

CAMBRIAN CAVING COUNCIL *CYNGOR OGOFEYDD CYMREIG*

Affiliated to the British Caving Association

102 Rake Lane, Wallasey, Wirral. CH45 5DE

Tel: 0151 630 5626 Email: secretary@cambriancavingcouncil.org.uk

Fleur Loveridge
Secretary PDCMG
c/o Wren Cottage
1 Newbury Road
Whitchurch
Hampshire
RG28 7DY

1st June 2014

Dear Fleur

It was stated at your November 2013 meeting that PDCMG planned to close the Drws Cefn entrance to Ogof Draenen in the summer of 2014. As of a week or two ago this had not yet been carried out. The view of the Cambrian Caving Council executive is that Drws Cefn should remain open and that a new access agreement for its use should be negotiated with the landowning company.

There has been an open entrance at Drws Cefn since the 1990s when this land was in the ownership of the Coal Authority. The connection to Ogof Draenen was made in the summer of 2009 which is about 10 years from the purchase by the present landowning company who, until the connection was made and attendant publicity, seemed to be unaware of this natural cave entrance on the mountain. Other than for a few months in 2010, when it was gated by the explorers and with local cavers' assistance, Drws Cefn has remained open at the surface for at least 15 years without any public safety or cave conservation concerns arising. The gate referred to above was taken over by PDCMG in 2010 and then removed a few months later by persons unknown. It was never replaced, leaving free access ever since into or out of the main cave, but for a sheet of corrugated iron placed to keep livestock away.

The case promoted by PDCMG in 2009 for closing Drws Cefn was based entirely on cave conservation risks. But in the five years since then no conservation problem has arisen despite Drws Cefn being a viable route. Indeed had this extra entrance been adopted and understood it could have played a beneficial role in underground safety incidents during the past five years, and could easily do so again in the future.

May we remind you that there was a serious diabetes incident where a rescue was initiated by means of using a mobile phone at the blocked Nunnery entrance after the victim became unable to return to the original entrance. If such cases ended with a fatality or serious but avoidable bodily harm arising near an entrance which had been deliberately blocked (so as to place cave conservation above safety) there could be major legal repercussions as well as a tragedy.

Gross negligence is normally excluded from commercial insurance cover. A limited liability company of itself does not provide complete financial protection for its directors and members. We understand that gross negligence and trading while insolvent are amongst the matters for which company directors or the principals in an unincorporated organisation can be held personally liable.

In the past five years, the usage of the original entrance has fallen steadily to 200 or so person-visits per annum. Some of these people will make more than one visit in a year, so the number of distinct individuals now interested in seeing Ogof Draenen is much less than 200 nationally. So paradoxically Ogof Draenen is both the longest cave and also one of the least visited caves in Wales. Conservation is not the same as preservation where access is lost or minimised with few areas visited or little achieved by way of cave extensions as the consequence. Conservation implies having reasonable access, but the site being appropriately managed.

It is policy both of this Council and the British Caving Association that cave access bodies should take up any opportunities that present themselves to improve access for cavers through new negotiations whilst safeguarding conservation interests. Clearly that did not take place in this particular case. Years of opportunities to complete the cave survey, undertake scientific study and discovery have been lost, but they need not be lost forever. There is nothing now to be gained by repeating the access-conservation debate of five years ago since all subsequent events speak perfectly well for themselves.

The forthcoming meeting of PDCMG is perhaps the timely opportunity to strike the right balance, for PDCMG to become more compliant with national policies, by delivering an access agreement for Drws Cefn which both satisfies the needs and wishes of proficient and keen cavers whilst respecting the wishes of the present landowners for reasonable security – and one would imagine for caver safety too.

As neither of the cave entrances is particularly easy to use, and the footfall has been demonstrably insignificant in recent years, there is no prospect of over-use nor conservation risks. The proposition we would like you to consider in June is not to block the Drws Cefn entrance to cavers, as you have planned for later this summer, but instead to fit an appropriate gate with the same padlock key as used at the original entrance and to make caver access available via Drws Cefn on the same terms. We are sure these are the sentiments of the majority of British cavers.

Yours sincerely

Dave Tyson
Secretary
Cambrian Caving Council