

IREBY FELL CAVERN

A.K.A I R B Fell Cavern

Date: 11th August 2007

People present: Pete Dale, Duncan Jones, Rob Santus, Alex Ritchie, Chris Scaife

Weather: Dry, warm and hazy sunshine

An alternative view on this trip can be found in Alex's write up lower down..

After the previous week's trip, myself, Dunc and Rob had decided to take Alex to I R B fell cavern for a bit of SRT training (yikes!), so after some careful planning and female negotiations we were all set.

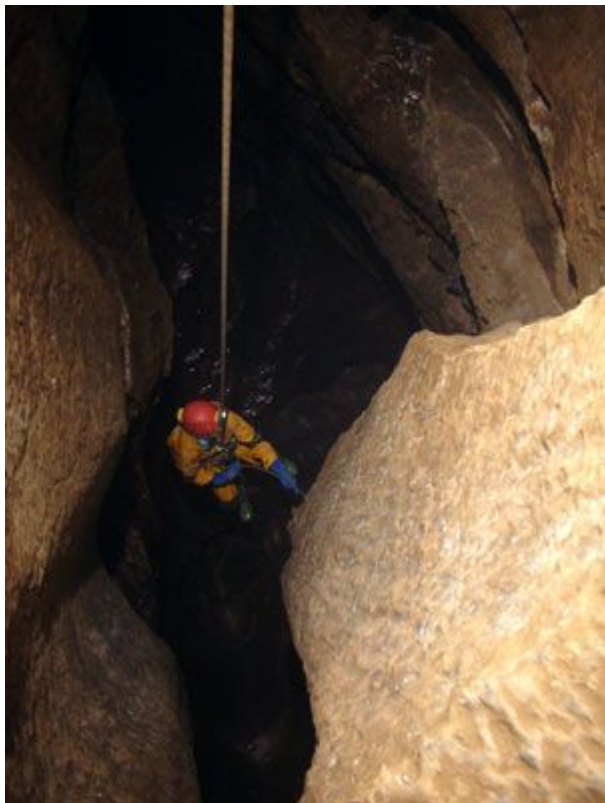
Saturday morning arrived all too fast and by 8am I was up and ready. Dunc arrived earlier than expected (for a change) so a quick brew and a bite to eat was had. We then said our goodbyes and headed off for Masongill. Arriving at Masongill we were surprised to see Rob, Chris and Alex already there and almost changed, so we quickly kitted up while Rob packed the ropes ready; just before we set off to I R B, another group of cavers appeared, informing us when asked, that they were going down Ireby Fell and doing the same route we had planned for our trip, what are the chances of that eh?? Oh well, I decided it would be better if we took the alternate shadow route to avoid spaghetti ropes to make Alex's life a little easier.

Rob, Chris and Alex set off to the cave while me and Dunc finished packing lights and SRT gear. Once sorted, we too headed up the hill to the cave. While walking up the Turbary road I turned round to look at the view and to my surprise Dunc seemed to be trailing behind; he said it was due to taking pictures but that's just a feeble excuse if you ask me (he's becoming unfit). Over the stile and across the field which is usually muddy and it was a welcome relief to find it more or less bone dry, considering all the wet weather we have had in the last few weeks. It was strange to say the least but it meant that it would be dry underground as opposed to Marble Sink last week!! Making our way up the hill to the next stile we all got a little out of breath and by the looks of it lost a few pounds in sweat!

Finally we had reached the entrance and my what an entrance; a great big gash in the hill funnelling down to a small concrete pipe leading into the underworld; quite a bit has changed around here since my last visit: there seems to have been a few run-ins on the side where the water sinks and the stream has been diverted down the other cave entrance in the shake hole (complex cave behind boulders on left as NC3 states). We all kitted up and then helped Alex with his harness - it took three of us just to get his 'D' on!! Then we realised we had forgotten to attach his cowstails and chest/hand jammer. Unfortunately, it was at this point Alex informed us he had also misplaced his chest jammer, so Rob lent him his to use and he would worry about how to get out later on. Me and Dunc set off down the entrance so we could get a head start with the rigging but this was short lived since we all too soon caught up with the other group who didn't seem to know what they were doing,



but their rigging looked fine so I just put it down to being over careful. By the time I started rigging the other three had caught us up so Rob and Chris decided to go and look at the new Bubbles route, which breaks off about 20ft before the first pitch. I was half way down the first pitch posing for the camera when I heard some mutterings above me and then was informed that Alex and Chris were coming with me and Dunc and Rob were going down the other route and rigging the last pitch in front of the other party.



With those too off on a jolly it was up to me and Chris to get Alex down the pitches safely (God help us!!). Swinging across to the ledge to get to the start of the shadow pitch route I was seriously thinking about heading down the normal route, but I convinced myself that we could do it. I rigged the re-belay and sat on the ledge and shouted “rope free” to Alex and then waited and waited.....still waiting..... ahhh here he comes.....still coming.....yeah!!!! He’s here; I then explained to Alex what to do while I threaded the rope into my descender ready for the next pitch. Confident in his ability, I then abed down to the next p-hanger. After a struggle to get through to the re-belay I got a good stance on some ledges and rigged the rope ready for the next drop. Shouting rope free I then had the long wait for Alex to arrive; after a bit of playful banter I coached him through to me and got him clipped in. Rigging the last pitch I realised that I hadn’t been given a sling for the shadow pitch deviation, luckily the pitch is straight and any rub points are on smooth rock for the

bottom half of the pitch so I concluded it was safe and carried on to the bottom and got ready for the long wait.

Once we were all at the bottom we headed off towards the next pitch. We all used the rope on ‘pussy pitch’ (even though it is technically a climb) then the long trudge along the stream way to the first of two wet crawls. Now the first time I came down Ireby I remember a thorough soaking in the, what was then ducks, so it just shows how dry it was. We finally got to Well pitch and then had to wait for what seemed like hours for the other group to rig a straightforward drop! Finally we could descend Well pitch so I went first; Alex was already halfway down having climbed it and Chris was following up the rear. Upon reaching the 2nd part of the pitch and seeing how Rob had rigged it, I opted to re-rig it since I wasn’t prepared to spend another hour getting Alex down. (Just to let you know Rob that you had rigged it correctly albeit with dodgy knots (Rob’s response: what’s wrong with alpine butterflies?) and I would have rigged it the same under normal conditions. At last we were all down and on our way to dyke street (sic), to have a look at the dig in Whirlpool Chamber. Reaching Whirlpool, Dunc and Rob were talking to the other group who disappeared to look at the sump. Since Rob and Dunc had already been up the pitch to look at the dig, I decided to go up and have a look since that was my objective after all. I didn’t spend too long up there so by the time I had got back down Alex and Chris had come back from a quick look at the sump and we all headed out well before the other group.

Catching up with Rob just before the end of Duke street I shot past him in a bid for freedom and made my way quickly to catch up with Dunc who was just kitting up for the short climb before you get to Well pitch. It was at this point that decisions had to be made with regards to Rob not having a chest jammer, so after a few suggestions by Dunc, it was decided that Rob would use Dunc’s

jammer and head out the shadow route with Alex and Chris with me and Dunc would exiting via the Bubbles route with one jammer between two of us?? A rather interesting choice to say the least. Reaching the start of the Bubbles route, Dunc and me gave Chris instructions to beat Alex if he doesn't do as he is told and sent them on their way.

I haven't had the pleasure of the new route down Ireby so this is virgin cave to me and how nice it was; leaving the normal route a short 10 ft tube crawl ends at a climb up a boulder ruckle and to the bottom of the pitch. This route is very different since there is technically only one pitch and a few short climbs to the entrance. I set off up the rope to the first re-belay and Dunc climbed it using his hand jammer. I then made my way up to the next re-belay 40 ft higher and balanced myself somehow on a few bulges in the rock; once safe and clipped in I took my chest jammer off and sent it down for Dunc to use. Dunc safely up, we swapped again and I set off up the final short pitch to the top; I then inspected the first of four climbs to the entrance. After a failed attempt to get up the first one, I made the small pile of stones a little higher to give me a better stance to get into the rift above. Once up, Dunc had caught me up and he seemed to struggle a bit with it but both safely up we shuffled round the corner to the next climb which luckily had a rope on it making it easy if a little narrow. A short crawl round a bend encounters the next climb, again having a rope on it making it easy. Unfortunately for Dunc, a Henry was waiting for him and whether I dislodged it or it just fell we have no idea, but it wasn't that big and no one was hurt; we then climbed the scaffold poles in to the main entrance passage and sat down waiting for Chris, Rob and Alex. After a short while Alex was seen ascending the rope and Chris had turned up behind us having already made his exit long ago. Me, Dunc and Chris then made our exit and took our kits off. Having done so, we then re-entered to get the bags from Rob since we figured by this time he would be stressed and close to suicide. Everybody out and safe we headed back to the car across the moor in the warm evening sun. Once changed, we headed to Ingleton for a quick drink and wind down in the Wheatsheaf.

A good trip all in all and some valuable skills learnt or not learnt by Alex, he did well for his first proper SRT trip but will need to trust the rope and equipment more next time.

Pete Dale

Alternative report, by Alex

The Descent

So there I was again, heart in my mouth and my nerves all over my place. I came up to the first pitch (God I hate the waiting) but came quite close to bottling it twice to tell the truth. Then out of the blue (well black) I slowly made my way to the first pitch head which required a little traverse to get to it.

I latched my descender on with out much of a problem and started to descend. Shortly all those nerves I felt began to drift away quite quickly as I reached the first re-belay which was perched above a ^ shaped rock. I sat on that like a horse's saddle while I attached myself to the next section of the rope once Pete gave me the "rope free" signal that is.

The next section was a little more difficult; after descending another 15ft down I had to use the rope to swing/scrabble my way through a rift; all the time I was trying my descender was pulling me



back harder and harder like someone had attached a massive counter-weight to me - I felt like I was lugging a car. Slowly I released my descender but the more I did, I knew the further I would have to swing back. After a little bit more of a struggle, as the rift was also tight, I made it through to another pull through swing to the next pitch, which I did not know was over 30 metres.

After another wait for the rope below me to be rigged it was my turn to attach my descender and descend. A few minor problems occurred here; first I had managed to get entangled with the other rope so the only way to fix this was to get back onto the pitch head; climbing back up was quite awkward with attaching and detaching my ascenders. After sorting that out I got back on the descender. Oh no!! too much tension on my remaining cow's tail to unclip it. Back onto the pitch head again. Finally after sorting that out I made my descent down and down against the smooth rock (how far down is this thing?). Finally after descending for what seemed forever, I reached the bottom.

A few more little pitches follow from here, none higher than 5 metres. One of which was being descended by someone else causing another rather long wait. Finally we reached a long river passage which, after following that for a while, we finally made it to the sump that marked the end of trip where we would have to turn back.

The Ascent

I was beginning to get a little tired now most of the ascents were against a rock face which meant it was difficult to use my legs, so I was tiring my arms out.

After a few pitches I reached the bottom of the main ascent. Looking up at the water coming down was like gazing into a meteor shower as water dropped all around me. Once Rob had caught up (as he was de-rigging behind me) I latched on and made my ascent. Again I was against the wall so it made it awkward to use my legs.



My progress up the ascent was rather slow, as there was a worrying clicking sound coming from my SRT kit. I had to keep stopping to check it as well as the robe was rubbing against certain sensitive parts on my body which slowed down my prusiking some what. Getting onto the pitch head/re-belay was nowhere near as difficult as going down so I was very pleased with my progress. But this moment of triumph was short lived because when I attached my ascending gear to it, I realised I had attached my ascender the wrong way round like a complete plonker, so I was trying to go up to the re-belay again - what a plonker! After re-ascending to the re-belay and attaching it the right way round, I carried on and squeezed through the rift with a little help from Rob behind on the other rope pushing me through. I carried on up and after about 20 minutes later I reached the top without any real hitch and was out into the cloudy sky outside.

Alex Ritchie

Photos - Duncan Jones and Rob