

Speedwell Cavern, Castleton.

Part 3: The Assault Course and Pilkington's Series.

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

The Assault Course

Crawling forwards through the metal door, one enters a flat out crawl in a partially sediment-filled phreatic tube. This gradually trends uphill and progress is made slowly on a slippery mud-covered floor. After turning a number of bends one emerges at a point where a small stream flows from a very immature inlet on the right, towards the left. The floor changes to solid rock and at this point it is possible to kneel up. The water from the inlet flows across the floor and drops into a vadose trench about knee deep on the left. The water slowly flows away back towards the Far Canal. Continuing forwards, hands and knees crawling along the rock shelf leads to a low wet, muddy section on the right, for a few metres until it is possible to stand up in a vadose page. The way forwards eases to a steady walk through mud until one needs to stoop down once again for a few metres until it is possible to stand up in the relative vastness of **Pilkington's Cavern**. Going back to the 1940 when T.D. Ford first explored this area, there was the remains of a miner's platform in the roof. This has since fallen to the ground! Pilkington's Cavern leads up into Pilkington's Series.

Continuing on from Pilkington's Cavern, another 60m of winding passage leads from the base of Pilkington's Cavern reaching a larger streamway flowing from right to left. Downstream a 1.5m high but narrow canyon winds its way down to a sump after about 120m. Upstream, the canyon has frequent boulder obstructions creating crawls and roof-level squeezes. Progress is rather slow in this very awkward passage. Apart from a tiny passage off to the left (which becomes too tight) there are few landmarks in this interminable grovel. Various boulder obstacles have been removed along this section and eventually a small chamber is reached "**The Grand Day Out**".

This signifies the vertical development of this part of the system situated on **Faucet Rake** and consists of a series of four pitches 20m, 12m, 8.5m and 20m respectively. Note that the ropes on these pitches were 9mm in diameter and are the original exploration ropes. A few small well decorated chambers exist but the only thing worthy of note is the 'Legless Crawl' (half way up the last pitch. This flat out crawl is 20m long and draughts

powerfully but becomes too tight for the average caver, that's where the exploration ended 1996.

Speedwell Cavern - Pilkington's Series

R. Shaw and J. Harrison bolted up the wall of Pilkington's Cavern in the 1990s to gain a passage at the top. Pilkington's Passage leads on from here as a very awkward vadose passage averaging 40 to 50 cm wide and 150 cm high. In places there are loose stones on the floor that were smashed off by the miners in an attempt to make the passage a little more comfortable to progress along. After twisting a turning for what appears to be a lifetime a low section makes one lay down and progress by crawling flat out in what is the only wet section of the whole passage. After this point the going becomes a little easier and loose gravel on the floor denotes the approaching end of the crawl. A pool of water which is stepped over is the source of the water flowing along Pilkington's Passage. After this, larger pieces of rock line the walls and after climbing upwards for a few metres one arrives at the foot of the Round Pitch (10M).

At the top of Round Pitch and just around the corner is the short Galena Pitch (5M) which has much loose material at the top. There is evidence on the right of a buddling (washing) area that the miners used for washing and sorting the lead ore. This area is somewhat different in nature as it appears to have been developed in a more phreatic way than passages so far visited. Continuing upwards, a climb in a steep section of vadose trench leads to the foot of Chain Pitch (13M). This is a fine, spray-lashed pitched leading to a passage at the top.

What follows from here are two short, awkward and exposed climbs totalling 5 or so metres. Great care needs to be taken here as a fall could have serious consequences! From the top of these a fine example of a joint controlled phreatic passage leads to the spectacular Waterfall Cavern. This was bolted by N. Ball in the late 1990s to a height of over 20M with no way on at the top.

In the corner of this chamber is the Stemple Pitch (8M) split in the middle by a small ledge. When getting off the rope at the top and looking outwards over the top of the pitch some rather large boulders rest on what are probably very rotten stemples.

Hands and knees crawling away from the pitch head leads to the base of a climb up through a boulder choke (Deads Pitch) for 8M. Free climbing is not difficult but care needs to be taken so as not to move anything.

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The Deads Pitch leads up through the floor and into the vastness of **Mud Hall**; a large cavern with a totally flat roof. Walking along the floor one rises quickly to the far side of the chamber at its highest point. The way straight forwards leads to a little stooping section after which one is able to stand upright in **Watrice Cavern**. This is a long phreatic development following the line of the **Faucet Rake** mineral vein.

To the right (east) the passage way is of ample proportion passing much flowstone deposit on the walls until it reduces in size and eventually becomes sediment and boulder filled at an impassable choke. Returning to the entry point of **Watrice Cavern** and going to the left (west) a short traverse over holes in the floor leads into an area of mine workings which eventually loop around back to the right and it is possible to return back to your starting point down a low crawl at floor level. A radio location has suggested that this area is forty metres below the surface. Trending left it is possible to enter a section of passage which is very clean washed and has extremely sharp rock, leading up into a small chamber. The whole of the Watrice Cavern area shows much evidence of mining activities.

Back in **Mud Hall**, looking back down the slope to the top of the **Deads Pitch** the left hand wall can be followed, taking care, to where a small phreatic tube leads off at roof level and continues as a low crawl. This passes a number of small, well decorated, side chambers until a descending shuffle over boulders leads to the base of an aven. This is the bottom of the **Axe Pitch**, so named because an axe head was found sat wedged on a bedding plane when the pitch was first ascended. The pitch (15M approx) eventually closes down into a very immature inlet.

Various other sections lead off around the walls of **Mud Hall** but all lead to nothing. This area is of great interest as the roof strata is identical to that found in "Heaven" at the western most point in the "White River Series" in Peak Cavern. A cross-sectional extension of the cave system suggests that the roof bedding in Mud Hall is a continuation of the roof bedding of the White River Series.

All of the pitch in this area of the cave have rope is them from the early 1990s and it must be stressed that no guarantee can be given about their quality. They should not be climbed. Without some way of protecting oneself from a failure. One pitch in particular, **Stemple Pitch**, is rigged on 8mm rope!

Description Notes:

The Assault Course:-

Written: 2004 by Nigel Ball.

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Pilkington's Series:-

Based upon John Cordingley's 1986 book "The Peak Cavern System - a Caver's Guide" and a personal account from Nigel Ball. The Assault Course description is from Dave Nixon, personal communication 10/2003

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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, DW Gill & JS Beck 1991.
- The Peak Cavern System - a Caver's Guide (p47), J Cordingley 1986.
- Limestones and Caves of the Peak District (p302), TD Ford 1977.

Entries in Descent Magazine:

- #118 (p8) Jun./Jul. 1994 (Troubled Waters) - (see Pt.5).
- #134 (p11) Feb./Mar. 1997.
- #135 (p19) Apr./May. 1997.
- #162 (p15) Oct./Nov. 2001 (The Assault Course).
- #189 (p13) Apr./May. 2006 (Pilkington's Series).

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