

The history of cave rescue before the 1959 'Neil Moss tragedy'

by Bill Whitehouse

The Neil Moss tragedy was a momentous event which had a huge impact on the nation at the time. Even now, more than fifty years later, at any of our street collections or similar events, at least one member of the public will come up to say how they remember 'when that chap got stuck in Peak Cavern'. Indeed, so great has been the effect that many people seem to imagine that cave rescues in Derbyshire – even caving in Derbyshire – started with Neil Moss. This isn't true, of course.

In fact, underground accidents in the Peak District must have been fairly regular occurrences ever since man settled in the area. It's only in recent centuries that chroniclers (or the press) have been around to record them.

About the earliest recorded example of a Derbyshire caving accident took place in the late 1500s when the Earl of Leicester, an early outdoor pursuits enthusiast, graciously consented to have one of his servants lowered down Eldon Hole to see what was there. The appointed speleonaut, one George Bradley, was duly lowered down in a basket while his companions dropped rocks to frighten off the devils known to lurk there. We are told he was lowered a distance of 200 ells (an ell was



about 1.25 yards) which is about 750 feet. Today the Eldon entrance shaft is 200 feet deep so their estimate was generous – even allowing for 500 subsequent years of people filling it up by lobbing rocks down to 'see how deep it is'.

Anyway, when George was pulled back up again he was found to be suffering from something they described as a 'distempered brain' which I can only assume must be an Elizabethan term for serious concussion or severe mental breakdown. Either would have been understandable. It is recorded that poor George died eight days after his adventure without revealing what he had seen, which must have vexed the Earl no end.

Another recorded incident occurred in 1773 when a party of

visitors in Peak Cavern were being shown the Buxton Water Sump. Suddenly and without warning, one of the party, a Mr Day, plunged into the sump and vanished. The guide, no doubt concerned about his anticipated tip, reached as far as he could into the sump and managed to grab Day's arm and drag him out. Mr Day, the report continues 'was speechless for some time' and then being as daft as some cave divers today he announced he wanted another go.

His companions decided they'd had enough excitement for one day and stopped him. As far as I know, this is both the first recorded cave dive and first recorded sump rescue. To complete the saga, I should add that the intrepid Mr Day's next project was to visit the

Speedwell Cavern some time before the first World War. Big moustaches and heroic poses seem to have been a caving requirement in those days! The boat would have contained all manner of pseudo scientific junk so they could pretend they were doing serious research instead of just enjoying themselves



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bottom of Plymouth harbour in a barrel. Unfortunately, his visit turned into a permanent one.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many accidents are recorded as having occurred in Derbyshire lead mines – such as the unpleasant demise of William Wragg who in 1764 was working in Outlands Head Mine at Bradwell. It seems he got his thumb caught while attaching a kibble (or ore bucket) onto the winding rope and was drawn up the shaft. All went comparatively well until he was close to the shaft top when his thumb came off, or if you want to be pedantic, he came off his thumb.

To bring us to the latter part of the nineteenth century there was, in 1879, an incident in Black Engine Mine under Hucklow Edge that has passed into local folklore as 'Dennis Bagshawe's Entombment'. There's even a jolly little song about it. The unfortunate Bagshawe found himself trapped both in and behind a fall of rock and he remained there for seven days while local lead miners, hampered by bad air and the threat of further falls courageously worked to free him. In the end they were successful, in spite of having the surface end of the operation hampered by around 2000 rubbernecking sightseers, sideshows and all the trimmings.

Actually this was only one of a number of similar incidents in the late 1800s. One trapped miner, who was also a lay preacher, exhorted his toiling rescuers for several days by singing psalms at them and quoting at length from the Bible. I'm not too sure what effect that would have on rescue teams today, but it seems to have worked for him.

During the lead mining era in Derbyshire there had always been a large number of local men used to working in the mines and caves and they were always available to turn out and help in an underground emergency. But by the end of the nineteenth century lead mining in the area was all but finished and the numbers of active miners had dwindled to a handful.

About the same time, though, there was in the Kindyr Club and a few other bodies a growing interest in the area's caves and abandoned mines. In the years up to the first war quite a lot of what was, in effect, re-exploration took place and, in spite of dramatic accounts of events like underground shipwrecks in Peak Cavern (in what can only have been about two feet of water), they seem to have been carried out relatively free of serious incident.

The First World War put a stop to the work of these pioneers but after the war a new generation of cavers gradually emerged and underground exploration was restarted.

Many old lead mines and known caves were re-explored and interest grew in searching for and opening up new caves and passages. Like today, this met with limited success only but gradually the amount of underground passage accessible to cavers increased – for example Oxlow Cavern (a former lead mine) was reopened in the 1920s and in 1934 the Derbyshire Pennine Club dug out the entrance to Nettle Pot. The number of serious cavers involved in this work was still very small and the frequency of the expeditions they could mount was limited by travel difficulties and the logistics of getting sufficient cavers with

enough free time to a cave entrance, together with their masses of bulky rope ladders and other kit.

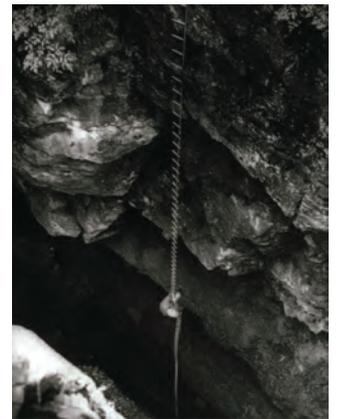
In those areas that people could easily get to on a day trip out – for example Alderley Edge and Matlock – the caves and mines received much more attention, often from casual ill-equipped and ill-informed visitors many of whom were much luckier than they really deserved to be.

However, some weren't so lucky and throughout the interwar period there was a constant trickle of accidents in these areas, including a number of fatalities. In 1929, two youths entered West Mine at Alderley and got lost. The mine was searched without success and their bodies were only discovered by chance when other explorers stumbled on them some months later.

Fortunately most of the systems where accidents occurred in this period were either short or relatively easy and rescues, searches and body recoveries could be carried out by policemen, firemen, ambulancemen, miners and local people, some of whom showed remarkable courage and resourcefulness.

The organised caving clubs, who generally operated in larger numbers and with better experience and equipment seemed during this period to have been able to handle any difficulties they encountered themselves (although they too seem to have been lucky).

After the Second World War interest in caving increased, often from ex-servicemen finding the return to civilian life rather lacking in excitement. A number of new clubs formed in the towns round the Peak District and membership



Eldon hole

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of the existing ones increased.

Accidents started to occur again and club cavers started to get involved. Two examples illustrate the sort of thing that was beginning to happen.

In 1947, British Speleological Association members who were working in a mine on Eldon Hill were on hand to rescue four youths who had descended Eldon Hole by rope hand over hand only to discover that gravity is mono-directional. If the BSA hadn't been in the area, the youths would have been marooned for very much longer and the consequences could have been very serious indeed.

And then there was an incident which occurred in 1951. Two cavers from Nottingham University went down Lathkill Head Cave on a Sunday afternoon and got lost. When they failed to return home that night, Nottingham police were informed. The following morning they contacted the Derbyshire police and the university authorities.

An ad hoc rescue team formed from the university mountaineering society set out for the cave which was some fifty miles (and then at least two hours) away and at the same time two Derbyshire bobbies were detailed to search those parts of the caves in Lathkill Dale that they could.

On Monday afternoon, some 26 hours after entering, the two cavers finally managed to find the correct passage and they met one of the policemen in the cave close to the entrance. They then subsequently met the rescue team somewhere on the road to Bakewell.

It was incidents like these, together with the knowledge of happenings in other caving areas (particularly the two serious Pen y

Ghent accidents in the Dales in 1951) that started certain Peak District cavers thinking. If anything serious happened in Derbyshire there were very few locally resident cavers, there was no system of calling them (or more distant cavers) to help, no system to organise and control them when they did turn out, no equipment for them to use and no training for them in rescue techniques.

Early in 1952, Roy Midwinter, the secretary of the Stoke on Trent Pothole Club, wrote to all clubs suggesting that Derbyshire cavers should set up a cave rescue organisation and he invited club representatives to a meeting in May to discuss the idea. He then had to go abroad, but the meeting took place and John Plowes of the Orpheus Caving Club was appointed secretary and charged with carrying out preliminary work and calling a second consolidating meeting later in the year. That meeting was held on 18 October and was attended by 53 cavers representing most clubs active in Derbyshire and also many individuals. (I think that's probably the most we've ever had at any meeting!)

The day after the meeting, a first rescue practice was held in Peak Cavern and this was to be the pattern in the early years – one rescue practice a year, the day after the AGM. One year it turned into the real thing when three team members got lost in Giants Hole. The press loved that one – most embarrassing!

The initial call-out system that was set up in the first couple of years was a simple card index of the names and addresses of individual cavers, copies of which were kept in a number of Peak District police

stations. Its maintenance was both difficult and patchy and it was usually badly out of date.

By present day standards and requirements, the original DCRO was woefully inadequate and its response time was incredibly slow because few members lived nearer to the caves than Sheffield, Manchester, Nottingham or Derby, few of them were on the phone and hardly any of them had transport. Also DCRO had no money to buy equipment of its own and had to rely on the member clubs to supply just about everything.

Even so it was a thousand per cent better than the complete vacuum that had existed before and, being realistic, it was probably all that was possible or could be seen as justifiable at the time. After all, it has to be remembered that caving in Derbyshire in those days was very different – there were still only a few cavers and very much less accessible cave passage to play in. There were in fact very few known systems of any size. Only small and relatively easy parts of Giants Hole, Oxlow Caverns, Carlswark Cavern and Lathkill Head Cave were known and many other now popular caves including much of Peak/Speedwell system were totally unknown.

In the first few years, incidents involving DCRO repeated the pattern of the interwar years with mostly easy rescues in the Matlock and Alderley Edge areas.

Typical was DCRO's first ever call-out by the police in November of 1952 when a party of four teenagers got lost in Devonshire Cavern at Matlock after their lights failed. Fortunately it was not a difficult rescue, only involving a



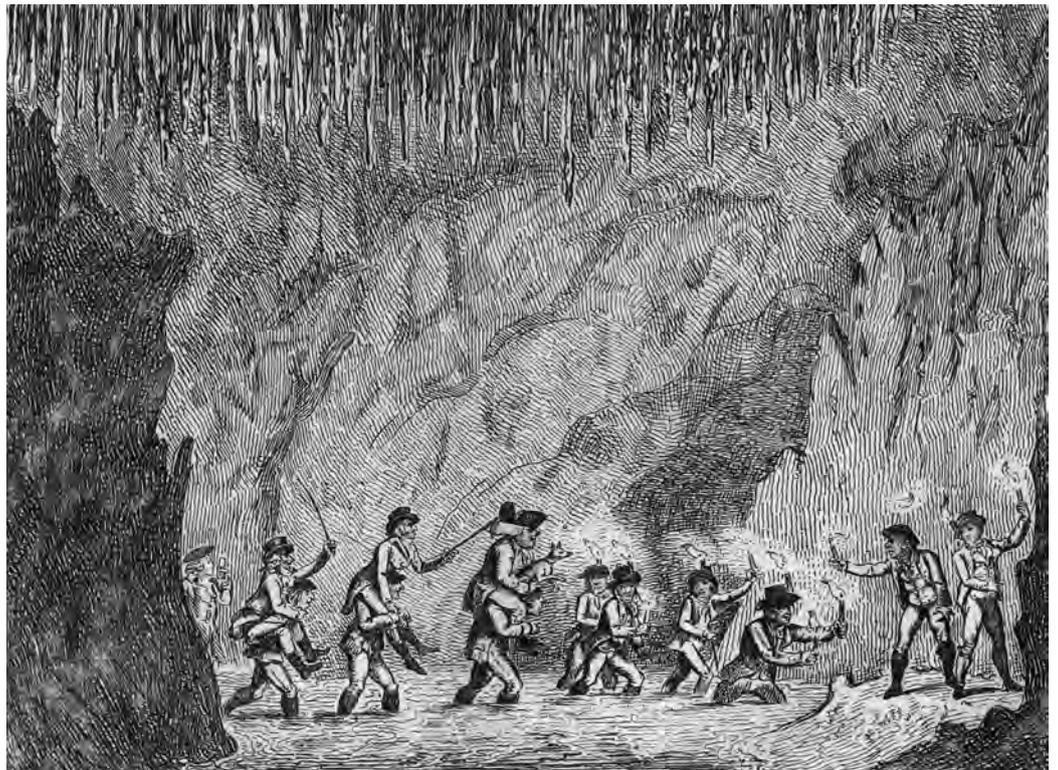
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couple of team members going down, finding the missing cavers and guiding them out, but it did reveal some very real problems with the call-out.

Apart from a couple of individuals, the nearest available group of DCRO rescuers lived at the time in and around Derby, nearly twenty miles away. Some of them got the call, but none of them possessed transport so the police were asked to help. There was no police vehicle in Derby at the time (policemen mostly used feet or bicycles in those days) and a van had to be summoned nearly ten miles from Long Eaton. By the time it had met up with the rescuers and their equipment in Derby the incident was over.

Afterwards it was suggested in all seriousness by the Derby rescuers that, as the police were unable to provide transport, then the best and most reliable way to turn out on a rescue was by public transport, which to be fair was more plentiful in those days!

The twelve call-outs that occurred in DCRO's first seven years were all relatively minor incidents and involved only small numbers of rescuers. The system set up in 1952 coped adequately with the demands placed on it and to most members there must have seemed little need and less incentive to expend time and resources in developing the organisation further. Better to get on with real caving instead – after all, there was more to go at with each passing year – Giants Hole was now fully open for business after the breakthrough at the Backwash Pool sump, the way to



from an engraving in 1797 showing tourists – 'the gentry' – on their way to Buxton Water Sump in Peak Cavern, where Mr Day made his heroic/stupid dive in 1773 (only 24 years earlier)

New Carlsark had recently been opened, the exploration of Knotlow Cavern had started and serious efforts to further extend Peak Cavern were under way.

And it was whilst pushing an interesting lead in Peak Cavern that Neil Moss got into difficulties and nothing was the same again.