

October 2015

Issue 47

WALES UNDERGROUND

Cambrian Caving Council Newsletter

Cylchlythyr y Cyngor Ogofeydd Cymreig

NEWS IN BRIEF

- The two access agreements between Cave Access Ltd and NRW / Welsh Ministers will renew in 2016. NRW said at a review meeting that "this is working well from our perspective". It is hoped to add some new sites as discussions about details continue.
- The new access agreement for Ogof Gofan is also to continue after its successful first year. The access rules remain unchanged. All visiting groups must apply first to the CCC Access Officer who then gets consent from the landowner so only one group will be in cave at any one time.
- Access into the restricted 'Range West' firing area at Castlemartin to look for new caves will also continue through the 2016-17 season. So far only a few visits have been made, but the limestone geology is amazing with 100m high cliffs similar to the Penwyllt limestone. For information on how to join, visit the Castlemartin discussion on the ukCaving forum.
- CCC's response to the WG Green Paper on countryside access can be found at http://www.cambriancavingcouncil.org.uk/pdf/greenpaperresponse_Oct2015.pdf

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Photo credits

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THE CAMBRIAN MINES TRUST REVIEW OF 2015

Cwmystwyth

Underground safety works to facilitate access in Level Fawr and to prevent a possible collapse due to a rotten stull adjacent to the incline have now received Ancient Monument consent. Works should commence in the near future.

The first phase will involve the permanent support of a sagging timber with concrete that is to be faced with stone packwall so as to harmonise with its surroundings. The second phase involves a walking-height roadway to replace the second plastic drum in Lefel Fawr.

Unfortunately, the hydroelectric power scheme has faltered which leaves CMT dependent on its grazing income, voluntary contributions, and external funding.

Hen Barc

A proposal for a trial investigation to assess the possibility of safely re-opening the Hen Barc adit on Ty Newydd farm land has received SSSI consent. An initial investigation has been made to assess possible head of water prior to the actual reopening.

Bwlch Glas

The transfer to CMT of the 50% of the mineral rights owned by Mr Bernard Moore is imminent, the contract having been forwarded for signature.

Upper Dinas Silica Mine

Natural Amenities Ltd, an associate company of CMT, has acquired the mineral rights at this site to safeguard future access. Explorer access into the mine is unaffected.

Enlargement of the CMT Board of Directors

It was unanimously agreed to invite Dr Simon Timberlake to join the board, in view of his special knowledge of the Cwmystwyth site and his contacts in the archaeological sphere. Simon Lowe of aditnow has also joined the board, bringing the number of directors up to five, with Roy Fellows acting as Managing Director and Prof. David James as Chairman.

Roy Fellows, on behalf of CMT, September 2015

DRWS CEFN

CCC's AGM in March 2015 decided that CCC and PDCMG would both benefit by holding discussions aiming to resolve long-standing issues around the Drws Cefn entrance into Ogof Draenen. Andrew Hinde of BCA then kindly agreed to provide impartial mediation. PDCMG accepted this proposal at their next scheduled committee meeting which took place during June 2015.

CCC's first meeting with PDCMG was held in late August in Yorkshire when PDCMG said they would look at modifying their approach. PDCMG then disclosed at a second meeting held in late September that NRW had rejected a bat conservation licence application filed in early July to seal Drws Cefn permanently. As a result, PDCMG needed to consult with their landowner. It is now hoped that some new proposal will emerge at the PDCMG's November meeting that first of all is acceptable to NRW as the statutory conservation body for Wales and also satisfies the landowner along with the whole caving community.

Dave Tyson, CCC Secretary

A RIVER SINKING NEAR PONTYPOOL

A report received from a resident of Garndiffaith village, above Abersychan near Pontypool, described the Afon Ffrwd sinking into the ground from 11 July 2015 leaving the lower river bed completely dry. This was after an unusually cold dry and summer. The Afon Ffrwd is a tributary of the Afon Llwyd which starts near Blaenavon, skirting the Cwm Afon forest, through Cwmbran and joining the Usk at Caerleon. The 'new' sink is 30m up from the Afon Ffrwd footbridge on Ffrwd Road at SO 26985 03906. The clue is in the name of the town where Aber would mean River Confluence and Sychan means Dry, so the recent event cannot be in any way unique.

The Ffrwd sink is about 5kms from the nearest point in Ogof Draenen and 100m lower too, so the initial assumption of local residents, which prompted them to write saying that it may affect caver safety, was a bit wide of the mark. But this serves to remind us that the same limestone beds that we see exposed at Pwlldu continue right down the valley from Blaenavon past Abersychan to Pontypool where there are some significant risings and many springs. Yet there are no caves in the Eastern Valley – only a few digs.

A layman might think the South Wales Valleys geology to be like a saucer made of limestone running roughly from Neath in the west to Abergavenny in the east, and from Merthyr in the North to the outskirts of Cardiff in the south. The milk in the

saucer, so to speak, is the coalfield whose centre is perhaps Treharris. This means the limestone dips from east to west in the eastern Afon Llwyd valley, at about 15 degrees which is the typical angle of the sides of the 'saucer'.

The main river caves in South Wales lie on the Nedd Fechan, Hepste and Mellte rivers which disappear almost as soon as they reach limestone. Lesser rivers which also disappear include the Giedd, emerging at Dan-yr-Ogof, and the Byfre which runs through Ogof Ffynnon Ddu. So why does the main Afon Llwyd not also disappear into the rock?

An interesting article from 1968 in the Cwmbran Caving Club Journal entitled *The Eastern Valley Master System* suggests that the river does not sink as its bed is filled with waste debris from local industrialisation. So if a cave is found, its chokes are thus more likely to be coal than mud blockages. They mention an occurrence in 1967 when the Ffrwd stream sank after heavy winter rains. A dig was started, but this had to be abandoned when further floods filled up this dig and the river then returned to its normal course. Pontypool Council tried to dye trace the sinking water at the time but failed, as they did in 2015 after the river's latest disappearing act.

Going back over a couple of centuries, The Royal Society ran a report of the sinking of the River Ffrwd starting on 1st January 1756. The lower river bed was completely dry following severe storms. The RS article, which had the same title as this story, was written by a local tax inspector of the era, and it is a very precise account of the moment of discovery when "a poor woman living near its mouth sent her daughter for water who returned in surprise with the account that [the river bed] was dry".

The 1756 event was pre-industrial revolution when the area was forested. It talks about limestone clefs and sink-holes in the Ponynwynydd direction which opened up or deepened. These are now under Incline Road, houses and a school. Limestone beds and shelves were clearly visible where the river was sinking, making it sound something like the Pwll-y-Rhyd cleft where the Nedd Fechan diverts towards White Lady Cave amongst nothing but limestone scenery. The RS article also speculates on hydrology, mentioning three springs a mile or so south (i.e. Pontnewynydd or Trevethin fault area) which normally ran clear but were discoloured in the same shade as the Ffrwd floodwater and their volume was much higher than normal.

The Cwmbran journal goes on to mention blocks of 1960s flats built over caves examined by CCTV cameras in bore holes, and modern-era bridge piers collapsing into cavities. It concludes: "There is undoubtedly a large cave system running parallel to and west of the Afon Llwyd [and more research] may result in some interesting cave discoveries." The cave potential of this Eastern Valley area is far clearer now with the discovery of Ogof Draenen and its drainage being towards the Afon Llwyd line.

Andy Farrant, from British Geological Survey, adds that he has heard the Afon Llwyd too may dry up just south of Blaenavon in dry summers and the dip of the limestone makes it highly probable that the main Draenen-Pontnewynydd conduit runs beneath the western flank of the Afon Llwyd valley, especially given the Old Red Sandstone crops out in the valley floor near Cwmavon. So if a dig on the Afon Llwyd is feasible then it may drop straight into the main conduit.

Stuart France
CCC Conservation/Access Officer

2015 DIARY

Sunday 22nd November

PDCMG meeting, 10am, Salisbury Community Hall in Govilon

2016 DIARY

March 5-6th Weekend

CSG Cave Surveying Workshop at Penwylt (SWCC)

Sunday 13th March

CCC AGM, Mid-Wales

June 17-19th Weekend

NAMHO, Dublin

August 13-20th Week

EuroSpeleo 2016 Conference, at Dalesbridge Centre, Yorkshire



THE LEAD MINES NEAR GWRYCH CASTLE, ABERGELE

Gwyrch Castle is an extensive listed ruin which lies on the northeast flank of a wooded limestone escarpment which runs parallel to the A55. While the castle and its grounds are interesting, the hill behind, named Cefn-yr-Ogof, is crossed by two lead veins and these were actively mined in the 18th century. The hill also contains two areas with natural caves: the 'Tan-yr-Ogof' caves lie to the northeast of the castle and Dulas cave (or Ogof Dulas) lies almost due west. The woods behind the castle are leased by Natural Resources Wales and are one of the sites which Cave Access Limited has permission for mine exploration.

There is a short description of the workings in a Geological Survey memoir [1] which describes the two mineral veins as starting in the Dulas valley and extending all the way to Gwyrch Castle, a distance of about one mile. This would make a great through trip, and a few members of the Great Orme Exploration Society had the same view and investigated in the 1980s. Their report [2] can be found on the web and makes interesting reading. Sadly the mine has suffered from the passage of time with collapses and in-wash sealing any passages which might then have existed. But there are still areas which would merit re-visiting so we decided to explore the mine remains.

The OS map does not show any public footpaths traversing the area. However, there are three entry points with permissive paths leading to the various sites. The castle itself, and the remains of the adit, and workings further up the hill are best accessed from the 'green gate' on the Tan-y-Gopa road (SH 9339 7717) where there is space for a few cars. Dulas cave and adit are best approached from a path near the village green at Rhyd-y-Foel (SH 9128 7703). The Tan-yr-Ogof caves are accessed from a path by a roadside hole in a wall near Terfyn (SH 9138 7800).

The Gwyrch Castle Adit is directly behind the castle itself (SH 9275 7753) in a lightly wooded area below a main path. It cannot be seen from

the path, but a dead tree provides a marker. The adit heads off SW but is blocked by sandy infill after about 15m. Heading up the hill proves more interesting as there is a fenced area with a long trench and some helpful holes. It looks like the stopes have reached the surface at SH 9273 7752 and there is an elongated hole with a big tree as an anchor.

Dropping a rope down and abseiling showed it to be about 28m deep with several passages leading off at different levels. All of them looked to be run-in and were not investigated further, but there was a nice pack-wall of deads, and some traces of galena on the walls. A little further up the hill is a shaft at SH 9272 7750, which we did not descend. But it is mentioned in the GOES report as being 30m deep and disappointing as the southerly passages here collapsed after a few metres. Heading further up the forest there are some shallow depressions at SH 9270 7746 which may be the remains of other run-in shafts. Heading further west there are some old shaft mounds at SH 9222 7733 but these are probably just of historical interest.

Heading to the Dulas valley, parking by the village green at Rhyd-y-Foel, there is a wide path though the woods heading north running almost parallel to the road. After some distance there is a split with the wide track descending slightly while a narrower path continues. After a short distance some rubble is seen on the hillside above: spoil from the adit at SH 9137 7754. This is blocked after about 100m. Carrying on along the path, then taking the right-hand fork, leads to the Dulas Cave a few metres further uphill.

This cave has been altered by mining and there are the remains of an adit under the cave itself. The end of the cave itself is extremely muddy, but would probably go if someone wanted to push it. There are remains of other shafts in this area which might repay closer examination.

Dave Tyson, Wirral Caving Group

[1] Resources of Great Britain. Volume XIX - Lead and Zinc ore in the Carboniferous Rocks of North Wales. Pages 32-33.

[2] http://www.goes.org.uk/assets/Journals/1989_02_Extravaganza_Special.pdf



The Gwyrch Castle Adit



Getting ready for an abseil



Another open vertical shaft

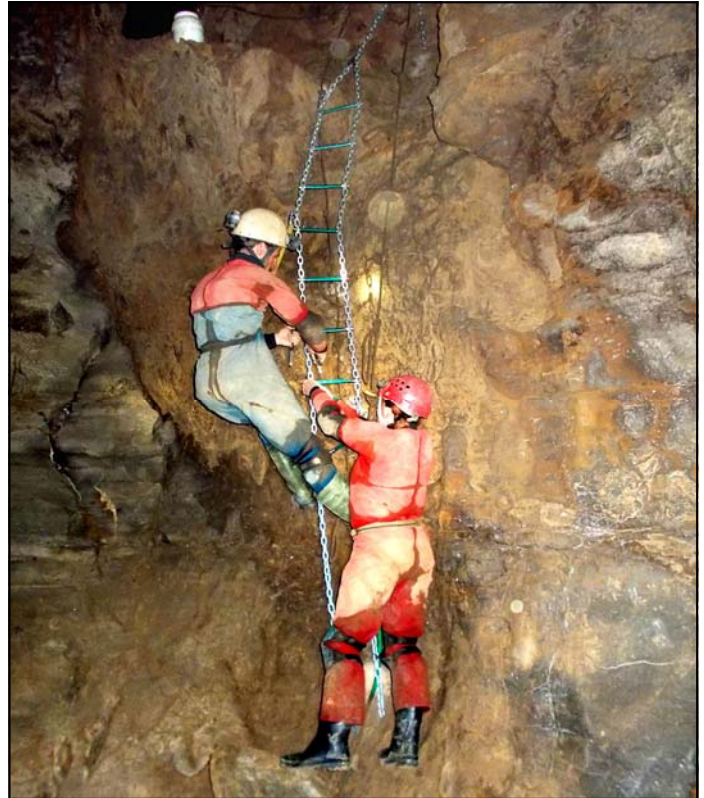
NEW CHAIN LADDERS IN DAREN CILAU

With financial assistance from the Cambrian Caving Council, a total of five new chain ladders have been installed in Daren Cilau at two locations – Eastern Fly-over and Frag Street. About 80kg of metalwork were carried into the cave. The new ladders, in the photo right, were assembled on site and hung during July and August by Adrian Fawcett, Matt and Mandy Voysey.

These chain ladders have allowed for the retirement of rusty electron ladders which had been in situ for around 20 years, and as far as I am aware there are now no long-term electron ladders remaining anywhere under Mynydd Llangattock, apart from a stainless steel one beyond the Restaurant camp in Daren Cilau. Clearly, removing safety hazards deep inside this cave was a major motivation for this most recent ladders project.

The Frag Street ladders give access to some kms of cave, but in particular to the exquisite helictite grotto “Helibeds”. The Eastern Flyover ladders provide a connection with Half Mile Passage, an alternative route that runs parallel to Bonsai Streamway and into a very fine section of cave. It is hoped that by publicising the existence of these new ladders more visits will take place to experience these remote and interesting destinations.

Adrian Fawcett



FRACKING THREAT TO THE RFoD

Four applications, covering the whole of the Royal Forest of Dean, have been received by the Government. It seems to be impossible to find out who the applicants are and what they are interested in finding.

FoDCCAG have filed their response to the “Habitats Regulations Assessments of 14th onshore oil and gas licensing round” which is now closed.

For background, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/habitats-regulations-assessments-of-14th-onshore-oil-and-gas-licensing-round>

These are huge documents. Appendix D gives the current assessments. Search in this 302 page / 10MB document for the Licence Block covering SO50, 51, 60a, 60b, 61. Appendix E is a 159 page / 73MB document which has the maps covering the RFoD at pp.102-106.

With numerous underground SSSIs, an AONB and a SAC within the scope of these applications, this seems somewhat unbelievable. The RFoD contains at least 25% of the UK population of Lesser Horseshoe bats. Fracking is not just for oil shale and gas.

John W Hine, Hon. Secretary, FoDCCAG

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Please send news items, short articles, club profiles and newsworthy photographs for the next issue to Dave Tyson by 31st December 2015