

Tatham wife hole, 16/03/2013 – No longer grade 3.

People present:

Me (Alex) & Don

Weather

Drizzle, and a bit of downpour the night before, so we knew it would be damp underground.

“Only Alex can make a grade 3 trip a grade 5” Don – What he means to say is I avoid the tourist trappings and visit places that are more interesting.

I woke up with a feeling that something may go wrong but I dismissed that feeling as I knew today's plans were not too ambitious it should be a relatively easy trip, I have been in this cave a few times, provided its not too wet we will be fine, despite a few off beat adventures I planned for us.

We parked up at the usual spot, thankfully all the fences and stuff that were previously blocking this parking spot had been removed, giving us ample parking. Before we set off I took a compass bearing to make sure I headed straight to the entrance, I am sick of wandering around for ages in bad vis before finding this cave. This forward planning saved a lot of time since we went straight to it.

Don rigged the first little drop (as it was rather wet) and the 2 pitches after that while I pointed out where the deviations were, but I think we missed one on the second pitch as we would be hard pressed to avoid a soaking on the way back up.

We carried on to the third pitch where I took over the rigging. Instead of dropping straight down and then onto the ramp where most sensible people go, we swung off a couple of meters down and entered an entertaining passage. I anchored the rope to an old rusty bolt and called Don across to join me. Following the passage we were quickly on an awkward to reverse climb. A hand line would probably be helpful, here but there was not much to anchor to except the rope used to swing into the passage. We slithered our way down to what we thought was the floor but it wasn't it was a long way down.

The passage soon shrank to a hands and knees crawl which eventually got too tight for us to continue at that level. The way on was down through a tight slot in the floor, just before the the passage got too tight. This led us into a tube like passage. At the end of this the floor vanished and after traversing over a chasm I could see no way on without some sort of suicidal move, so I back tracked while checking the passage above the tube and sure enough there was another slot leading back up. This slot was slightly less awkward than the first one. This led to a bit of well decorated passage above a hole. A short, careful crawl between formations reached a short standing height passage with the big pitch on the left.



I rigged this from old spits, and we landed at the bottom of an aven, just beyond the sump I mean duck (As I said, it was rather wet today).

Don wanted to complete the cave so we dropped the last pitch, very wet it was too but careful traversing and climbing of the the walls avoided a wetting on the way back up. After this we went up North branch inlet. It starts off as a tall rift passage that gradually got smaller before we were forced to stoop, then crawl. We reached a junction, to the right the bigger passage is of course not the way on, the way on was to the left, through 15m of flat out passage. Beyond this the passage opened out unexpectedly. We followed a steeply ascending roofless canyon, up many climbs some of which were rather difficult, all of which were beginning to take their toll on our energy levels. It was a bit like Wretched rabbit climbs but going up much higher and there was no rope with the exception of the first muddy one that leads to the start of the canyon.



At the top of this after ascending a good 60m or so was not daylight unfortunately, nay, it was a boulder choke. A small boulder-laden tube led into a larger unstable boulder floored and walled passage. At the top of this was a low crawl which we then slithered through for a short distance into a rumbling stream way. A small waterfall led up to yet another terminal choke probably quite close to the surface, I spotted a few spider webs and an old drinks amongst the rocks, perhaps the can belonged to a victim of a recent rock fall?.

I went first through the lower choke asking Don to wait so as to not knock anything down. I had just completed the first climb down below the boulders when I heard an almighty crash and the unmistakable sound of many rocks and boulders crashing together which went on for what seemed like several seconds, the choke had collapsed! Several shouts for help brought me back up the climb in super fast speed to the start of the boulder choke all the time shouting in reply “Im coming, don't move!”. To Don that probably seemed like an age.

The vision that confronted me was one of my worse nightmares, I could just see the bottom half of Don between fallen boulders, he appeared to be sat in the choke, with many large blocks resting on his legs and lap, I thought at that moment that he was done for, crushed, this was serious. Quickly I cleared what I could to get to him chucking it all down the hole behind me until I got close enough and I noticed he could still move his legs. By a stroke of sheer fortune the rocks had partially wedged them selves rather than placing their full weight on his legs. I encouraged him to “slither” back out, which after a struggle he was able to do.

Somehow he was unhurt, but we were faced with a new problem, Don was now on the wrong side of a very unstable and blocked boulder choke. Don said the boulders blocking the passage may be holding back more stuff, so he understandably did not want to move any of them. I could not move

anything more on my side as the boulders were at the top of a 45 degree slope the highest one was out of my reach from that side and even if it was if I attempted to move the wrong one the hole lot could come down the passage onto my head.

So in a loud voice I uttered the words, I think Don will never forget “We have two choices, either you stay their and I get help, but it will be at least 4 or 5 hours if not longer, or you can try to move those boulders and we can have a laugh about it later in the pub, later tonight.”

After a bit of a wait, I started to psyc my self up for a swift solo exit to get help, when I heard the sound of rocks being moved and Don informed me he was going to try and make a break for freedom. There were two more collapses almost as loud as the first, I can only imagine what that was like for Don. Each time I shouted rather pointlessly are you all right (Because if he was not there was not much I could do about it on this side!) Eventually though he had moved enough so there was one solo rock in the way.

Don asked me to move it as he presumable had ran out of stacking space, gingerly I moved and rolled it with me down the slope all the time re-enforcing my earlier shouts of “Stay still!”. Boulder moved, Don asked me to grab his legs and he shot out like he was on steroids, continuing down the slope to the drop, I urged him to slow down not least because he would likely dislodge more boulders, but he understandably wanted to be out of there. I controlled his speed by getting in his way, just before the drop, much to his annoyance. Using me as a mobile climbing frame he dropped into the dry stream way. He then proclaimed he wanted to make love to me (The most scary part of the whole trip!). You dug your self out mate, all I did was give you verbal encouragement and moved a rock or two.

We don't know why the boulders collapsed, it was just “luck of the draw”, we were being careful as always.

Anyway we eventually made it out after a very exciting days caving at about 6:45pm after entering at around 11am. Who would have thought you could spend nearly 8 hours in a grade 3 cave! We arrived at the cars 40 minutes before call out.

It was as if something was trying to teach us a lesson, or the universe was have a little joke at Don's expense because what was on TV when I turned it on that night? 127 hours, that's what! At least Don (who is also American) got to keep all of his limbs.



Don's version of events at the choke

The room was very unstable to begin with. As Alex said, we were walking/climbing through a section of perhaps 6 or 7 cascades, roughly 5-12 feet high each, very reminiscent of Wretched Rabbit. After the last one there was a 4 or 5 foot long tube at hands and knee crawling height, at the end of which was a smallish opening 2 or 3 foot high above, which, once climbed, brought you into a small chamber (probably about 15 feet long by 6 feet wide). This room was very loose. You then had to climb roughly 10 feet up through an opening which then brought you into a chamber (very solid, no loose rock) that was a combination of a hands and knees and flat out crawl for another 2 or 3 minutes til you reached a small waterfall where you could stand up but the passage dead-ended.

On the way out I waited at the top of the crawl while Alex climbed down into the small chamber first and then out through the tube passage, because I didn't want to dislodge any rocks that might fall on him on his way out. I then carefully climbed down into the small chamber, swung my feet over the edge of the tube passage, and all of a sudden, with no warning, a group of rocks to my left just slid down and pinned my legs. Thankfully one of them got partially jammed on both sides of the passage, so the other rocks fell on top of them, otherwise my legs would have been crushed. It was an effort to get out. Managed to move a couple of the other rocks so I could make a space big enough to fit through the tube. Quickly got in the passage and Alex pulled my feet to drag me through in case it collapsed.

Both of us were extremely careful climbing through the passage both times, so it's not as if we weren't paying attention to the loose rocks in the room. I wasn't even touching the rocks that slid onto me when they fell.

Rigging required for alternative pitch, good for wet weather.

Swing to passage from top of third

14m rope, 3 crabs, 1 hanger (to anchor the rope)

Aven pitch (18m)

35m rope, 3 crabs, 3 hangers, back off of stal boss.

***** Stay away from the boulder choke at the top of North Branch Inlet climbs. *****