the country discovering, exploring and surveying new caves. On Mendip, Colin Vowles, a dental student of Guy's Hospital, was caving every weekend with his friends Howard Kenney, Vincent Simpson, Derek Goldie and Willie Stanton. In 1947 or 1948, Colin persuaded his father, a chemist in Sadler Street, Wells, to give him an old wooden hut to use as a caving base, which would mean they had somewhere to stay overnight rather than having to cycle back home at the end of the day. The hut came from Mr. Vowles Senior's photographic works in Silver Street.



Fred and Leonard Young of Lower Farm, Charterhouse allowed Colin to set up the hut on a bank above an old stone barn below the farmhouse. He at once realised that it was too small and his father had two block-built rooms added.

"Mendip Mansions" / The Cabin, 2008

The wooden room (the original hut) had a stove and was used for sleeping and sitting; the east extension room was the kitchen/diner and the other extension room housed a huge electric generator that roared and throbbed to light about four bulbs and to dry sodden clothes almost instantaneously in the hot blast from the fan.

The group's wise old teacher was Herbert Balch and their driving force was Luke Devenish who had piloted tanks through the Western desert and was now a Mendip resident spending most of his time caving, diving, digging and archaeologising for Mr Balch.

Willie's first sight of the hut was on 28th December 1948 and in his log book he recorded:

"Colin took me up by car from Wells to their new hut at Longwood, which is a real cavers' paradise. Three rooms, anthracite stove, electric light, water and a sink, camp beds, armchairs, etc. I think it is better than anything else on Mendip." In those days of austerity and rationing after the War, the unaccustomed luxury led them to christen the hut "Mendip Mansions". The lack of a loo didn't seem important, with the wood so close by.

With the Mansions as their base, between 1949 and 1953 they visited all the classic Mendip caves including August Hole, which was then very new, and many mine shafts. They dug at Nod's Pot, Middle Down Drove Swallet (Tiddle-Tum-Tum), Reservoir Hole, the so-called Priddy Green Passage in Swildon's and Badger Hole.

They discovered, explored and surveyed the Black Hole Series and the St. Paul's Series in Swildon's and explored Ludwell Rising. They geologised in Lamb Leer, Waldergrave Swallet and the closed basins southeast of Cheddar Gorge and surveyed in Swildon's and various Cheddar caves.

Except when Colin's car or Luke's Jeep were available, early expeditions were on foot or by push-bike. Later the rest of the group acquired motorbikes.

One day they took Fred and Leonard down GB and Leonard had second thoughts in the flooded Devil's Elbow: "I don't think you chaps oughter've brought a fellow like me into this place!"

Post war austerity lent importance to meals. Once, according to Willie's log, they "breakfasted well at lunch time off bacon, egg, beans, bangers, cornflakes, coffee, bread, butter and treacle." One night they invited the Youngs to a "mighty meal" and on another occasion they "cooked a small bunny which Col had run over, with onions, spuds, mixed 'erbs and toasted cheese, followed by tinned strawberries and cream and later coffee, bread and marmalade. Turned in about 1.30am in a satisfied state of mind."

Willie's vaguer memories of that time were of running around the hut barefoot at midnight to welcome the New Year, of days spent revising chemistry (Colin), geology (himself) or accountancy (Howard and Vincent), of long evenings playing pontoon for matchsticks, of cross-country walking by compass in Mendip mists and of field trips in Luke's Jeep when they examined obscure places that his researches had unearthed, like Hollowfield Swallet, Willet's Lane Hole and Nedge Hill Hole. These trips sometimes included extracting the Jeep from some ditch or swamp that Luke in his overweening confidence had challenged.

Of course, it all had to come to an end. The team variously married, went abroad or became more involved in their jobs. The "Mansions" fell into disuse and Colin sold them to the Youngs in 1954 for £17.

*Dr. Willie Stanton visiting
in Summer 1984*

For 16 years, the building fell into gentle decay. Eventually, the farmhouse and buildings were sold to new owners: Ron and Yvonne Trim, who set about transforming the old farmyard into an idyllic garden with Longwood as a magnificent backdrop.

However, "Mendip Mansions" was destined for a new lease of life. In 1970, following a serious rescue from nearby Longwood Swallet, Ron Trim got into conversation with the cavers from the Unit Two club, and suggested that they might like to use an old barn in his garden to get changed in when caving in the valley, and this quickly developed into an offer to use Colin Vowles' old hut for caving weekends. At that time, no-one was aware of the structure's

earlier use as a caving hut. The club, later to become Wealden Cave and Mine Society, was pleased to have use of the "cottage" as it was initially called. Within a few years all pretensions of grandeur were lost and it was rebranded "The Cabin", becoming a very convenient base for the club.

Although a number of improvements were made over the years, The Cabin never lost its "pioneering" atmosphere, with its gas lighting, cramped conditions and generator-supplied electricity. It developed a unique odour, not so much unpleasant as uniquely "Cabin". The author will always hold fond memories of caving from the Cabin over a period of some 25 years, from the roaring stove keeping the bitter frost outside at bay, to crystal clear summer nights with calling owls in Longwood providing the only sounds, notwithstanding the perpetually dripping tap in the kitchen.

Willie came back to see "Mendip Mansions" in the summer of 1984, and it is from that time that the recollections in this article are derived. Willie's extensive logbooks are available online at the MCRA website.

https://www.mcra.org.uk/logbooks/index.php?/category/Willie_Stanton

Use of the Cabin declined from around 2008, at which time WCMS was in active discussions with South Wales Caving Club to occupy a semi-derelict cottage close to their own base at Penwyllt, but that is another story. By 2020, very few members of the club were using the



Cabin on a regular basis, and with changes in family ownership, and following Covid lockdowns, it was clear that our long association with this delightful location had drawn to a close. To the very end, Mr. Vowles Senior's old hut from Wells survived as the bunkroom of the Cabin. It was certainly at least 90 years old, having survived intact, mainly due to being well-clad in corrugated iron sheets. The liberal coats of the type of paint used to protect electricity towers probably helped. Some cavers are employed in very useful places! The whole unassuming structure was one of the last surviving "traditional" club huts, and structurally much as when first occupied. A caver's time machine!

Peter Burgess (WCMS)

If you have any recollections you would like to share of cavers and caving on Mendip please send them to me at comms@csc.org.uk