

HAMMER POT

Or how Alex got hammered!

Date: Sunday 20th September

Present: Pete Dale, Daniel Jackson, Alex Ritchie & Rob Santus

Weather: Sunny and fairly warm

Entry time: 11.00am

Rob's version of events: *(see below for Alex's account)*

Hammer is by all accounts a daunting prospect, especially through the entrance crawls/rifts and Stemple Rift. With this in mind we applied for another permit and then, eventually, the day arrived. With a four man team meeting in Inglesport, we had a quick bite before heading up to Fountains Fell. The tackle was packed into 3 bags in order to spread the weight to make life easier through the rifts, with Alex carrying his own SRT kit bag (thank God).

After eventually reaching the depression and finding the cave (no thanks to my good self!) we entered with me insisting that Alex lead after his meteoric improvement in caving prowess.

The entrance crawls are not half as bad you would think, with only one awkward bend to negotiate at the end before the first pitch where there is plenty of room to kit up. The first pitch can be free climbed, but I still rigged it, thinking about the return. From the bottom of here is another rift, leading to Stemple Rift. This begins after a double bend (hesitation corner) and is identified with a wooden stemple half way up the rift. With Alex being prodded by me behind him, along we went. The rift itself is not that difficult, but it ends with a slightly awkward diagonal descent to the 2nd pitch. As with most of these kind of caves, it's always harder with tackle, but it's always easier on the way down with gravity coming to your aid.

We all made fairly swift progress down to the top of rope pitch: both the 2nd and rope pitches were free climbed landing us in Showerbath chamber with route finding a careful consideration. From here I then took over from Alex to go and rig the 4th Pitch. This is quite impressive with a short drop leading to the main very large y-hang dropping you down an impressive shaft. Once Pete and I were down, we continued down an easier passage to the 5th pitch (7m), consummately rigged by Pete. Once down, you are straight into Sludge Crawl.



The guide book says that this is a gloomy hands and knees crawl through water for 100 metres. This is a good description. At the end it gets flat out in water to really dampen your spirits and a little further on leads at last to the Out Fell Master Cave.

Upon reaching this point, we re-grouped with Alex having a look up a side passage on behalf of the Northern Cave Monitoring Conservation Scheme. Once done, off we trundled down the OFMC with its pot-holed floor and decorated roof to a free climb where Tank Passage joins on the left. Minutes later, you reach the last pitch (12m) with the pitch head reachable by crossing a cross rift. The rigging requires a traverse down and round to the right, through a

small passage on the left, ending up on the other side of the cross rift where there is an easily rigged y-hang. This pitch is splendid, with a fantastic calcite cascade forming a large part of the upper far side wall.

From here, there is fairly simple caving to the final sump with a choke to be bypassed en route. I cleared part of this, removing a very large boulder to make life easier for the hordes who will be no doubt be going down Hammer Pot in the future. With the sump viewed (quite pleasant), we headed out.

The exit was incident free up until the Showerbath Chamber. Pete and I had ascended Rope and the 2nd pitches and were standing in the lower beginnings of Stemple Rift. Dan and Alex were confused about which way to go up. With directions given I carried on up into Stemple Rift where I was waiting for Pete to pass tackle. The trouble was, Pete couldn't get enough purchase to squeeze up into the diagonal traverse of Stemple Rift. With Alex and Dan below him, they provided a foot hold to give him the required purchase. Once up, he passed tackle to me and on we went, not believing that that a grade 5 aficionado like Alex would need any assistance. How wrong we were. With me and Pete out, I told Pete to carry on up the 1st pitch as he was too knackered to offer any help. Next came Dan who was also tiring – somehow he had overtaken Alex in the rift! I went back in to meet Dan and offer help by grabbing his tackle bag. With 3 of us out, it was just Alex to come who had made the fatal mistake of falling down the rift and got himself totally wedged. After loads of discussion, I decided to go back in for the 3rd time to see what Alex was whingeing about. Oh yes, he was stuck alright, but no real bother I thought as all he had to do was somehow get himself horizontal and wriggle along to the 2nd stemple to offer support for his weary arms. This idea worked and Alex got to the 2nd stemple; it was here that I told him “whatever you do, don't let you legs drop back into the rift”. So what did he do, you guessed it.

He then thought (against my explicit warning) that he would try to pass at stream level. Utterly preposterous. If anyone cares to take a look at the stream level tube in Stemple Rift you will know what I mean. Anyway, after much jiggery pokery, Alex was trapped like a rat at stream level at Hesitation Corner. It was at this point that his pleas for help from CRO were being heeded by me. He'd already requested their help an hour earlier, although I totally refused, but now, with me tiring, I thought there was little else I could do. I requested that Dan stay with Alex while I head out and call the CRO. Once back at the car, a fully changed Pete met me and we made a couple of very protracted calls to summon help. This took an hour at least! After a cup of coffee and some food, I headed back to the cave with water and food for Dan and Alex and whilst en route, I saw the blue lights of Alex's saviours.

Through the entrance crawls again (lucky me), I met Dan at the top of the first pitch. In my absence, the proceedings were: Dan found some food and water in his bag which he shared with Alex. After quite a long time, Alex then found the strength to retreat along the stream passage to where he slid in. He then managed to pull himself out and into the rift proper, eventually extricating himself out of Stemple Rift unaided. Just as I was helping the CRO chap with his gear from the entrance crawl, Alex was coming up the first pitch. Fair play, the lad done well; as it transpired, no rescue was necessary, although we were extremely grateful to see the dedication of the CRO on a Sunday night into one of Fountains Fell's more daunting delights. After plenty of apolgisising from me, we all headed out and into the CRO Land Rover. A lift! What a treat (the one silver lining). The thing that really annoys me is that it was so late, Alex deprived me of my much needed pint in the pub. I got home at 11pm, fairly weary. Good day out but you pay dear for simple mistakes in grade 5 caves.

Rob

Alex's version of events!

Grading Grade 5, My grade 10 million. Well the cave is not that hard but my experience makes it for me grade 10 million for me!

I awoke to this trip feeling a bit of anxiety; I had not felt anxiety like this for a long time. I did not get much sleep in the night just passed. Shortly after I awoke, the whining of the alarm reminded me that I actually have to get up.



Well I headed down old Ingey and made sure I had the full breakfast not just the mini one as I knew this trip was not going to be easy. Dunc had cancelled (I don't blame him) so it was left for the four of us to brave the perils of Devils hammer pot (actually known as Hammer pot).

We headed to the cave in the glorious sunshine and after a little bit of bad luck on my part (I found the entrance) we set off through the first trial of the cave; the long entrance crawl. Although it was very rocky and bruising the crawl did not go on for too long and soon deposited us after a short squeeze at the top of the first pitch. Pete couldn't be bothered to put his SRT kit on so he treated it as a hand-line climb while the rest of us donned our descending gear.

Once at the bottom, we were greeted by the yawning chasm of Stemple Rift, cautiously we progressed onwards into the rift. This rift starts off easy and lulls you into a false sense of security with plenty of ledges and stemples to stand on along the way until you are forced up higher into the rift. Near the end of the rift where there are no hand holds or ledges I could no longer grip my tackle sack and keep my self from slipping so it was bye bye tackle sack. Mercifully there was a climb down which I'd seen before I dropped it so I got it back without much fuss and was able to carry on at lower level bypassing the top half of the second pitch.

Once the others had caught up and tackle sacks passed though we all free climbed the 3rd pitch landing in splash chamber. Splash chamber was the roomiest part of the cave so far despite being rather small. A quick shuffle through the following passage leads to the 4th pitch. For once this pitch was an inspiring one and had a descent hang down the main pitch. Down this pitch we went. We next tackled the few climbs that look more awkward then they are. The 5th pitch was next with its slightly tight pitch head.

Down that and another climb we reached the dank crawl of Sludge Crawl. The crawl started off rather pleasant containing sand not grit and very little water, but the further we progressed the more water filled the passage and the more the roof lowered. Eventually the passage relented slightly at which point we met the master cave streamway.

I attempted at this point to take a picture of near by formations however I was foiled in the attempt by an inexplicable fog that not only blocked my camera's vision but I realised it was blocking mine too. I was unable to see more then 10 or 15ft in front of me, a strange underground mist had descended on us or maybe we were just breathing too hard. The others shot off while I was taking photos, leaving me to find the holes in the floor that make up most of the streamway my self. I caught up to the others at the pitch head to the final pitch.

We rigged the traverse, well it was more an abseil and then went down the pitch proper, gazing at the calcite flow as we went. Shortly after some easy walking then crawling we were at the sump. It was now 2:10pm. We headed out with no issue and soon reached the top of 4th

pitch by 3:30pm, we were doing well. The third pitch/climb went by with no real problems except I went way too high on the third pitch and wondered where the heck the way on was.

Finding my we met the others and we headed up the second pitch/climb with a bit of struggling from all of us except Rob. We had now reached the infamous Stemple Rift.



Well this was where the trouble began, I was behind Dan in the rift where he was having a breather. I was close to him owing to the fact I wanted to be out of the bloody rift. Before I knew it forced to stop in a less than satisfactory position and had managed to slip a couple of inches or into the rift being such skinny bummer, no big deal right? At this point I was not stuck just unable to go forwards or up. I decided to reverse a bit hoping to find something behind me to push off of to get up. Problem was however there was not and I had backed up over empty

space in a slightly wider bit of the rift and my legs swung below me leaving me in a standing position with my waist firmly wedged. Now I was really getting stuck, my waist was in the tightest bit and the more I struggled to free myself the more I slipped downwards until at last it was now my chest that wedged me into rock, like the filling in a rock sandwich.

I was stuck like this for around 20 minutes, until Rob, being able to see behind guided me to where to swing my legs and managed to get back to a horizontal position. By this point I had lost a grip on my tackle and had used it as a stepping stone at one point dropping it down to the stream level.

I managed to push my self forwards past the tight bit that blocked me earlier however I was still too low in the rift but I didn't care I just wanted out of it. This however caused me to be in the wrong position to tackle the rest of the rift. I was also quite tired and stressed from the previous point of being stuck so when I reached the wooden stemple I had no purchase and my legs again slipped back down into the rift and the rest of me followed.

I was now in the streamway glad to have solid ground beneath me at least. It did not seem possible to get back onto the stemple at least not bloody easy. So it seemed to me that the best option would be to try and get to the end of the rift at stream level and climb out at a wider point.

What followed was 20 minutes of moving rocks and thrutching while being assisted from above by Rob's foot, until I eventually reached a point that was just too narrow. This narrow bit was blocking my freedom I was literally a couple of feet from the end of the tight rift known as hesitation corner, so close I could touch Robs legs as he stood in the stream way just beyond the impossible tight bit. However the distance may had well been forever as I was not getting through this last bit.

It was at this point Rob decided to get help and left Dan to keep me company. As I knew help was coming and I was so near too freedom me and Dan thought it would be best to wait where I was rather than to get stuck somewhere even worse. After an hour or so passed I realised that they would actually have a lot of trouble getting me out from my current

position, so the best thing to actually do is get back to the stemple where I came down they would at least be able to get a rope around me and pull me out.

Crawling backwards was much harder then going forwards was as I had to contend with the most awkward double bend tight backwards crawl imaginable with rocks and discarded wellies blocking my way. Some how through various wriggling and manoeuvring I managed to back my self slowly but surely backwards. Eventually I reached the stemple where I originally slid down. I knew at this point if I was going to get my self out this is the only sure way because if I could fit down it I can fit back up it.

Now I needed to stand up. I will attempt to describe how awkward a move this was. I was lying on my right hand side on the floor a piece of wood is approximate 4 feet above my head. My legs were around the corner to my right. The rift is only wide enough to bring one leg slightly back and was still tight everywhere else. I managed it by basically pushing with all my might into my left leg while at the same time pushing with all my might on my right and once high enough pulling my self up left arm on the stemple. A primal roar later and I was stood up next to the stemple still holding onto it, as if I let go now I would fall into a nameless void.



I made a few attempts to climb up onto the stemple with little success and thought it would be best if don't waste what little is probably left of my energy as rescue is near here. After 20 minutes or so I heard movement, Rob had come back into the cave. Him arriving actually spurred me on to give it one last go.

I chucked my left leg directly up in the rift so my foot was actually higher then my head onto a ledge I spotted. With my leg high above my head and my hands pushing off the stemple I was able to use my leg as giant lever to pull the rest of me up and onto the stemple. I was back where I should be in the rift. I simply stood up and walked out of the rift at traverse level with no issue except I had no wellies.

I met the others who were probably surprised to see me at the bottom of the first pitch. Rob lent me his SRT kit and I made my way up the pitch. At the top the nice people of CRO met me. After a quick chat we all headed out of the cave and onto the surface where the nice people of CRO probably owing to the fact I had no footwear gave us a lift to the cars.

Rest assured I donated to CRO after this event, as I and everyone else is safe we can all have a good laugh about it only problem is what can be done about my £400 of stuff lying somewhere in Stemple Rift!

Hammer Pot part Duex

Date 4th of October

People present: Alex Ritchie, me and err me? Who else oh yeah me!

Weather: Sunny with light showers

Grading Grade 5 , My grade Grade 4 – 5.

It has been two weeks now since my last err visit. My gear is still rusting in the bottom of Stemple Rift. Tried as I might, by contacting all my contacts from three different clubs, I could not find anyone who was free or willing to help. So there was nothing for it but to do a solo trip. I managed to borrow a ladder and a couple of slings from “Bog” of Northern Boggarts who happened to live just round the corner from me. So off I went, alone.

I had constructed a device consisting of a 3ft long pole and a hammer wedged into the end of it to act as a grappling hook, this I hoped could be put to use in getting my gear back.

I made slow progress through the entrance crawls owing to the things I was carrying. I arrived at the first pitch. After a quick drink I rigged the ladder and descend the pitch. I was soon dragging the pole and the slings through the rift but dragging them both quickly became too awkward so I stuffed the slings into an alcove and carried on with my hammer device.

I headed on through the rift sliding from stemple to ledge to stemple before I reached the corner where I lost my tackle sack. Disaster! It was much further away than I thought there was no way I was going to reach it. I returned through the rift to have a re-think. I had an idea but I thought it probably would not work but it was at least worth a try. I knotted the slings (with a hook on the end) to the end of my hammer and headed on back through the rift, this time I found the rift more tiring my strength already starting to wain slightly.

I leaned out from the last stemple almost in mid air and spent the next ten minutes doing something that I can only describe as fishing. I was casting my line through the rift each time either missing or not taking hold until eventually I got one lucky hit and landed my SRT kit attached to the outside of my bag. Nailed IT!

Now I had the tricky task of removing both tackle bag and my “fishing pole” out of the rift, unfortunately I got so hung up on not dropping my tackle sack, by the time I was turned around my fishing rod was at the bottom of the rift. Oh well no way I will be getting that but at least I got what I came for.

I slowly made my way out of the rift, up the pitch where I spent 10 minutes de-twisting the ladder (did I mention I hate ladders) and then moved two tackle sacks through the entrance crawls. Along the way as I was sliding my self onto a stone slab, I heard a tinkle noise as though I had dropped something but I thought it must had been my cows tails as I could not see anything.

Near daylight now I noticed the spanner I brought in for rigging lying on the floor. That’s funny it should have been in my pocket. I looked at my pocket and there was a huge hole in it bugger! I did a quick check for my car keys they were not there! “S***e I thought, I don’t want another call out because I cant get into my car to tell Dunc I am safe”. I quickly chucked my two tackle sacks onto the surface and went back in, part way along I remembered I heard the tinkling noise, now I know what that was!

I retrieved my car keys from the stream, where I heard the noise and went through that entire rocky crawl again to exit calling the cave names along the way. On the surface now time was not looking as bad as I thought I still had well over an hour.

I got back to my car rang Dunc and cheered, mission complete! Even when writing this I am still surprised I managed to get my tackle back I thought I had no chance.

Alex Ritchie

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