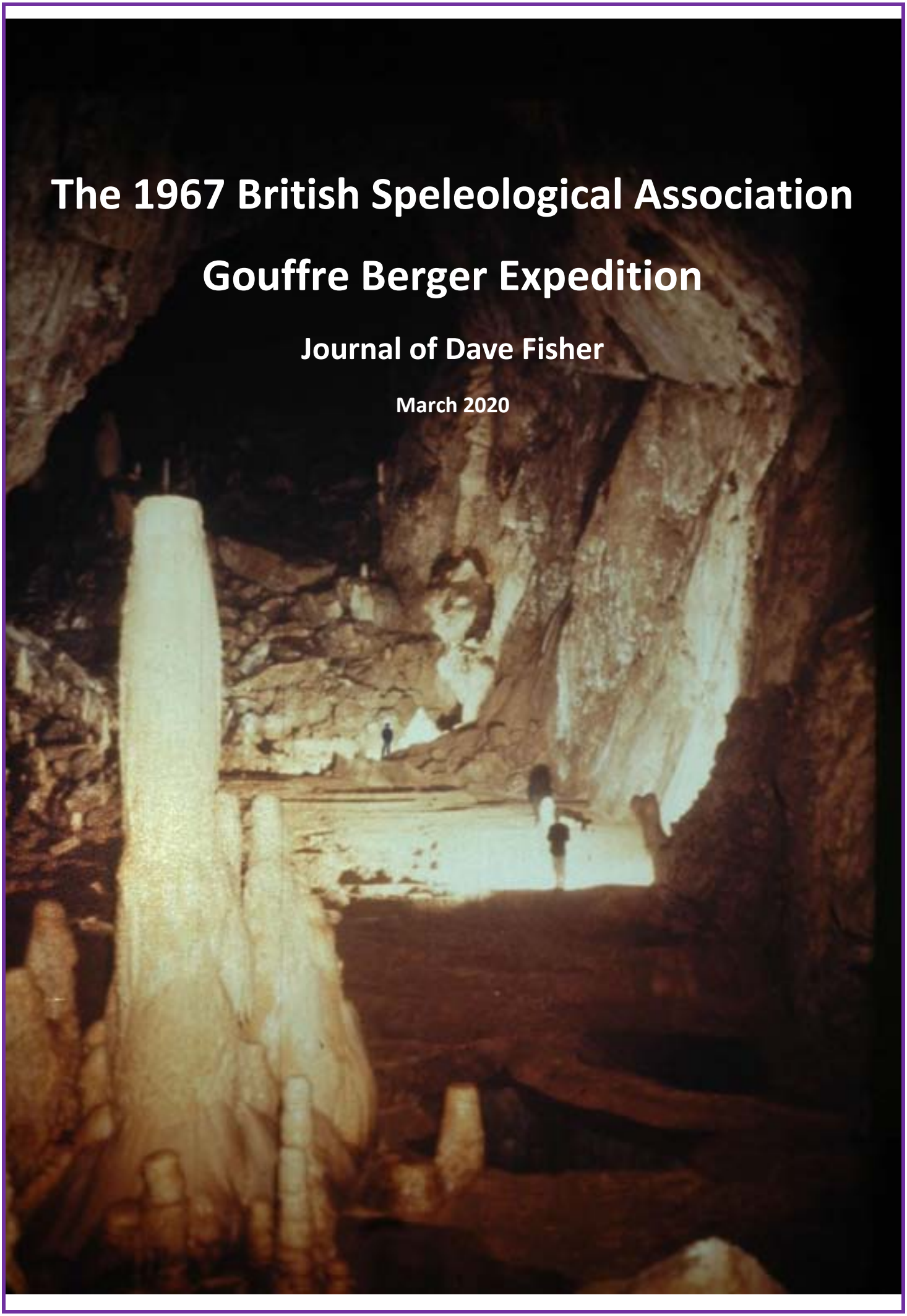
The 1967 British Speleological Association Gouffre Berger Expedition

Journal of Dave Fisher

March 2020



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Surface camp Fig 1

1.0 Introduction

It is now 52 years since I went down Gouffre Berger and on our last Mossdale commemorative walk Dave Brook suggested that it would be a good idea to write up my memories of it. These are my recollections along with contributions from other members of the expedition, clouded by the elapse of time.

In August 1967 I was a member of the Gouffre Berger Expedition organised by the British Speleological Association (BSA) led by Ken Pearce. The objective was to support a team of divers to reach the sump at -1122m who would dive the sump with the intention of continuing the exploration. My objective was to reach the sump then get out.

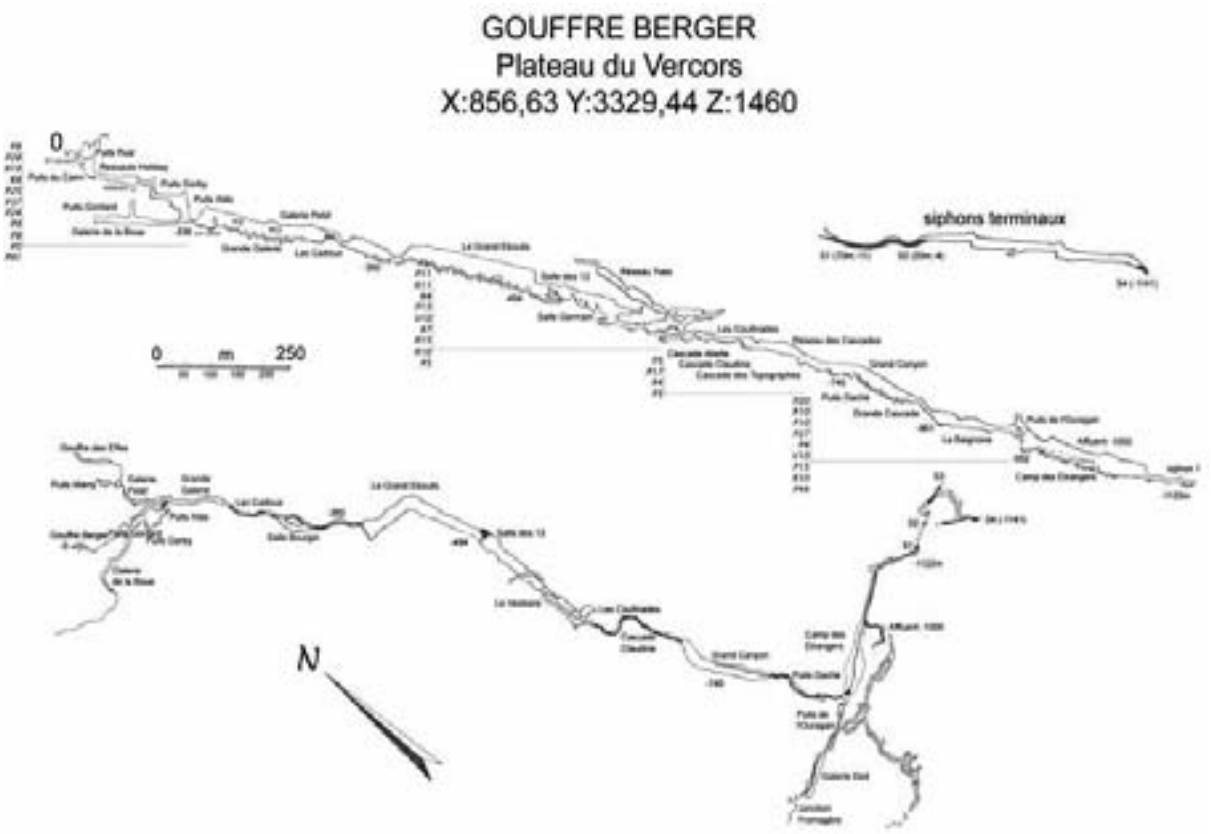
This cave system during the 60's competed with the Pierre Saint-Martin (PSM) system to be the deepest natural cavern in the world. Both are located in France, the Berger is located in the south east in the Vercors area. The PSM is in the western end of the Pyrenees close to the Spanish Border.

2.0 History

The Gouffre Berger was discovered in May 1953; amongst the party was Joseph Berger hence the name of the cave. Exploration continued during the fifties and the sump at -1122m and a length of 3000m was reached in August 1956. This was a large well supported expedition with multi-national involvement.

It was in the sixties that the British first got involved on their own, in August 1962 Frank Salt's expedition with Ken Pearce explored the sump at -1122. There is no report of a dive. The following year in August 1963 Ken Pearce on S. Wynne-Roberts expedition dived the sump, breaking through after 70m to a second sump.

In 1964 a further British expedition with Ken Pearce was caught in the lower reaches of the system by rising water and prevented from reaching the sump.



Survey of the Gouffre Berger *Fig 2*

3.0 Selection

Early in 1966 word circulated round the caving fraternity in the Yorkshire Dales that an expedition to the Gouffre Berger was planned for the summer of 1967. A number of people in our club the Happy Wanderers Cave and Pothole Club (HWCPC), including me, decided that we would like to get involved.

I was asked on a number of occasions how we came to be called the HWCPC. It is my understanding (I was not an original founder member) that the locals mainly in Ingleton, who knew club members, called them the Happy Wanderers therefore, the name was co-opted.

A meeting was held in the Marton Arms at Thornton in Lonsdale fronted by Ken Pearce, he outlined what was required and how it would be carried out. A number of meets would be organised and prospective cavers who wished to be considered as members of the expedition would be expected to attend. Assessment would be made as to the suitability of the participants as the meets progressed.

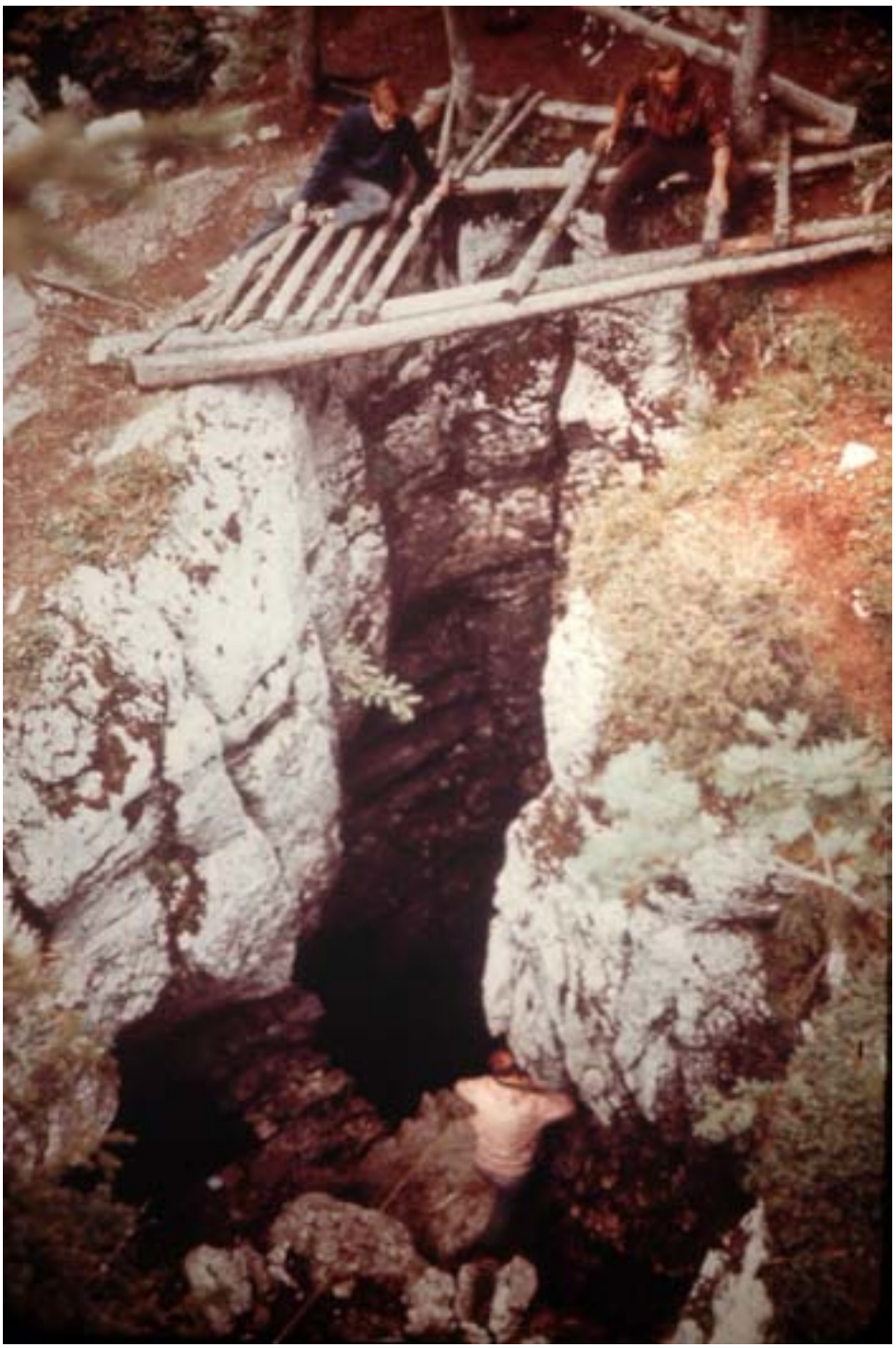
A number of the major classic cave systems of the Yorkshire Dales were visited, together with a trip to Derbyshire. The one that stands out for me was a latter day one, overnight to Ireby Fell Cavern. We ferried diving gear down to the sump where the team of divers dived through. A number of us called at the Ingleton chippy and purchased fish and chips, the intention was to eat them during the trip. Needless to say they were cold when we finally ate them; however the bonus was the smell of the fish & chips all down the cave.

At the end of the training period all the HWCPC members were co-opted into the team as underground members. They were; Frank Barnes, Jim Cunningham, David Fisher, Leonard Plat, John Rushton, John Shepherd, David Taylor, and Ken Taylor.

Parallel with the above activities went the raising of monies and the scrounging of all sorts of gear and food as well as collecting together over 3000ft of ladders. This was greatly helped by HRH Duke of Edinburgh agreeing to be patron.

All the underground team members were equipped with dry suits made by a firm called Frankenstein at a cost of ten pounds. These garments worn under a boiler suit were fully water proof with integral feet. Access into them was through the neck which was sealed by a Velcro fastened neoprene seal. A modification insisted upon by our expedition leader was the addition of rubber grommets above the ankle that were sealed with a plastic bung.

His reasoning for this was that when we descended vertical pitches that had water streaming down any water ingress could be released by pulling out the bung. He was frightened of the suit filling up and the weight dragging us off the ladder. A silly mod as the suit was very efficiently sealed at the neck. My only water ingress was through a defectively installed grommet, the result being a wet right foot.



The entrance *Fig 3*

4.0 Gear and Techniques (Used during the 60's)

The cave system is split into different sections each with its own challenges, in the 60's it was usual to establish camps at two depths rather like tackling a major mountain. In fact it was at the time that the Gouffre Berger was considered the Everest of caves. The first camp was at 1500ft down; the second one at 2800ft down. To get there you negotiated a series of pitches using Electron Ladder (a pitch being a vertical drop, ***(see Fig 9)*** of Hurricane Pitch which is the longest at 145ft). Each pitch had a safety line, used to protect the person climbing the ladder; the line is at least double the length of the pitch which allows the climber to be protected from the bottom of the pitch. The caver wore a safety harness made from climbing rope with a carabiner allowing easy attachment to the safety line.

Each caver had a personal kit bag, this contained a dry set of clothes, a sleeping bag and a Lilo all wrapped in two polythene bags. Working clothes were a boiler suit outer garment, dry suit then undergarments of a long sleeve vest and long johns which were made out of polypropylene. A spare set of these were in the kit bag, these were the fore runner of the current base layer but not as comfortable to wear. They only absorbed a small amount of water; footwear was a pair of leather boots.

Each underground member carried a small satchel; in it were sweets, water and food bars for the day along with a small plastic jar with a screw top that was sealed. This contained carbide, a stub of a candle and a small box of matches. I had bonded a small patch of emery cloth to the inside of the lid for striking the matches. Our small carbide light on our helmet was the main source of light underground; this had about two hour's endurance. To replenish the light you would sit down near water (always available underground) take out your carbide jar, remove the top and extract the candle. Remove your now flickering light from your helmet and light the candle, unscrew the light, discard the spent carbide, top up with fresh carbide, fill the tank at the top with water and reassemble the light. Click the drip tap at the top of the water tank, put the light to your face to confirm gas generation, cover the jet with your hand to create a pocket of gas then flick the integral flint and with a pop the light would shine, finally adjust the tap to give a steady flame.

This was a ritual repeated over and over many times on the trip.

Also carried in my satchel was an electric light which was used on very wet pitches when carbide lights would be useless. Mine was made from an old bike lamp with a bracket attached for helmet mounting and powered by a bell battery. To activate I would connect wires to the two spade connections.

To transport the gear through the system, besides our personal kit bags, we had tackle bags for ladders, belays and ropes; these ropes were made out of polypropylene and had a tendency to coil up and tangle. For perishable goods and anything that had to be kept dry, such as food, we had had glass fibre boxes made with a quick release lid that sealed on a rubber gasket making them watertight. Special metal lugs at the back mated with a customised pack frame allowing a quick lock-on for carrying the boxes. Glass fibre containers shaped to take a diving bottle were used to protect and transport these items.

5.0 Expedition Trip

Three of us Jim Cunningham, John Shepherd and I travelled down in Jim's minivan to the Sornin Plateau over the week end starting Friday 4th August. We had a leisurely drive, sleeping by the roadside, arriving on the Sornin Plateau late to the ire of the leader. The rest of the expedition had spent most of the day ferrying gear to the campsite near the cave entrance.

Monday August 7th

Ferrying gear and setting up the surface camp continued all day. The Italians, who had gone down the Berger before us, had still not exited the cave much to the annoyance of our leader. Surface camp was established and telephone lines laid to the cave entrance. These would be laid through the cave to establish communications with the surface party. Liaison was established with the local weather station which was very important because sections of the cave were liable to flood in rainy conditions especially in the lower reaches. We pitched our tent and sorted our gear.

By midday, with the Italians still departing, a laddering party went in followed by us porters who started to move the gear through the entrance pitches. These lead to Cairn Hall pitch, at the bottom of which you reach the Winding Cleft. This is a rift passage that falls away to a 120ft depth. You maintain height traversing on ledges. Not technically difficult but if you are moving gear through then you have to be careful. Down more pitches then the final one called Aldo's 42m (138ft) drops you into the River Gallery.

Here you meet the main stream which you follow through the Bourgin Hall onto Lake Cadoux. This lake which appears and disappears according to how much rainwater has fallen can be up to 200ft long.

A dingy, with a line tied fore and aft, was not for the cavers but to get kit across. Cavers just clung to the dingy, which was pulled with the line, and were dragged across floating on the buoyancy created by their dry suits. The dingy returned the same way thus transporting gear very efficiently.

Bourgin Hall River Gallery *Fig 4*

Two other impediments stick in my mind; the cascade, a short 25ft, drops into a pool negotiated by stretching a line across then sliding gear down. Then the boulder field - this was made worse when carrying 30lbs to 40lbs on your back. Boulders, some the size of houses, blocking the path, creating hollows - caving within a cave – or rocks to be climbed over and all done within a 10 foot cone of your carbide light. Pioneers had marked the optimum route with florescent tape - always a bone of contention. I never thought, when passing through, from where and when these boulders had come from. After that the heaven of camp 1; a quiet sandy place where sleeping bags and Lilos where laid and your dry set of clothes could be donned. When awake in your sleeping bag you could tell where the boulders had come from for you would hear them crashing as they dropped from the roof which was at least 200ft high.

Sadly, camp 1 was a mess left by the Italians. On this trip we were not staying only setting it up. We set off back to the surface. Tired out, we had been on the go for 20 hours, which meant some people, having fallen asleep with exhaustion, had to be wakened up at the bottom of pitches in order to take their place to climb up. Eventually out after a trip of 27 hours. Somehow we had lost Tuesday!

Wednesday August 9th

A quiet day, used to organising gear, with limited movement in the cave. A heavy thunderstorm occurred during the night when 0.78in. of rain fell.

Thursday August 10th

Today should have been the start of the big push to the bottom; it started badly as a number of cavers decided that they did not wish to go down the cave again.

At midday 21 men entered the cave with personal bags, 7 tackle bags and 17 containers. By 11-15pm most of the equipment was down to the bottom of Aldo's at the start of the River Gallery. Lake Cadoux was at its highest. The dingy was like a shuttlecock ferrying gear back and forth. By 6-30am Friday the main party was ready for bed at camp 1 after an 18 hour day.

Friday August 11th

Up at 7-30pm and fed and another shock - more people had decided to exit the cave. There were now 13 people left to carry on the expedition with equipment and supplies which had been carried down by 21 men. A decision was made by Ken Pearce the leader to call off the expedition.

Saturday August 12th

Jim Cunningham the expedition photographer was keen to obtain some photographs. I along with two others assisted him. Jim armed all of us with a flash-gun and spare bulbs and sent us in different directions to areas of the cavern. His instruction was to operate the flash-gun as soon as we saw his camera flash go off. We were in effect painting in the scene, it was weeks later after the expedition that we saw how vast was the chamber ***(see Figs 4 & 5).*** Back at camp 1 it was 3-30am when we went to bed.

The move started out of camp 1 at 8-00am and by 6-15pm we were back at the foot of Aldo's pitch which was streaming with water as it had started raining at 5-30pm on the surface so the equipment was stacked above water level and the party finally left the cave at 10-00pm.

Sunday August 13th

This was a quiet day of reflection, relaxation and resolve. A number of the group were keen to go back in the cave to at least attempt to reach the first sump.

Monday August 14th

The expedition re-formed with 7 men - Jim Cunningham, Frank Barnes, Julian Coward, Dave Fisher, Dave Gill, John Shepherd and Stuart Whitmey. Entering the system at 6-15pm by 10-00pm we had reached the River Gallery where I was stationed at the bottom of Aldo's pitch. I was un-clipping gear bags from the line used to lower them down the pitch. Suddenly a shout from above of "*below*" rang out, I dived away from the bottom of the pitch and then I heard a sound like heavy rain falling. Once it had stopped I crept back to the foot of the pitch and there around me, scattered on the cave floor, was the expedition's supply of Liquorice Allsorts. A bag being lowered down the pitch had upended and disgorged its contents. I now had a means of relieving the boredom by selecting the ones I preferred to eat. We arrived at camp 1 at 1-15am, by 3-am Tuesday we were in bed.

Tuesday August 15th

Up at 11-00am I was feeling very queasy. The other members went about their work but I had sickness and diarrhoea. It was my own fault as we had been warned not to use the water in the River Gallery as there was evidence of contamination. We were told to go up into side passages to fill our water bottles. So it was a stay at camp 1 for me confined to bed at 470m (1542ft) underground by Dr Kidd the expedition doctor quite a unique experience.

Wednesday August 16th

Not a good day knowing that colleagues were moving down on their way to the bottom and my only contact was listening to phone conversations. I was joined later on by John Rushton and Dave Taylor spending the night at camp 1.

Thursday August 17th

I was feeling much better as we moved off to our objective camp 2; we walked through a large cavern called Hall of the Thirteen, past massive stalagmites to the top of the Balcony pitch. This dropped us into the canal section where we were up to our necks in water buoyed up by our dry suits. On down pitches that are now vague in the memory to camp 2; another spot of calm and dryness. Then back to work. Three of us - Jim Cunningham, John Rushton and I were detailed to lay telephone cables below camp 2. Afterwards, under the supervision of Jim the photographer, we assisted in taking more photographs. Back to camp and a few hours kip; tomorrow, our 5th day continuously in the system, I was to bounce down to the bottom traversing the most difficult and dangerous section of the system. This meant descending 860ft (260m) and returning to camp 2, it is the wettest and most difficult section of the system. In the Yorkshire Dales, where I usually caved, a 600ft (180m) deep cave was the deepest but there you started from and returned to the surface.

Hall of the Thirteen *Fig 5*

In the canal section *Fig 6*

Camp 2 *Fig 7*

Friday August 18th

The trip to the bottom has a few outstanding memories I remember clipping my emergency electric light to the bracket on the back of my helmet; this would be needed down Hurricane pitch. I set off with John Rushton; after a series of pitches, all close by the fast flowing stream, we came to the Little Monkey Pitch. This entails a short traverse above the stream then an awkward move above and across it. It was here that my carbide light decided to part company with my helmet and was last seen on its way to the Hurricane pitch. A quick fumble to turn my helmet round and connect my emergency electric light; I was now set up for Hurricane pitch.

On a balcony above the top of Hurricane pitch I pulled up the lifeline which was coiled like a knitting ball. The polypropylene rope had a propensity to do this and it took me ages to uncoil it. When climbing down Hurricane you are adjacent to the falling stream which creates a vortex and the lower reaches are whipped around showering you like rain. The pitch is the deepest at 44m (145ft). Wet – yes - but I had been on worse pitches in Yorkshire; we were lucky with the weather it would have been much worse in flood conditions. Hurricane pitch drops you into a large boulder strewn hall, an inhospitable place, noisy and damp. Surprising that on an early expedition it was the site of camp 2.

Little Monkey *Fig 8*

The way on is down the slope, passing through the 1000m depth point, following the stream to a low passage almost filled with water and with an arched low roof touchable if you held your arm aloft. We bobbed along in our dry suits to emerge at the sump. This was the bottom. We had made it. A small chamber filled with water not unlike many terminations in Yorkshire caves.

The same day our leader Ken Pearce dived the first sump 73m (240ft) for the second time then negotiated 18m (60ft) of air space. He then dived a second sump, belaying the line and diving equipment, and explored the ongoing passages stopping at the top of a 15m (50ft) pitch. This action added more depth to the already deep system.

Back at camp 2 Dave Gill very kindly lent me his spare carbide light so I could get back to my normal light routine.

Hurricane Pitch *Fig 9*

Saturday August 19th

A long day taking some 11-0 hours from vacating camp 2 with members in various groups carrying out differing tasks and migrating to camp 1. It is interesting to note that my detail recollection of this period is devoid of any technical problems such as negotiating the system. The outstanding memory is one of endless boredom in lugging kit and gear in leap-frogging steps.

Sunday August 20th

The last day in the cave saw the moving of kit and gear helped by members of the surface party who descended to give a hand. Two outstanding memories - the first working in the Winding Cleft carrying gear back and forward and handing it over to Frank Barnes. Frank tells the story that I threatened to write all over the walls with my carbide light *"HWCPC were here 1967"* - frustration setting in. The second memory was when climbing the last pitch with the scent of pine growing very strong as I got to the top; the entrance being in a pine forest. It was good to be out but sadly I was too knackered to appreciate it.

The Bottoming Team *Fig 10*

Back row left to right; Julian Coward, Frank Barnes Ken Pearce. John Huntington, Dave Gill,
Front row left to right; Dave Fisher, John Rushton, Stuart Whitmey, Dave Taylor, John Shepherd,
Jim Cunningham

6.0 Conclusion

It is now over fifty years since I went down the Berger and even wearing rose-tinted glasses I cannot say that the expedition was a happy one. I compare this trip to the one I was on 2 years later in 1969, this was to the Pierre Saint-Martin - a happy trip. The Ken Pearce style of leadership was authoritarian, with little consultation, just orders. The brutal start to set up camp 1 in one push then out again was questionable.

Concerning the initial collapse of the expedition it has been said that the Mossdale tragedy contributed to it. This was the incident when 6 cavers were killed by rising flood water, 2 were to be part of the Berger team. Initially 10 cavers entered this complex and difficult system in the Yorkshire Dales 4 came out early. It occurred in June 1967 just 2 months before the Berger trip; 3 of the 6 people that died were in our club the HWCPC yet 6 members of our club reached the bottom. Two of them, Jim Cunningham and John Shepherd, were on the Mossdale trip but came out early. At the time the club of only about 20 members was very active and very good at caving. I was too young when national service finished and I always thought that I had missed out. However, I consider my time with HWCPC was my national service with all the fun and camaraderie without the intense discipline except when we were underground.

My personal recollection is that it was my burning ambition to reach the bottom along with the thought that I did not want to let my colleagues down and that kept me going. Frank Barnes another HWCPC caver who got to the bottom took inspiration by doing it for his good friend Oggy---John Ogden another HWCPC member who died in Mossdale.

7.0 Acknowledgements

Every year on the anniversary of the Mossdale tragedy which occurred on June 24th 1967 we meet and walk to the cave entrance. It was on the 2019 trip, whilst walking with Dave Brooks, who suggested that I should write about the 1967 Berger Expedition. I started it and then left it, then the Covid 19 lock down was instigated and this seemed a good time to return to it and complete it.

Without access to and reading the 1967 Expedition Report written by Ken Pearce I would not have been able to complete my journal.

8.0 Addendum

Whilst doing research for my journal I was interested in the company that made and supplied us with our dry suits which was P. Frankenstein of Manchester. My interest was sparked by the fact that it performed excellently even when at times I was immersed up to my armpits in water. It kept me dry and warm throughout the trip the exception being the enforced mod that resulted in a wet foot. During my web search I found out that the company, now part of the Allied Polymer Group, specialised in garments required for challenging environments. They manufactured rubberised fabrics out of which garments of all descriptions were made - inflatable lifesaving equipment, protective clothing, specialised safety suits used in flying by the RAF and survival equipment. Frankenstein was one of two Manchester companies that contributed to the design of the Apollo space-suit that allowed Neil Armstrong to walk on the moon.

So you could say that at the time Frankenstein were involved in clothing used by man at extreme altitudes and at extreme natural depths.

I still have my dry suit ***(see below).*** When it was dug out and unrolled it started to fall apart. It was like parchment. All the rubber parts had just disintegrated.

Dry Suit *Fig 11*

9.0 Overview of the Pierre Saint-Martin (PSM) trip

9.1 Introduction

I first learned about the PSM whilst at school, this was from a book lent to me by my teacher Mike Seed. The same teacher who was responsible for introducing me to the great outdoors - he took us camping, climbing and caving.

The book told me of the early exploration with its trials, tribulations, exhilarations and sorrows, wetting my appetite.

It was the summer of 1969 that our club the HWCPC teamed up with the Eldon Pothole Club, which was based at Buxton, and organised a trip to go down the PSM. We were tasked by the French to carry on exploring an up stream passage which they had found had terminated in an avon. (An avon is a cavern in a cave that has a high roof.) They believed if we could climb this there would be a high level passage that would carry on. The best access to this was down the Gouffre de la Tête Sauvage; once we had completed this task they would provide us with a guide who would take us through the system and bring us out of the EDF Tunnel.

9.2 History

The original entrance to the PSM was discovered in 1950 by Giuseppe Occhialini and Georges Lépineux who established, by dropping stones, that they had found a very deep shaft. It was the following year that the shaft was descended and found to be 334m (1095ft) deep. This was the deepest single descent at the time and was achieved by using a hand powered winch. This gave a very laborious way into what they quickly established was a large cave system. The cave got its name, Pierre Saint-Martin, from a nearby French-Spanish frontier stone.

The following year disaster struck when the winch failed just above the bottom plunging Marcel Loubens to the bottom. He was very badly injured and was looked after by his companions as best they could, but they could do little but keep him warm and as comfortable as possible. He sadly died after 3 days and was buried in the cave. Two years later his body was extracted and buried at the nearby village churchyard of Sainte Engrâce.

In 1953 they found the giant underground chamber – La Salle Verna; the largest known underground chamber in the world at the time, 4.5 million m^3 , 255m long, 245m wide, and 180m high. Exploration continued and information released; from this in 1956 the Électricité de France-EDF bored a tunnel into the Salle Verna with the intention of creating a hydroelectric station in the valley.

Unfortunately, the exit into the Salle Verna came out part-way up the side of the chamber far away from the target of the stream. The bonus to the cavers was a quick and easy access into the system. The power project was revived by a new owner, the Société Hydro Électrique du Midi (SHEM), completed in 2006 then inaugurated in 2008 and now produces 4MW of power.

Exploration continued at a pace. In 1966 Gouffre de la Pierre Saint-Martin was linked to Gouffre de la Tête Sauvage and now the depth of cave system was 1171m. and this is where our trip begins.

9.3 Expedition Trip

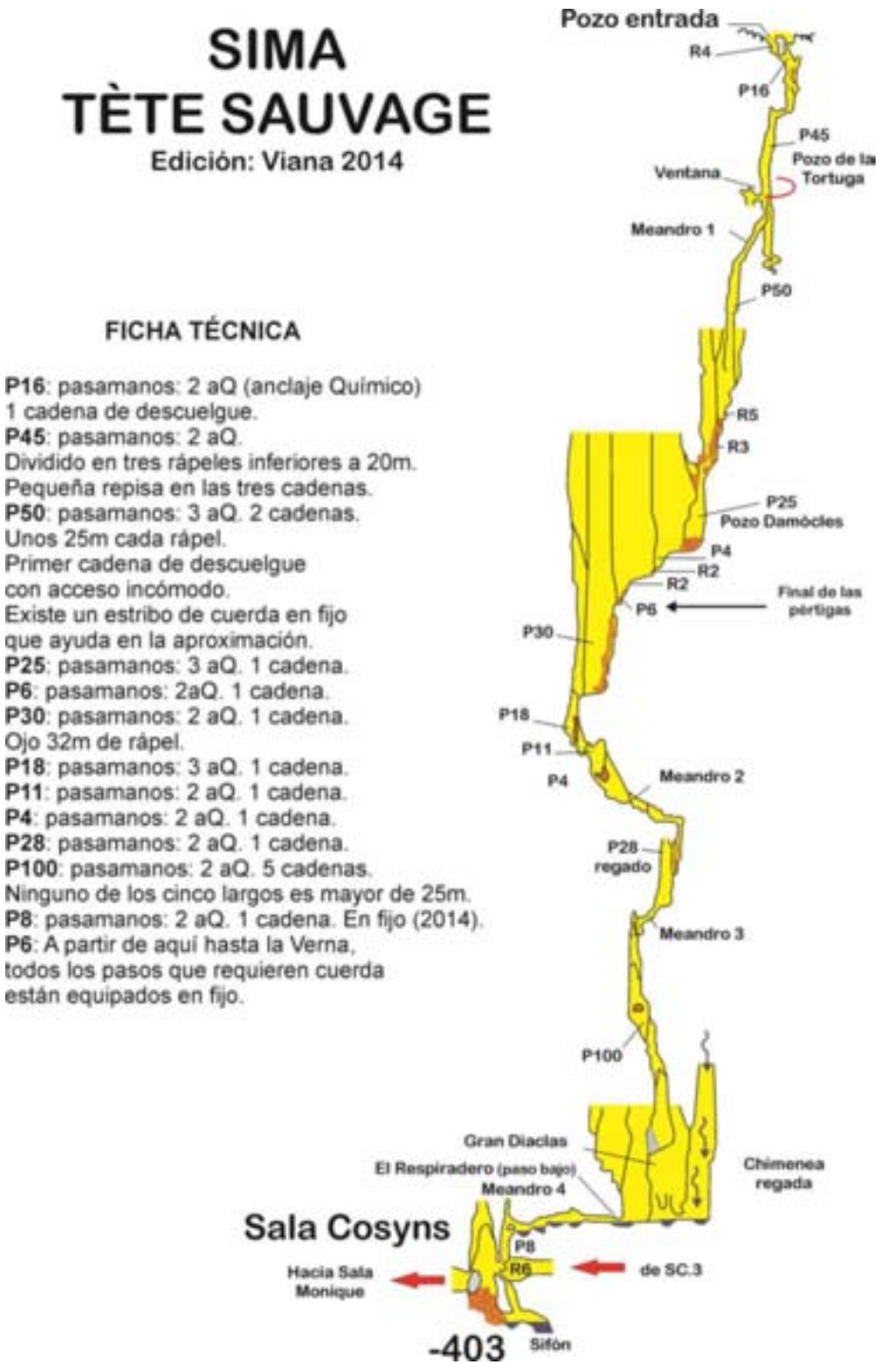
It was in the summer of 1969 when we went down the Gouffre de la Tête Sauvage. The agreement we had with the French was that we would carry on the exploration upstream from the furthest point that they had reached. This was in an avon with no way on. The French thought that if we could climb this there would be a passage at high level. Our plan was to camp at the bottom of the Tête Sauvage then push on from there. Once we had completed this task they would provide us with a guide who would take us through the system to exit through the EDF tunnel; this is a distance of 8k. (5mls)

As you can see by the survey **(See *Fig 12*)** the system has virtually no horizontal passages, it is vertical. The upper smaller pitches had fixed ladders, **(See *Fig 13*)** very good and quick to get you down but no good for gear lowering. We laddered the large pitch **P100** 330ft. which dropped us into the Sala Cosyns, this is where we set up camp.

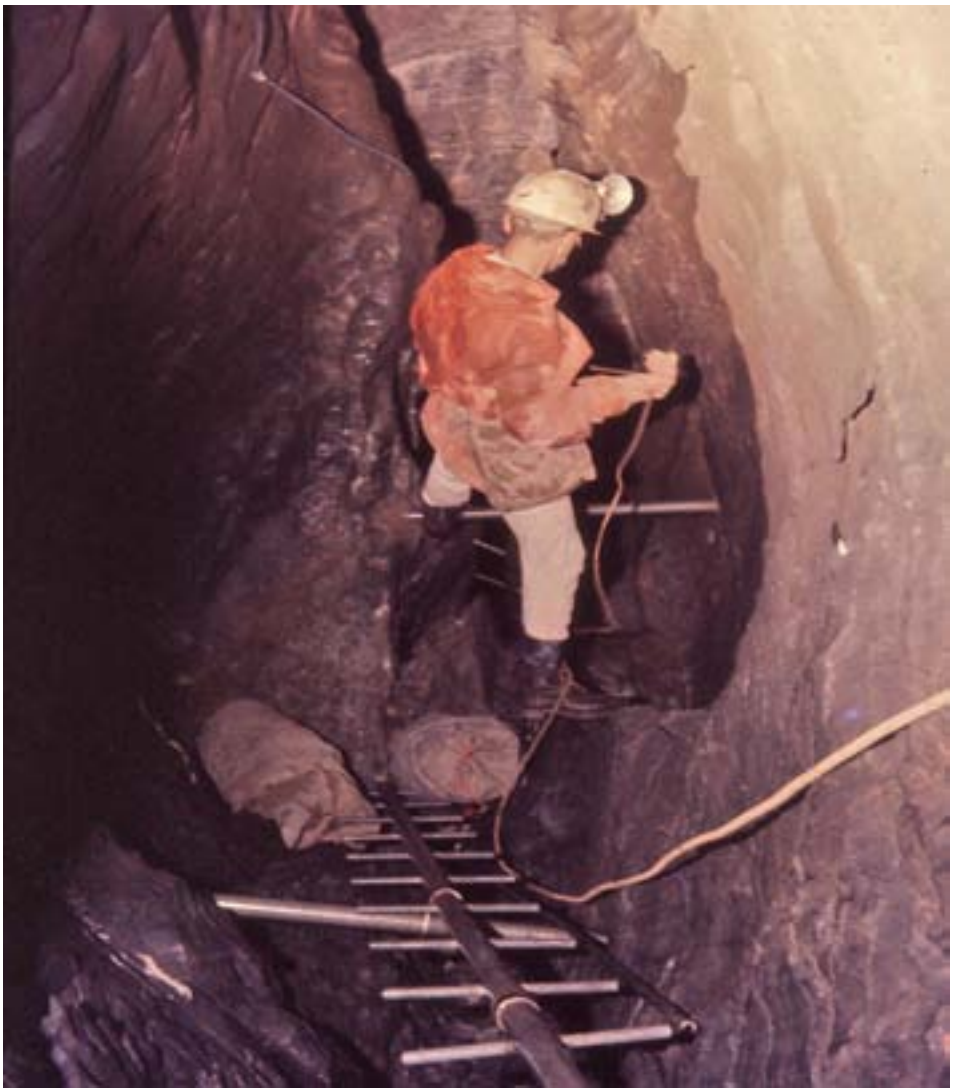
Our way to our objective, the avon, was upstream and the opposite way which we would take in a few days' time on our trip through to the EDF tunnel. It did not take us long to reach our objective where our climbers set about climbing up the avon. It did not take them long to reach the top where they found a large passage. A ladder was rigged so the rest of the party could climb up, then along the passage we went. This was large enough to stand upright but then started to close in but widen; eventually we were crawling flat out in a wide rift passage. We were stopped when the passage was so narrow that our helmets became wedged, still wide but the roof closed right down.

Survey copied from Club Viana website with thanks.

https://www.clubviana.org/



Survey of the Gouffre de la Tête Sauvage *Fig 12*



Fixed Ladders *Fig13*

Back on the surface our guide who would take us through the system to the EDF tunnel had arrived. He asked us how many dingys we had; we had non but we explained to him that some of us had dry suits others had wet suits. We said that we were happy to either swim or flop along the flooded areas. I and others who had been on the Berger trip had excellent dry suits in which we were very confident.

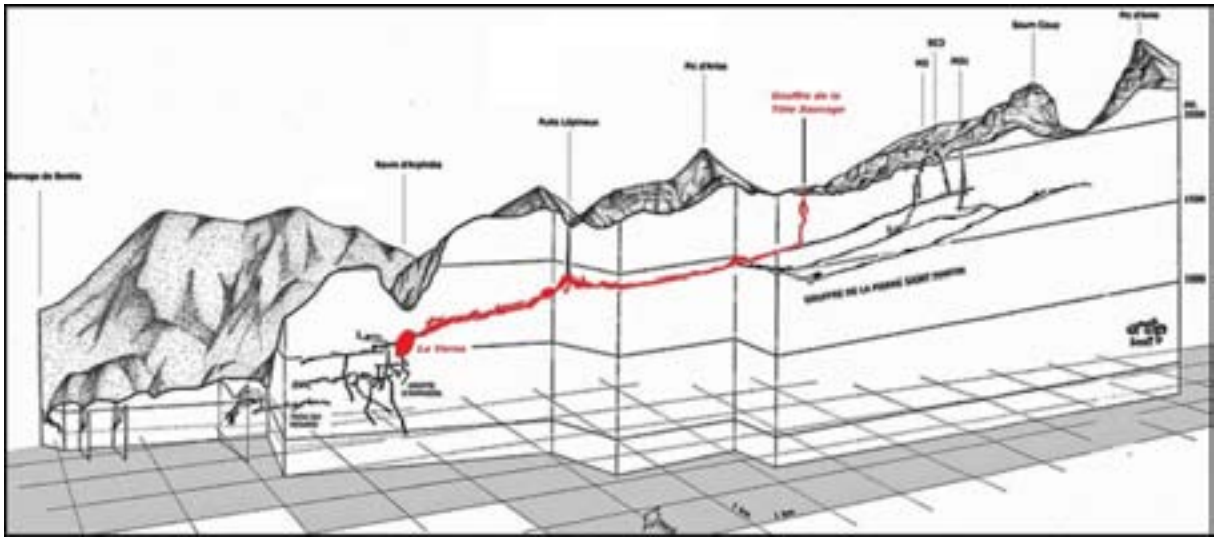
The details of the traverse through the system have faded with time but I do remember that the flooded passages presented no difficulties, we either flopped or swam depending on our clothing. The problem with those of us who had a dry

suits was that once we were on the other side of the lakes we just overheated. It would have been better to take off my dry suit but I could not be bothered. The other outstanding memory was entering the chamber, where the original entrance was, with its massive pile of stones that had fallen down the pitch. Also was the memorial to Marcel Loubens at the place where he was temporarily buried.

Pierre Saint-Martin Cave. On the stone is written:
Here Marcel Loubens lived the last days of his courageous life Fig 14

Very poignant for me as I had read all about it in the book lent to me by my teacher all those years ago.

Shortly after we came to the Salle Verna our entrance into it was by scrambling down by the side of a waterfall that poured into the chamber. By the light of our carbide lights we could not guess the enormity of the chamber. With our backs to the waterfall we scrambled up the right hand side of the chamber and started to appreciate the size. We ended up on a level platform where our guide went to a contraption that was fixed to the floor. It had a pulley with a handle around which a thin wire was stretched and which disappeared into the distance. Attached to the wire was a small tin plate with a candle standing upright around it more candles lay. The candle was lit and the pulley rotated which propelled the tray into the void. After winding, for what seemed like ages, the candle was a mere glimmer in the distance and now stationary. It had arrived at the opposite side of the chamber which was 245m (800ft) away.



Survey showing Tete Sauvage to La Verna trip *Fig 15*

Our platform led to the EDF tunnel entrance with its flat concrete floor about 2m high and 2m wide; half way along we came to a closed metal door. Our guide warned us to be careful as once we opened the door a powerful wind would occur which was caused by there being entrances at different heights. We had to lean hard on the door, once through it, to close it. After 700m we emerged into the night as it was by now early in the morning. Just outside the entrance was a large wooden hut, this is where the cavers stayed when exploring the system. Our guide mischievously burst into the hut and switched on all the lights as he knew that the French Speliologists would be sleeping. Of couse we awakened

them up, but eventually they became friendly and were surprised at the very fast traverse of the route. We had taken about 8 hours to complete the trip, they were also interested in our gear, our dry suits sparked a lot of interest.

To complete the trip we had to descend to the village of Sainte Engrâce to pick up our transport. This seemed the longest and hardest part of the journey.

9.4 Conclusion

This trip, organised by the Eldon and Happy Wanderers Caving Clubs, was at the time the epic caving trip to do. For me it lived up to this particularly as I thought back to my school-days when I read about the early exploration of the PSM system. It was also a happy trip which was helped by having organised it ourselves.

9.5 Addendum

I was back in the Salle Verna cavern in the late summer of 2014 when Jim Cunningham and I were on our way back from a walking trip in the Pyrenees. I had found out that the Salle Verna was now open to the general public. To gain access you have to book a trip on-line (see website below). An Information Centre has been created 1k west of the village of Sainte-Engrace. Here you can see information about the PSM. If you have booked a trip you board a shuttle bus and are driven 7k to the entrance of the EDF tunnel. Once kitted out you walk through the iron doors (now at the entrance) and you will now experience the strength of the wind, then you will walk along 700m of tunnel to emerge into the Salle Verna cavern. Computer controlled lighting enhances the experience and allows you to appreciate the vastness of the place.

Website booking details; https://www.laverna.fr/reserver-17.html

La Salle Verna Fig 16

Dave Fisher

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