

Gouffre Berger Expedition 1967

It was spring time 1964, a few caving friends and I were walking through Kingsdale in the Yorkshire Dales near to the cave resurgence of Keld Head, when we saw two men, one was sat on the grass bank grinning and the other running completely naked along the bank in big circles as though it was his way of drying himself off after diving in the cave rising, he was a huge man for a caver.

I remember saying to my friends who the hell are they? One of them thought the big man was Ken Pearce and the other was Mike Boon, both cave explorers of renown.

Although I did get to know Mike Boon in my caving days, it was another two years before I saw Ken Pearce again.

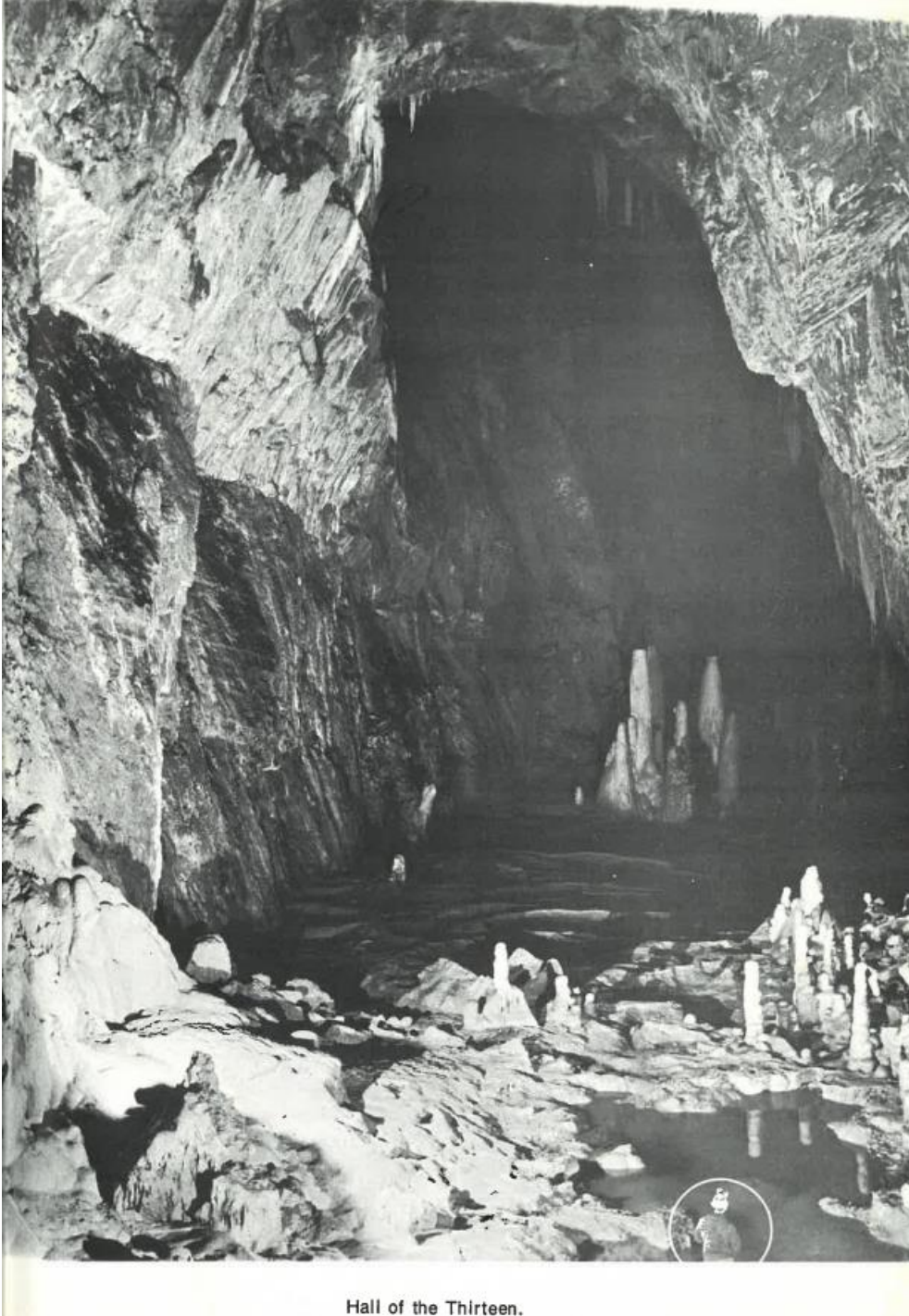
He was recruiting in the Dales for cavers to go with him on an expedition in 1967 to the Gouffre Berger in France, one of the deepest caves in the world at that time.

He had been down the cave three times before but had ambitions to go deeper still by diving beyond the first sump, which he had been through on his 1963 expedition.

Out of the twenty-five underground members of the 1967 expedition he chose nine members of the Happy Wanderers Caving Club based in Kingsdale near Ingleton of which I was a member.

We started our training going down caves in the Yorkshire Dales, Ken proved to be a bossy and bullying leader but with a good sense of humour. He would make us climb up and down hundred-foot pitches twice to test our fitness, the Happy Wanderers were a tight knit bunch, very fit and took every test he gave us in our stride.

On Tuesday 8th August 1967 the surface camp had been set up on the Sornin Plateau near the entrance of the Gouffre Berger. The underground party set off the same day, partly to setup Camp 1 this first trip took 27 hours it was a very arduous task carrying and moving equipment and food supplies down vertical shafts across small lakes and down a mountain side terrain named the great rubble heap, we had to thread our way down through a maze of huge boulders carrying very heavy loads on our backs for about 500 yards down to Camp 1 at the bottom, just beyond was the hall of the thirteen, a beautiful serene place with calcite floors, enormous stalagmites and gower pools in a cathedral like chamber, it was an underground photographers dream, and a promise of things to come. At a depth of sixteen hundred feet, we had a meal and our leader ordered everyone out and back to the surface for more supplies.



Hall of the Thirteen.

This great effort to Camp 1 and back to the surface in twenty-seven hours was a mistake, we were falling asleep on our feet at the top and bottom of the pitches. I remember at the bottom

of Aldo's shaft about seven or eight of us were waiting in turn to climb out when Pearce shouted, "wake up Barney", I awoke only to see everybody falling asleep...including Pearce. He wrote about the first days in his report on the 1967 expedition that it might have been more prudent to introduce newcomers more gently into expedition life, but he was just as tired as the rest of us.

On August 10th we went down to finish setting up camp with a smaller team because some of the members had dropped out, eighteen of us set off down, an advanced party of four arrived at Camp 1 first and slept there while the rest of us ferried the bulk of the equipment down to the Camp and one member had returned to the surface. The advanced party had rested and went back to check on the telephone wires because there had been a flood in up in the river gallery, three of us were sent back up the great rubble heap to collect some left kit bags, the two lads with me said they'd had enough, they had wives and children and felt homesick. I bade them farewell and set off alone back down the rubble heap with what I could carry.

When reaching the Camp 1, Pearce snapped, "where are the others, Barney?"

"They've gone out" I said.

He looked at me and the lads and said, "I hope there's no more clever devils going to play tricks like that".

Below - Boulder In Great Rubble Heap.



Thirteen of us were left at Camp 1, we discussed the possibilities of going further, Pearce was reluctant to carry on with such a depleted team, I pointed out to him that on the 1963 expedition they had succeeded with thirteen men, there were thirteen of us at Camp 1 plus

another four who had gone to check on the telephone wires, although two of these unknown to us had quit.

Pearce told us we didn't compare to the calibre of men on the 1963 expedition, he commented on their strength, comparing Bob Gillibrand a good friend of mine to a donkey, who you just couldn't give him enough to carry and I thought this is just what you need to be for this kind of work. By now Pearce had lost faith and called the expedition off, we packed up and set off back to the surface again. We had spent three days carrying supplies down to Camp 1 and back, so it was quite soul destroying but some of us weren't for giving up.

I think there were a number of reasons why several members of the team had quit the expedition, some for personal reasons others from sheer exhaustion and all of us were affected by the loss of six of our friends who had drowned in the Mossdale Caverns' tragedy in the Yorkshire Dales only six weeks earlier. It remains the worst caving disaster to happen in Britain. One of the party was my long-standing friend John Ogden (Oggy) who I had known from school, we had been friends since the age of eight, both of us introduced to caving and rock climbing at Camp School, where youngsters from local towns spent a few weeks a year in the great outdoors. We loved it and joined our first caving club when we were 14 years old. Bill Frakes and Colin Vickers also lost their lives in Mossdale, they were Happy Wanderers members and were due to go on the Berger Expedition, it was a terrible blow. I think everyone on the expedition would have been in a better frame of mind had it not been for this tragedy.

On Monday 14th August, seven of us reformed and decided to go down the cave again. Jim Cunningham, Dave Fisher, John Shepherd and I all Wanderers' members, Julian Coward, Dave Gill from other clubs and our old friend Stu Whitmey from the Northern Exploration Group, Stu was our nominated leader by Ken Pearce. We had time on our hands and a chance to explore further down the cave.

Monday 14th August, we set off at 6.15pm to Camp 1 for the third time, where we had left equipment and rations for a small party, arriving at 1.15am in the hall of the thirteen and were in bed for 3am.

Tuesday 15th August, we rose at 11am, Stu contacted Ken Pearce on the inductor phone and arranged a meeting at the bottom of Aldo's Pitch to discuss carrying of diving equipment and more supplies further down the cave, we agreed to do this and after taking more photographs we went to bed at 1.00am.

Wednesday 16th August, we rose at 11.00am and started moving tackle down to Camp 2, we left Dave Fisher in bed at Camp 1 as he was feeling ill. We moved supplies quickly through the canals and down pitches to Camp 2, the three of us, myself, John Shepherd and Julian Coward, meeting up with three lads from the Pegasus team. The Pegasus Expedition's objective was to explore a roof series, however some of them had an interest in going to the bottom of the cave, they had already laddered down to the Grand Cascade but had run out of tackle, we acquired more equipment from our team.

Thursday 17th August at 7pm John, Julian and myself set off from Camp 2 down the Grand Canyon, a huge cavern which descends to Gashers Shaft and the river to the Grand Cascade where we met up with the three Pegasus men their leader Anthony Huntington his nickname was Wingnut (I wonder why!) He was a very agile and competent caver I had only met him for the first time the previous day, he was the nearest thing to a trapeze artist, and I was inspired by him. He swung down the Grand cascade on the ladder rungs with his feet on the walls astride of the water for 125 feet, it seemed like a couple of minutes I was amazed. I followed him down, it was very sporty, and we all arrived at the traverse to the little monkey pitch.

I told Wingnut I had an ice peg about 9 inches long that Pearce gave me which just drops into an eye hole in the rock at the end of the traverse to hang the ladder from down the vertical pitch. We lined him down he was swinging about above the Hurricane Shaft, he rigged the ladder horizontally above the water to the far wall and anchored it and we followed him down with the remaining tackle for the Hurricane Pitch.

There was a short climb up to a natural belay on the left-hand wall and about 15 feet away from the main waterfall the ladders were lowered 150 feet to the bottom, it was a cold, wet, forbidding, intimidating place in an enormous chamber with water roaring and crashing everywhere, it was nature in its rawest form, the entire cave came alive at this point. By the time Shep, Julian and myself regrouped at the bottom of the hurricane, the Pegasus lads had set off for the sump.



Frank Barnes, Johnny Shepherd & Julian Coward leaving Camp 2 for the bottom.

We clambered down a boulder slope into a canal and after a short distance climbed out into a dry oxbow before dropping back into the water, we saw the Pegasus lads on their way back from the sump, we said we would meet up with them back at the little monkey series.

We dropped into the deep water and floated for what seemed to be about 30 yards to the sump, we clambered onto a shingle beach on the right of the sump it didn't look much different to any other cave sump, but it was 3650 feet underground and a long way from home and was as far as us mere mortals could go. The day after Ken Pearce would dive from this lonely place alone for 240 feet and continue along 60 ft of air space to a second sump where he dived another 300ft to a dry passage then walked 100 yards to a 50ft pitch where he could get no further and then returned to his team at the first sump.

Pearce never divulged what he had discovered until days later when we had vacated the cave. We sat there a bit longer ate our rations of nuts, raisins, chocolate, and cheese. Our ambition was fulfilled the three of us looked at one another I remember saying "lets get the hell out of here". I grabbed a handful of pebbles for souvenirs, put them in my tobacco tin which I kept in my booty bag, and set off back up the river, Julian led the way, Shep followed with me at the back. It soon became clear that Shep was in trouble, he wasn't a strong swimmer, and the current was very strong, he kept floating back to me, I was trying to push him forwards and keep his head out the water at the same time, it was quite exhausting as you couldn't get any grip on the sides of the walls, it was a serious situation. I managed to push him in an upward manner, keeping his head above the water and gaining a bit of ground with each push, eventually reaching the oxbow, this was the hardest 30-yard swim I've ever experienced.

We now headed for the hurricane, we climbed up a small hillock and on the top was a dump of climbing equipment including ropes, carabiners, slings, pitons. They must have been left by the Italian Expedition just before ours, it must have been worth thousands of pounds of today's money. We walked past and never touched a thing, it had been left by a previous expedition which was ironic really because we were using the most cumbersome 300ft rope you could imagine on the hurricane, it was made of cotton, about an inch thick and weighed a ton in the wet conditions, but we put up with it as we just wanted out.

The three of us soon climbed the hurricane and joined the three Pegasus lads in the little monkey series, we made our way back to Camp 2, where we slept for a long period. Unknown to us quite a few more lads had gone down to the bottom of the cave and back before we woke up, Pearce had also completed his dive.

The strangest thing happened, I was awakened by Ken Pearce holding a bowl of shredded wheat covered in hot milk, "get that down you Barney, it will do you good". I thought to myself 'is this really Ken Pearce, the bully of the Berger treating me to breakfast in bed?'. I had no idea what he had found in those sumps but he was in the best mood I had seen him in since the expedition started. "What I want you to do Barney is take Shep and Julian and detackle the bottom section of the cave and get back here."

"Does that include the big rope as well?" I replied, he said "yes I'm afraid so".

He explained that a lot of the tackle had been borrowed from clubs and individuals who wanted them back. The three of us descended to the bottom of the grand cascade where we found the rope and a few ladders near the bathtub, it was an enjoyable trip down and back to Camp 2, with no pressure on us after our bottoming success.

I remember packing up at Camp 2 ready to go to Camp 1, I was putting my tobacco tin away when Pearce spotted me, he came over and said "give me that" he opened the tin, saw the pebbles and said "what do you think your playing at Barney" I looked him in the eye and said "we've carried enough loads up and down this cave for you this week, and these are going out with me", he smiled, gave me the tin back and said "okay Barney, let's go".

We made our way to Camp 1, Ken would fall back into his old ways and shout from behind "keep those kitbags moving" and we'd shout back "shut up Ken you're only the leader if we say so". He seemed to like this banter and said, "I know but you can't blame me for trying". We reached Camp 1 at 11.30pm on Saturday 19th August, went to bed at 1.30am, Sunday morning we rose at 8.30am and started moving out of the cave, some of us had spent the best part of nine days underground.

I felt my senses coming back, I could smell the pine forests from hundreds of feet underground and when I eventually reached the surface everything seemed a purple colour until my eyes adjusted to the light, it had been a truly wonderful adventure. A lot of things have been said and written about Ken Pearce, good things, bad things and lies.

I have a wonderful book on the Gouffre Berger, covering the first explorations through to recent times, there are wonderful photographs of the cave by Robbie Shone which gives us an insight into the beauty and splendour of the cave which we couldn't get from the photos in the old days.

The only thing that spoiled it for me was how Dave W. Gill criticised Ken Pearce and his organising of the 1967 expedition in the book and the story of Pearce sending a couple of members out of the cave on the 1963 expedition to get more supplies and telling them to pull the ladders up behind them in case there was a mutiny as though he was a mad man, which he was not.

In fact, I know a lot of the men from the 1963 expedition, and they admired him for his leadership. The organising of the 1967 expedition was not perfect but he was dealing with all sorts of psychological problems, the timing was so soon after the Mossdale tragedy. One of the best parts of his organising was to choose good caving teams, there was no mutinies on any of the expeditions. These caving expeditions were major undertakings at the time and not meant to be cosy.

Stories like that are not helpful and give the impression that members of the expedition were used as slaves instead of a group of young ambitious cavers going to the bottom of the deepest cave in the world and knowing exactly what to expect. I consider the stories an insult and a

slight on the expedition members. Why would the two team members pull the ladders up only to drop them down again when they came back down with the provisions shortly afterwards. The bottoming party were a dedicated team with the same objectives as Pearce.

The regrouping of the 1967 Gouffre Berger Expedition was one of the finest achievements of The Happy Wanderers caving and potholing club to make this expedition a success out of the 12 men that went back underground to fulfil the aims of the expedition were seven members of The Happy Wanderers Club. Dave Fisher, Dave Taylor, Jim Cunningham. John Rushton, Len Platt, John Shepherd and myself, and members of other clubs Dave W. Gill, Julian Coward, J.S Huntington, Ken Pearce cave diver and Stu Whitmey, the new leader. Unfortunately, Len Platt didn't make it to the bottom, he injured his wrist due to an accident with a pully and had to return to the surface, he was devastated, but the rest of us were successful in fulfilling the aims of the expedition.

I remember Dave W. Gill very well out of our team I believe he went on to do great things, but at that time he was relatively new to caving and very fortunate and privileged to go down the Berger with Ken Pearce and some of the best cavers in England at that time. Ken Pearce went down the Berger four times in the sixties he led three expeditions, he might not have been the most popular of leaders, but he was certainly one of the most courageous and it doesn't seem right to discredit him out of the history of the Berger in this way through sour grapes after so many great achievements. They say every sport needs its characters, if the same can be said of dangerous pursuits, then Ken Pearce certainly was a character, and if it hadn't been for him and his ambitions, most of us would never have gone to Gouffre Berger in the first place.

By Frank Barnes



Successful Bottom Party (Back Row L to R) J Coward, F Barnes, K Pearce, J S Huntington, D Gill, J Cunningham
(Front Row L to R) D Fisher, J Rushton, S M E Whitmey, D J Taylor, J Shepherd.