

OTTER HOLE

There's no mud in your eye -or- OTT in Otter.

19th April 2008

People present: Duncan Jones, Pete Dale, Rob Santus, Alex Ritchie, Daniel Jackson. Leader: Damian Weare

Weather: Cloudy, rain

After this trip Pete decided he would write the trip report - see below for his version, I was waiting patiently for this report to arrive in my inbox but got itchy fingers and I figured as it was such a fine trip it maybe deserved two versions of events, plus it's been a while since I last wrote a report so I put finger to keyboard.

Numerous years have passed by whilst I pondered the possibility of having a trip in this fine cave. My first encounter of anything Otter-ish was a short video about its discovery and the realisation by one of the exploration parties that the entrance series was prone to flooding. Photographs have been seen in books and the internet and this made me want to visit even more.

Move forward a number of years and with no trips being available, either through being fully subscribed or just not bothering to arrange access we arrive at 2007. The date was set but alas as the time approached our leader had to pull out, disappointed - yes, giving up - no. 2008 arrived and we once again arranged a date, 19th April, a between tide trip and it would be only the second trip of the year, we waited patiently!

With work and a relatively recent baby I was keeping myself busy, but the lure of Otter meant I had some hard bargaining to do at home and work. Luckily negotiations worked a treat, still not sure how I managed it though! All I needed now was a reasonable window of opportunity in the weather and the trip was cracked. We did have a backup plan should the weather not be suitable and that was a guided tour somewhere in Ogof Draenen - it's fair to say I would have been happy with a trip in there too.

As the date approached Pete, who had booked the trip, was emailed by Damian our leader for the trip. The email, which Pete forwarded to me, contained words that I didn't want to read. The contents were roughly: The first trip of the year arrived at the sump and found it draining only very slowly, non of the group fancied the eyehole, a long wait was had before they enjoyed a wet duck through the sump. A lot of time was thus wasted and they didn't make it to the pretties. It also went on to say; although the eyehole is not recommended if your group wanted to do it then it would save time and thus give us more chance of seeing the pretties. Decisions had to be made. The first objective was, however, to gain information on this 'eyehole' - why was it so hard finding information, why did the previous group not fancy it etc etc. Damian had replied back to Pete's question and informed us that it opens a bit before the main sump which would allow more time on the far side of the sump, it involved a short swim and wriggle through to gain the other side. He had never done it before but was willing to go that way if that's what our group wanted. The decision was finally made to go there and assess the situation on the day when we could actually see what it involved.

Saturday morning arrives and an early start (for some) - the journey down was uneventful and we arrived in the Forest of Dean in good time. Someone noticed the Old Station cafe and opted for a quick brew and maybe a bite to eat before we carried on the last few miles to the car park. Once fuelled up we headed for the parking spot where Damian was waiting for us. A quick chat, few pointers about the cave, glance at the survey and we were changed and ready for action. Although the over-ground caving through the woodland gave us a wake up call as it is somewhat different to the usual open Dales fells!



At the entrance we prepared ourselves for our muddy onslaught. The entrance series starts as crawling and wriggling about - this is how I envisaged it would be all the way to the sump, but this was not to be. The caving in this section of the cave is varied, with a bit of everything thrown in - crawling, thrutching, stooping, walking, climbing and various other forms of entertainment. As for the mud, well it was average and when we arrived at the tidal sump, much to our surprise as it had taken far less time than we anticipated, we were informed that the mud was not up to its usual thick, gloopy sticky standards. Luck it would seem was on our side today. The sump and eyehole were nowhere to be seen, so we sat around and drew lines in the mud to see how far the sump was dropping. After a short wait the first of the lovely gurgling noises arrived, this was followed by further gloops and gurgles as slowly but surely the eyehole made its appearance.

At first sight we were undecided, but as the water drained away and the ropes became visible the decision had to be made before it was too late to enter and we would then have to wait for the main sump to open. Thoughts of the email about last weeks trip made our minds up. Rob was ordered into the water and told to investigate, a quick splash and he was away, a voice from the far

side seemed to suggest it was ok. Without further ado I decided I would go for it, I got half way there and realised I hadn't switched my light back on, oops. I got to the eyehole, flicked the switch and could see a short mini-thrutch into the sideways hole with one hell of a draught howling through it, this soon opened into a rift with water of unknown depth below me. I hopped about on some ledges before landing on solid ground. Great stuff! I would recommend this way to anyone who contemplates taking this option, it's short and fun and you soon feel warm again (even though the water didn't actually feel that cold) and it saves precious time - something in short supply on a between tide trip.

The way on from here is again varied caving with streamway, clambering, chokes, traversing - all good fun. The streamway, which is a fine one eventually passes the connection to the high-level passages. We stopped here and Damian told us that sump 2 was only a short distance upstream, only me and Rob took the opportunity to visit this and more pleasant caving was had before the roof lowered. As we strolled back to the rest of the group we commented on the fact that the trip we had done so far was pretty good and worthy of a trip in its own right - even without seeing the 'main' pretties. Once regrouped we were soon crawling and wriggling about in the connection passages. Eventually you pop out in the high level passages and the going eases, allowing for more of a pleasant stroll.

What can I say about this next section without over-doing it on the superlatives. It won't be easy. To say the cave is well decorated would be like saying the Yorkshire Dales has lots of vertical pots - bloody obvious, so I won't say it. But the formations start and there are some very fine examples and all varieties to be viewed. As your head sweeps around the passages and chambers you constantly see formations - and it has to be said some fairly big examples, big of course had they been in any other cave except Otter. At one chamber a tell-tale sign caught my eye, the Bee-hive (think that's what it's called) was the first sighting of the very impressive Hall of the Thirty. What can I say about this place, wow? It's a fair sized chamber with some very very large stal-bosses occupying the floor that make you feel, well, small. The roof of course is also adorned with yet more large formations, we skirted the sides and gained a bit of height so we could turn and gaze across the chamber. This is one very impressive viewpoint, if it were on the surface there would be a very large pay-and-display car-park nearby with all manner of related goods on sale!

At the top of the chamber we still had a few hours to spare before we had to turn back so Damian presented us with an option of continuing further. Some thinking took place. Dan and Alex decided they would stay and photograph the Hall of the Thirty whilst myself, Pete, Rob and our leader Damian went in search of further pretties. Easy caving followed and every once in a while we would stop to take in the pretties - did I mention this cave was well decorated!? I could say the highlight was Long Straw Chamber, which is aptly named as the straws are many many feet long - certainly the longest I've ever seen. But a bit further along we branched left into a dead end passage, well, it might go if it was pushed but anyone pushing this would want pushing off a cliff! Beautiful white formations, a delicate curtain - a highlight of the trip, certainly another in a long line of contenders..



After the short detour we did an awkward climb and saw yet more fine formations before stopping just before Tunnels Junction. There was an interesting and very steep clamber up and down some mass of calcite - I can't even recall where these were along this passage but at first sight they appear quite daunting, but actually are fairly grippy and easily negotiated.

We retraced our steps and joined the photographer and his model (!) before setting off on our journey out. The exit was largely uneventful and was fairly pleasant caving, we stopped for a quick snack of semi-demolished chocolate bars (in a couple of cases) after we rejoined the stream, for a brief break and refuel. Carrying onwards we eventually arrived back at a partially drained sump - passing this required a deep wade, the eyehole was now above our head and out of reach. Sampling both ways was a good choice.

The entrance series was all that separated us from the outside world and as you would expect it went without any problems or mischievousness (eh Damian?). The rain greeted us outside, which meant my muddy suit wouldn't dry on the walk back but it did mean it wouldn't be too warm a walk back up that hill (it's a grade 5 walk back to cars!) Well, I've worn out my fingers tapping away, all I will say to finish is if you get the chance of a trip in here, take it - I would definitely say it is one of the top ten trips in the country. Superb!! As for the mud, well we came out slightly muddy but not Otterly muddy which is the norm, I guess it's the luck of the draw, oh, bugger, wrong cave... Thanks go out to Damian for being an agile and nippy leader and showing us the sights and sounds of this classic cave.

Duncan Jones

Alternative report, by Pete; OTT in Otter

The time had come for us to visit this magnificent cave and to see the formations for ourselves so after requesting a date we were given a leader/guide and all was set.

Meeting Rob and Alex at 6:30am we set off down the M6 on the long drive to Otter hole, the rote planners on the net gave a travelling time of 2hr 57 minutes but this turned out to be more like 2hr 20 minutes!! Anyway it gave us time for a quick stop at a café for a bite to eat and a coffee or tea. We then carried on to the meeting place and once there we met Damian and got kitted up for the big trip to follow. Once we were all ready we set off down the hill towards the entrance.

A long walk to the entrance soon passed and now we were face to face with the steel door protecting the depths of Otter. Damian led the way and we followed like lambs to the slaughter. Short stooping sections led to a climb up and along into a small chamber with the way on being a climb down and a muddy crawl through a pool where the not so bright ones went the hard way

through a squeeze. Next came a small squeeze onto a dropped block and a slide along and down in to another muddy crawl and again another climb up and down to a long wet crawl in deep water. After that we were soon in to walking cave with odd boulder obstacles thrown in for good measure here and there. All too soon we arrived at the tidal sump which to be honest looked rather inviting, but we were too early so had to wait for a few minutes for it to open or not.



Gurgle gurgle splurge splurge sloop slosh was all we could hear for a minute or so followed by a few booms and then we noticed the water level dropping which was good news so we waited patiently for the sump to drop low enough for us to gain access to the eyehole and the far side of the tidal sump. All too soon I noticed the ropes that were in place to assist you over to the eyehole and upon shining a light over to the far side we could indeed see the eyehole had opened up completely. Now the only thing left to do was for one of us to volunteer to go through it first. Damian seemed reluctant to lead anymore so Rob was forced to

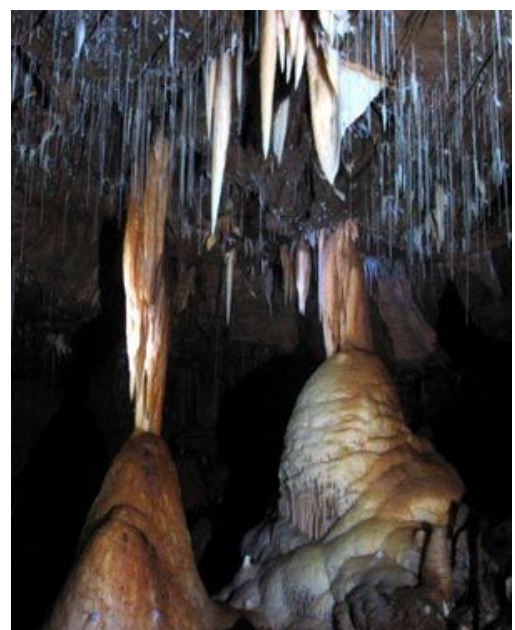
go first followed by Duncan and then me. Strangely the water was warmer than I thought it would be and it wasn't that bad at all with the only problem being swimming in wellies full of water! Luckily the eyehole was not that far and by the time I had reached it my nose was still above the water. I then climbed up and into the eyehole which wasn't very tight at all the only hard bit being the wind that was blowing through with tremendous force! Once through the eyehole a short traverse in the water along the rift to the far side to where it was possible to touch the floor albeit in chest deep water. Daniel came through after me and was not impressed at me talking to him while he was chest deep!

Once we were all through the way on was up a ladder and through a couple of climbs then back down to the stream way a short walk in the stream led to another boulder choke to pass, easy enough and then a traverse and some more boulder hopping. Then some more stream way until the junction with Cross over passage was reached. Cross over passage is the connection to the higher level and the place where all the pretties are.

Cross over passage starts as an upwards sloping rift followed by a boulder choke and then a wriggle through a squeeze (apparently) then some more boulder wriggles until you climb up into an 'L' shaped chamber, the way on being a climb down behind a big boulder at the top of the 'L' after that it is just straight forward walking in an enlarging passage until you appear at the bottom of the Hall of Thirty.

Well what can I say the formations in the Hall of Thirty are out of this world and by far the best formations I have seen in the UK to date, everywhere you look there is either a stal or flowstone or a straw they are just everywhere!

We left Daniel and Alex to do some photographing while we carried on a bit since we had 3 1/2hrs spare before the sump closed. I find it hard to believe that some groups only have time to get to the Hall of Thirty and have to turn back and even some groups don't get that far! Never the less we had so we carried on to have a look at some nicer formations and we eventually turned back at Tunnels junction. We had the time to get to the end of the cave but



since it was apparently just sand crawls it wasn't worth our effort plus the others would be getting bored and cold. Retracing our steps back to the Hall of Thirty we picked up Daniel and Alex and made our way back to the sump. Reaching the sump it was fully open now and we walked through the bottom only getting wet up to our waist. Having been through both the main way and the eye hole I recommend the eye hole due to its excitement and it's a challenge. We then made our way out through the entrance crawls with a few tricky climbs due to the wet slippery mud covering everything and finally exiting at around 3:30pm which coincidentally was 1hr 50 minutes before the sump was due to close!

Well we had done Otter Hole with three of us making it to Tunnels junction. I enjoyed the trip thoroughly and would recommend it to anyone, it has allsorts and does not get boring in the slightest. Yes it may be muddy in places and there is the tidal sump to pass but as for being hard? Not really the hardest bit was walking back up to the car!!

Pete Dale

Photos - Daniel Jackson



A [Black Rose Caving Club](#) trip report.