

Blackmoor Valley from the Log book



Mendip Caving Group
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The Departure Lounge Upper Flood Swallet – Mark Shinwell



Neverland – Mark Shinwell

Front Cover photo Dan Matthews

Back Cover Upper Flood Survey - Ben Cooper- overlaid on Google Maps Copyright Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky 1/1/2001

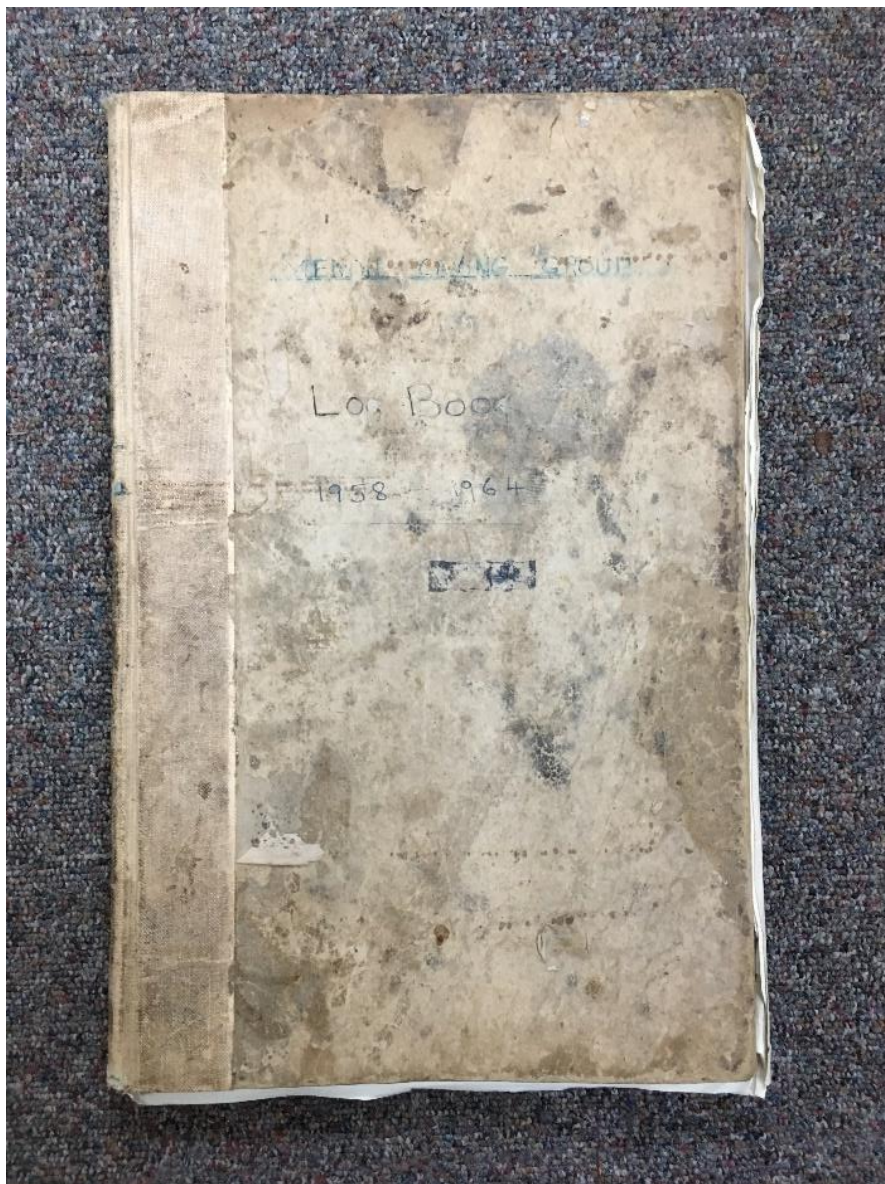
Editor Richard Carey

From the logbook: a history of the MCG at the Blackmoor Valley

Tim Francis

Earlier in 2021 it became increasingly evident that we had a bit of a problem with the record keeping of the Group's activities in the Blackmoor Valley. Some members were not aware that there is a requirement to fill in the Green Logbook for Upper Flood, Waterwheel and Stainsby's and subsequent recording and archiving of entries was becoming noticeably patchy. I volunteered to try and stitch together what we had to create, as best as I could, an electronic record of all activities back to the start of the access agreement of the late 1980s. This involved collating and cross-referencing earlier databases, what logbook sheets I could find, tackle sheet records, the cottage and online logbooks, and the Upper Flood journal.

As the work progressed it became apparent that a rather compelling story of the Group's more recent exploration of the caves of the Blackmoor Valley was starting to emerge. Inspired by what I was reading and previous reports about the area, most notably Jonathan Roberts' summary of digging at Upper Flood up to the discovery of Midnight Chamber in 1985, as written up in the 1996 Upper Flood Journal, I started to wonder whether it would be possible to create a fuller record. Thus, I set myself the rather ambitious task of creating a high-level summary of all recorded MCG trips in the area, whether digging or tourist, right back to the start of the Group's formal record keeping. This turned in to a significant undertaking but once completed we now have as full a record as possible of what the group has got up to in its core stomping ground.

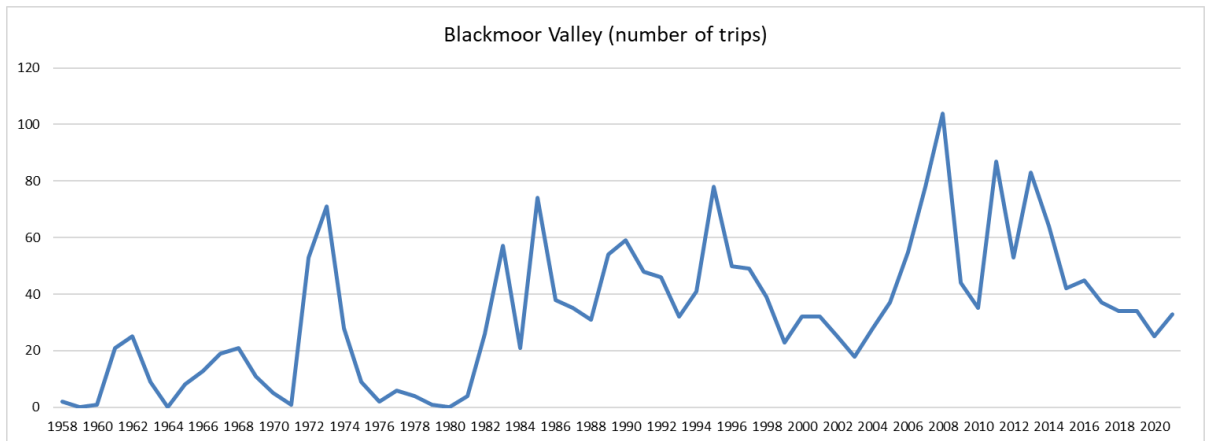


Logbook Number 1 1958 – 1964, Photo – Tim Francis

The Headlines

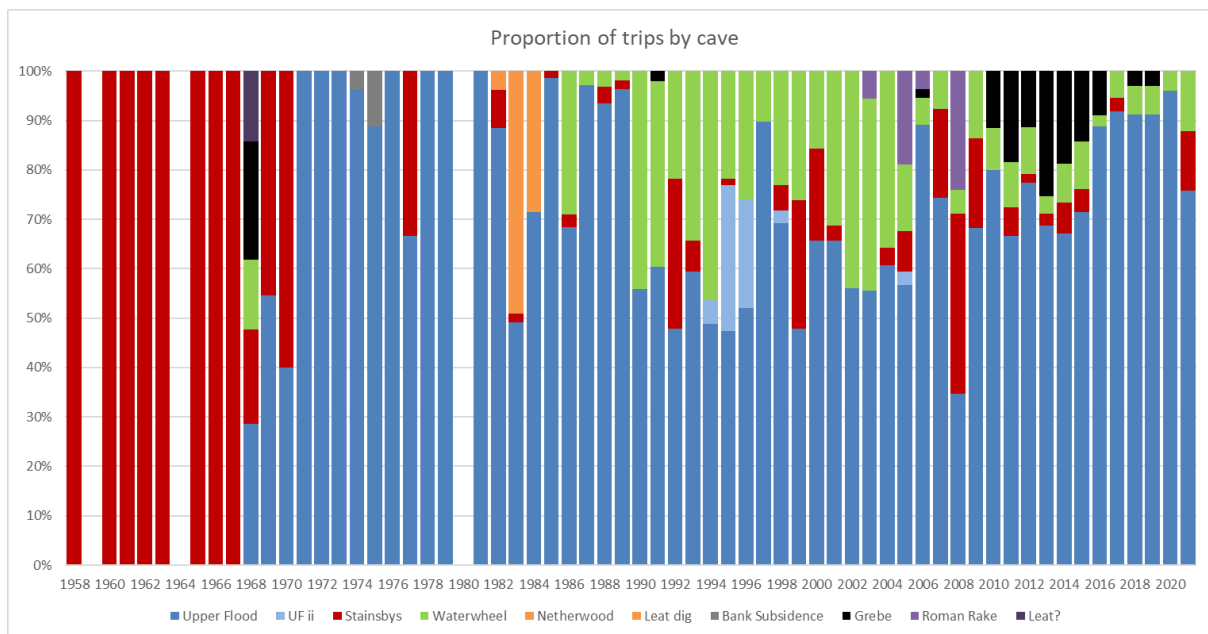
There were 2,151 recorded trips conducted by The Mendip Caving Group between August 1958 and December 2021. And this amounted to 7,401 caver trips. A typical caving trip could be summarised as consisting of about 3 people, caving down in Upper Flood, doing a mix of tourism and light exploration, on a Saturday in May. Of course, underneath the headlines there is a lot of a variation and now that I have everything in a single database it can be mined for interesting nuggets.

The first observation is that, whilst the long-term trend for the amount of activity seems to be on the up, there is a huge variance in the amount of caving that occurred in any one year. The peak year was in 2008 with 104 trips. At first glance this might seem surprising as the big breakthrough in Upper Flood occurred at the end of 2006 but in 2008 the MCG were actively digging in Stainsby's, Upper Flood and Roman Rake so we saw a wide spread of participants and interests. There were three years without any recorded caving being conducted in the valley: 1959, 1964 and 1980. Again, this seems surprising but across the years MCG attention has been turned to many other caving projects, notably Coopers Hole, Longwood August, Bone Hole, Pinetree Pot, Ubley Hill, Cow Pot, East Twin Swallet, Ubley Warren and Rod's Pot. We also had several cottages to build and renovate. And caving was on occasion disrupted by: the extremely heavy snowfall of the 1962-63 winter; foot and mouth outbreaks in 1967 and 2001, and of course the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-21.



Those unfamiliar with the history of the Mendip Caving Group may also be wondering what the various peaks in activity are associated with, and especially now that many of the original participants of the early days are no longer members of the Group. Interrogation of the logbooks entries provides a fresh, cave-focused, perspective on what was actually happening at the time.

Across the whole 1958-2021 period 68% of trips were to Upper Flood, 12% to Waterwheel, 11% to Blackmoor / Stainsby's and 9% to other sites. That seems to make intuitive sense as it reflects the relative size and thus interest in each of the caves as we might think of them today. But it masks the quite significant differences in actual activity in each of the caves in individual years. The database allows us to look at visits to individual caves by year and some interesting patterns emerge. In the chart below I've illustrated the cave visits as a proportion of the total number of trips, so the data tells us the share of Blackmoor Valley caving by cave in each year. The three blank columns (1959, 1964, 1980) are where no caving activity in the area was recorded.



Upper Flood, in blue, dominates overall but the picture is a bit more complicated than that. I can see roughly 5 phases:

- 1958 – 1970 Blackmoor Swallet excavations
- 1971 – 1981 Hard going at Upper Flood
- 1982 – 1989 The Netherwood dig and progress at Upper Flood
- 1990 – 2005 Fun in Waterwheel and Upper Flood tourism
- 2006 – 2021 Big caving in Upper Flood, hard graft in Grebe

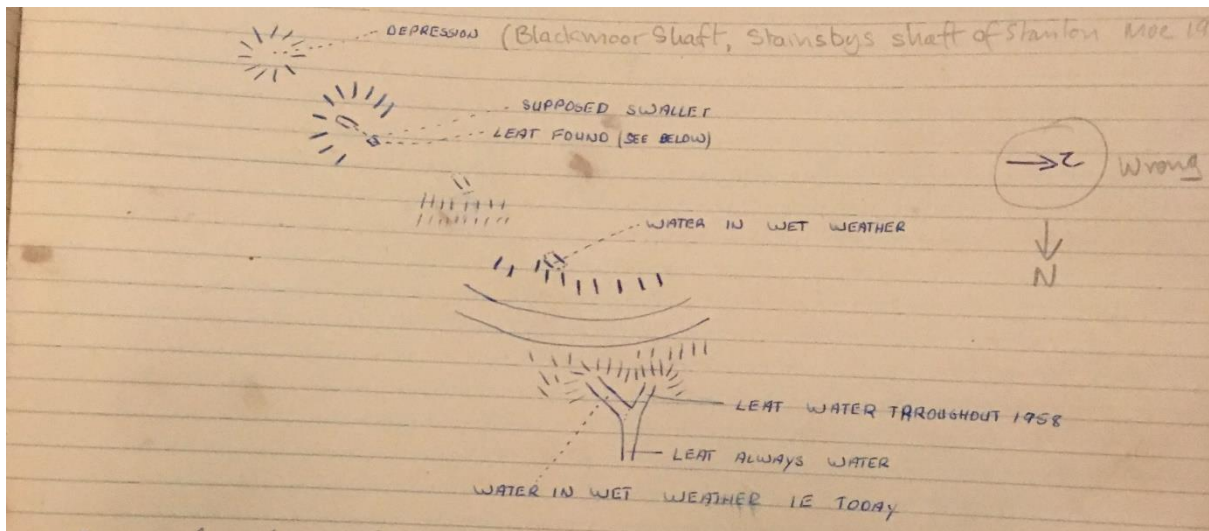
Over time each cave has benefited from the fresh impetuosity created by new generations of cavers, changing access arrangements and new equipment, both for digging and sport caving. Of particular note is the ‘Great Flood’ of July 10th, 1968. Its enormous impact on Mendip caves has been well documented elsewhere but its affect is clearly apparent in the caving activities conducted by the Group in the Blackmoor Valley. In the logbook there are excellent first-hand accounts, most notably by Arthur Cox, of what had resulted from the flooding in the Blackmoor area. In 1968 immediately after the flood MCG members started to look at the prospects in all the newly opened up entrances – Grebe Swallet, Upper Flood, Waterwheel and the area of bank subsidence further upstream. At the time it wasn’t obvious which of these had the greatest potential but all of them looked intriguing.

Blackmoor Swallet, Blackmoor Shaft and Stainsby’s Shaft

Back in the late 1950s, it seemed to MCG members that there surely must be a cave system running from the swallets high up in the valley near Netherwood all the way down to the resurgences in Cheddar. Observations at Cooper’s Hole in Cheddar Gorge, their dig at Timber Hole and water seeming to sink in the upper Blackmoor Valley suggested as much. And they also chatted to the locals about the prospects for caves in the area as in this note from Tony Knibbs to myself in 2006:

“I remembered an old legend concerning the lead miners on Blackmoor, which was told to us when we started prospecting around the minery in the late 1950s. The legend held that miners had discovered a large and beautiful cave during the course of their operations. We spent simply ages ferreting around the rakes without finding anything...”

Of course, all the mining activity that had occurred in the valley since pre-Roman times meant that the original pattern of the natural landscape was somewhat obscured but nevertheless there were indications that cave passage might be found. Below is a sketch by Malcolm Cotter of the surface area after a period of heavy rainfall in August 1958, the first MCG logbook record of a cave swallet in the valley.



Blackmoor Swallet area, 7th August 1958, Malcolm Cotter. Pencil annotation 1994

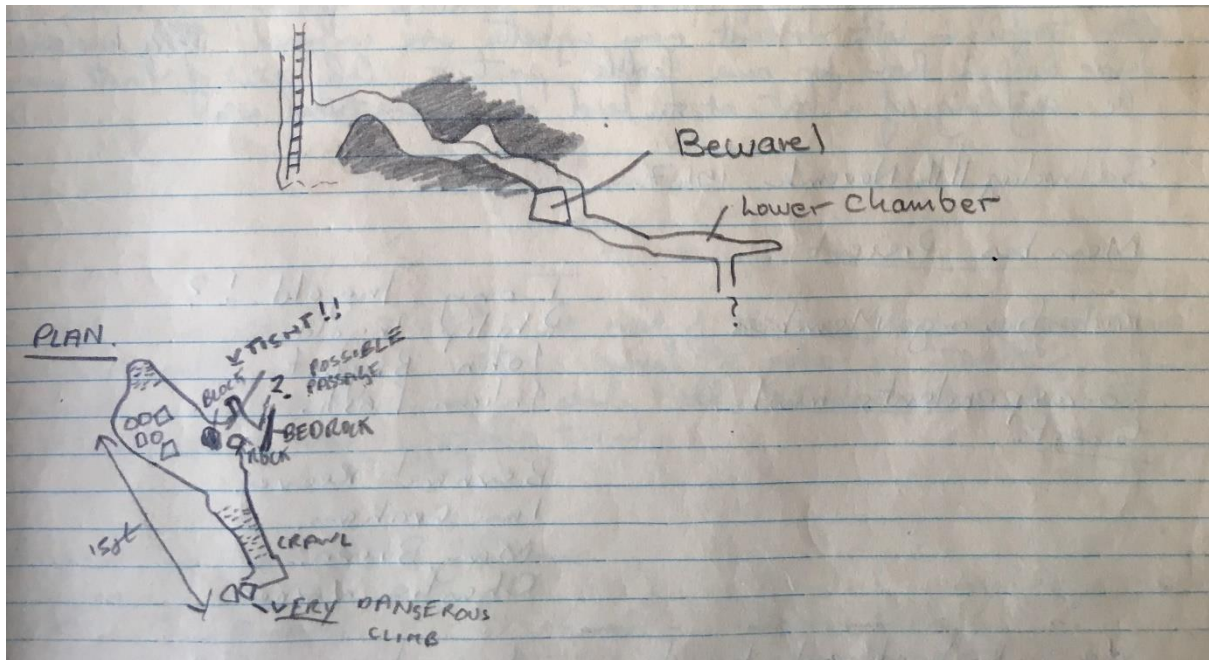
Intrigued by the prospects of the swallet, on 27th July 1958 Pete Goddard and Tony Crawford had already called on Mr Saye to get the address of the Bristol Waterworks Company and the Group sought permission for an excavation from BWC's Chief Engineer, a Mr Picken. Digging was commenced at Blackmoor Swallet on 7th August 1958 by Don Searle and Pete Goddard. The depression on Malcolm's sketch above was noted down as appearing to be an old mine shaft, a shaft which we now know to be Stainsby's Shaft.

"Digging commenced on the supposed swallet was rather easy-going loose stones and thick clay and mud. A leat was found to enter the other end of the depression and appeared to be a natural bedding plane, inclining towards the swallet. The depression above the swallet groaned very interestingly. It outwardly appears to be an old mine shaft but contained a considerable amount of dripstone, sometimes cementing smaller rocks together. Pete unearthed an old stream bed untouched by miners. Its bed contained water rounded pebbles and fossils in sand and clay of varying horizontal layers, with bedding inclining towards the underside of the rock face." Don Searle.

As an aside it wasn't until a visit to the dig on 5th January 1985 by Martin Rowe and Alan Dougherty that the name Stainsby's was first used to refer to the shaft. This was subsequent to the publication of Clarke and Stanton's 1984 report, "Cornish miners at Charterhouse-on-Mendip", in the UBSS Proceedings. And it wasn't really until around 2007 that MCG cavers formally started referring to the location as Stainsby's Shaft instead of Blackmoor Shaft.

The digging was initially focused on the swallet but by late 1961 attention switched to the depression and subsequent shaft. The dug tunnel beyond the swallet was a pretty grim affair and the shaft held out the prospect of a bypass to what must lie beyond. Naming conventions get rather muddled but from what I can tell the last formal digging in the swallet tunnel was by Ted Gabb, Pete Munt and Beth Gabb on 6th April 1963 and a "stream sinking well" observation on the 7th April by Dave Mitchell and Paul Dye.

Blackmoor Shaft remained the only caving site open to the MCG in the valley throughout most of the 1960s. It wasn't entirely clear to the diggers which parts of the cave were natural and which parts were man-made but nevertheless good progress was made, and a strong cold draught was always present. So more recent cavers are always bemused as to why the dig was left as it is. The answer is of course the switch of focus by the Group to Upper Flood after the 1968 flood. John Miriam, Carlo Benedetto and Jack Glover went for a look at the shaft on the 13th July, two days after the flood, and observed that there was no damage at all to the dig. Nevertheless, digging at Blackmoor Shaft ground to a halt soon after with the last digging trip of that era made on 5th June 1970 by Don Vosper, John Evans and Greg Smith. The swallet itself was noted to have been "blocked by a small mud landslide" later on in August. Below is one of the last sketches of the dig, the natural passage marked "tight" being of most interest to those looking to continue at this location in 2022. The boulder marked "beware!" which nearly squashed Richard Peat in 1967 is still there to be enjoyed.



Blackmoor Shaft, 28th October 1967, Malcolm Cotter

Apart from a few cursory visits, Blackmoor Shaft received no attention until Kevin West, Bill Headington and Katja Kaufman took up the baton in January 1992. This time the emphasis was on the main shaft dug by the miners. The hypothesis was that the shaft blockage might just be a plug and that if this could be dug around then a fine abseil would ensue. Digging activity petered out in 1993. Renewed efforts were made in 1998 - 2000 by a tightly knit team led by Malcolm Cotter, one of the original diggers from the 1960s project, but again not a great deal of progress was made.

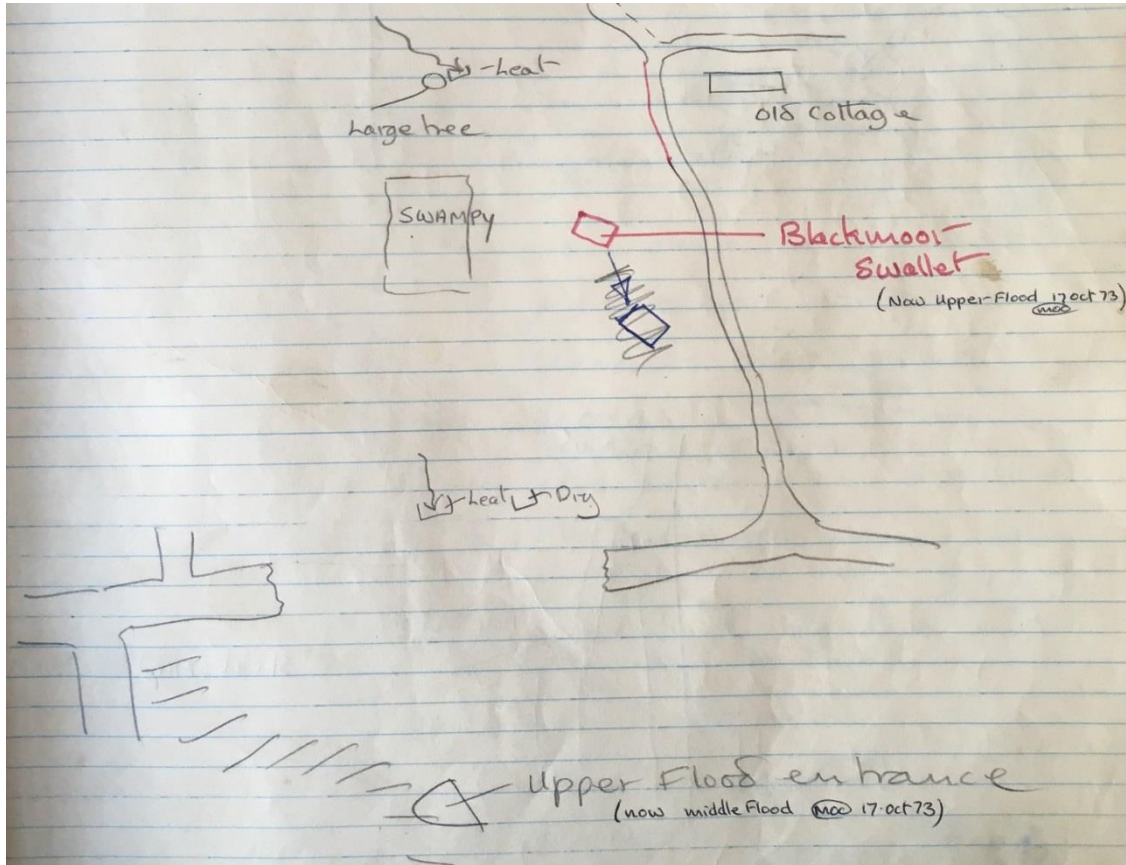
The most significant work undertaken in recent years was the huge amount of manpower focused on the main shaft between 2007 - 2009. Close reading of Willie Stanton's article and other historical sources by Biff Frith and others re-inspired a new generation of diggers. The difference this time was that the streamway extensions to Upper Flood had been found in 2006 and accurate surveying had shown the close proximity of the passages to the projected continuation of Stainsby's Shaft. I say 'projected' in that Stanton's 1984 drawing is a sketch based upon published descriptions of the mine; no contemporary survey is known to exist. Either way there was physical proof that significant cave passage lay beyond the end of the terminal choke.

A massive engineering effort was undertaken in this period utilising modern digging techniques, fixed ladders, scaffolding and a large enthusiastic team brought into play. Most notably on the weekend of the 6th and 7th September 2008 when thirteen diggers were present and hauled vast quantities of rocks and mud up the shaft. By 2009 the shaft was dug down as far as the miners' original 18 fathom level. Original timbers from the 19th Century suggest that this is the case. But, as had been the result with previous efforts, the technical nature of digging at Stainsby's and the associated need to sustain a very large team over an extended period of time meant that the 2000s project eventually came to a halt.

Occasional visits are still made each year. Perhaps most significantly on 4th September 2021 a team led by Jason Cardwell reassessed the potential of the blocked natural passage discovered in 1967. The expectation is that this will be the focus of attention in 2022.

Upper Flood Swallet discovery

As mentioned previously the presence of a cave at this location was totally unknown to cavers before the 1968 flood. It must have been known in some form or other to the 19th century miners as vast quantities of black mud and tailings had been washed down into the swallet, and one has to assume that this was done on purpose. Furthermore, one side of the entrance was built up as dry-stone wall and a few pieces of rotting wood were seen by the first exploring party. Perhaps these timbers had been used to cover over the entrance before spoil and turf were added on top.

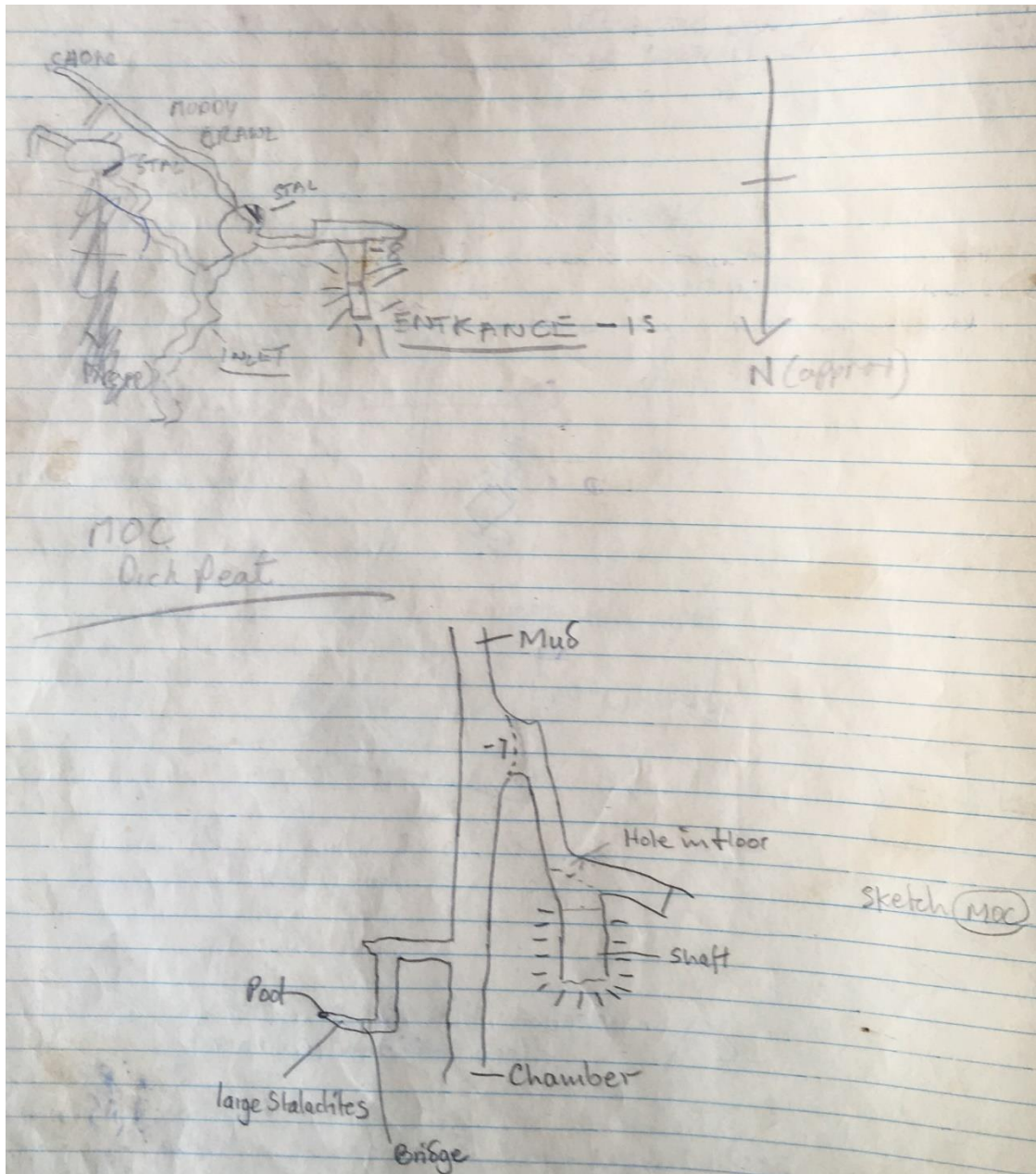


Blackmoor Valley, 4th August 1968, Malcolm Cotter. Annotation 1973.

The first trip into the cave was made a few weeks after the flood on the 4th August 1968 by Greg Smith, Roger Wallington, Richard Peat and Malcolm Cotter. This was after Blackmoor Shaft had been inspected for flooding damage and both Grebe Swallet and Waterwheel Swallet had been discovered and entered. Even more amusingly those previous caving parties would have walked along the track from Nordrach just above Upper Flood and not known it was there.

The logbook entry for that day, typos included states:

"Peter Anderson, our hero! The finder of the natural entrance to Blackmoor Swallet. First decent (sic) - Greg Smith, Roger Wallington, Richard Peat and Malcolm O. Cotter. Whilst looking for a camping site of Friday 3.8.68 Peter & friends nearly fell down an open shaft near the old cottage. Seeing us digging on the Saturday he came over & asked if we knew about it! Explored approx. 300'. Entrance certainly known to miners.....This is most definitely a small piece of the major cave which must exist in the area and is, at present, the most promising dig on Mendip."



First sketches of Upper Flood Swallet, Richard Peat and Malcolm Cotter, 4th August 1968

Remarkably few trips were made into the cave in the next few months but not surprisingly there was a lot of interest in what damage the flood had inflicted on other caves in the area. Cavers especially wanted to see the dramatic changes to the Forty in Swildon's Hole.

Cave name conventions

A slight, but important digression is needed at this point. The eagle-eyed reader might have already spotted differences in cave names on the original drawings to those that are familiar to us today. In part this was due to the staggered discovery of the caves after the '68 flood but also in that for many years there was not a consensus as to the official name of each of the caves. If you recall that before 1968, apart from a few insignificant leats, there was only one known cave in the valley. Or to be precise a pair of entrances at a single site. These were referred to, interchangeably as Blackmoor Swallet and Blackmoor Shaft. Immediately after the flood two new entrances were discovered: one a little further down valley from Blackmoor Swallet and one a little further up valley. We now call these Grebe Swallet and Waterwheel Swallet but at the time, as there were only two newly known caves resulting from the flood, these tended to be recorded, tentatively, in the logbook as Lower Flood and Upper Flood. So far so good. But then a few weeks later another cave was found even further up the valley: the cave that we now refer to as Upper Flood Swallet. For some the solution was to rename Upper Flood as Middle Flood, for others the solution

was to call the latest discovery Blackmoor Flood Swallet. Confusion and argument reigned. And even more so that other cavers, notably the Wessex Cave Club and Axbridge Caving Group, had also taken an active interest in the new sites. Editions of popular guidebooks of the time, “Mendip – the Complete Caves and a view of the hills” (1977) Barrington and Stanton; and “Mendip Underground – A caver’s guide” (1987), added somewhat to the confusion. Not least because there was little in the public domain about Grebe Swallet. More recent publications have come to this consensus:

Stainsby’s Shaft: formerly Blackmoor Swallet and Blackmoor Shaft. Named after Peter Stainsby, the infamous manager of the Mendip Hills Mining Company.

Grebe Swallet: formerly Lower Flood Swallet. Named after a bird seen by Tom Elkin, the warden of the Charterhouse Outdoor Pursuits Centre, swimming in a pond that had formed at the entrance. Story has it that a whirlpool formed, the bird flew off in alarm, and the water drained away.

Waterwheel Swallet: very briefly Upper Flood Swallet and then Middle Flood Swallet. Named after a waterwheel, associated with the workings of the Mendip Hills Mining Company, found in the later entrance dug in the depression above the original ‘68 Swallet.

Upper Flood Swallet: briefly Blackmoor Swallet, Blackmoor Flood Swallet and on occasion Blackmoor Cave. The uppermost swallet cave uncovered in the Blackmoor Valley by the Great flood of 1968.

Roman Rake: formerly Limekiln Dig, and sometimes Roman Rift, but renamed to avoid confusion with another Limekiln Dig in Priddy. Named after the archaeological excavations carried out by Professor Michael Todd in 1994 and later investigations by John Cornwall and Mick Thompson in a Roman lead-mining rake.



View of Blackmoor Valley from Roman Rake, 7th May 2005, Photo - Martin Rowe

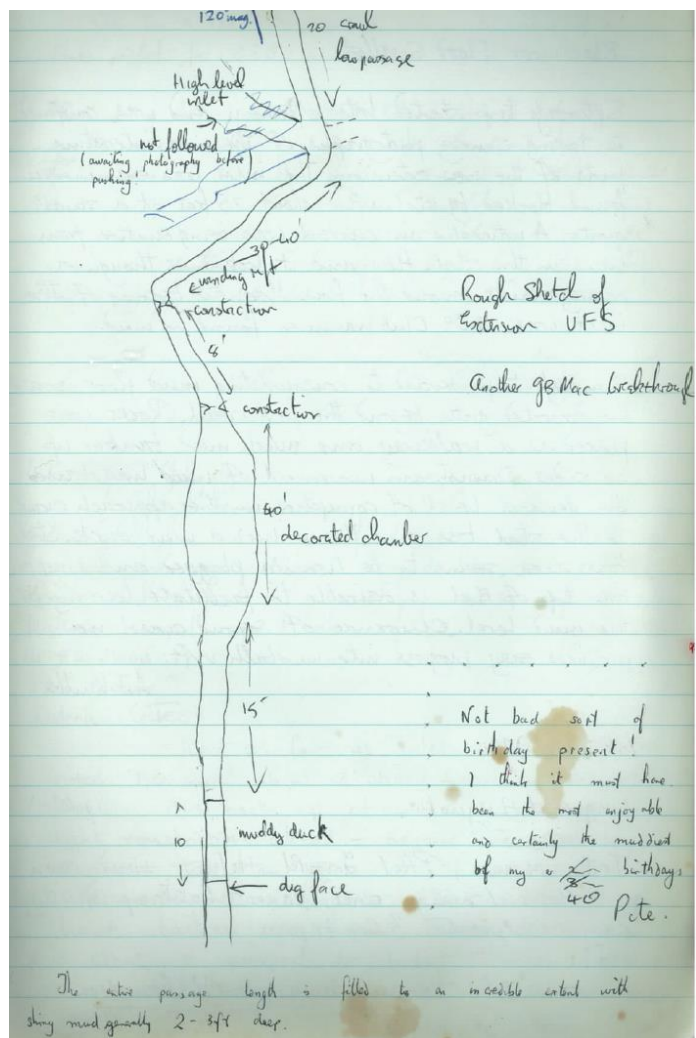
Hard going at Upper Flood, 1972 – 1981

Much has been written over the years about the history Upper Flood, most notably in the 1996 journal. So rather than replicate those accounts this article will just highlight a few additional observations to complement the previous work.

Initial MCG involvement in the digging at Upper Flood was sporadic with the ‘Reservoir Hole’ team led by Willie Stanton putting in the hard yards. MCG attention in the early years of the decade was focused on the Oxbows in

Longwood / August. But after formally agreeing upon a joint dig at Upper Flood the MCG began a systematic assault on the cave in the years 1972-1974 racking up 53, 71 and 27 trips per year respectively. This added up to 494 caver trips; a monumental effort considering that the digging was hideous, especially when the stream was running. Huge amounts of bang were required, vast amounts of black, muddy slop were removed, and all the spoil needed to be dragged out to the surface. All for very little reward. Although it's hard to pick out the key protagonists in those years as almost everyone in the club seemed to have been involved, all of the following played a significant part: Bill Jones, John MacMillan, Pete Matthews, Malcolm Cotter, Bernard Reeves, Greg Smith, Don Searle, John Miriam, Wayne Hiscox and Tony Knibbs.

The first breakthrough finally came on the 11th June 1972. A digging team consisting of Pat Walsh, Pete Matthews, Don Vosper and John MacMillan passed a hideous duck of black ooze to discover 120ft of passage ending in a stal boss. There was black mud everywhere. On route they passed a pretty chamber which we now think of as the first decorated chamber in the cave, and which was cleaned up with a water spray by Malcolm Cotter, Tim Francis, Duncan Horne and others in 1994.



Sketch of first 120ft breakthrough, John MacMillan, Pete Matthews annotations, 11th June 1972

Spurred on by the discovery, digging continued week after week, including several three-day weekends. Of particular note was a big spoil removal and hauling party of 14 people on the 29th July 1972 when vast amounts of black mud was shoved in to poly bags and dragged back from the face. Current cavers will be amazed to hear how grim the cave was in the 1970s as now the whole of Upper Flood Passage is almost entirely clean washed.

I sense a bit of rivalry with the 'Reservoir Team' in the logbook entries both in terms of digging tactics and spoil removal. And notably after the Reservoir team broke through beyond the stal boss on the 18th August 1972 to find a chunk of walking passage before things closed down again. At this point things got really difficult: solid rock to bang and constant glutinous black mud. The constant need for drilling, banging and spoil removal meant that party sizes

dropped to solo trips and twos and threes on occasion. Bang fumes became a problem – there are lots of comments about sore heads – and the dig face often flooded. Hence the dams. By the end of 1974 enthusiasm for the dig had started to wane and you can see a marked tail off in activity. Yes, this was a time when cottage building at Nordrach was at its height but irrespectively only an average of 3 or 4 trips were conducted by the MCG between 1975 and 1981, and even none at all in 1980.

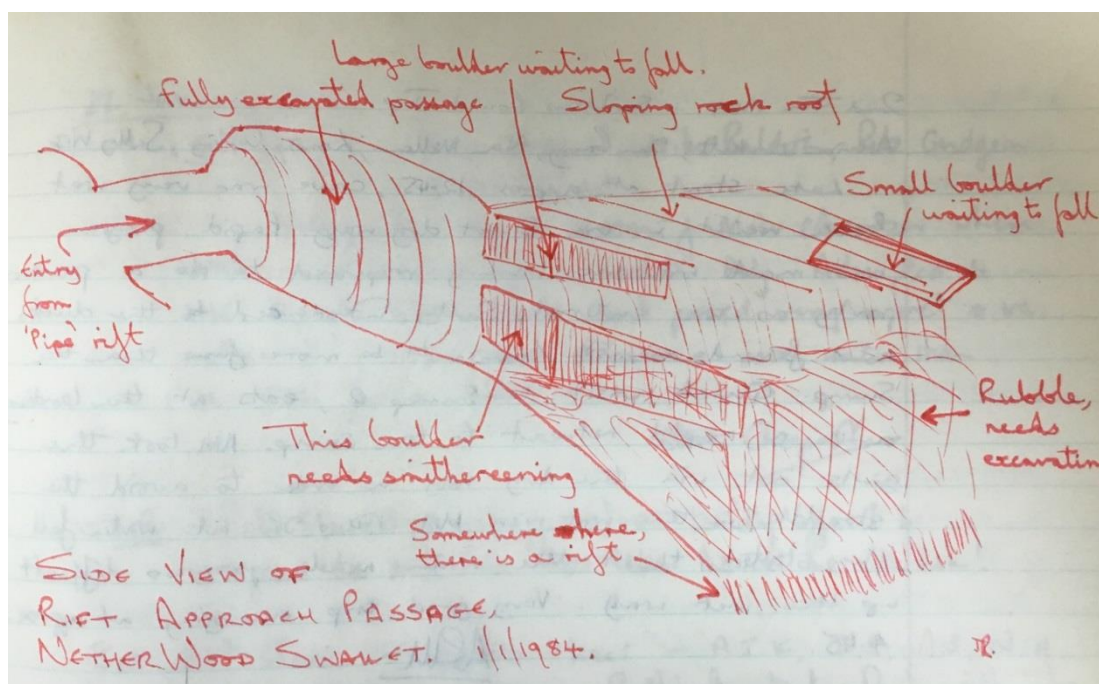
The Netherwood Swallet dig

Now little known to most members, Netherwood Swallet was an extremely active dig for the MCG in the early 1980s with members clocking up 33 trips – 111 caver days - between 1982 and 1984, rivalling Upper Flood for the number of trips in 1983. In part this was due to the poor returns achieved on digging efforts at Upper Flood with members looking for alternative options in the area. The main protagonists were Arthur Spain, Bernard Reeves, Jonathan Roberts and Martin Rowe.

In personal correspondence to Jonathan Roberts (1984) Malcolm Cotter noted that he had inspected the shakehole in 1960 and found it to be 1.75m deep. It was quite a conspicuous depression but there was no rock exposure. Later on, in the decade a small collapse occurred as a result of the July 1968 flood and, according to the 1984 Journal, a small digging furtle was made by Roger Wallington, Greg Smith and Vic Ingraham in the August. There is no record of this in the 1968 logbook. The Axbridge Caving Group dug the site of the collapse during the course of 1969, making ten trips to the shakehole, but their activity had lapsed by early June. The alternative delights of Ubley Warren proved much more compelling. Passing MCG cavers walking down the Nordrach track noted that by 1971 there was almost no trace left of the ACG's work. Tony Jarratt, writing some years later in the Grampian newsletter (2009) about ACG activities after the Flood, commented:

"Digging at Netherwood Swallet, Nordrach, started early the following year but was not to last. Seeing what lies below it now maybe we should have persevered!"

Interest in the site was rekindled over a decade later, with Arthur Spain obtaining permission from the landowner, Mr Bruce Luffman, on 17th October 1982. Arthur cleared the site on the 17th January 1983 and digging started in earnest on the 14th March. A considerable effort was put in at the site in 1983 with work running in parallel to renewed efforts at Upper Flood, with on occasion cavers digging in both sites on the same day. Pipes were installed, bang used, cavities found, and a discernible draft detected but the team were constantly thwarted by the unstable nature of the passage.



Netherwood Swallet sketch, 1st January 1984, Jonathan Roberts

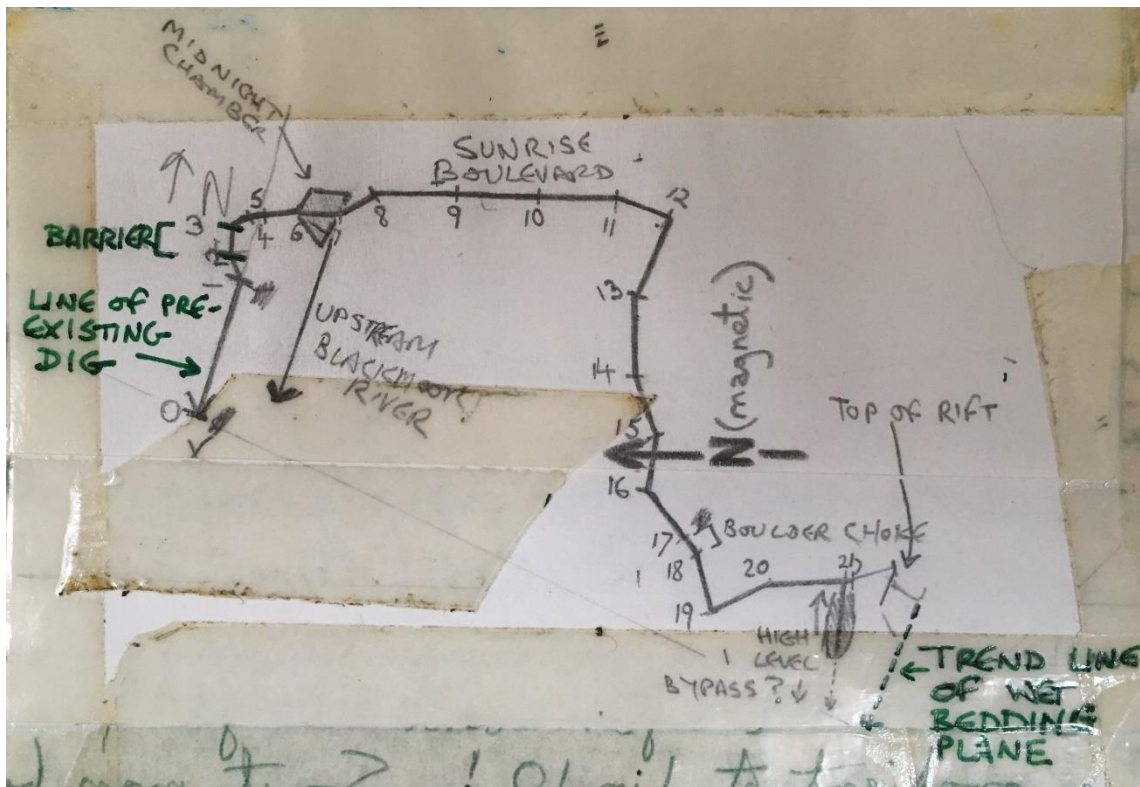
A catastrophic collapse occurred in January or February 1984 and the team were unable to recover the lost ground. The final digging trip was made on 26th August 1984 by Bernard Reeves and Arthur Spain. They attempted to dig straight down but the air wasn't great.

It may seem strange with hindsight that digging at Netherwood ceased but the site was always challenging. In parallel, progress at Upper Flood was finally being made and with the discovery of Midnight Streamway occurring in March 1985 that cave was understandably the focus of attention for the Group for many years to come. Ownership of the Netherwood land changed when the MCG were digging and after a few months of inactivity at the end of 1984 the new landowner filled in the entrance. The depression itself remains visible from the Nordrach track and is marked by old tree stumps and tree branches. The land ownership has changed on several occasions since 1983 and several formal and informal requests by the Mendip Caving Group for permission to dig have not received a positive response.

Midnight Streamway and the Riddle of the Red Room

After only four trips in 1981, digging in Upper Flood really only got going again at the start of 1982. The impetuous was to convene a trip on the 24th January whereby 12 cavers contributed to the removal of a large quantity of bags of spoil. This was followed up by another large spoil removal trip on the following weekend. This allowed the MCG to reappraise the dig with a fresh sense of optimism. The familiar pattern of digging, drilling, and banging and spoil removal resumed. And between the start of 1982 and the Midnight Streamway breakthrough on April 13th, 1985, the team undertook an impressive 75 digging trips. Contributors in this period differed somewhat from those in the early 1970s. There were a few familiar faces, but the main protagonists of this new era were: Mike Haselden, Malcolm Cotter, Bernard Reeves, Martin Rowe, Jonathan Roberts, Richard Dominey and Alan Dougherty. This of course masks the true contribution of the membership with 285 caver days made across the period, mostly to haul back the spoil once the drillers and bangers had done their stuff.

In the run up to the breakthrough reports of running water on 9th November and 16th December 1984, plus improving air quality spurred the diggers on. Undoubtedly this was Midnight Streamway that could, on occasion, be heard ahead. This makes sense as the main streamway is always quite high in the winter months. The highest flows, though, tend to lag rainfall a day or so as opposed to, say, Upper Flood Passage itself which reacts within only a few hours of very heavy rainfall. The pace of digging and banging by Mike Haselden and team intensified in the Spring of 1985 until finally on the 9th April he described that he had reached "a duck under calcite" and "a noise of a waterfall" and a strong draught. One more bang and the breakthrough was on. That weekend, on the 12th and into the early hours 13th April a strong team of Mike Haselden, Sue Haselden, Tony Knibbs, Denise Samuel, John Miriam and Jonathan Roberts dug through to discover the beautiful Midnight Streamway (originally called Sunrise Boulevard) and all of the cave as far as Bypass Passage. What a find and what an effort. The logbook records 265 caving trips consisting of 895 people from the first discovery trip in 1968 to the glorious breakthrough.



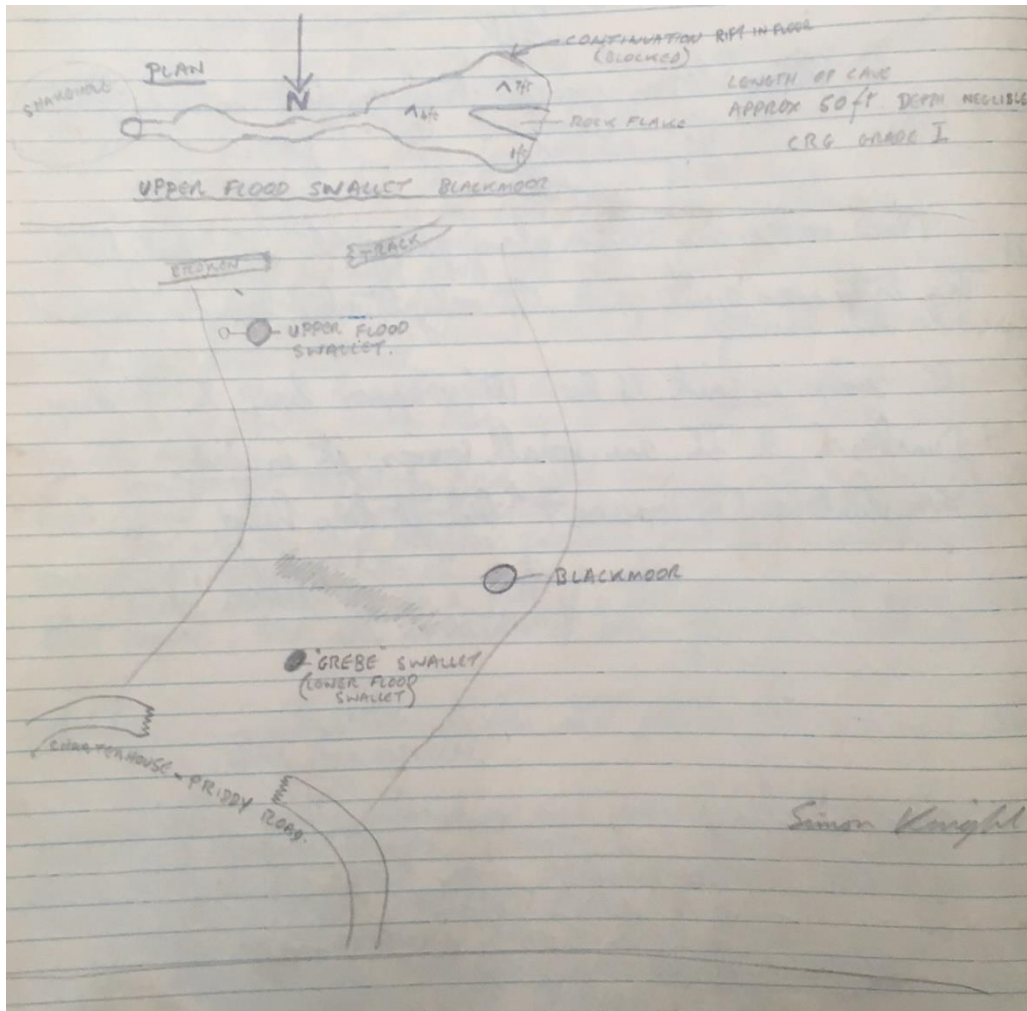
Grade 2 survey of Midnight Streamway, 13th April 1985, Jonathan Roberts and John Miriam

1985 still remains the peak for visits to Upper Flood with 73 trips made in that year. It seems that everyone and anyone wanted to look at the new discovery. Digging continued at the end of the new extensions throughout 1985-1987 with Bypass Passage and Hannah's Grotto revealed. The horrors of the Lavatory Trap, Sludge Duck and The Canal were slowly removed and by the 4th August 1987 The Red Room was reached. And here, setting aside upstream sojourns to Black Aven (1989) and Rip-Off Aven (1993), this was the known end of the cave until August 2004. This sixteen-year period of almost no forward progress was a long one compared to other periods of exploration. But unsurprising when you consider the grim prospect of cold, wet and awkward digging in the boulder choke beyond the Red Room that awaited the unfortunate volunteer / victim. And accentuated by the remaining few bang licences in the Group having mostly lapsed by 1990. Of particular note, though, in the late 1980s was the amount of digging undertaken in Upper Flood by the 'Wednesday Nighters', an aspect which had not been such a dominant feature of earlier generations of diggers. Key protagonists working in the Red Room between 1987 and 1990 were Vince Simmonds, Brian Murlis, Steve Redwood and John Beauchamp. Vince was the most enthusiastic of the team and he clocked up 53 trips between 1987 – 1990! Unfortunately, despite their extremely hardcore efforts, neither the stream sink in the Red Room nor the boulder choke itself were passed.

As an alternative many of the caving trips of this period were of a tourist nature, both guest groups and MCG groups alike. Lee Hawkswell and Tim Francis were the most regular leaders and digging cajolers of the period. Many such trips turned back at the Lavatory Trap. The Trap regularly getting close to being full in the Winter months or indeed sumping off on occasion. Nevertheless, Upper Flood remained a popular tourist trip until the early 2000s when interest was finally starting to wane. The quietest year was 2003 with only ten trips undertaken and all primarily tourist in nature, and mostly for guest groups.

Fun at Waterwheel

Not long after the '68 Flood the MCG were seen prospecting over at Waterwheel, at the time referred to as Middle Flood Swallet. Don Searle went for a look on the 27th July 1968 followed up by a spot of digging by himself and Simon Knight on the following day. They describe digging for a few hours and finding about 50 feet and being stopped by a choke. A further trip was made on the 10th August to put up some fencing around the entrance.



Sketch survey of Waterwheel Swallet and location, 28th July 1968, Simon Knight

Accounts of that period are a bit confusing, not least because of muddled up entrance names but the logbook makes no further mention of any further trips. The main attraction of Upper Flood must have diverted attention away but still it does seem rather surprising that the dig wasn't pursued. After a while the entrance fell in and that ended the MCG's involvement at the Waterwheel location until 1986. Willie Stanton and his team took on the dig in the Summer of 1977 but this time they dug down from a depression above the original Middle Flood Swallet. And they found the famous Waterwheel mechanism and masonry walls during their initial archaeological investigations.

MCG interest was rekindled on the 22nd February 1986 after Alan Dougherty, Andy S (?), John Beauchamp and Liz Price spoke to Terry Matthews at the Charterhouse Centre about the MCG getting a key to the cave. This was at the point in time when Willie Stanton's team had abandoned attempts to dig the small tube beyond Sump Three and Patay Aven. From that time onwards Waterwheel became a firm favourite of the Group for fun splashy trips, introducing beginners to caving, training trips and photography. Some of these early trips necessitated swimming from the bottom of the ladder to the top of the dam, but this does not seem to have happened for many, many years. The dam of course is no longer watertight, but I do sense that there has been less backing up of water than in the early days. Some digging was conducted by the Wednesday Nighters "upstream" in March – May 1990 but nothing of note was discovered. Perhaps the end may warrant a reinspection involving more persuasive techniques at some time in the future.

Between 1990 and 2004 it was usual for about ten visits per year to be made to Waterwheel. The most notable aficionados of the cave at that time were Bill Headington, Steve Albino, Kevin West, Barry Parker, Martin Rowe, Yvonne Rowe and Geoff Beale. But since 2004 annual trip volumes have been much lower, typically only 1 to 5 a year. Some have commented that the raised lips of the dams make the cave a less attractive trip for beginners and perhaps a little too 'sporting'. Larger trips have been associated with rescue practices conducted in 1999, 2009 and 2011 and a visit of 12 people on the 9th July 2019 described as "tourist, the massed Tuesday night hoards!". Finally,

honorary mention needs to be made of the infamous naked caving trip undertaken in the early hours of New Year's Day, roughly 3:30am, on January 1st, 1991 by Barry Parker, Dave Tooke, J.P. Burch and a drinking buddy from the Castle of Comfort. A sight to behold, I'm told. Don't worry, knee pads, helmets and lights were worn. The sprinkling of snow on their underpants left on the surface whilst they were underground added to the fun. A reprise was held at the same time on New Year's Day, 1st January 1999 by Dave Tooke, Marcus Ward and Tim Woodhams. Again, the Castle of Comfort being the culprit.

Upper Flood II

By the mid '90s it was becoming apparent that a breakthrough in the Red Room area of Upper Flood was not going to come easily. Ideas of banging the streamway came to nothing but there did seem to be the remote prospect of engineering a route through the boulder choke. That could be either down at the lowest point where on occasion a faint rumble of a stream was heard (now known to be A Streamway Regained) or at a high level, straight ahead through gaps in the larger boulders. It was anticipated that either option would require large amounts of scaffolding and cement. Dragging large amounts of a materials along the Midnight Streamway without damaging the formations was not considered to be an ideal option. But the discovery of Rip Off Aven at the uppermost reaches of Shale Rift on the 30th August 1993 by Tim Francis, Julie Hesketh and Joel Corrigan suggested an alternative solution. With its presumed close proximity to the surface, confirmed by a molephone radio-location conducted on the 20th November 1993, the idea of a second entrance was proposed.

Permission for a surface dig was duly obtained by the Hon. Sec. Joan Goddard but with strict working conditions to be followed, an archaeological excavation required and a time-limited agreement. The archaeological dig was commenced on the 8th April 1995 under the leadership of Yvonne Rowe. And from that point a vast digging effort was pursued both above and below ground to try and make the connection. Between the start of the dig and the fixing of the permanent lid on the 29th July 1995 the logbook records 39 working trips associated with the dig involving 215 caver visits. The numbers are certainly an underestimate as a complete list of all those attending on each day was not fully recorded. Nevertheless, this was truly a club effort involving cavers from right across the MCG's membership spectrum.

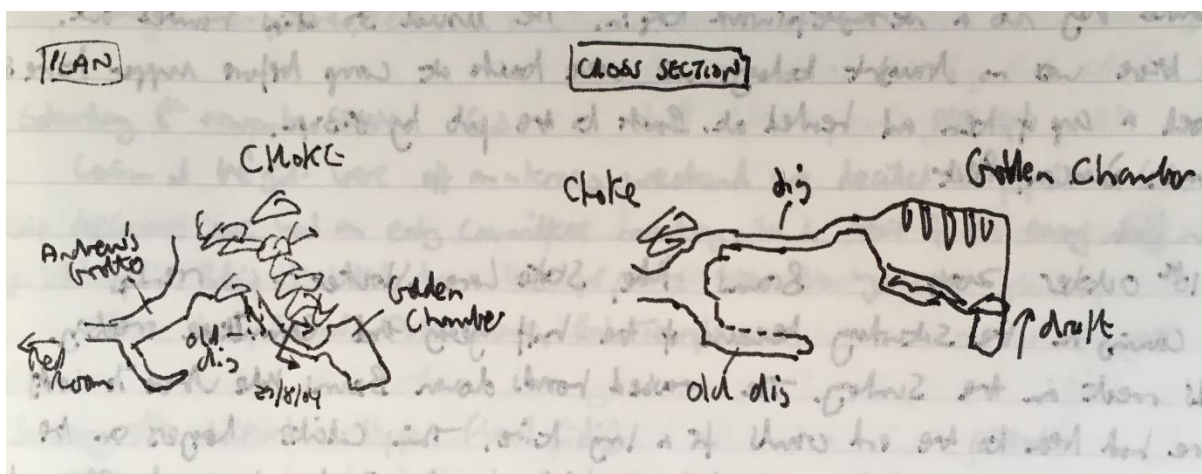


Digging at Upper Flood II, the first shaft, 14th April 1995, Photo - J. P. Burch

In the event two shafts were dug: the first being in the base of the depression and the second being closer to the track, the final shaft that exists today. Unfortunately, neither connected to Upper Flood nor was any airspace found. This is despite the second shaft being extended down through solid rock using a hydraulic pace-breaker to a depth of over 5 metres. With hindsight a pair of narrow sand filled tubes found at the base of the first shaft on the 22nd April 1995 could perhaps have been pursued but the team at the time were expecting to find void. Drilling efforts were finally ended on the 27th May 1996 by Dave Tooke, Lettie Patte, Tim Francis and Joe Frampton when the shaft became too narrow at the base.

“Good News Days” at Upper Flood

Although little remarked upon at the time a significant date for Upper Flood exploration occurred on the 6th October 2001. After dropping off three scaffolding bars in the Red Room, Tim Francis and Peat Bennett “started a new dig in a mud filled rift in the choke. Is it solid or is it boulders? The next trip will see”. And, yes, it seemed diggable. Only five more digging trips were made to the site over the next few years with the unexpected breakthrough into Golden Chamber made on the 29th August 2004. It was so named as it was the MCG’s 50th Anniversary Year rather than anything to do with the colouration of the stalactites or crystals.



Sketch of Golden Chamber breakthrough, 29th August 2004, Tim Francis

The logbook notes the significance of the small find in that it was the first time since the Red Room’s discovery in 1987 that there was a real possibility of finally passing the boulder choke. The chamber had a solid ceiling and solid walls! The discovery of Golden Chamber and the faint sound of running water inspired and energised a fourth generation of MCG diggers; the main protagonists being Peat Bennett, Tim Francis, Louisa Minahan, Doug Harris, Mike Richardson, Ben Cooper, Mark Ward and Malcolm Cotter. This upsurge in Upper Flood digging was described by Malcolm at the 51st Annual Dinner as the “good new days”. And indeed, a total of 29 digging trips were made to the Golden Chamber area (148 caver visits) before the breakthrough to A Streamway Regained was made on the 7th May 2006 by Peat Bennett, Tim Francis, Doug Harris and Mike Richardson. A sad postscript to the event was that Malcolm Cotter had died in the Canal in Upper Flood on the previous weekend, Saturday 30th April 2006, and thus the most longstanding explorer of the Blackmoor Valley never quite got to see the realisation of the hypothesised cave system made back in 1958.



"Malcom Cotter, Upper Flood Entrance" 2005. Photo - Charlie Allison

Upstream, explored by Tim Francis on the 9th July 2006, was a very small, highly decorated streamway, L33t Inlet, ending in a highly decorated chamber. Dye tracing in August 2011 – Keith Knight being the pourer of the yellow dye, Tim Francis being the receiver - identified that the water comes from the surface leat that sinks underneath the Charterhouse Centre track, as marked on Malcolm Cotter's 1958 sketch. But downstream was the focus of efforts and remarkably, only a further six digging trips were required before the big breakthrough. On each of these trips small extensions were made in the boulder choke, always following wherever possible a solid right hand wall. On Sunday 6th August Peat Bennett and Tim Francis turned around after their latest mini breakthrough at a nasty looking boulder collapse. Mike Richardson was widening squeezes a little further back. They had left the safety of the solid fault wall on the right and cautiously peered ahead into a jumble of rocks. Some of the collapse looked quite recent so despite the huge draft pouring out of the gaps between the rocks they weren't too confident of the next steps.

The breakthrough trip - "The Best Trip Ever" - came on the next trip on Sunday 10th September, a snatched visit the day after Jonathan Robert's wedding. Mike Richardson, Julie Hesketh and Tim Francis thought they'd do a quick Sunday tour of the new bits to assess what was to be done:

"Mike busied himself chipping away at some of the squeezes whilst Julie and I carried on to the choke at the end. Scooped some mud to get into the loose choke. But the hole Peat and I had spotted was too dodgy. Down on the right I spotted a slot between boulders. We spent an hour or so clearing out rocks from the floor. I then dropped through. A route could be followed between the choke and the solid wall. Passed some flowstone and the stream could be heard. A bit more sideways wriggling and I'd emerged at the edge of a huge passage. I ran back to get Julie. After some more calcite chipping, she squeezed through. We then stomped off downstream and were aghast at the size of the place...". Tim Francis

More than 500 metres of fine passage was found on that first trip including The Departure Lounge, Walk The Plank Chamber, Netherwood Inlet to the end of the streamway as far as the tight muddy tube. Another 20 trips were undertaken until the end of the year with new discoveries coming thick and fast: Charnel Passage on the 23rd

September; Royal Icing, East, West and South Passages on the 29th September; the unbelievable Neverland on the 1st December – “*You’ll hear about it!*” - and all the way to Far Chamber on the 2nd December. Key protagonists of this 2006 era in Upper Flood were: Tim Francis, Peat Bennett, Doug Harris, Mike Richardson, Dong Woo Kim, Mark Ward, Bill Chadwick, Julie Hesketh and Ben Cooper.

What a year!



Happy cavers return after the Royal Icing Junction breakthrough, 30th September 2006. Photo - Louisa Minahan

Roman Rake

Between 1993 and 1995 Malcom Todd conducted several archaeological excavations at Charterhouse including at several points along a rake on the valley side above Waterwheel Swallet. Several items of 1st century AD pottery were found and a Roman coin, a Julius Caesar denarius. Of interest to cavers were suggestions that the rake, was in part, of natural origin and the Somerset Historic Environment Record of the site, 25720, reported “at some points a natural cave system was encountered”. So, in the early 2000s John Cornwell, Tony Audsley and Mike Thompson of the BEC revisited the site and conducted a brief and inconclusive dig to assess the potential for cave. Mick Norton expressed an interest in what they were up to in late 2002 with a first look at where things had ended up on 10th February 2003. The BEC diggers moved on to their Old Farts Dig and were happy for the MCG to pick up the baton.

The site is a bit complicated from an access perspective with a mix of interests from the landowner John Small, English Nature and the AONB but the Hon. Sec. Tim Francis was able to obtain the relevant permissions. Not least as English Nature had previously provided permission to John Cornwall, dated 6th September 2001. The MCG dig commenced on the 7th May 2005 with nine digging sessions conducted during this first phase. Prospects were considered to be slight, but it was still worth pursuing. However, with the core team heavily involved in the Upper Flood discoveries of 2006, interest in the site inevitably faded.



Roman Rake entrance, 4th September 2005. Mick Norton, Doug Harris, Tim Francis. Photo – Bill Chadwick

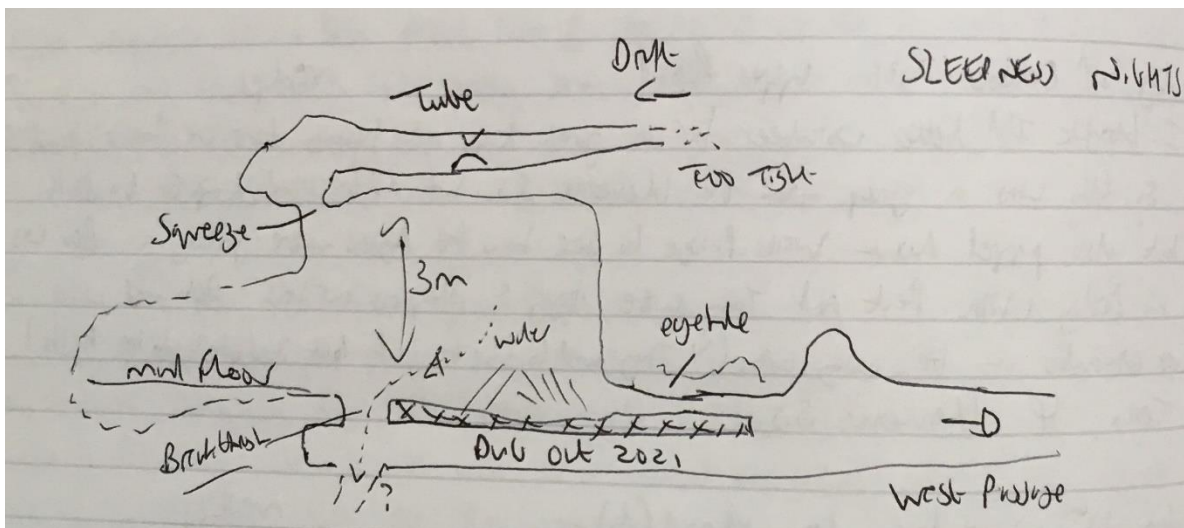
However, the dig was not forgotten. The rake can be seen on the surface heading directly for Blackmoor Shaft, with Waterwheel Swallet in between so there is certainly an intriguing potential. Mark Ward, fresh from discoveries in Upper Flood, was keen to take on the challenge. In 2008 he dug in Roman Rake an incredible 25 times, often on his own, sometimes with Doug Harris and occasionally with moral support from the passing Stainsby's diggers. Some downward progress was made but eventually the instability of the hanging boulders and the call of Battery Swallet led to Mark mothballing the dig. The final clips, mesh and scaffolding were removed on a bitterly cold evening on the 1st November 2008 by Mark Ward and Doug Harris. No further visits have been made.

Consolidation in Upper Flood

After the enormous extensions made in 2006, attention turned to surveying and consolidating leads in 2007. Most of the new passages were surveyed by the original explorers in the first months after their discovery, primarily by Richard Carey and Tim Francis, but it was quickly realised that a highly accurate and professional survey was needed, befitting a cave of such calibre. Ben Cooper picked up the gauntlet and since then he has surveyed and, in many instances re-surveyed, the whole cave to an extremely high level of accuracy and detail. Most notable of these trips was a mammoth 11.5 hours survey trip made to Neverland with Richard Carey and Tim Francis on the 3rd February 2007. And on the same day Bill Chadwick, Sonya Cotter, Mike Richardson and Doug Harris conducted a series of radiolocation points using the MRO Heyphone in West Passage, Royal Icing, Departure Lounge and unsuccessful attempts also made at Zebra Aven and the end of West Passage.

Since the initial flurry of discoveries new passage in Upper Flood was increasingly hard won and on a smaller scale. Tim Francis and Richard Carey made a handful of discoveries on the 2nd June 2007. A pretty grotto and chest deep gour at the top of the climb above Duck-under-Boss; Walk the Plank Inlet; Wall Street and the Pom Poms, and half-way along what is now called the 'Tim and Peat Tube', a low tight crawl off Charnel Passage. The end of the tube was finally connected to further along the main route of Royal Icing Passage on the 24th October 2007. To this day I suspect only Peat Bennett and Tim Francis have made the transect, a clear indication of the diminutive nature of the tube.

The main digs of note between 2007 and 2021 included excavating H4x0r Tube and Mud Out in East Passage; boulder choke clearing in East Passage sink; Chuckle Choke leading to Chuckle's Joke; crazy digging attempted in the boulder choke at the end of West Passage; hypothermic grovelling in Wall Street; opening up Shake 'n' Vac; Brian's Eye and Walk The Plank inlet; and most recently the small extension at Sleepless Nights in West Passage in December 2021. None of these digs have led to significant breakthroughs.



Sketch of Sleepless Nights breakthrough (elevation), 4th December 2021, Tim Francis

Specific mention should be made of the digging work undertaken by non-MCG members Andrew Atkinson, Simon Flower and team at the downstream limit of Malcolm's Way, Terminal 1. Early attempts by Tim Francis and Peat Bennett to cap the final squeeze in 2007 had not amounted to much progress. Andrew and Simon took a fresh look on the 16th October 2014 and decided to tackle the dig in a more determined manner. After three banging trips this had widened the stream rift to reveal a slippery 3 metres high waterfall on the right. This was descended to a too-tight rift, one which still took the whole stream. Subsequently they have undertaken 48 digging trips to the site between June 2015 and the end of 2021 and extended the cave by approximately 85 metres, passing a duck and sump in the process. Work continues.

At various points in the cave there are indications of further passage at height. However, apart from Duck-under-Boss all climbs in the streamway, made in the first few months after the breakthrough, led to nothing. Further in the cave several high avens have been climbed: Zebra Aven by Joel Corrigan on the 13th October 2007; the Old Curiosity Shop on the 6th December 2008 by Brian Snell after previous work by Richard Carey; AWOL Aven by Kevin Speight on the 3rd December 2011; and Pork Pie Aven on the 24th April 2014 by Kevin Speight. Only AWOL Aven uncovered anything of significance: a small section of tubes leading to a flowstone gour pool.

Watery investigations have been made. Most notable of these have been the various projects led by Kevin Speight. These include the manic pushing of Eliza Sump in South Passage on the 28th June 2012; dam building and bailing in South Passage in 2013/2014 and passing Muddy Hell to find Cross Rift 2 on the 26th May 2012. There are also four 'official' sumps in the cave. Gary Jones was the first to dive East Passage Sump and the Neverland Sump on the 20th January 2007. He found that East Passage Sump is just a blind pool and Neverland Sump continued for 15m to a dead end and with one small air bell on route. Neverland Sump was dived again by Chris Jewell on the 5th May 2014 and

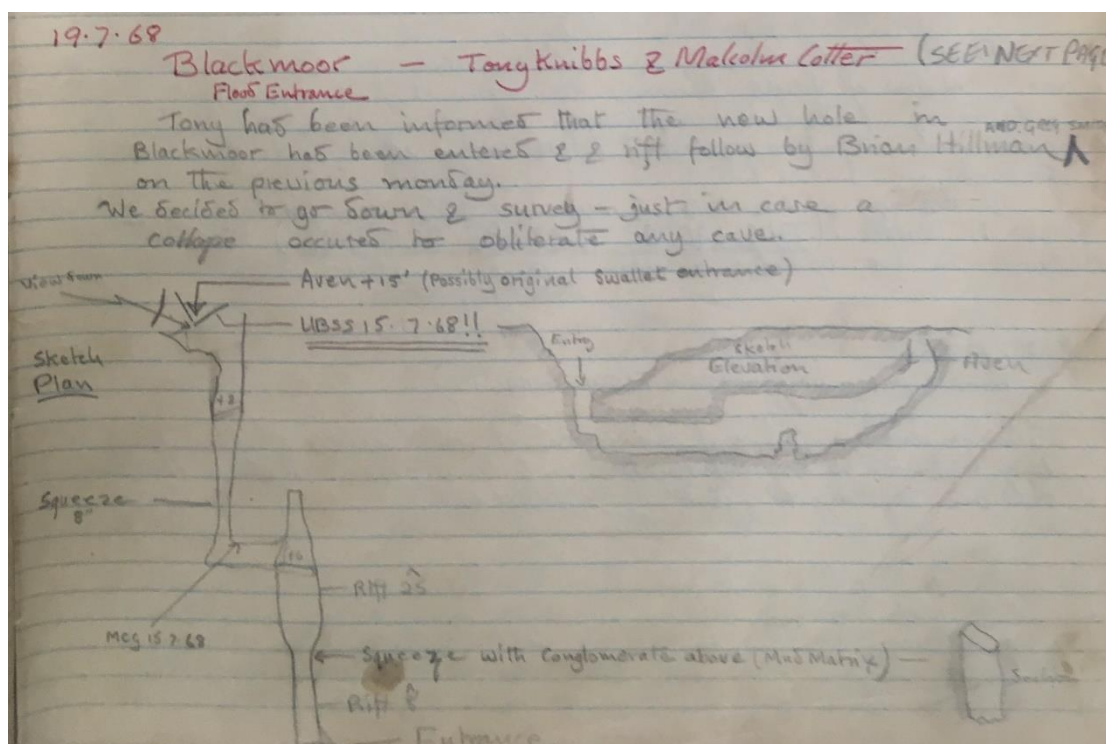
he came to the same conclusion – it doesn't go. The third sump, found on the 13th November 2010 by Tim Francis, is accessed via an extremely tight squeeze at the Waterworks in East Passage. It is a static sump but one which appears to back up during very wet weather. It remains un-dived. The final sump is that towards the end of Terminal 1, mentioned above, was dived by Claire Cohen on the 4th November 2018. It was a short, tight dive of 3 metres with the passaging continuing but small.

Inevitably after the excitement of 2006 and 2007 the nature of the trips into the cave tended more towards tourism and guest trips rather than working parties. And the volume of trips between 2015 and 2021 was typically around 30 per year. A small number of guest leaders were trained up once the Guest Leadership Scheme was introduced in early 2012. And hence the presence of some unfamiliar names in the Blackmoor Valley logbook from this time onwards. Of the MCG leaders, Richard Carey, Mike Richardson and Bill Chadwick led the lion's share of the guest trips during this period.

Tourist trips were greatly helped by the opening up of Link 1, the Neverland Bypass, after a concerted effort by Ben Cooper, Mike Richardson and Andrew Atkinson. The final connection was made on the 2nd February 2013 with Ben Cooper, Alison Moody, John Cooper and Peter Buckley the first group through. Guest groups could now visit the Pork Pies without concern for the vulnerable decorations of the original route via Bare Hands Dig. The latter having been effectively off limits since 2007.

Grebe Swallet

Grebe Swallet has not been traditionally a haunt of the MCG cave due to the tightly restricted access to the cave and very limited published information during Willie Stanton's tenure. But as with all the other sites opened up by the 1968 flood it was immediately looked at by MCG members. It was first noted on the 13th July 1968 by John Miriam, Carlo Benedetto and Jack Glover who described this "new hole near Blackmoor" as having an unstable entrance from which water could be heard. It was not entered on that day but Brian Hillman and Greg Smith made an initial look on the 15th July, followed by Tony Knibbs and Malcolm Cotter on the 19th July. They surveyed the passage "in case of collapse" with the cave extending for about 40 metres to a boulder choke.



Survey of Grebe Swallet, 19th July 1968, Tony Knibbs and Malcolm Cotter

Brian Hillman returned with Alan Wicks on the 21st July to find a load of scaffolding labelled BEC / Wessex at the entrance. They mused about the need to negotiate a joint dig but in the event the last MCG trip of the era was a

Saturday evening visit in the 27th July by Don Searle and Malcolm Cotter. No more entries are recorded in the logbook after that point and by 1970 the entrance had slumped in again akin to its pre-1968 flood state. Remember that on the same weekend Don Searle was already prospecting at Waterwheel (50 ft of passage found on the 28th July) and Upper Flood was entered the following weekend. So, the MCG were rather spoilt for choice. As always 'hindsight is a wonderful thing'.

Willie Stanton and his Waterwheel team took on the dig site in 1981 as the prospects at the end of Waterwheel were becoming less optimistic. Digging progressed well. It soon became clear that rather than being a natural swallet alone much of the initial part of the system was in fact an old lead mine. Stanton's 1991 report in the UBSS Proceedings goes in to great detail regarding the exploration and excavations of the site including the miners' boot prints, 18th century graffiti in the mud, large lumps of galena and Neptunian Dykes. Only two MCG tourist trips are recorded in the logbook in this period, the 13th March 1991 and the 10th May 1997, and both were led by Linda Wilson of the UBSS. After Willie Stanton's death in January 2010 ownership and access control of the cave passed on to Chris Binding who was later to become a member of the MCG. Whilst maintaining a rigorous approach to conserving the mine and its artefacts in the way that Willie would have wished for, Chris also reappraised the potential for extending the natural cave beyond the limit of the miners. And not least due to the proximity of the end of Grebe, the Semicostatum Ruckle, to the passages off to the West in Upper Flood discovered in 2006. And most notably the area around Walk the Plank Chamber and Trench Passage which are also liberally coated with black mud deposits from the old lead mining activity.

MCG logbook entries for Grebe Swallet after 2010 should be considered as an MCG lens on the cave and as such a partial record. Numerous trips, both tourist and working, have been conducted by Chris in a non-MCG capacity and often solo. The first MCG logbook that refers to digging in Grebe Swallet was on the 1st September 2010 by Chris Binding and Kevin Speight. And between 2010 and June 2019 the MCG has recorded 83 trips in to the cave. Between 2010 and 2012 digging efforts were focused on pushing beyond Willie Stanton's 1990s limits in the Semicostatum Ruckle. Grim rocky and muddy digging with plenty of cementing was to be had in The Garden of Earthly Delights and SD4. However, over time, attention started to switch to digging out a passage closer to the entrance, straight ahead and passed the 8 Fathom Shaft (now filled in) at Sidcot Chamber. This passage, Perdition, was found to run roughly parallel to Semicostatum but potentially closer to the Western reaches of Upper Flood. Digging here has been hard going not least due to the considerable spoil hauling distance required as the passage has been lengthened. On occasion larger party sizes of six or seven have been deployed to help with spoil removal and clear backlogs. In an echo of the work conducted in Upper Flood in the 1970s a pattern of drilling, banging, spoil removal and hauling has been employed with occasional small breakthroughs. Poor air quality has also been a frequent challenge. The main MCG protagonists of this era have been Chris Binding, Graham Price, Ed Waters, Andy Horeckji, Mike Moxon, Tom Harrison and Michael Perryman. Digging has tailed off somewhat during the pandemic.

All quiet at Upper Flood and the pandemic years

MCG activity in the valley had already begun to diminish in 2015 long before the Covid-19 pandemic, but during the two pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 less than 25 trips per year were recorded. The intensity of the Grebe Swallet project lessened in 2016, the main Upper Flood diggers were now focused on Ubley Warren and there were no new large-scale projects elsewhere to compensate. So, it was a similar story to that seen after the Midnight Chamber breakthrough: a typical caving trip into a cave in the Blackmoor Valley was, in this latest period, most likely to be a fun tourist trip or a dig in Terminal.

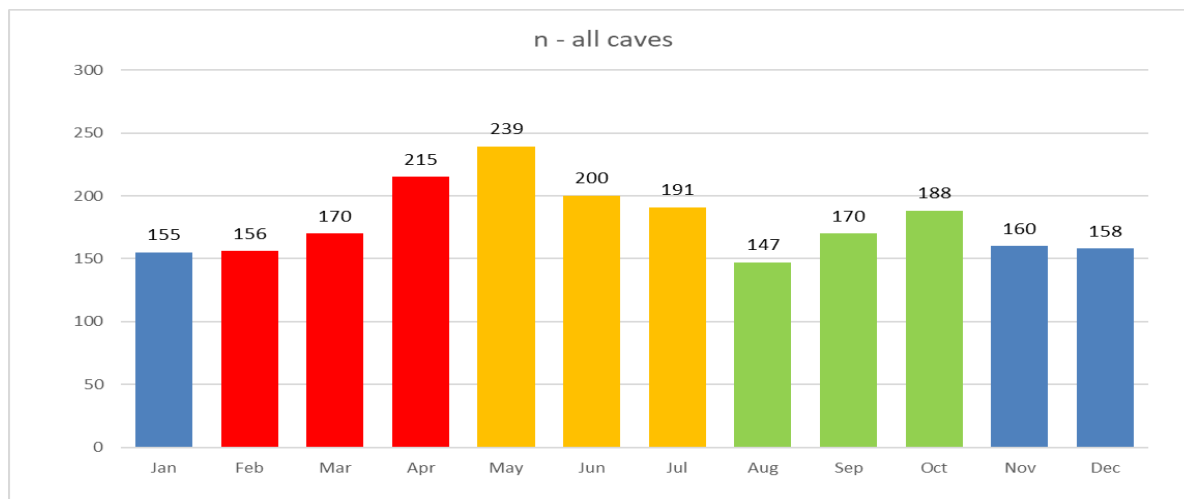
Some digging resumed in Upper Flood in June 2019 at Shake 'n' Vac, primarily by Peat Bennett, Tim Francis and Ben Cooper, with eight trips conducted so far. Attention switched briefly in September 2020 to Zig Zag inlet, the only location between The Departure Lounge and Netherwood Inlet where a permanent flow of water enters the main streamway all year round. This was abandoned as a long-term prospect on the 5th June 2021 and the team moved on to West Passage. Here in the latter half of 2021 digging has focused on banging Links 2 and 3, the aim being to create a caver friendly route to the further reaches of Neverland that totally bypasses all the formations. Elsewhere in

2021-2022 a few tourist trips resumed in Waterwheel and Jason Cardwell has begun to re-evaluate the digging sites in Stainsby's with a view to restarting the end of the 1967 dig. Ultimately in 2022 we are at the mercy of the pandemic, emerging variants, and associated restrictions on socialising.

Final statistics

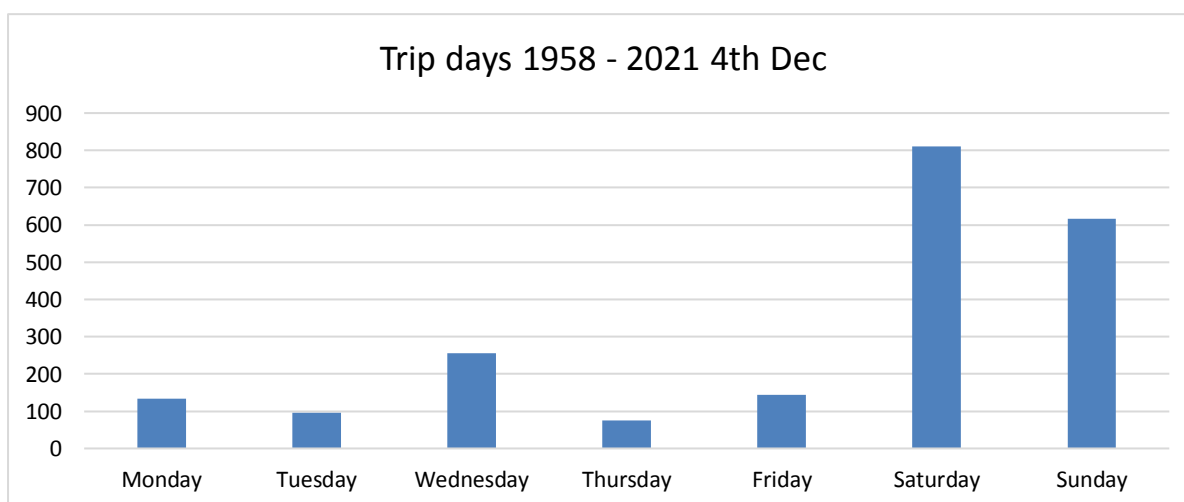
As mentioned previously the creation of a database of logbook entries now makes it possible to analyse the records in a little more detail. Or at least it makes it much easier. So as a final exercise I thought I'd look into the trips taken and answer some of the musings that one turns to when passing the time slogging out of Upper Flood.

First up is the question of when people actually visit the caves? We'd always suspected that trips were less likely in the winter months and that has proved to some extent to be the case.



Although actually the data suggests that mid-Summer is the quietest period, with perhaps domestic caving in August competing with both expeditions and family holidays for priority. Personally, the noticeable peak for caving in May was a surprise result.

And then I wanted to know the extent to which weekend caving and digging had dominated. Wednesday does have double the amount of caving that most other mid-week days do but clearly most caving happens on Saturdays and Sundays.



Finally, I conducted some analysis on which individuals have caved in the area the most since 1958. A big caveat: the data must be treated as an approximation of the story. There are almost certainly gaps in the records versus what happened in reality. See "notes on the data" below for assumptions. But overall, it gives a reasonable summary of who has done what. I have not made any attempt to distinguish between types or purpose of trip and have just

reported totals. Maiden names and married names have been combined, as appropriate, and longevity is based upon first and last-named entry in the logbook, not length of MCG membership.

		Number	Longevity yrs	Trips per year
Malcom Cotter	1960-2006	298	47	6.3
Tim Francis	1990-2021	267	32	8.3
Mike Richardson	2005-2019	180	15	12.0
Richard Carey	1993-2021	148	29	5.1
Lee Hawkswell	1989-2019	123	31	4.0
Ben Cooper	1995-2021	120	27	4.4
Bill Chadwick	2001-2021	104	21	5.0
Kevin Speight	2008-2021	90	14	6.4
Martin Rowe	1981-2008	89	28	3.2
Julie Hesketh	1991-2021	87	31	2.8
Peat Bennett	1991-2021	86	31	2.8
Chris Binding	2006-2019	84	14	6.0
Ed Waters	1997-2014	78	18	4.3
Mark Ward	1989-2013	77	25	3.1
Biff Frith	2005-2015	70	11	6.4
Greg Smith	1966-1977	67	12	5.6
Tony Knibbs	1963-2001	65	39	1.7
Andrew Atkinson	2007-2021	65	15	4.3
Doug Harris	1998-2011	65	14	4.6
Sonya Cotter	1983-2007	64	25	2.6
John Miriam	1968-1995	62	27	2.3
Yvonne Rowe	1984-2008	62	25	2.5
Jonathan Roberts	1977-1997	59	21	2.8
Steve Wyatt	1986-2014	58	29	2.0
Bernard Reeves	1972-1995	56	24	2.3
Simon Flower	2007-2021	56	15	3.7
Mick Norton	1968-2011	56	44	1.3
Vince Simmonds	1987-1993	54	7	7.7
Don Searle	1958-1988	51	31	1.6
John Beauchamp	1985-2008	50	24	2.1

The table above summarises all those cavers for whom I have counted 50 trips or more in the logbook records. They make up only 38% of all the caver numbers in the records so it's very clear that a huge number of people have caved in the area over the years. Unsurprisingly, Malcolm Cotter as an MCG founder member and unwavering believer in the potential of the Blackmoor Valley tops the list. But there are a few interesting call-outs. Most obvious of those is the amazing average of 12 trips a year which Mike Richardson has amassed, far surpassing all other visitors. A large proportion were undertaken in the first few years subsequent to the big breakthrough of 2006 in which of course he played an important role. And then from a longevity perspective, more recent members may be surprised to see Mick Norton at 44 years duration and hear of his visits to the area in his youth. In September 1968 he undertook three solo digs and rummages in a small site, probably a leat, not far from Grebe Swallet when staying with the MCG. I have also kept in non-members, Andrew Atkinson and Simon Flower, due to their exceptional number of trips to Terminal dig and elsewhere in Upper Flood. Finally, Biff Frith stands out for his focus on Stainsby's Shaft.

Notes on the data

The primary source I have used is the run of cottage logbooks, numbers 1-18 (current), which commenced in 1957 when the Group took on the tumbledown cottage at Netherwood. I'm not aware that there is a formal record of day-to-day caving from the Group's first trip, Swildon's Hole in February 1954, up to when the Netherwood Cottage logbook was commenced. But for the purposes of this database and article I don't think that is of concern in that there were no open caves in the valley at that time and MCG activities were focused further down valley, notably at Timber Hole, and further afield such as at Cooper's Hole and Saye's Hole. I have not consulted personal caving logbooks, other than my own, nor cross-checked with the MCG's newsletters, nor tried to reference non-MCG digital forums, blogs, or archives. Something for another day perhaps.

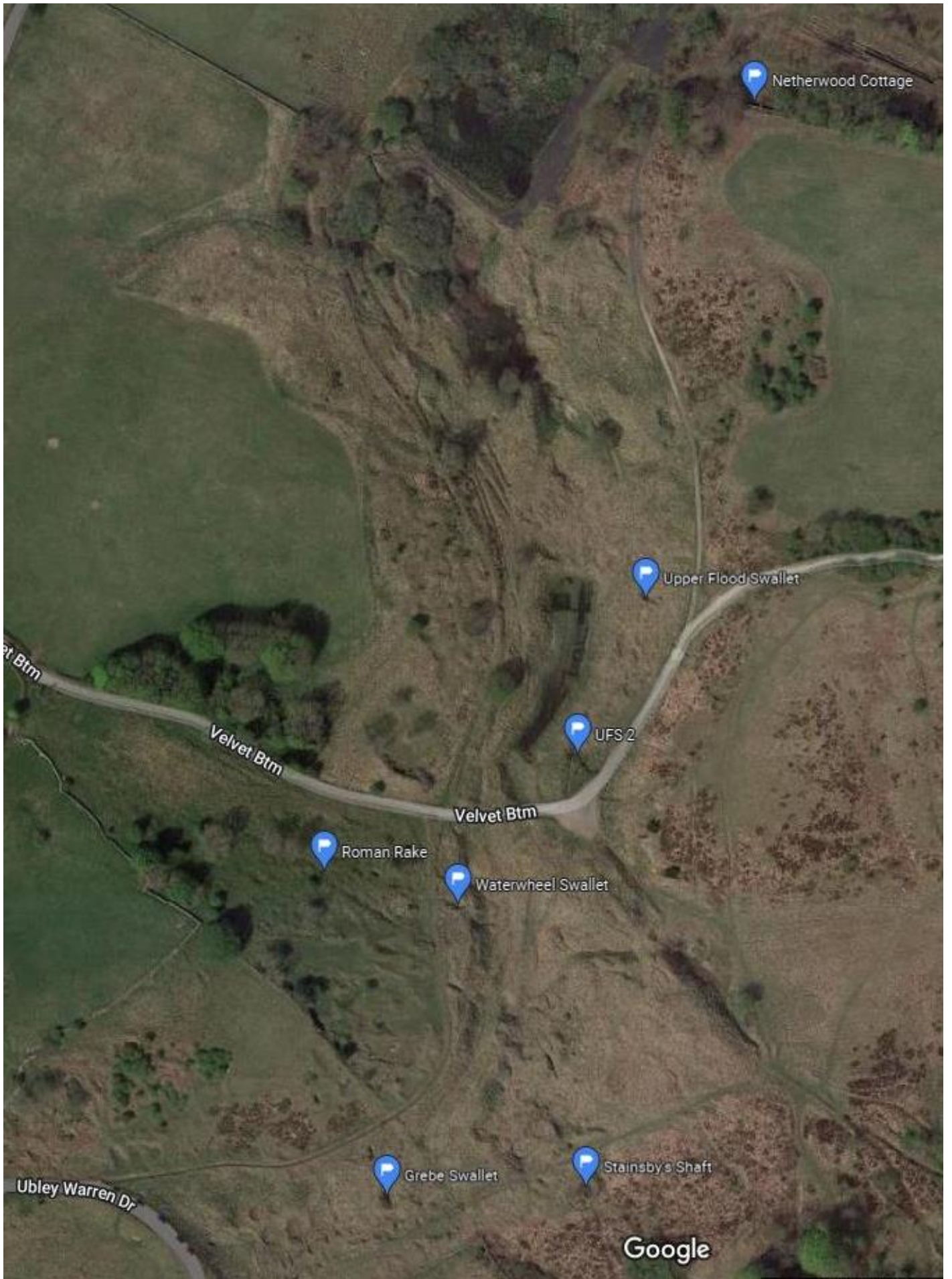


Netherwood Cottage, 1958

So inevitably I know that the data is incomplete. And that probably the earlier records from the pre-1980s are better than the more recent ones. There were fewer members and fewer caving trips, trip write ups and party details were more structured, 'standard' guest trips were rarely undertaken, there was only one logbook and generally a greater concern for accurate record keeping. In the '80s and '90s trips were not necessarily written up in both the green logbook and the cottage logbook, and party details sometimes noted down as a named leader plus x number of other participants. There was also a bit of tension and secrecy between mid-week digging trips and London based weekenders. Some logbook pages were even ripped out making timelines a bit tricky to decipher. And finally in more recent years there has been the gap between trips recorded in the cottage logbook, those written up online and those I suspect to have not been written up at all. So ultimately all numbers quoted here must be treated as being approximations rather than the exact truth.

The data covers the period August 1958, the first recorded caving activity in the Blackmoor Valley, to the end of December 2021. I have included all below and above ground activities for which the epithet 'caving' might encompass. For me that was where some form of caving attire or equipment was used and at a site within the valley. Surface digging is included but not entrance spotting or general rambles around the valley or surface surveys. The sites I have included are Blackmoor Swallet, Stainsby's Shaft, Waterwheel Swallet, Grebe Swallet, Upper Flood Swallet, Upper Flood ii, Roman Rake, Netherwood Swallet and various surface rummages and leats. There were no other cave sites recorded in the logbooks. I have not included any sites over the wall above Bleak House and up on the rakes, so sites like Charnel Shaft and Halfpenny Hole have not been included. Nor anything further down valley like Timber Hole or up valley like Ubley Warren or Nettle Pot.

Finally, it is important to note that I have not created a full transcription of the logbook entries but rather inputted just enough to summarise the trip details for future reference. The database taxonomy covers the trip date, cave name, names of the party, number of people on the trip, a brief description of the trip and temperature records for Upper Flood if noted down. As such the original handwritten notes in the logbook remain the primary source material if you ever need to know more about an individual trip or exploration event.



Map of Blackmoor Valley - Google Maps

