

Report from the Pwll Ddu Cave Management Group

Please accept my apologies that I am unable to attend the 2016 AGM. However, given developments in the last 12 months I thought it was important to at least send an update.

At the last CCC AGM I agreed to take the idea for a proposed mediation regarding Drws Cefn (by Andrew Hinde of the BCA) back to the PDCMG committee. Due to the illness and ultimate death of my mother it took me a number of months to do so, but the matter was brought to the PDCMG at its June 2015 meeting. It was agreed to proceed with the mediation and Andrew Hinde was contacted, leading to a meeting with Andrew, Charles Bailey, Stuart France, Dave Tyson and myself in August. Andrew had spoken with our landowner so was clear that he (the landowner) wished Drws Cefn to be closed as soon as possible and that his patience was running out. However, recognising that permanent closure could be seen negatively by a proportion of the caving community (both those knowledgeable of the background, and those that would simply read about it) we also needed to consider whether something that is seen as less permanent within the eyes of the caving community could be implemented. We undertook to see what could be done, but would be restricted by the nature of a licence application already submitted for works to be done at Drws Cefn. I took actions to contact NRW to discuss.

Before the mediation team was due to meet again at Hidden Earth in September, the licence application relating to Drws Cefn was rejected by NRW. This is for two reasons. First there had been some miscommunication about the exact solution to be implemented that meant licensing were not assessing the correct concept. But additionally there also seems to have been a change of stance from NRW and ideas which previously were agreed in principle as acceptable are now disputed. In particular it was suggested that we should be applying for a development licence not a conservation licence as previously recommended, and that greater attention needed to be paid to changes in airflow. While frustrating in some respects, this situation actually led to an opportunity to make more significant changes to the proposed works at Drws Cefn and the possibility to accommodate a greater compromise.

A meeting was held between the landowner, NRW and myself in early November 2015 at which revised options for Drws Cefn were discussed. It was proposed that installing a grille at (or in) the entrance, rather than a more permanent blockage would i) get round any concerns about airflow which NRW had with the original licence application and ii) also offer a compromise to the caving community. The grille could then potentially be changed in the future if the landowner changed his mind about access and the PDCMG desire it. This proposed approach was then also agreed by the PDCMG committee at its November meeting. The only amendment being that it would be an "openable grille (although without access, since this was not permitted).

It was also hoped that, in the spirit of the original mediation, this compromise could also be supported by the Cambrian Caving Council, especially since this support would reduce the risk of any subsequent vandalism at the site. However, the day before the November PDCMG meeting a letter was received from solicitors in Cambridge threatening NRW with judicial review relating to caving and the CRoW act if it did anything to prevent access to Drws Cefn. While the action was taken on behalf of individual cavers from the Group Garimpeiros, one of those individuals was Stuart France, the Conservation Officer of the CCC. Following a response from NRW in December which made it clear that they did not consider caving to be covered under CRoW, a further letter was sent by the

firm of solicitors on the 16th February. This subsequent letter was instructed by Stuart France alone and was a pre-action protocol regarding the previously threatened judicial review. Since that date I have received no further correspondence from either party.

Meanwhile, we continue to prepare for a new licence application based on the revised plan to place a grille at Drws Cefn, with the view to completing this work after the bats come out of hibernation later this year.

In other news, I can report that a tentative start has been made on a conservation monitoring programme for Ogof Draenen, using photographs of certain features in selected locations within the cave. Given the extent of the system there will be a need to be very much selected in this respect, but most visited and/or most vulnerable aspects are expected to be selected. It is hoped that in due course the scheme will run along a similar line to the northern cavers monitoring scheme.

Finally some maintenance works are expected to take place on the scaffold shalt in the entrance series, commencing later this month. While not an official fixed aid, it has been reported that there is some deterioration in the timbers within the shaft and it is considered prudent to replace some of these.

Fleur Loveridge, 8th March 2016.