

CCC Conservation & Access Officer's Report March 2014 to March 2015

WELSH GOVERNMENT

The Green Paper on improving leisure access in the countryside has been postponed to at least 2016. The Minister realised late in the day that it was top-heavy with too many sporting interests, some competing for the same territory – like fishing versus water-sports. CCC has since met with the British Mountaineering Council who will now lead a small group seeking a positive result in coming years focused only on pedestrian land-based recreation like rock climbing, rambling and caving which have little or no impact on other sports and landowner interests.

The Welsh Government is developing radical and potentially game-changing pieces of big legislation. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Bill, the Environment (Wales) Bill, and the Planning (Wales) Bill will address some of the most crucial issues facing society into the medium and long-term. These include climate change, loss of species, and encouraging ways of living sustainably. The WFG Bill will enable all public bodies – from health boards to local authorities – to carry out their work in an environmentally responsible and sustainable way and to influence others to do so.

Natural Resources Wales, which combines the former CCW with the Forestry Commission Wales and the Environment Agency Wales, is two years old next month. The new NRW is committed to promoting healthy living, sports and physical activity. NRW has drafted an Outdoor Recreation and Access Strategy document for 2014-20. Recreation investment is continuing, such as on mountain bike trails and promoting walking in the countryside and near home too in community woodland. The benefits are seen in terms of tourism and health via outdoor recreation, education about the natural world, and generating a sense of responsibility and care.

There is another side to NRW. They are far more formal to deal with than the former CCW was. This has been demonstrated by a year-old investigation into a cave dig on an SSSI which had not been formally consented by NRW, although the landowners had given permission. It seems NRW's intention is to demonstrate their future intent and make an example of the individual concerned. This could bring a prosecution rather than dispose of the matter in some less extreme way like an enforcement notice. Making sites untouchable should help with the preservation of existing scientific assets, but not in delivering anything new. The approach that CCW took previously was such that cave discovery was welcomed as an essential step in opening up additional areas in which to carry out new scientific research.

We need to factor in this potentially serious strategic change in outlook by the new statutory conservation body running alongside government greening. In the past year I met with NRW staff several times, talking about SSSI cave management generally, educating cavers about SSSIs, and making SSSI documents easily available online.

I also attended the National Access Forum for Wales (NAFW) meetings which are run by NRW as a consultative committee established under the CRoW Act to liaise with all sport governing bodies on access issues.

REGIONAL POLITICS

CCC has recently received the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (BBNPA) consultation on their National Park Management Plan for 2015-20. There is very little about caving in its 100 pages. Dave Tyson will be responding on our behalf.

Each National Park is required by the CRoW Act to hold Local Access Forums, akin to NAFW but with a regional focus. BBNPA LAF members are selected by the Park staff on the basis of interests, knowledge and connections. But caving is mentioned only twice in LAF minutes during the past seven years when our interests were represented throughout by Bernie Woodley who continued to attend LAF meetings during 2014 after leaving council. We were unaware of all this until recently. As there has been no contact with Bernie, there has also been no opportunity to brief or receive feedback.

The other Welsh national parks, Pembrokeshire Coast and Snowdonia, will also have LAFs but caving opportunities in these regions are far smaller than in the Brecon Beacons. CCC has never had any contact with these other LAFs, it seems, but perhaps we should find local cavers to monitor or try to join such groups.

The A465 dual carriageway project gained approval at Public Inquiry for the sensitive Clydach Gorge section and work has begun. This project was mentioned as a cause for concern at the CCC AGM back in 1995, i.e. twenty years ago. A conservation audit with extensive photography and mapping has been carried out by Dr Peter Smith and John Stevens, both local cavers who possess the right professional skills. The principal consultant speleologist is the well-known caver Prof John Gunn. It is reassuring that this level of supervision and technical input is in place and that the main contractor, Costains, will have to demonstrate at the completion of the road works that the caves are undamaged by comparing them with the audit. Access to the gorge, e.g. Ogof Capel, will be disrupted while the area is a building site. I have a dialogue open with Costains on behalf of CCC and I am being kept informed.

CCC NEWSLETTER

Our council newsletter has been made more attractive and readable this past year not only for cavers' benefit but also for distribution to the third parties with whom we deal. The importance of having good publications in various media to underline our credibility, grab attention, and communicate ideas is quite obvious at meetings such as NAFW, and when dealing with staff in external organisations.

Horse riding representatives offered beautifully produced flyers and a detailed booklet at the November NAFW meeting containing scientific research into the health benefits of horse riding, with absolutely perfect timing to fit the health and well-being national politics explained on the page above. The BMC has an attractively printed climbing access manifesto which was sent to every MP, with the aim of getting promises into political party manifestos ahead of the May general election. Whilst our budget does not match that of these other big National Governing Bodies, there are practical and affordable ways to raise our game and we need to use them.

The newsletter is one of these, and its four issues this year have been a team effort in terms of the written material contributed and the production effort. One club supplied an article in the form of a club history and profile which was much appreciated. Some contributions from other clubs that showcase caving activities and exemplify good practice would be most welcome as special features in future issues.

MINES AND MINE HISTORY

I have attended some mine history meetings and made new contacts during the year. These have proved invaluable in advancing the NRW Mines Access Agreement envisioned by Elsie Little to an operational system. The pace of progress has been painfully slow at times, chasing to get replies to emails or calls, then to get papers signed off, put into envelopes and delivered to us. But we are about there now.

We have set up a new company Cave Access Ltd (CAL) which has full commercial powers but will be operated on a not-for-profit, no remuneration, and no charge for permits basis, ideally without handling any money at all. The directors are myself, Roy Fellows and Dave Tyson. We have legal responsibilities as company officers that could land us in a criminal court or on the end of a civil action – health and safety being the most important one – so we must retain control of operational matters. Having said that, we are open to all ideas and suggestions coming from anyone.

The Welsh Government and NRW and CAL have signed and dated two contracts for mines access which run initially for one year. We await the hardcopy from their solicitors. CAL are also waiting for BCA to confirm the insurance as an access body. CAL must also supply the NRW land agent with Risk Assessments for each mine on the permitted site list before it can invite cavers and mine explorers to visit them. Here is the initial site list:

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|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Gwrych Castle Mines | Abergele |
| Parc Lead Mine | Gwydyr Forest |
| Cae Coch Sulphur Mine | Gwydyr Forest |
| Rhiwbach Slate Quarry | Penmachno |
| Bryneglwys Quarry | Abergynolwyn |
| Hendre Ddu Slate Quarry | Aberllefenni |
| Henfwich Pryse Estate Sheep Walk | Nant-y-Moch, Ceredigion |
| Minllyn Slate Quarry | Dinas Mawddwy |
| Allt y Crib | Tal-y-Bont, Ceredigion |
| *Temple Mine | Rheidol Valley |
| Draethen Lead Mines | Draethen, Caerphilly |

*Owned by NRW. All other sites owned by WG.

All documents should be in the correct place by the CCC AGM weekend so we can make the first official trips into the Parc Lead Mine and Rhiwbach Slate Mine then.

OGOF CARNO

CAL is likely the best platform for restoring access into Ogof Carno which begins as an adit owned by Welsh Water plc. I had an informal meeting with WW management about this and they want to talk again later when the NRW mines access system is seen to be a success and we have obtained a supportive recommendation from NRW. Welsh Water is a big landowner and they have some other interesting but currently forbidden sites such as a natural limestone tunnel with over 1km of diveable passage, which is ongoing. The water company is very focused on health and safety matters which will need to be fully addressed in any new access agreement.

GREENBRIDGE CAVE AND CARMARTHENSHIRE KARST

Access has been negotiated and cave keys obtained to Greenbridge Cave. Visitors should contact me for them. It is a little visited area but has huge potential with a beach resurgence with the volume of the DYO outflow but no direct cave access there. Greenbridge Cave itself is further inland and while small is significant with a very long and tight on-going lead. Slightly further inland again I have negotiated access with a neighbouring farmer who is quite enthusiastic about cave digging or prospecting. All his land is good limestone, it has some interesting karst features, and all unscheduled. If you are interested in this area for an exploration project then please contact me.

OGOF GOVAN AND CASTLEMARTIN RANGE WEST

Access into Ogof Govan on Range East has always been slightly controversial in that the original explorers appear to have handed over cave management to the curator of Haverfordwest Museum with the consent of the firing range management of that era. Needless to say such an arrangement did not work, and people just went to the cave without museum consent. The landowner is now a MOD agency called the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) and they are understandably not too happy about the lack of communication, the YouTube videos, and large photos in the Daily Mail. But the good news is that they are keen to enable a well-managed legal access system not only for Ogof Gofan but also for prospecting any new caves on Range West which is a live firing area for tanks and aircraft, some navy operations, special forces training with personnel from our own country and allies.

A meeting took place in March 2015 between myself and two army officers, two staff from NRW and two from the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park at the range office. We have agreed an interim system for Ogof Gofan which is that cavers will contact me to have an informal conversation about the terms and conditions of access, and I will then pass them on to the park staff who will authorise visits on a one-off basis.

Range West may contain unexploded ordnance, from recent to very old. Cavers wishing to explore for caves must attend a safety briefing and obtain a personal photo pass. This is handed back to the range office at the end of each visit on the range, and a report of any cave discoveries needs to be filed. The pass is for your own use, not for family and friends or your dog. New caves found must not be entered until archaeologists and cave scientists have had opportunity to assess them and given clearance. Placing bolts and hammering in metal ground anchor bars is not allowed on safety grounds because these could break into shrapnel which can be accelerated to fly several kilometres beyond the range boundary if hit by the explosive in shells. This is not an agreement either just to go walking on what is otherwise a forbidden karst landscape. The National Park offers guided walks on certain dates each year for those who simply want that kind of relaxed coastal day. If you are interested in using the cave prospecting agreement then please call me first for a discussion of the T&Cs.

I expect that over the course of the coming year we will obtain a final written legal access agreement from DIO covering use of Range West and Range East, and that will replace the interim access permission methods that are described above.

LITTLE NEATH RIVER CAVE, BRIDGE CAVE, PWLL-Y-RHYD, ETC

Another serious diesel pollution incident was reported to me in September 2014. This is the latest in a series going back to April 2008 at least. A further report received in December 2014 is thought to be due to a development of the September incident rather than a fresh incident.

I attended the scene, along with NRW officers. The strongest smell of fuel was in the small entrance passage where the water sinks from the main river. The Nedd Fechan river itself was not polluted, and neither were any of the downstream caves which I checked. There are no historic reports of the downstream caves ever being polluted. From this we concluded that diesel was likely poured into the LNRC entrance on such occasions, and it is wondrous that previous investigations did not figure this out.

I removed several intact and near empty oil containers from Pwll-y-Rhyd. There is also an old 100-gallon oil drum stuck in the cave roof there, which is also empty and intact, to be removed by NRW contractors in due course. None of these containers has leaked. One of the 5-litre engine oil cans that I took off site, and a modern plastic one at that, had red diesel residues inside matching the smell in the cave. I went into LNRC in February 2015 and found there are still waxy deposits and scum on static pools although the fuel smell has gone. So caving is now about back to normal.



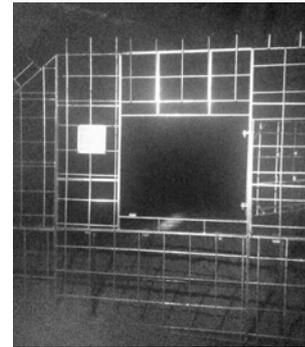
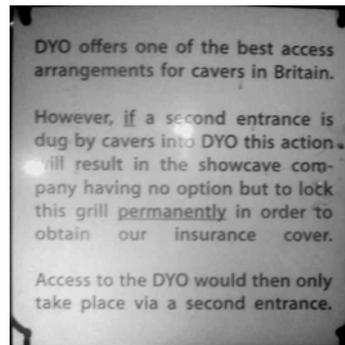
We could be dealing with a linked series of nature crimes at LNRC, and in any crime investigation one considers motive, means and opportunity. Motive is usually money, passion or power. This cannot be money, so it must be passion and power. Passion covers a wide spectrum of emotions including exclusion, frustration, envy and revenge. Power would include enjoying affecting cave access, the thrill of getting away with something that is unrecognized as a crime, and the attention each incident generates. This apparently absurd series of attacks thus makes complete sense to somebody whom I fear is a caver with appropriate means, opportunity and unusual personality. There are other interpretations, but this one is my best shot. We must all be vigilant and mindful of the fact that cavers enjoy exceptionally good relations with the landowner at Blaen Nedd Isaf farm who is having to put up with these roughly annual pollution incidents and the subsequent inquiries by NRW.

CAVE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

I am very grateful for the efforts of many others in managing our biggest and best caves. It is a massive contribution by so many people to look after them so well.

The arrangements at OFD and new access system into OFD1 following SWCC's land purchase are working well. Further east, the MLCMAC has also had a quiet year with nothing more to contend with than a few fallen boulders coming from various cliffs above cave entrances or footpaths. OFDCMC and MLCMAC are NRW committees and we are grateful to Richard Preece and his professional staff in Abergavenny for their leadership with cave management over many years. We also give Richard Preece our best wishes for the future on leaving NRW in March.

The new DYO committee is now running smoothly although the cave landowner is understandably concerned about activity in 2014 with regard to upland cave digs. A new grille and a notice about cave access have appeared recently at the DYO lakes.



PDCMG's self-belief remains inversely proportional to their comprehension of what caving is all about. They are still intent on closing the Drws Cefn entrance as soon as they have official 'bat consent' on the grounds that the landowner now wishes it closed having been persuaded by them that caving is harmful to bats. This is not a view shared by CCC officers and a letter was written to PDCMG accordingly. Some bat data loggers placed by PDCMG were stolen during the past year, but there have been no more lock/gate thefts. Drws Cefn is on CRoW Access Land and given the pro-CRoW referendum result in BCA, I feel that it is pity that no fresh attempt was made to compromise, such as fitting a gate like the one at the first entrance. The group is said to be bracing itself for the inevitable backlash that closing Drws Cefn may imply. Let's hope that PDCMG's political talent does not run to closing the whole of Ogof Draenen.

LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD

I have had an interesting first year in this role and it has taken up a lot more of my time and broadened my understanding in ways that I did not imagine at the outset. I could have said more in this report, but it is long enough already, so apologies if I have missed out a topic of greater interest to you.

The 2015 focus has been on better access and this effort should be continued. But a greater effort needs to go into cave conservation from here onwards, which is far more complex to plan and deliver successfully. We need to study the Derbyshire Caving Association's flagship methods, then begin to catch up. It is not something to attempt alone. We will need a whole team for advancing this, and thus unity amongst ourselves, along with winning the hearts and minds of others to uphold our aims.

I would like to thank my fellow officers on our Council for their support, the wider help and encouragement, and I am willing to be nominated in this role for a further year.

Stuart France