

January 2017

Issue 52

W A L E S

U N D E R G R O U N D

News in Brief

- **BCA CRoW Access Campaign** halted by dissenting cavers. BCA says it must now try to amend its constitution which implies an expensive postal ballot. Read more at ukcaving.com/board/Index.php?topic=21489
- **NAMHO 2017** will be hosted by WCMS and takes place in Godstone, Surrey over 23-26th June. See the conference website for more details: namho2017.info
- The **Aditnow** site has recently been updated with a new list of events and meets. These cover a wide range of activities from talks to underground visits. See their website for more details: aditnow.co.uk/events
- The **Council of Northern Caving Clubs** has recently revamped their website and it now has extensive details on access, rigging and better descriptions of many northern caves. Visit cncc.org.uk/caving/
- **Ogof Gofan** is featured by the MOD in gov.uk/government/publications/sanctuary

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Photo credits

Dave Tyson
Martin Lavery
Stuart France

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Cambrian Caving Council Newsletter

Cylchlythyr y Cyngor Ogofeydd Cymreig

Minera Quarry - Good Caving Potential - New Owner

Minera Quarry lies to the north of Esclusham mountain and forms the westernmost boundary of the Minera lead mining belt. The site has seen limestone extraction for aggregate and lime burning for around 200 years until its final closure at the end of 1993. The current owners, Tarmac, cleared and fenced off most of the site around 2005, apart from the public footpaths, leaving nature to reclaim the area. Grassland, wild flowers and scrub have now developed in recent years.

The site has significant industrial archaeology with the remains of a Hoffman Kiln and several older designs of lime burning kilns together with some shafts and old building remains from earlier lead mining activities. Some mineral veins, e.g. Ragman Vein, pass under parts of the quarry. The Aber Sychnant flows along the quarry's western boundary and then through the quarry heading east and eventually forming the River Clywedog. The river bed is normally dry in places as water sinks into subterranean passages which link to drainage adits dug to dewater the mines in the 19th century. Prior to this there were several active resurgences near to and within the quarry.



Minera Quarry looking across the dry river bed towards ODB cave entrance

There are several cave entrances within the boundary of this quarry, the most familiar of these being Ogof Dydd Byraf and Ogof Llyn Du, but there are many smaller ones including Ogof Hen Ddyn and Ogof Malwen. Access to underground locations was severely restricted when the quarry was operating, but subsequently various groups have systematically searched the quarry area looking for new cave systems. One cave passage, New Passage Pot, was exposed while the quarry was being worked and cavers had a short period to explore it before the entrance was sealed on safety grounds. It is also known from historical records that a far larger and more significant

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Training News

The BCA Training Committee has recently changed its structure.

It no longer has anything to do with the BCA training awards, i.e. Local Cave and Mine Leader Awards and the Cave Instructor Certificate. Its only responsibility now is for training sport cavers.

For this reason I am emailing all the CCC affiliated clubs to ask if there is any sort of training that they want or need help with in 2017. For instance, CCC has run workshops about photography, surveying, geology, bats and SRT in the past few years.

The CCC has funds to run these courses. There is also money available for clubs through CCC and BCA training grants to hold courses for just one club.

If you have any questions or want any sort of training please get in touch.

Richard Hill, CCC Training Officer

2017 DIARY

Sunday 12th March

CCC AGM 12.00,
GCRG HQ, Cinderford, GL14 2TT

Saturday 25th March

BCA Council Meeting 10.30am at The Red Lion, Alvechurch, B48 7LG. New constitutional proposals to be tabled regarding the CRoW Cave Access Campaign which was stopped by the BCA 2016 AGM. Anyone may attend.

Saturday 22nd April

CDG AGM / Dinner, Old Rectory Hotel, Llangattock, NP8 1PH

9-11th June

BCA Party & AGM Weekend
Rotary Centre, Castleton.

16-18th June

BCRC Conference Weekend
SWCC HQ, Penwyllt.

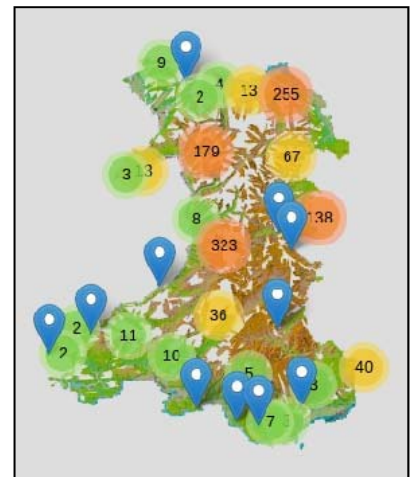
Extensions to Cambrian Cave Registry

In December the CNCC extended their online coverage of northern caves to become close to guidebook level with the incorporation of rigging guides as well as descriptions. This prompted Robin Griffiths on the ukcaving.com forum to suggest that it would "be nice ... if cave lists and details were accessible via an API for mashup purposes", echoing this on the corresponding aditnow.co.uk forum for mines.

The BCA's National Cave Registrar thought this was a good idea and noted that CSCC already made their data available (but not freely via an API). The CNCC wanted to further consider the implications of free access. As Cambrian Cave Registrar, I have called Robin's bluff by providing online access, both for caves and separately for mines, to:

1. list all sites with name and location
2. give full details of any specified site

Having sorted out details, using essentially the JSON data-interchange format, Robin quickly came up with these maps which I find both interesting, innovative, and useful for extending and improving the repertoire of the Registry itself.



The sample map on the left makes use of clustering to illustrate the relative number of caves in the Cambrian Cave and Mine Register.

The mine map on the right shows Lidar coverage, from a wide range of bases which also include geology, soil, historic and contemporary maps, as well as aerial photos.

Within a fortnight of Robin's suggestion a request came from an academic project for access to the Cambrian Cave Registry data so as to compare cave locations with other archaeological information for which I now had a solution in place.

The interface and its use will be fully documented shortly and I can provide further detail on request.

Please contact me at registrar@cambridgancavingcouncil.org.uk with updated and new underground site information, along with suggestions for technical and functional improvements to the registry which will always be welcomed.

*Martin Laverty,
CCC Cave Registrar*

Caving within Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)

Those of a certain age may remember Mendip caves being closed to cavers in the 1980s when most of that region was designated as a SSSI. Caving was deemed to be a "Potentially Damaging Operation" (PDO) affecting the scientific interest. The powers-that-be got a little carried away as SSSI legislation came into effect. The cave closures were ended by adding the words "unless this is normal practice for caving" to every PDO, e.g. "moving boulders is a PDO unless this is normal ...", with the effect that normal caving practice on Mendip is now pretty much completely outside of all formal SSSI restrictions.

What on earth am I talking about? Most cavers are aware of SSSIs simply as a four-letter acronym concerning nature conservation, but most have no idea how the system operates or how it might affect their activities. This lack of basic knowledge about SSSIs is exactly what this article is intended to address.

The statutory conservation body for Wales is now Natural Resources Wales (NRW), formerly the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), and not Natural England as over the border and for Mendip. CCW started defining and documenting its SSSIs from the mid-1980s following the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 establishing the statutory SSSI framework.

Each SSSI has four key documents which should be 'public domain' and are served on landowners affected by SSSIs to make them formally aware of restrictions on what they cannot do on their own land without conservation consent. These are:

- the SSSI boundary map
- a scientific citation
- PDO list
- site management statement (SMS)

Everyone other than the owner of the SSSI land, such as walkers and cavers, whether present with the consent of the landowner or there by legal right such as under 'right to roam' legislation or as a trespasser, is regarded as a 'third party'.

There are higher penalties for owners breaching SSSI laws than for third parties - since owners have been served with the rules and should then know what they are doing. The CROW Act 2000 made it an 'absolute' offence for anyone to damage a SSSI even if they were unaware that it was one or what is being protected. This is different to ancient monuments where unlawful damage has to be done knowingly and deliberately.

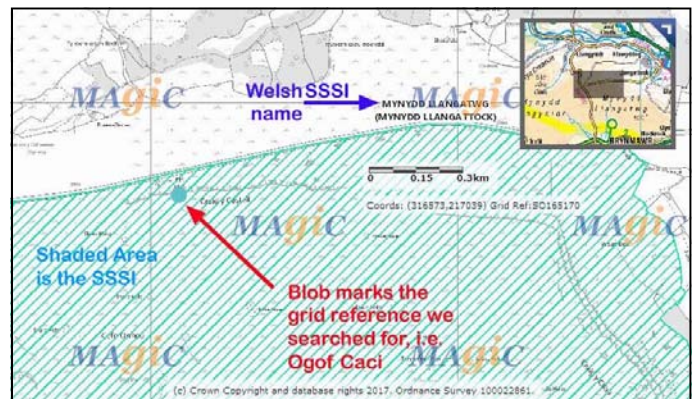
The SSSI offence is 'damaging the scientific interest' with maximum fine up to £20K for owners but far less for others. The problem for statutory conservation bodies, which prosecute these offences, is proving actual damage. They concede that SSSIs are not uniformly endowed with 'scientific interest' which is defined by the citation document. For example, rare plants do not grow upon every square metre within some SSSI boundary. NRW would have to prove that in some particular square metre someone specific had damaged real rare plants. In other words, that the accused person in performing a PDO resulted in material rather than potential damage. This is not easy to establish after the event if the plants disappeared, or if the crime scene is 'cold' or 'contaminated', and if there are no witnesses or confessions. Anyone facing a hostile investigation in any context needs professional legal support before providing anything more than endless 'no comment' answers.

If the citation does not specifically mention cave formations as being of scientific interest then it will be hard to argue later on that such were protected because of their scientific interest. At Mynydd Llangatwg, for instance, only Ogof Craig a Ffynnon is mentioned for formations, not Agen Allwedd or Daren Cilau. It also usually comes as a complete surprise to ordinary cavers that these special 'sites' of 'scientific interest' can be

vast areas of upland. For example, the Llangatwg SSSI is 17 square kilometres, while the Mynydd Du SSSI, which includes Dan-yr-Ogof, is a massive 67 square kilometres. And these are not the biggest of the 1000+ SSSIs in Wales that cover 12% of the land. One in 8 square metres of Wales is inside an SSSI. Blanket scheduling of huge upland regions makes a nonsense of the word 'site' let alone 'interest' and 'scientific'. What science is going on there? We all want to play our part in genuine conservation, but there needs to be more proportionality and focus than as at present.

Suppose you are interested in exploring for new cave, i.e. cave digging projects, either inside existing caves or from the surface. You should consult the landowner and obtain their consent, but you may find they are as ignorant as you are about the SSSI system, particularly where the land has been inherited down a family line. So neither you nor they might be aware of specific SSSI issues. Thus you need to check for yourself if the land of interest to you is scheduled. And here your problems will begin.

NRW has no online mapping tools: whether for SSSIs or for public 'access land' under 'right to roam' legislation. You cannot easily discover the name of any SSSI that corresponds to a map grid reference. But you need to know that SSSI name to index NRW's documents, which thankfully now seem to be online most of the time. So instead you must head to the DEFRA website and view Magic Map. To get this to display a sufficiently detailed map with a coloured overlay for an SSSI in Wales is complex for an average PC user to figure out, so a walk-through of the procedure is on the walesunderground.co.uk document link website using the Ogof Caci dig at Llangatwg as a worked example.



The pale blue blob in this shaded area of the map shows the Ogof Caci grid reference is just inside an SSSI called Mynydd Llangatwg in Welsh and you can now visit NRW's website and search under that SSSI name for the four documents shown in the list opposite. A walk-through for navigating NRW's website to download these documents is also at walesunderground.co.uk including copies of the example SSSI documents themselves.

The Mynydd Llangatwg SSSI citation mentions the soil and the rare plants and lichens near the limestone escarpments, along with the geomorphology and cave sediments. The PDO list mentions dumping materials of any kind, extraction of minerals, placing debris next to cave entrances, modification of any cave entrances or interiors, amongst 28 items. It is thus clear that some advice from NRW conservation officers will be needed before embarking on any digging project or involving the landowner in obtaining conservation consent from NRW for such activities.

Stuart France
CCC Access / Conservation Officer

Minera Quarry *(continued from page 1)*

cave, Minera Quarry Cave, is located somewhere in the quarry. The old description from 1892 does not provide us with sufficient detail to pinpoint where the entrance was, and despite much searching it has still not been located.

Around 2005 Minera Quarry Trust (MQT) was formed by local individuals and some NWCC members to investigate gaining ownership and developing greater public access, but the process was frustrated by the economic downturn. Recently North Wales Wildlife Trust (NWWT) has worked with MQT and is currently in the process of buying the quarry from Tarmac with a view to managing it and improving access. The site is now a significant nature reserve with a good mix of wild flower species, cliff-nesting birds and several species of bats which roost in the old lime kilns and some mine shafts. Conservation work to remove scrub, manage grassland and fence off dangerous areas will be needed before access other than by the existing public rights of ways can be permitted.

From the caving and mine-exploring perspective, this area has lots of potential for new discoveries and it is hoped that the Cambrian Caving Council, local caving groups and NWWT can work together to provide safe access for cavers and mine-explorers while safeguarding the general public and protecting wildlife. Once the land transfer has been completed we hope NWWT will convene a meeting of interested parties to plan future developments and then to be able to report on these in future newsletters.

Dave Tyson, CCC Secretary

CCC AGM 2017

The CCC Annual General Meeting will be held at 12 noon on Sunday 12th March 2017 in the headquarters of the Gloucestershire Cave Rescue Group, St. Whites Road, Cinderford, Gloucester GL14 2TT.

The agenda and documents will be circulated by email to member clubs and a limited number of paper copies will be provided at the meeting. After three years in the post, I will be stepping down from the role of CCC secretary at this meeting and welcome nominations for my replacement.

Dave Tyson, CCC Secretary

Cave Access Limited Update

Cave Access Limited have just completed the annual renewal of the disused mine access agreement with Natural Resources Wales and the Welsh Government.

Cavers and mine explorers are reminded that they need to re-register with CAL each year if they want to lead trips into any of the CAL mine sites in 2017.

A simple email to permits@caveaccess.co.uk stating your name, BCA membership number and club name (stating 'BCA' as your club if you are an independent caver) is all that is required. You will receive an acknowledgement email and you are free to explore any of the sites subject to any seasonal restrictions, such as to conserve bats. Please email CAL either before or after your trip stating the name of leader, site visited, date and number in party.

We regret to announce that we are removing Draethen Lead Mines from our mine site list because we have been unable to make any progress to agree an access protocol due to the concerns of local NRW staff about Greater Horseshoe bats which hibernate at this mine in the winter.

Dave Tyson, CAL Director

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Please send news items, short articles, club profiles and newsworthy photographs for the next issue to Dave Tyson by **31st March 2017**