

## The late Melvyn Davies

### Notes on his contribution to cave archaeology in Wales

Mel Davies was one of a now-almost-extinct breed of self-taught Welsh cave archaeologists: His excavation work spanned several decades adding significantly to the documentary record. He was a warden for the Welsh section of the Nature Conservancy Council (subsequently renamed the Countryside Council for Wales, but now known as Natural Resources Wales). His work allowed him to follow his love of cave archaeology, mainly in South Wales, but he also spent eight years excavating in North Wales from the early 1970s.

Mel was a member of British Nylon Spinners Caving Club, based in Pontypool, South Wales. He later became a long-term member of Cwmbran Caving Club. In the 1970s and 80s, he spent a few years excavating the caves of Caldey Island with Brother James Van Nederalde, who had previously carried out excavation work in 1950 with Professor W.F. Grimes. The Visitor Centre on the island has a small archaeological display exhibiting some of the finds.

In 1973 the Nature Conservancy Council re-located Mel to Penmaenmawr in North Wales. That same year he became a founder member of North Wales Caving Club. For the next eight years his archaeological work centred on the Great Orme and Little Orme at Llandudno, although he also examined caves throughout the area. Mel moved back to South Wales in 1981 and continued his excavation work as a member of Cwmbran Caving Club.

It was during his time in north Wales that I got to know Mel Davies, exploring caves with him and assisting on one or two archaeological excavations. My sparks of interest in archaeological caves ignited Mel into typing up a five page guide on "*How to become a cave archaeologist*". He supplied me with bone specimens, including a complete wild Gower pony which had perished on an Oxwich beach during a bad winter, and which he buried in sand, allowing bacteria to strip the bones clean. Inviting my wife and I down to the Gower for the weekend, the three of us excavated the entire skeleton filling several bin-bags, which we then struggled to carry home.

As an amateur cave archaeologist, Mel's work was not valued at the time by professional archaeologists of Wales. This was reflected in three 'rules', based upon experience, that Mel adhered to:

- "Never loan artefacts to a museum – you will never see them again".
- "If you take an interest in cave archaeology, professionals will treat you worse than a metal detectorist".
- "If you excavate anything of importance in a cave, you must publish it in a recognised archaeological journal, otherwise professionals will plagiarise your work".

Mel's published work was prolific. He wrote 86 articles for Cwmbran Caving Club alone on cave exploration, discovery and archaeology. He also produced scores of articles for North Wales Caving Club, Cambrian Caving Council and many other archaeological organisations. He published guidance for cavers on discovering new caves with archaeological potential. He published suggestions for the protection of archaeological caves, arguing that the current method of Scheduling is largely ineffective.



Amongst his later written works are two sections of the book "*Limestones and Caves of Wales*" edited by Trevor D. Ford. One covers south Wales: "*Recent advances in cave archaeology in southwest Wales*", the other: "*Cave archaeology in north Wales*", effectively describing the state of knowledge of Welsh archaeological caves in 1989.

Many of Mel's digs were not carried out alone, and local man Duncan James of Llandudno Junction frequently assisted on many of Mel's cave excavations in north Wales. Duncan himself was the first to recognise the age and hence the importance of copper mines on the Great Orme when he discovered charcoal lying beneath a speleothem floor in the underground workings. Duncan paid £70 to have the charcoal carbon dated, not an insignificant amount in 1988. This proved the workings to be of a great age and Mel naturally persuaded him to publish his results. The copper mines are now accepted as one of the most important Bronze Age mining sites in Europe.

In the 1970s Mel was the first to attempt identifying and exploring all the coastal caves of the Great Orme. This was carried out by several boat trips during which he photographed every visible cave entrance. Systematic exploration then followed by abseiling down the precipitous cliffs. In the late 1980s, Mel was involved in the fight to prevent the quarrying away of Ogof Pant-y-Llyn by identifying many of the archaeological remains.

Mel was a colourful character whose presence at meetings or AGMs frequently enlivened proceedings. He was a good judge of character and didn't suffer fools gladly. He was always willing to pass on his knowledge to others and was passionate about caving and cave archaeology. He was in every sense a good man, and I am privileged to have known him. He passed away in 1997 leaving a wife and son.

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