

Speedwell Cavern, Castleton.

Part 2: Halfway House Series.

See *Part 1* for an overview of the entire system, access and location.

The Cave

Leaving the **Speedwell Level** at **Halfway House** a crawl forwards over a long clay dam leads on to a wooden door set across the passage. Going through this leads to where the passage increases in height and one can stand up. At this point doubling back on the left the blocked off workings of the **Loncliffe Vein** can be seen extending back towards The Speedwell Level and show cave.

Walking forwards for a few metres there is a pit in the floor only a metre or so deep where previous explorers have dug downwards for various reasons. A short distance forwards from here the extension of the **Loncliffe Vein** can be seen running westwards and a climb up can be seen into the workings this is short lived as the climbing becomes dirty and difficult where the vein hedges to the north and a retreat becomes difficult. Leaving this climb and walking on the floor a little more to the west leads the caver to yet another climb upwards. This leads upwards for approximately twenty metres to a point where the workings have been capped off from above. This is where Dr. T Ford had an interesting experience when a large area of miners "deads" fell around him in the 1940s. Back at floor level the next feature is a partial blockage where miners debris has fallen and the explorer has to lie on their side and crawl forwards for few metres and then descend the other side of the rubble. Again after a short distance of walking a third rise can be seen leading off overhead, whilst forwards at floor level eventually leads to the blind end of the level.

Back at the last rise into the roof, this is the way on to continue exploration. Reclimbed in 1991, this leads up for fifteen metres up through many stacked, bulging deads to a point where it is possible to step to the left (west) on to a false floor. Great care needs to be taken here as there is much loose rock hanging in the air! After a short distance a short back and foot climb leads to a small stance at the bottom of the next pitch. At this point the floor is a number of metres down to the left. Climbing upwards to going is quite easy until it narrows down for the last few metres. This gains a short section of walking up a rubble slope to the base of the last upwards pitch in this area. This leads up through an area of false floors to a fairly

solid area to get off the rope at a height of 36m above the Speedwell Level.

Eastwards the going is easy walking until a roof collapse is met and no further progress is possible without digging. Originally this section would have continued to the east, over and beyond the Public Canal into an area of mine that is now about but not entered for a number of hundred years. Back to the top of the pitch and moving to the west leads through an area of what can only be described as hanging death and collapsing false floors. It goes without saying that great care has to be taken here as an accident could easily happen. There is a short traverse in situ. The way forwards takes one up and over a number of piles of collapsed deads until after a number of metres there is a rather curious short, low wall spanning the passage. Being placed in such an unusual place, with no obvious function, it is presumed to have some significance in terms of mine boundary / ownership. A short walk from here leads to the top of shaft which can be descended to the chamber below. A fixed traverse line leads over the top of the shaft and following this leads to a high vantage point looking out into the vastness of Justification Chamber.

Justification Chamber is a very large phreatic cavity entered by the miners hundreds of years ago. A descent of 14m can be made by following the left wall to a rebelay and final drop to the rubble floor. By walking under the overhand when one gets off the rope it is possible to look up a climbing shaft which is the one traversed over on the approach to Justification Chamber. Going down the steep rubble slope a descent of maybe fifteen metres is made to a more solid floor. With you back to the slope, once stood at the bottom, a passageway doubles back on the left running back towards the Public Canal. It is short lived and soon a solid rock wall is met at the end.

Walking forwards from the bottom of the rubble slope a short drop is soon met on the left. It is possible to climb down this with care and this leads to the top of yet another rubble slope, a little constricted at the top. This leads down to a fair sized chamber underneath the upper level. At the very bottom of the slope everything is covered with thick mud indicating severe flooding at times. In the corner of the chamber at the lowest point is a pool of clear water with a stemple wedged across the front left corner. This has been dived (J. Cordingley) to -14M with no obvious way on.

Back at the top of the short climb down, at the bottom of the rubble slope, the way on is towards the west along a tall passage. Immediately on the left there are the remains of an old miner's railway track. Beyond this there are

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a few stooping sections and the passage rises a little to an obvious widening out on a left hand corner. There is a vein passage doubling back on the right that leads into a series of stopes heading in the direction of **Justification Chamber**. Forwards down to the left, the passage continues to where it lowers to a crawl. At this point on the right there is a pitch upwards which gains a narrow section on the vein and it is possible to traverse forwards over small rotten stemples to what appears to be a collapse in the passage. This choke is easily passed around the left side. At the far side the passage widens dramatically and develops into a two metre wide and eight metre tall rift. Follow the floor down a series of scrambles leads to a short slither over a slab of rock into an area known as **The Understudy**. This is a series of mud filled cavities between very large boulders. At the entrance to the Understudy, against the right hand wall of the rift, there is a narrow slot downwards between rocks. This has never been descended but it may be worthwhile working on as falling water can be heard below.

Instead of descending to the bottom of the rift from the choke, it is possible to traverse forwards with care to gain the continuation of the rift further to the west. The passage suddenly widens out when the cave stands on the floor and forwards from here is the start of the **Barmote Court**; a very large chamber leading up to the right into the base of an immense boulder choke containing rocks the size of cars! This is a very confusing area and great care must be taken in it due to the instability of the choke. It has been penetrated in various areas but the way on, probably upwards, is uncertain. Walking along the left hand wall of the **Barmote Court** leads to a sloping floor down to a very immature vadose trench which has been followed for a short distance to a point where it becomes too small to go further.

Staying higher and skirting around the base of the choke an area of wet ground is crossed and at the far side of this there is a crawl along a mud lined bedding into the continuation of this area. This crawl is followed to where the mud stops and once again it is possible to stand. This is a clean chamber, full of boulders and known as **The Underpass**. An interesting feature here is steeply descending phreatic passage, partially filled with boulders and in need of a good dig! At the highest part of the chamber it is possible to climb on to the top of a very large flat-topped boulder. Crawling along here for a short distance there is an obvious passage way entering from above on the left. It quickly chokes but the infill is loose and easy to dig. The only problem is that it lands on your head. This point is only about fifteen metres below the bank of the southern side of the Winnats Pass and probably eight or so metres below road level. Radio locations verify these measurements.

Let us return to the top of the boulder slope at the foot of the pitch in Justification Chamber. It is possible to climb up the wall away from the abseil rope to gain a stance some eight or so metres up the west wall: it is a small muddy area about two metres square. Bolting up this wall has led to many interesting places least of which is at the top where a large ascending phreatic development is met. This leads upwards over much loose material to the base of the Full House Choke. Climbing upwards with extreme care, one can enter the side of the choke and penetrate for a further six or seven metres. A radio location has pinpointed this place to be only eight metres below the surface. Instead of climbing into the choke it is possible to continue to the west along an immature passage above floor level and gain an area with a very small stream. After a short distance and a few small scrambles the passage becomes too small for further progress. In this area there are a few places where a green coloured deposit can be seen in the bedding plane, hence this area being called The Emerald Gardens."

WARNING! At present (July 2004), the whole of the Halfway House Series is rigged with ropes that have been in place for over twelve years and their condition is totally unknown. These ropes could potentially be unsafe and should not be used under any circumstances.



Description Notes:

Written: 2004 by Nigel Ball.
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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.)



Surveys:

Available from Hitch n Hike 01433 651013 www.HNHoutdoors.com
Basic A4 elevation in Crewe CPC Rigging Guide available directly from
CCPC and local caving shops



Further reading:

- Caves of the Peak District (p102), DW Gill & JS Beck 1991, now out of print ISBN 1-85568-034-3.
- The Peak Cavern System - a Caver's Guide (p47), John Cordingley 1986, now out of print ISBN 0-948152-01-X
- Limestones and Caves of the Peak District (p302), Trevor D Ford 1977, out of print ISBN 0 86094 004 1 (paper) & 005 X (cloth)



Entries in Descent Magazine:

#102 (p15) Oct./Nov. 1991.
#116 (p18) Feb./Mar. 1994 (Justification Chamber).



Entries in Cave Diving Group Newsletter:

#110 (p15) Jan. 1994 (Stemple Sump).



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).

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