

BIRKS FELL CAVE

A grand day out

31st May 2008

People present - Chris Scaife, Dominick Mennie, Alex Ritchie, Rob Santus

Weather : Warm and sunny

An alternative view on this trip can be found in Rob's write up below.

Birks Fell Cave is a fairly flood-prone trip requiring a CNCC permit, so a real privilege for all those lucky enough not to have broken fingers or other paltry excuses preventing them from caving. Four of us met in Buckden and headed up the hill in bright sunshine to the easily located entrance.

The trip begins with a very short drop and brief wriggle leading into a pleasant walking passage. This merges seamlessly into a short flat-out crawl known as the Bradford Crawl, named in honour of those kind people who rigged Disappointment Pot for us during the week. After a bit of crawling there is an easily climbable cascade and a flat-out rocky crawl leading to the 1st pitch. There is apparently a free-climbable alternative to this but it didn't look very tempting so we slipped into our SRT kits and headed down.

From the foot of the pitch, some exciting passage is followed, including something for everyone. There are cascades and boulder chokes to scramble through, wet crawls to cool down the neoprene and plenty of well-decorated streamway. There is then a fun squeeze under a jammed boulder with a rope at the other side for an ape-like descent of a 2m drop. Almost immediately follows an enjoyable free climb into the stream passage and the top of the 2nd pitch, a short one that is fairly wet and made wetter by Rob's hilarious trick of blocking the flow and then unleashing a torrent onto the unfortunate caver below.

Some flowstone formations decorate the rift leading up to Elbow Bend. This is a hairpin bend to the left and after this point a few minutes of crawling in chest-deep water lead to the Thrutch, a remarkably easy traverse given such a grand title. After a bit more crawling, Shale Pitch is reached. This pitch is bizarrely rigged from an enormous Y-hang using spits and a sling as backup. There is quite a lot of water coming down the pitch and a cold ledge used for a rebelay does little to keep the water away, especially for me, as when I ascended the pitch Beryl had already managed to flick the sling out of place.

At the foot of this pitch, we stripped elegantly out of our SRT kits and headed to the sump. The cave changes in character here and the last part is narrower than before, culminating in an awkward crawl to the head of Slimy Slit Pitch. Anyone who had carried rope or a ladder (as Selected Caves suggests) to this pitch would be annoyed as this is a straightforward free-climb. From the foot of the pitch a canal is followed to the sump. This is a very enjoyable few minutes of caving in water of varying depth, from knee-deep to neck-deep. My neofleece, which had almost burned me on the approach walk, kept me warm to the bitter end.

This is a long trip and on exiting, Rob had to hurry off home, whilst Dom, Alex and I headed to a restaurant beside the car park. The owner was flamboyantly camp, but soon showed off his extremely racist views once the other customers had left. His almost certainly closeted sexual preferences did nothing to prevent a fine meal, and we headed home with our heads held high, having completed a fine caving trip.

Chris Scaife

Alternative report, by Rob

With Alex, Chris, Dom (yes Dom) and myself present in Buckden, we headed up the hill. Another sweltering slog, 2nd in three days, to the entrance, via an absent farmer's house.

A beautiful vista is had over Upper Wharfedale from the entrance, especially on a day like that. A small entrance leads to some pretty passage to the Bradford Crawl, which is low. More passage leads eventually to the first pitch. From here quality passage, cascades, avens, chambers, chokes and various slots, drops and climbs with the second pitch en route eventually lead to the third (Shale) pitch. It took about 2 hours 40 minutes to this point with route finding no real problem. Alex decided to wait at the top of this pitch, so once rigged (poorly placed spits and re-belay) we descended this wet pitch. SRT kits off, we headed for the bottom. Narrow rift follows, followed by an awkward crawl and squeeze at the top of Slimy Slit pitch, which we free climbed. Dom waited at the top of Slimy Slit while Chris and I had a look at the Sewer Series. It's no wonder really why most trips don't go this far in this place. The route to the sump was a neck-deep/waste-deep canal; forever the hydrophobe and not wearing a neo-fleece, I turned back and headed for the up-stream sump instead. Chris proved his manhood and waded the 5 minutes to the sump. Time to the bottom: approx 3 hours 30 minutes. Both utterly inspired, we all headed back to Alex at the top of Shale pitch.

Progress was then made back out, gradually and without much incident. Rick is right in that exit route finding is not totally obvious because it's just a long way and looks very similar. Back tracking to drag the missing sheep into the fold had to be done on occasion, especially as the lesser spotted Dom was dog tired, as was Alex (his first really big trip) and Chris had pushed himself hard too, confessing to being "pretty tired". Hardly surprising I'd say. With all this in mind, I volunteered to carry as much tackle as I could and make a lead for the exit. Alex and I surfaced after a 7 hour 20 minutes extravaganza, into a beautiful evening, Chris and Dom appearing 40 minutes later after steady perseverance through the entrance crawls and passage.

We then headed back down the hill, calling at the absent farmer's house once again to present the unrecognisable permit, to the cars. Quickly changed, I left the other 3 to reflect on their day's efforts in the Buck Inn.

Rob Santus

A Black Rose Caving Club trip report.