

Speedwell Cavern, Castleton.

Part 1: The entrance to Main Rising & Cliff Cavern.

Also see:

Part 2: Halfway House Series

Part 3: The Assault Course and Pilkington's Series

Part 4: The Bung Hole Series

Part 5: Whirlpool Passage

Grid Ref:SK 13920 82740

Alt: 249m

Length: (including Peak Cavern, JH & Titan) in excess of 17km

Access: There is no access to the show cave for cavers (unless you que up, pay and go in on the boat with the tourists!), nor is access permitted via the show cave to the further reaches. However, most of the Speedwell system is accessible via JH, Peak Cavern, and at some stage in the future, Titan.

Introduction

This description is based upon exploration from the entrance as is traditional but cavers will generally access the system from Peak cavern via Treasury Sump, Colostomy Crawl, The White River Series and Block Hall, or from J.H. The route into the system from J.H. is described in the J.H. guide. To aid navigation for cavers entering from peak, a simplified description of Speedwell from that perspective is given later.

The Show Cave

The entrance to Speedwell Cavern lies at the foot of **Winnats Pass** on the southern side of the road. From the steel door 104 steps descend beneath the road to a landing stage marking the start of **The Canal**. Standing on the stage facing the water, the main way on is to the left under a stone arch, south and into the hill. To the right, the canal continues for a short distance to the base of a mined shaft, originally used for hauling to the surface but now used as a ventilator. The top of this is by the toilets in the car park opposite the main entrance.

Under the arch, a very small passage to the left takes some overflow from the canal but soon becomes too tight. 100m on the next landmark is a small trial mine level on the left known as **Little Winster Vein**. After another 100m the passage widens at the **Halfway House**, a point where the boats can pass and workings lead off to the right into Longcliffe Vein.

These workings now generally known as **Halfway House** and lead to an extensive series of natural passage (see Pt. 2).

Back in the main canal the way on continues for another 260m reaching **The Bottomless Pit**, a large phreatic vein cavity developed on Faucet Rake.

The canal traverses via a platform, down to the left, over the railings, a 10m drop lands on a slope leading down to a huge sump pool. This has been dived to a depth of 8m to a mud floor with no way on (2). A small inlet in the left before the sump pool also ends at a sump which is too tight. Above the platform the cavern soars up out of lamp range. In 1921 a dangerous climb up old stemples was found to lead to a loose boulder ramp followed by a "broad water-worn passage running west" for 60m, ending beneath blocked mine shafts, some 40m above show cave level (3).

The Far Canal

The southerly continuation of the mined entrance canal beyond the end of the show cave intersects several small passages before it meets the main streamway. The first of these is about 60m beyond **The Bottomless Pit**, near the rotting remains of some old show cave boats. To the right it is too tight, but to the left a wet crawl can be followed which becomes too tight after 50m (4). Shortly after this a small swallet on the left is walled up, and the next passage Far Canal intersects is 150m from the show cave. To the right, a low crawl leads into **The Assault Course and Pilkington's Series** (see Pt. 3). To the left, a rather wet crawl becomes too tight after 70m (1). After another 25m an old miner's boat is found in Far Canal with another small swallet nearby, becoming too tight almost immediately. Another 60m of wading leads to the end of Far Canal at a heavy iron gate which is kept locked.

The Main Stream Cave

Passing through the iron gate at the end of Far Canal a T-junction is met with a large stream flowing from the right. To the left it soon thunders off through a small hole over a dam wall (**The Bung Hole**) leading downstream to **The Bung Hole Series** (see Part 4), To the right (upstream) is deep water wading, often against quite a noticeable current for 25m to a side passage, marked by some vertical timbers. This is **Pit Props Passage** and leads through a series of partly flooded mine tunnels, to a steeply sloping vein cavity. Part of the main stream sinks into a tight sump against the left wall here. After about 50m the passage ends at choked stopes at a

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higher level, probably on New Rake. **Main Stream Passage** continues beyond in a natural section only slightly modified by the miners as easy walking with the occasional waist deep wade to The Whirlpool, a deep pool where a strong inlet, **Whirlpool Passage**, enters from the right (see Pt 5).

A careful swim across this obstacle (fixed rope often in place) leads into a continuation, now entirely natural. The height increases and easy walking leads past a concealed window high on the right (leading to Whirlpool Passage) to where a heap of rocks suddenly blocks the passage - The **Boulder Piles**. Two avens above contain huge hanging boulder chokes, the main passage continues on but to the right a stream enters from the 1996 connection to the bottom of **J.H.** (James Halls Over Engine Mine). A short crawl passes beneath another but much smaller choked aven to a 5m climb up boulders beneath scaffolding. At the top of the climb a crawl continues to a junction. Ahead, a low slot leads into a now back filled chamber but to the right the base of a shaft is met. This shaft is equipped with iron ladders and leads up to a steel air door. Above, a short passage leads to the top of a mud pile overlooking a huge chamber, the base of JH's **Lavaliathan shaft**. Across the chamber at the base of the slope, is the connection to **Far Sump Extension** (see Peak Cavern Pt.3).

Back at the **Boulder Piles** the main passage continues but has more silt deposits on the walls and floor than before, due to Boulder Piles damming up the stream water in flood. The easier walking sections of this lofty passage are interrupted by various large boulders which have to be climbed over. At one point, a vertical pile of blocks, the size of small cars (**The Leaning Tower of Pisa**) has a clearly defined flood level marked on it. Shortly beyond on the right, a 5m iron ladder (or possibly not if it's been "borrowed" to access something elsewhere) leads up into **Bathing Pool Passage**.

- **Bathing Pool Passage** is a walking sized canyon passage obstructed by the occasional mud and boulder pile passes a well-calced rock-choked passage on the right before ending abruptly at The Bathing Pool, a large sump 6m in diameter. A 15m aven above this appears to close down whilst underwater the shaft has been dived to 26.3m (6).

Beyond Bathing Pool Passage the main streamway continues up to 9m high and 4m wide. At a right hand bend, an inlet passage enters (**Cliff Passage**) but deeper wading in the main route finally ends at the brink of a huge flooded shaft, **Main Rising**. This initially drops vertically to -36m before rising to -14m through the narrow **Bog Pipe Rift**. Beyond an airbell can be reached but below the shaft drops away again, down **Doux de Castleton** to a short descending slope at -42m. The slope soon reaches

the top of the massive **New Leviathan** shaft which descends to -70m. At the bottom a descending passage has been explored for a short distance to an elbow with a silt / sand restriction at -72m which could not be passed.

Cliff Passage & Cliff Cavern

Cliff Passage starts as a 1.5m high tube with a gravel floor. On the walls a number of historic inscriptions, made by miners and explorers, catalogue visits as far back as the 18th Century. A short crawl leads to a stooping height clean washed tube with the occasional clay filled offshoot. 120m from the start of the passage a scramble up over boulders accesses the base of **Cliff Cavern**. The floor of the cavern rises up a bouldery slop to the base of a huge aven with streams cascading down from above. Opposite the point of entry is **Transition Tube**, a muddy crawl that can be followed to a dig. This is a promising site as there is evidence that in wet weather a substantial stream enters from here.

Cliff Cavern was climbed in the 1980's and two high level passages were explored. The pitches have been re-rigged since then but the ropes and anchors that are currently in place (October 2003) are in a questionable condition and should not be trusted. Ascending the rope a rebelay is reached at 38m. From here, a traverse right leads to **Cliffhanger** but continuing up, a succession of rebelay leads up for another 18m to the roof level traverse. This goes left for 18-20m to the head of a 10m pitch down to the start of Joint Effort.

Joint Effort starts as an ascending boulder ramp in a passage 7m wide by 12m high, a huge rift formed on a joint with a flat roof (formed on a bedding of very white limestone which is also visible in Far Sump Extension just prior to Western Highway (see Peak Cavern Pt.3)). 30m along in the left wall there's a crack through which a stream can be heard. This can be accessed via the small tube at the top to an impenetrable parallel rift with the same stream running right to left. Further up, nearer the top the stream can be heard again and a dig in the floor leads town to 10m of passage. From the top of the slope a short section of passage leads through into the first chamber, at the far side the stream issues from a small sump and runs into the floor. Above it an old bit of 9mm climbing rope leads up to a higher level passage to a small dry crawl leading through to **Puzzling Evidence**. A big round chamber floored with boulders and a stream cascading in from the far side. The roof is formed in the same way as the previous chamber, on the prominent bedding. All ways off in the roof are solutional and blind. Following the water upstream, up two

cascares a short passage leads to the limit of dry exploration, **Joint Effort Sump**. The sump was dived in early 1989. The sump is 20m long and surfaces beneath a 7m climb, emerging part way up the wall of the 15m high **Spidros Aven** (5), too tight at the top and no way on.

Cliffhanger Passage enters Cliff Cavern directly opposite Joint Effort and is accessed from a traverse above the first rebelay. The hanging chokes are dangerous and should be treated with a great deal of respect. Once past the initial chokes the passage continues for approximately 180m past an oxbow to a gravelly sump. This has been dived for 40m to an impassable slot.

Description Notes:

Written: Based upon the description in John Cordingley's 1986 book, "The Peak Cavern System - a Cavers Guide" with additional information supplied by Dave Nixon, Nigel Ball, Shaun Puckering, Martin Groves and John Cordingley.

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References:

1. Caves and Caving (old series) vol.I, No.1, pp 87,88
2. O.C. Lloyd, Cave Diving Group "Secret File"
3. Caves and Caving (old series) vol.I, No.4, pp 125,126
4. Caves and Caving (old series) vol.I, No.3, p85 Page 48
5. John Cordingley (pers. com.)
6. CDG NL: #113 (p33) Oct 1994.

Surveys:

- Main Peak / Speedwell Sysytem survey: available from Hitch n Hike 01433 651013 www.HNHoutdoors.com
- Main Rising: Descent Magazine #127 (p16) Dec./Jan. 1995/96.
- Main Rising dive profile: CDG NL: #118 (p22) Jan. 1996.

Further reading:

- Crewe CPC Rigging Guide (topo) available directly from CCPC and local caving shops.
- Caves of the Peak District (p102), DW Gill & JS Beck 1991, now out of print ISBN 1-85568-034-3.
- Classic Caves of the Peak District (p161), Iain Barker 1997, now out of print ISBN 1-86126-058-X

- The Peak Cavern System - a Caver's Guide, John Cordingley 1986, now out of print ISBN 0-948152-01-X
- Rocks & Scenery of the Peak District (p19, 76, 79), Trevor D. Ford 2002 ISBN 1-84306-026-4.
- Limestones and Caves of the Peak District (p12, 63, 105, 176, 197, 208, 231, 300, 305-310, 341), Trevor D Ford 1977, out of print ISBN 0 86094 004 1 (paper) & 005 X (cloth).

Entries in Descent Magazine:

- #49 (p27) Jul./Aug. 1981 (Whiripool Rising and Main Rising).
- #77 (p13) Aug./Sep. 1987 (Cliff Cavern).
- #96 (p13) Oct./Nov. 1990. (Water levels).
- #106 (p18) Jun./Jul. 1992 (Secret Sump, nr Bathing Pool).
- #127 (p16) Dec./Jan. 1995/96 (Main Rising).
- #129 (p18) Apr./May. 1996 (Cliff Cavern).
- #167 (p14) Aug./Sep. 2002 (Main Rising).
- #175 (p16) Dec./Jan. 2003/4 (Main Rising).
- #181 (p10) Dec./Jan. 2004/5 (Historical)

Entries in CDG Newsletter:

- #60 Jul. 1981 (p29) (Main Rising).
- #70 Jan. 1984 (p25) (climbing Cliff Cavern).
- #86 Jan. 1988 (p8) (climbing Cliff Cavern).
- #91 Apr. 1989 (p17) (Joint Effort Sump).
- #94 Jan. 1990 (p18) (Bathing Pool Aven).
- #95 Apr. 1990 (p21-23) (Main Rising).
- #103 Apr. 1992 (p23) (Secret Sump).
- #104 Jul. 1992 (p17) (Secret Sump).
- #105 Oct. 1992 (p45) (Secret Sump).
- #109 Oct 1993 (p20) (Inlet Sump, Pit Props Passage).
- #111 Apr. 1994 (p31) (Joint Effort Sump).
- #113 Oct. 1994 (p11-12) (Bathing Pool).
- #118 Jan. 1996 (p25) (Bathing Pool).
- #122 Jan. 1997 (p33) (Bathing Pool).
- #127 Apr. 1998 (p23 & 24) (Main Rising).
- #131 Apr. 1999 (p12) (Secret Sump)
- #141 Oct. 2001 (p12) (Main Rising)
- #160 Jul. 2006 (p11) (Main Rising - or not)
- #161 Oct. 2006 (p16) (Main Rising - conditions note)
- #161 Oct. 2006 (p13) (Main Rising - conditions)
- #161 Oct. 2006 (p16) (Main Rising to sand restriction at -71m)
- #161 Oct. 2006 (p16) (Main Rising to sand restriction at -71m)

**Amendments:**

Amendments and additions can be sent to:-

caveguides@peakdistrictcaving.info (any information regarding access or safety issues is automatically passed on to the Derbyshire Caving Association).

**NOTES:****WARNING!**

Caving and exploring mines can be dangerous and fatal accidents can happen, especially if you are not sufficiently trained.

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