

A photograph of a cave interior. In the center, a small inflatable boat with two people inside is illuminated by a bright blue light. The surrounding cave walls and ceiling are dark and textured, with some areas reflecting the blue light. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and adventurous.

A celebration of 100 of the
finest caves and mines in
Great Britain and Ireland

HIDDEN REALMS

MARTYN FARR



A celebration of 100 of the
finest caves and mines in
Great Britain and Ireland

HIDDEN REALMS

MARTYN FARR



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.adventurebooks.com

A celebration of 100 of the
finest caves and mines in
Great Britain and Ireland

HIDDEN REALMS

MARTYN FARR

First published in 2023 by Vertebrate Publishing.



VERTEBRATE PUBLISHING
Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.
www.adventurebooks.com

Copyright © 2023 Martyn Farr and Vertebrate Publishing Ltd.

Front cover: Powell's Lode Cavern.

Frontispiece: Piccadilly in Ogof Ffynnon Ddu 2.

Photography by Martyn Farr.

Martyn Farr has asserted his rights under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-83981-081-7

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may
be reproduced or used in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or
mechanised, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage
and retrieval systems – without the written permission of the publisher.

Edited by Helen Parry; design, maps and production by Jane Beagley.
www.adventurebooks.com

Vertebrate Publishing is committed to printing on paper from sustainable
sources.

Printed and bound in China by Latitude Press.

Caving is an activity that carries a risk of personal injury or death. Participants
must be aware of and accept that these risks are present and they should
be responsible for their own actions and involvement. Nobody involved in the
writing and production of this book accepts any responsibility for any errors
that it may contain, nor are they liable for any injuries or damage that may arise
from its use. All caving is inherently dangerous and the fact that individual
descriptions in this volume do not point out such dangers does not mean
that they do not exist. Take care.

Always research access for individual caves before you go, as access arrange-
ments and the legality of entering a particular site can change over time.

Contents

PREFACE	vi
INTRODUCTION	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
South Wales	1
Mid and North Wales	43
Mendips and Southern England	65
Forest of Dean	101
Peak District and Central England	109
Yorkshire and Northern England	131
Scotland	179
Ireland	187
GLOSSARY	216

Preface

All of the caves and mines in this book are ones that I have personally visited and enjoyed over many years. I was privileged to be part of the discovery, early exploration or extension of a number of the sites and much of this I recorded photographically at the time. In compiling *Hidden Realms* I felt it was important to revisit as many of these sites as possible, and so, for the past two and a half years, this has been my mission. This enables me to present you, the reader, with many modern, quality images, complemented by some historical pictures from my library. I hope you enjoy this offering.

Introduction

This is the book I have always dreamed of – a photographic celebration of the underworld across the British Isles. Each site is portrayed through images that I hope will captivate and inspire you, and the few words I have written are there simply to add a little context.

I have been an underground explorer and enthusiast for over sixty years. It has been my lifelong passion and the elemental magic that this environment evokes has never waned. Yes, I understand that few people will be so fanatical, but for me there is something in this subterranean world that is as obsessive as a drug. Very simply, I love the physical challenge, the intense thrill of exploration, the camaraderie; and it all blends into one in a world of often amazing, wonderful, strange and beautiful sights. From ten years of age I was hooked, and, over time, photography became a complementary interest. It is one of the tools that enables me to show people what is down there, to share some of the wonders and to help explain why I love doing it. An image speaks a thousand words. Sixty years later the attraction is as strong as ever, and thankfully I am still fit enough to participate at a reasonable level. This is my opportunity to share my enthusiasm with you.

The sites included in this book have been chosen for a myriad of reasons; some for their size and splendour, some for sporting challenge, some for historical or archaeological interest, and yet others for their long-standing, popular appeal. Not all involve difficult caving and indeed some, in part, are show caves or mines accessible to all. Of the thousands of sites across the British Isles, one of the biggest dilemmas was which caves, or mines, to leave out. I apologise to those of you who think your favourite venue should have been included, but at the end of the day there were extremely difficult decisions to be made.

So, here is a window into my world, a snapshot of some of the places I have visited and some of the interesting and fabulous scenes I have captured. A number of the images are old and thus not presented at as high a standard as modern imaging techniques allow. However, I am sure that they will inspire nostalgia for many and to me they convey something special; an evocative memory or a historic exploratory event.

This book targets a wide audience and presents just a sample of the esoteric world beneath our feet. Many of you will want to see some of these places for yourself and I wholeheartedly endorse that desire. You don't have to be rich or highly educated to pursue this sport (I certainly was not!). Be aware that *Hidden Realms* is not a guidebook and it was never conceived in that light. You will need to research (thoroughly) and work out for yourself how best to visit these places. Some sites are easy to access, some are difficult and some currently have no officially permitted access (I was lucky enough to be granted access to a couple of sites for this book which are not normally accessible).

If you choose to seek out some of these wonderful locations you will need to exercise care – care not to occasion a rescue and, equally importantly, care for and conservation of the underground environment. Approaching your local caving club or mining society would be a responsible place to start. Remember: for the ill-informed, poorly equipped and perhaps foolhardy, these places present hazards which are potentially life-threatening. Ultimately, your safety is your responsibility.

Hidden Realms is a celebration of a unique and wonderful heritage. At whatever level you choose to explore this magical underworld, I guarantee you will not be disappointed.

Acknowledgements

While all the images in this book were taken by me, it is essential that I recognise the immense help provided by my companions at each of the sites visited. Every image is a snapshot in time but none of them could have been successfully captured without the other fantastically supportive people involved. There are those who facilitated a visit by supplying practical advice or arranging access, those who organised helpers and those who took on the role of trip leader. There were places to rig, equipment to be carried and lengthy periods standing around – all in cold, often wet and draughty conditions. To all of the people who have been involved in the creation of this book, I am eternally indebted.

I would like to recognise the particular dedication of a few helpers who each gave up their time on numerous occasions. In this respect I would mention Rodney Beaumont, Kevin Gannon, Martin Grass, Pat Cronin, Linda Windham, Dave McDonogh, Adele Ward, Greg Brock, Hugh Norton, Louise McMahon, Phil Rowsell and Paul 'Beardy' Swire.

I also thank the countless landowners, the show cave and mine owners, and Compass Minerals for supporting this project and, no less important, Jason Pepper for his invaluable IT support.

My greatest praise must go to my partner, Rachel Smith, who never baulked at carrying, standing neck-deep in water and modelling with the patience of a saint. She also helped immensely with the post-production activities in terms of literary and imaging expertise. I am an extremely lucky person.

My sincere thanks go to you all.



SOUTH WALES

The valleys of South Wales have a rich heritage synonymous with the mining of coal and iron. Throughout their working years, the countless sites evoked profound emotions; the pride and comradeship of workers and heartbreak of families, all too often caught up in mining tragedies. Today, the land lies quiet and nature has reasserted its presence.

Yet secreted beneath these hills are also found some of the longest and deepest cave systems in the British Isles. These are wondrous places to visit, with gently dipping limestone beds, dancing waterways and a profusion of beautiful decorations.



- | | | | |
|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|----------------------|
| 1 | Ogof Gofan | 11 | Dinas Silica Mine |
| 2 | Llygad Lluchwr | 12 | Ogof Rhyd Sych |
| 3 | Dan yr Ogof | 13 | Ogof Agen Allwedd |
| 4 | Pwll Dwf n | 14 | Eglwys Faen |
| 5 | Tunnel Cave | 15 | Ogof Daren Cilau |
| 6 | Ogof Ffynnon Ddu 1 | 16 | Ogof Craig a Ffynnon |
| 7 | Ogof Ffynnon Ddu 2 | 17 | Ogof Capel |
| 8 | Pant Mawr Pot | 18 | Blaenavon Coal Mines |
| 9 | Little Neath River Cave | 19 | Ogof Draenen |
| 10 | Porth yr Ogof | 20 | Garth Iron Mines |

Left The Hepste Resurgence in the headwaters of the River Neath.

Ogof Gofan





Ogof Gofan is unique in British caving. This cave lies well off the beaten track and a casual glance at its length and depth would leave anyone singularly unimpressed. But this is somewhere very special and provides a highly memorable day's activity.

Gofan lies halfway down spectacular limestone cliffs in the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. It is also situated in an active military firing range! Permissions are necessary prior to visiting and it's a fascinating walk across the range to Saddle Head. Atlantic rollers batter the rocks far below and just everything about this place is breathtakingly invigorating. As ropes are set, climbers look on bemused with little or no inkling of the wonders lying out of sight beneath ground level.

Finding the abseil point is the first challenge as the entrance cannot be seen from above. The rocks are razor sharp and you really wouldn't want to drop anything. Once into the narrow, slippery cleft, a crawl leads to a wonderful oval window overlooking the sea. After this, a squeeze leads to a further low section and then ... you enter one of the finest speleological caverns in the UK. The chamber is adorned with flowstone of all sorts on every side, and against the far wall lies a small and beautiful clear green 'lake' which looks like a magical wishing well.

There is more beyond, and everyone who has been to Ogof Gofan will confirm that a trip into this cave is a glorious day out.

Left Main chamber.

Above Window over the sea.

Llygad Llŵchwr



Other than to a Welsh speaker the name of this cave is nearly impossible to pronounce. 'Lugad Lechweer' is reasonably close, but it's simpler and easier just to use the letters 'LL'. Translated, the name means the 'Eye of the Loughor'. This cave may not be long (1,200 metres), but it holds a special place in history as this was the first recorded site of sporting cave exploration in the Welsh underworld.

At LL a substantial stream flows from a fine oval entrance, a volume of water which gives every indication of a massive cave network stretching back into the mountain. While the water rises to the surface via a flooded shaft, the cavers' entry is via a small body-sized hole set about three metres above water level.

It's amazing to consider how, in the 1840s, the first explorers found their way through

the intricate set of cracks and vertical fissures equipped as they were with tweed jackets, candles and oil lamps. They literally unrolled a ball of twine and the necessity for this soon becomes apparent to the visitor today. This place is complicated. Occasionally, the sound of running water leads one to a waterway where surprisingly the flow is seemingly from the wrong direction. Thomas Jenkins and his friends explored the entire length of the dry cave and revealed four river chambers, along one of which he took a collapsible boat, a coracle, to see where the river went. Audacious!

In recent years, divers have explored beyond River Chamber 4, including some sections of dry passage, but the many kilometres of undiscovered cave that assuredly exist currently elude all comers.

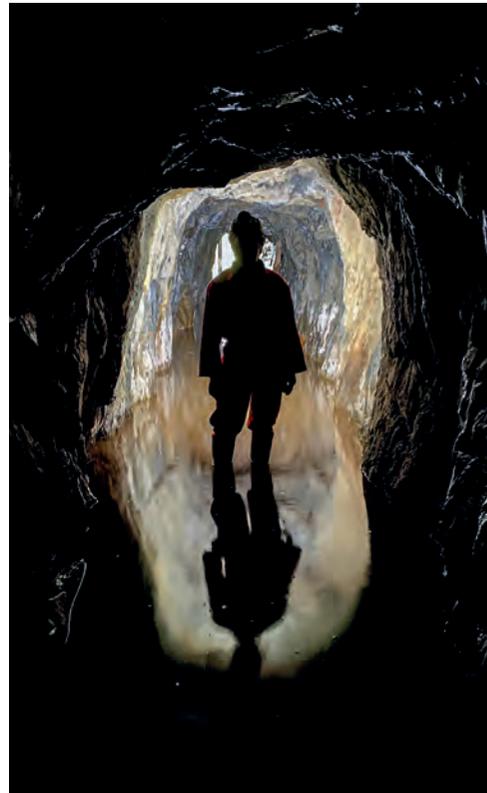
Above Deep water in River Chamber 2. **Right** A pillar formation near the entrance.



Ystrad Einion Copper Mine

Ystrad Einion Copper Mine lies at the head of Artists Valley above the village of Furnace, north of Aberystwyth. Other than the information board and a few ruined structures, little remains on the surface to indicate that mining once took place here. A diligent search amid the forestry will reveal that entrances to the mine exist on more than one level, but the main entrance is marked with a substantial metal gate and has a very small stream flowing out.

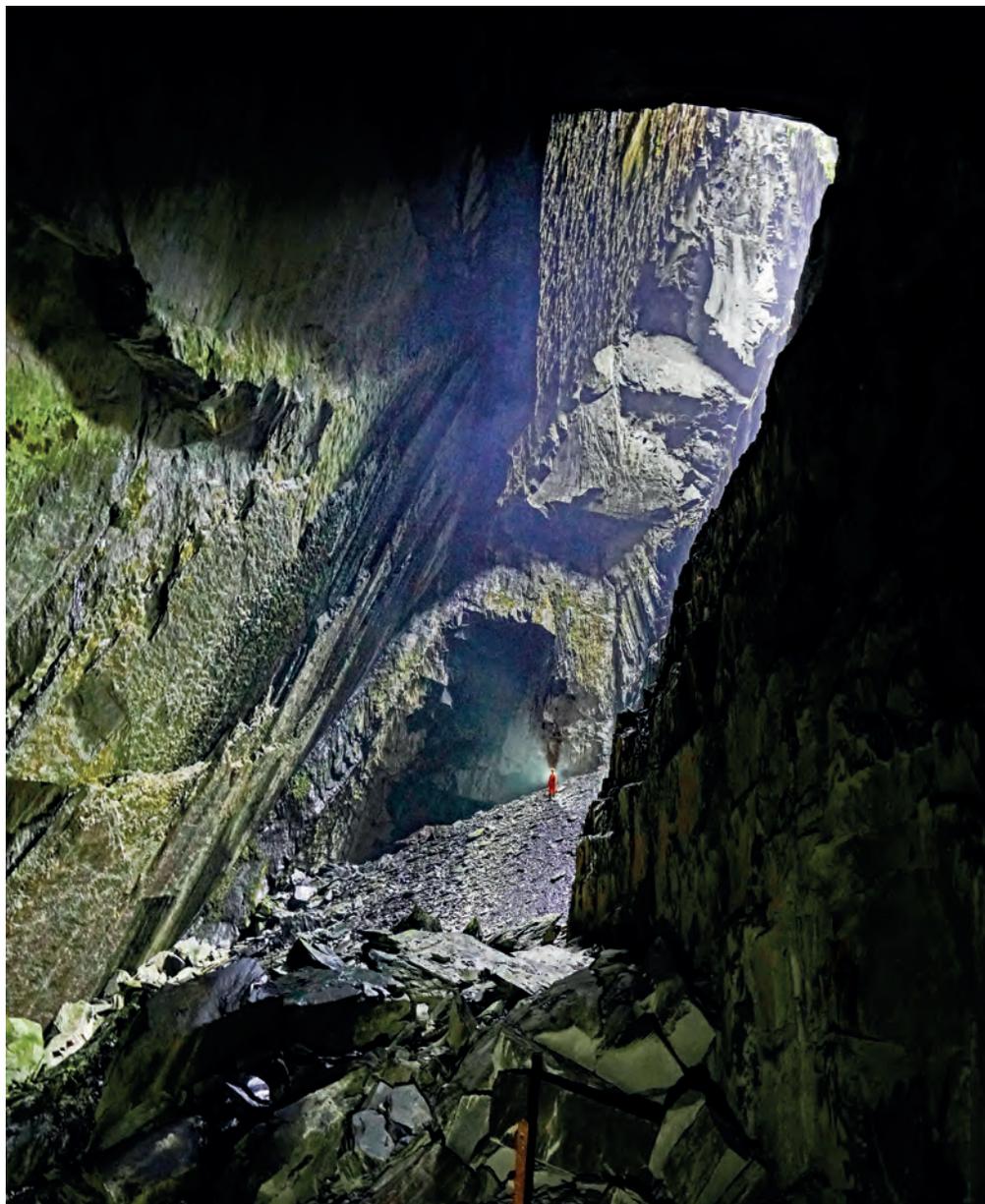
Stepping carefully should ensure that water does not get into your wellies, and an easy walking tunnel leads in for a relatively short distance to an outstanding sight. Here, the miners constructed a massive underground waterwheel, one of only two to be found anywhere in the UK. Sadly, this is now falling into decay, but suffice it to say that it makes a spectacular sight. Close by lies a deep flooded shaft, while exploring another tunnel will reveal a five-metre climb leading to yet another interesting relic of a long bygone age: a large metal hauling container for the ore – a kibble. One presumes that the ore body at Ystrad Einion was of limited extent, and little evidence of copper, or indeed any other mineral, is readily apparent today. But seeing a waterwheel and a substantial kibble *in situ* is particularly special. Such artefacts must be treated with all due respect.

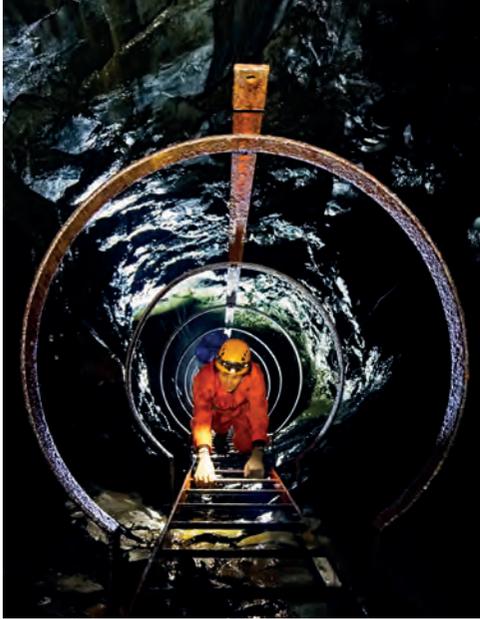


Top right The waterwheel. **Right** Entrance tunnel.
Opposite Plank crossing deep water.



Aberllefenni Slate Mine





Opposite Large daylight cavern.
Left Ladder between levels.
Below Dinghy in flooded cavern.

The primary level that leads right through the mountain is nothing special, but along that route huge caverns will be revealed. Some admit daylight from high above while others present yawning, perilous, gaping shafts off to the side. There are fathomless blue lakes of clear water and artefacts such as a lovely 'rock shoveller' and a set of trams. Directly adjacent, a massive metal crane bestrides a deep, flooded chamber. These features clearly date from the modern age and lie parked up as though awaiting the morning shift to arrive.

Aberllefenni Slate Mine is a spectacular site in every respect. The mine was evidently a significant producer of slate during the Industrial Revolution but finally stopped working around 2000 when the miners closed the doors at valley bottom for good. Today, that entrance has been sealed, but find a way in and you will be amazed at what has been left behind.

Aberllefenni Slate Mine lies a short distance from Corris, near Machynlleth. It is worthy of a visit at any time, but the place seems all the more worthwhile when the weather is dire and you can't appreciate the glorious scenery on the surface. It's a real treasure in the subterranean world of Mid Wales.



St Cuthbert's Swallet



St Cuthbert's Swallet is a classic UK cave system, approximately seven kilometres in extent with a vertical range of 145 metres. Lying on the eastern edge of Priddy village, you don't have to walk far to reach the entrance. Your leader will be equipped with both a key, for the manhole cover gate, and also a hefty spanner which will be used to close a sluice gate to enable you to enter the small stream sink reasonably dry.

The concrete shaft leads quickly to an eight-metre-deep entrance rift. You peer down the narrow fissure and as the sluice closes the stream rapidly diminishes to a mere trickle. The short pitch is not so much tight as awkward, but that overcome, there follows a continued rapid descent on fixed metal ladders. You soon realise that the place is a vertical warren – intricate, fascinating and very soon superbly decorated. St Cuthbert's is known especially for its magnificent curtains and calcite flows which are found at many locations throughout the cave.

Since the cave was entered in 1953 it has witnessed tremendous efforts to try and reach the elusive passages that assuredly run three kilometres beneath the Mendips to the resurgence at Wookey Hole.

Any number of interesting circuits are possible in this complex system, taking in countless wonderful sights along the way.

Above Curtain Chamber. **Right** Flowstone cascade.





Wookey Hole



Wookey Hole lies two kilometres north-west of Wells and is renowned throughout the UK as a show cave. Beyond its few hundred metres of tourist walkways is the best part of four kilometres of further passages, much of which are flooded.

Wookey was to be the site of the very first British cave dive, using Standard Equipment, back in 1935. An intrepid duo stepped into the water clad in lead-weighted boots and heavy brass helmets. Their air was pumped by a surface team along snaking hoses that the divers dragged behind them. Since then the cave has continued to host divers, with their increasingly refined equipment, as they have explored through many flooded sections, finally reaching the current terminus at a depth of ninety metres.

Dry sections of Wookey also have a long and colourful history, with archaeological remains being discovered in the first few chambers and an intriguing legend of a witch who once inhabited the cave. In 1975 the tourist area was extended by mining a tunnel and in 2018 a further section was artificially driven to reach another area until then restricted to divers (Chamber 20). From here, in 2020, dedicated explorers finally gained access to the divers' dry extensions in Chamber 24. Today, cavers can undertake a superbly sporting trip involving squeezes, climbing and swimming to see the white foaming water of the River Axe thundering down the cascades in Chamber 24, a sight which is quite awesome. Beyond here, the darkness still beckons.



Above Diver in Chamber 19. **Right** Chamber 1 boat crossing.



Clearwell Caves





The iron mines of the Forest of Dean are astonishing. The sheer extent of the underground workings is difficult to get your head around, even for a seasoned underground explorer. Ore has been extracted here for thousands of years.

One fine example of these forest sites is Clearwell Caves, part of which runs today as a show mine. For an informed educational experience this is most certainly the place to visit. The mine is part of a thirty-kilometre complex extending in a maze-like fashion from the village of Clearwell to Coleford, a couple of kilometres distant. It has a depth of 180 metres, of which the lower fifty metres are now flooded. Iron mining here ended in 1945 but small-scale extraction of the various pigments of ochre still continues today.

The show mine is open all year but at Christmas the decorations set out around the tourist tunnels are world class. For a 'wild tour' into the deeper parts of the mine you will be led by a knowledgeable and professional guide. You will appreciate not stumbling around using a tallow candle, which was the most common option for the original miners, but it may be interesting to see how long it takes to remove the reddish ochre staining which colours hands, clothes and footwear. It's said that you can always tell a Forest of Dean underground explorer just by looking at their wellies!

Left The show mine at Christmas.

Above Old Ham Mine, part of the Clearwell Caves complex.

Titan Shaft

Titan is in a class of its own. This site, which lies high on the Hurd Low hillside above Castleton, is breathtaking. Here lies a fascinating back story of extreme dedication, determination, skill and a heap of ‘derring-do’.

The tale begins more than 200 years ago with lead mining and tunnels that were subsequently ‘lost’. Fast forward to 1981 when lengthy passages and evidence of miners’ activity were found by diving through Far Sump in Peak Cavern. Spurred on by this, local cavers were prompted into a period of intense activity. Further discoveries were made, and on New Year’s Day 1999 Dave ‘Moose’ Nixon and team emerged at the base of an immense vertical shaft that defied the strongest lights – a shaft which they subsequently named Titan.

What followed was a climbing adventure. Eventually, after an audacious ascent, Titan was scaled to a height of 143 metres and established as the longest free-fall natural shaft in the UK. The challenge then was to achieve an upper entrance ... and so another epic excavational project began.

By 2003 an infilled mine shaft had been discovered and cleared. This dropped into a short horizontal passage to emerge 120 metres above the floor of the giant Titan Shaft. Today, the so-called Trade Route descent involves a forty-five-metre entrance pitch followed by two drops down the Titan Shaft, split by a welcome break at the Event Horizon. To descend (or ascend) this spectacular void is the ultimate SRT undertaking in the British Isles.



Above Explorer and pioneer Dave ‘Moose’ Nixon emerging from the entrance. **Right** The main shaft.





YORKSHIRE AND NORTHERN ENGLAND

The Pennine Hills and Yorkshire Dales present a beautiful vista. But on the windswept tops you will quickly see the very 'bones' of the landscape, eroded and fissured as rainwater dissolves the limestone rock.

This is the land of vertical caving. Venture beneath the surface and there are stunning sights – clean-washed, sculpted shafts often spray-lashed by waterfalls that thunder down, carving out the rock. With knowledge and skill, this is a wonderful area to visit.

Explore further afield and you will find the mines of Cumbria. From the neatly crafted tunnels of Nenthead to the blue hues of the copper mines, each has its own character and story to tell.



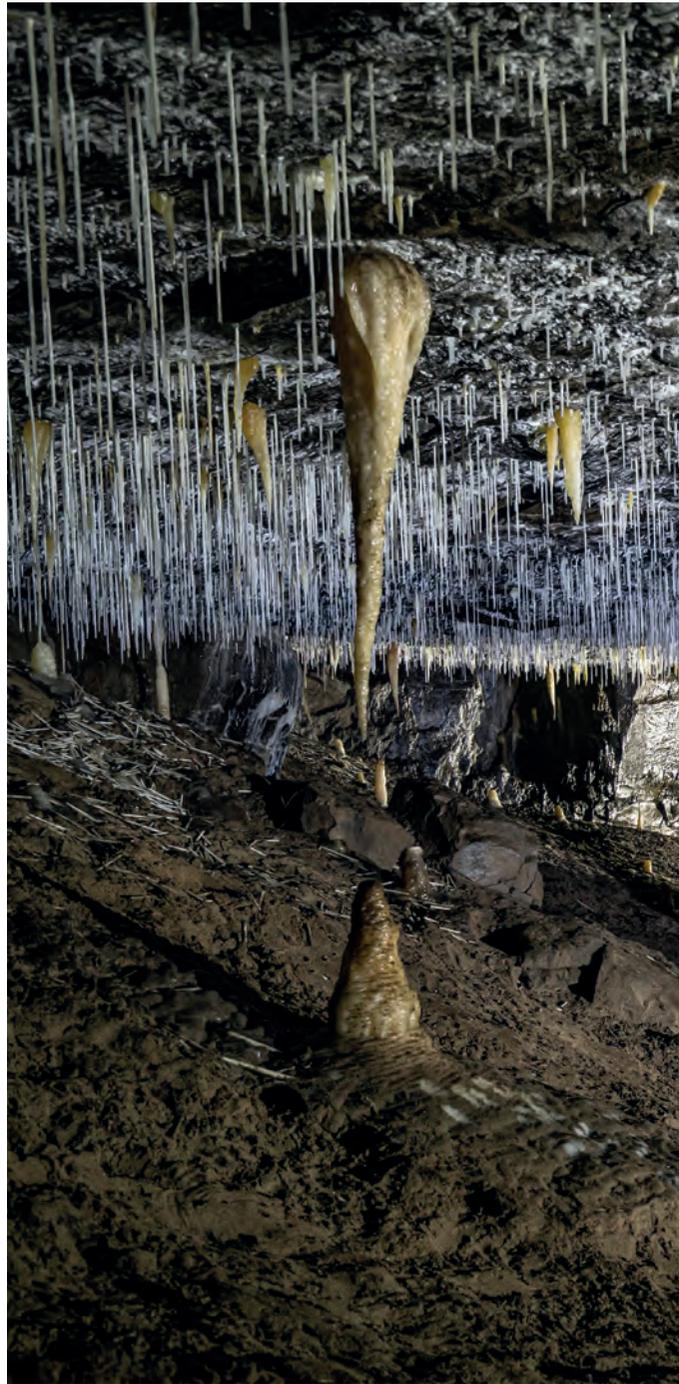
Left Limestone pavement on the flanks of Ingleborough.

- 61** Sell Gill Holes
- 62** Long Churn Caves
- 63** Alum Pot
- 64** White Scar Cave
- 65** Gaping Gill
- 66** Juniper Gulf
- 67** Lancaster Hole
- 68** County Pot
- 69** Shuttleworth Pot
- 70** Notts 2
- 71** Ireby Fell Cavern
- 72** Simpson's Pot
- 73** Rowten Pot
- 74** Kingsdale Master Cave
- 75** Illusion Pot
- 76** Sleets Gill Cave
- 77** Dow Cave
- 78** Mossdale Caverns
- 79** Stump Cross Caverns
- 80** Goyden System
- 81** Ibbeth Peril Cave
- 82** Coniston Copper Mines
- 83** Nenthead Mines

County Pot

County Pot is a complex labyrinth with over six kilometres of passages, a very popular route into the netherworld under Casterton Fell. Located on the side of the Ease Gill valley, the entrance was excavated by members of the Northern Pennine Club and Red Rose Cave & Pothole Club in 1952. Since then, it has been joined to a number of other entrances and is now subsumed into the ever-expanding Three Counties System.

This is a classic way to enter and explore the vast and complicated easterly part of the Ease Gill network. County Pot has something to suit everyone: short pitches, well-sculpted tunnels and sporting challenges such as the slippery chimney up to Poetic Justice. Many of its passages can be safely visited in most weather conditions. Route finding in the system is not easy; a survey and description are vital. With these in hand, it is possible to undertake extensive through trips, exiting the cave further up or down the valley, or indeed on to a different fell. Along the way, and providing excellent reward for your efforts, are some superbly decorated and nicely accessible places such as Easter Grotto and Gypsum Cavern.





Left The second pitch. **Above** Gypsum Cavern.