

Hidden Earth 2002

Paul Mann reports on the National Caving Conference held in Monmouth in September 2002.



A highly successful event was held at Monmouth Leisure Centre over the weekend 27th to 29th September 2002. We have received a lot of positive feedback. The venue, using the town's leisure centre and Comprehensive school suited our requirements exceptionally well. Both the close proximity of a camping field and the lively town centre were considered great assets to the event. Thanks for this most excellent venue are due to the Leisure Centre Staff, in particular Andrew Jones and all the other members of staff of Monmouthshire County Council's Leisure Services Department who were involved. The riverside camp site was loaned to us by Anne Webb, Monmouth's Town Clerk, who was also extremely helpful.

Thanks are also due, of course, to all the Hidden Earth team, the support staff, lecturers and chairpersons who made the event such a success.

Events

The lecture program filled three theatres throughout the weekend. The actual number of presentations was slightly down on Buxton in 2001, and significantly down on Leeds 1999; but the program is now at what we consider to be an optimal size. Two diving workshops were run using the centre's pool; these were considered a great success, and will certainly be repeated whenever facilities allow. Other workshops and field trips included an audio-visual workshop and a trip into local iron mines.

Attendance

The attendance was slightly over 800 delegate days, this being our second best attendance in a decade. (Buxton 2001 was our best at 996, with a typical year somewhere between 500 and 700). It is expected that the event will return a small surplus. Together with our experience at Buxton in 2001, we feel that we have demonstrated that cavers prefer green-field sites, where camping is convenient, to the traditional city-centre locations. In Monmouth we had the best of both worlds, a green-field site right on the edge of a thriving small town that is well-g geared to tourism. It will take some beating for a good location!

Organisation

The core team and the regular crowd of support staff from Mendip ensured the smooth running of the event and only a few technical problems were encountered. It was noted that the majority of presentations are now computer-based,

typically produced using *MS PowerPoint* on the lecturers' own laptops. We simply plugged projectors and sound lines into the laptop ports and encountered very few problems. In the coming years we may find that slide projectors and OHPs will become largely redundant, such that we only need one of each!

Our closing sequence encountered the most technical difficulties; although the over-run of the previous talk added considerably to these. 2003 will see a significant rethinking, with the aim of using less technology to achieve a similar slick prize sequence and grand finale.

Our ticket system has now eliminated the Saturday morning queues, so we can significantly reduce the slack time built into the conference opening.

Food and Drink

Once again, the Conference Dinner was successful, as was the Stomp, but our main problem appears to have arisen – again – from general catering difficulties, particularly the cafeteria's inability to cope with the demand. From an organising point of view, catering was far easier to coordinate in advance this year, but the end result to the delegate may not have been much better than last year. We consumed



The issue of *Caves & Caving* that was published in December 2002 carried a full report of the 2001 conference. Since this issue of *Speleology* follows so soon afterwards, I thought that a full conference report for the September 2002 event might seem a little like 'overkill' – especially as *Descent* carried its usual comprehensive coverage in issue 169 (Dec 2002 / Jan 2003). Additionally, although the conference was a great success, it is apparent to me that the team was rather over-stretched and, in fact, many of the post-conference reports have not yet been delivered to me.

Looking on the bright side, that gives me plenty of material for the next issue of *Speleology* – and I would like to encourage lecturers to prepare a version of their talks for publication here. Also in the next issue I hope to print some more of the entries in the Photo Salon.

As always, there is a long list of conference helpers to thank for their contribution to *Hidden Earth 2002*. Unfortunately, the list I have been given is incomplete and it would be rather unfair for me to thank some people and not others – so, without mentioning specific names – your work is definitely appreciated by an over-stretched conference team and I hope, too, by all the conference delegates.

David Gibson, *Speleology* editor

all 16 barrels of Real Ale provided; our initial request for 20 barrels would probably have run just short of actual demand, considering the sluggish serving rates.

Competition Winners

The next issue of *Speleology* will feature a list of prize winners of the various competitions – Photography, Art, Video, SRT races and so on.

Hidden Earth 2003

We are already planning Hidden Earth 2003. Most of the 2002 team is happy to continue organising the event. We are investigating a number of sites in the Craven area of the Yorkshire Dales, and hope to confirm venue and date in the Spring. ■



BCRA Photo Salon

This year, the Premier Trophy in the photo salon was won by **Andy Morse**. His portfolio of five photos appears on this page and on the front cover. Andy does not claim to be an experienced photographer and, as he writes (below), this was his first venture underground with a digital camera. The judges apparently liked the verisimilitude of the wet lens!

The main photo on the back cover, which accompanies the article on Cueva Negra on page 16, won the second prize in the colour print category and is by **David Gibson**.

We will feature further winning photos in the next issue of *Speleology*.

Andy Morse, winner of the Premier Trophy describes how he took the photos – see this page and front cover...

These photographs were taken during the joint DSS and WCC expedition to the Gouffre Berger in 2002. The slot allocated for the Expedition coincided with the worst weather in Europe for decades. During the expedition over half of the team were forced to remain in the cave for longer than planned. Despite the weather, seven managed to get to the bottom, but were then forced to wait out a flood, finding refuge on various ledges, for 14 hours.

The photographic trip consisted of myself and two other models/helpers (Becky Green and Brian Cullen). We followed just behind the first de-rigging team down to Balcony pitch. After about half an hour we met the de-rigging team coming out! They had encountered chest deep water just below Vestaire's pitch and found the Canals impassable. All the rigging beyond the canals had to be left behind as the cave was in flood (which helped the following two expeditions reach the bottom). Fortunately the Orpheus Caving Club were able to retrieve all our gear on their expedition a couple of weeks later.

The equipment used was a Kodak DX3900 digital camera (3.1 megapixels) and two flashguns (10m and 30m guide number) both with Firefly 2 slave units. I had decided to purchase a digital camera for its ability to work in low light conditions and its ease of use. This particular camera also uses a docking station, making it easy to transfer pictures to a computer. The pictures were edited with Adobe Photoshop 4.0 although, as a beginner, my skill in using the software was limited to adjusting brightness/contrast and cropping the images.

Photographs by Andy Morse – Gouffre Berger Portfolio. Shower Head, Entrance Pitch, Hall of Thirteen, Lake Cadoux, Pool Traverse. Also see Front Cover

National Caving Awards for 2002

There are now several of what could be termed the national caving awards. The 2002 awards were announced at *Hidden Earth* last September.

Treatman Award

This is presented by the Ghar Parau Foundation, a charity associated with BCRA, for the best contribution to British speleology in print. This can be in the form of an article, report or book. It was first awarded in 1979. The 2002 award, relating to a publication in 2001 is awarded to **Pam and Tim Fogg** for the publication *Beneath our feet – the Caves and Limestone Scenery of the North of Ireland*, published by the Environment and Heritage Service, Belfast. Pam & Tim

receive a cheque for £50 from the Ghar Parau Foundation.

Judges: Ric Halliwell, Don Mellor and Tony Jarrett

Arthur Butcher Award

This is presented by BCRA for, broadly speaking, 'excellence in cave surveying'. It was first awarded in 1988. This year it is awarded to **Chris Wood and Ed Waters** of the **Laki Underground Team**.

The judges considered that this was a good combination of detailed surface work

(e.g. with differential GPS transects) by geographers and underground surveying by cavers. The result was a clear, detailed, cartography that related cave to surface features; and a good overview using satellite photographs. The judges also liked their analysis of lava tube magnetic anomalies and the techniques used to deal with them. Effective use of GPS and differential GPS was also in evidence, as was good documentation of the methods used. The winners receive the Arthur Butcher trophy to hold for a year and a