

Cave Exploring in England

By T. W. Wilkinson

SPELEOLOGY! The word has a forbidding, scientific look. A science speleology really is, but it is also a sport. "Mountaineering reversed," or cave exploring, is both, though in general it is a recreation more than anything else. It is a splendid exercise, exciting, laborious enough to harden the muscles and brace the nerves, with that spice of danger that the sound-limbed Briton loves, and it has a fascination peculiarly its own. The "earth grubber" becomes enthralled in venturing where the foot of man has never previously trod and in peering into Nature's secret chambers, and awed as he views the mighty recesses she has formed and the rocks she

has carved into infinite fantastic shapes and clothed with delicate drapery, the result of centuries of weaving.

There is ample scope for the pursuit of the sport in this country. While there are doubtless many caves which have not been discovered, there are others which, although known, have never been explored. Some which have been entered are now forgotten. Not long ago a party of amateur geologists stumbled on such a recess in the Mendips. While rambling about the village of Wookey Hole they came upon an opening which led to a series of chambers, the largest of which was about one hundred and fifty feet below the surface, some fifty feet high, and of irregular



(From a photograph by Bamforth, Holmfirth)

Making the first Descent of the "Bottomless Pit," Peak Cavern

shape. From the roof depended huge bunches of stalactites, and the walls were hung with immense curtain forms. Scattered all over the floor were the bones of deer and other large animals, while several pieces of old pottery were picked up. Passages led off in various directions. As there was no evidence of the cave having been previously entered, it was at first thought that the geologists had indeed made a discovery; but it is known now that the interesting chambers were originally found many years ago.

Most of the systematic cave exploring in England is carried out by two clubs. The ground of one, the Derbyshire Kyndwr Club, is the Peak district, and of the other, the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club, the West Riding. Many investigations have been made by the first of these bodies, some of them on scientific lines. A notable exploration was that of Eldon Hole, which the club descended on Boxing Day 1900. The hole, for centuries considered in the Derbyshire highlands a wonder of the world, is about four and a half miles to the north-west of Peak Forest station, and the bottom was, according to an entry in the parish register, reached so far back as 1792 by a certain villager, who received a reward of 10*s.* for his temerity. Prior to the descent made by the Kyndwr Club, however, it had never been thoroughly explored.

Great care was taken in erecting the lowering apparatus. Two beams, crossed, were fixed on each side of the hole. Across the gulf, and resting in the nicks thus formed, with the ends pinned to the ground by stakes, ran a cable, from the middle of which was suspended a steel pulley. A rope running over this and having at the end a piece of wood to serve as a chair completed the equipment for reaching the bottom, but not the whole of the tackle. In addition the explorers were provided with a telephone, electric batteries, a camera, and a good deal of other impedimenta.

All being in readiness, and Mr. J. W. Puttrell, of Sheffield, having read a few rules drawn up with a view to minimising the risk of accidents, the first of the party was lowered down. Away he went dangling in

mid-air, and two and a half minutes later a shout from below announced that he had landed. One by one the rest of the explorers, with the exception of three—who remained at the top to attend to the telephone, &c.—followed him, all reaching the bottom in safety, though not without excitement.

The cave was found to be an elongated oval in shape, lying north and south, and about one hundred and eleven feet from end to end at its greatest length. Its depth is about two hundred feet, but its bottom, which slopes at an angle of forty-five degrees, is sixty-five feet deeper. In a dark corner at the lowest point is a hole, into which one of the explorers worked his way feet first; but though this is doubtless an outlet for the water that runs into the hole, he could not get far. Here the explorers made a curious discovery, finding as they did a perfect skeleton of a bird, seemingly a crow, which had died of starvation. Revealed by magnesium light, the cavern made a splendid spectacle. Its walls, covered with stalactites from top to bottom, end in a dome-like roof about one hundred feet high and bisected with a magnificent arch.

Having feasted their eyes on this sight, the party began to ascend. All went well; but the last six men had an experience more novel than pleasing. The life line had to be dispensed with, and they came up on a single Alpine Club rope. By 6.30 P.M., however—the first of the party had descended about 12.30—all were on top again.

A more important undertaking of the Kyndwr Club was the exploration of the famous Speedwell Cavern, Castleton. Discovered in the eighteenth century by a lead-mining company, this remarkable cavity has been a source of wonder to countless visitors; but until May last the depth and character of its most romantic feature—the “bottomless pit,” into which, tradition avers, the miners cast 40,000 tons of rock without appreciable effect—were mysteries. To the club is due the credit of having solved them.

The actual work began shortly before seven in the evening, the lowering tackle used at Eldon Hole having been previously

fixed up over the chasm, which is protected by an iron railing. Reaching it in the usual way—down the hundred steps and along the underground canal in a boat—the party of twenty mustered on the platform of the

consternation. The photographer, unknown to his companions gave the signal for it to be raised, that he might take an effective picture, and down the volume of water poured, with a fall of fifty or sixty feet, on



(From a photograph by Bamforth, Holmfirth)

The Large Cavern, Speedwell Mine

causeway, and listened to the booming of the waterfall as it descended into the "bottomless pit." This fall can be partly shut off by means of a hatch, which it is customary for the guide to open for the purpose of impressing visitors. Later on the door was the means of producing some

top of eight or nine of the explorers, who were right underneath. There was immediately a wild dash for places of refuge; but to escape the torrent was impossible, and consequently the men received a thorough ducking. The ardent speleologist, however, cares little for a wetting.

Mr. Puttrell again had the honour of making the first descent. On reaching a depth of fifty feet, he signalled "All well,"

feet. Current he could discern practically none, nor could he discover any outlet, though doubtless one exists somewhere.



(From a photograph by Bamförlth, Holmsfrith)

Canal leading to Cave, Speedwell Mine

whereupon others of the party, each with some apparatus, followed, till at last there were fifteen at the bottom. All these got more or less wet in descending, because it was impossible for them altogether to keep clear of the fall. Meanwhile, the searchlight provided for the occasion had enabled the leaders to see their surroundings. And this was the picture: In front, the water from which trickled over a slope of rocks at the feet of the explorers; behind, a pool into which the water ran, and beyond it, at the end of the cavern, a wall of smooth limestone; overhead, an arching roof about fifty feet high. This was the "bottomless pit"!

A possibility still remained that there might be something marvellous about the pool; but when Mr. Puttrell, standing on a hastily-constructed raft, plumbed it, he found bottom at a maximum depth of twenty-two

The fauna of the cave, on the other hand, more than realised expectations. The most important specimen collected was a species of *Lipura*, perhaps the first example of a blind cave animal recorded from Great Britain. When, however, the party reached the open air again at about 2.30 A.M. they were well content with their night's adventure.

After the romance of the Speedwell had been shattered, Mr. Puttrell made some explorations of the Peak Cavern, with results of a highly gratifying character. He discovered about one and a half miles of new ground, with caves, lakelets, and waterways; and in March the Kyndwr Club made an excursion over this interesting territory. The world-famed Blue John Mine, which was no doubt worked even in the time of the Roman occupation—the celebrated Murrhine vases were composed of Blue John—has also been made to yield up some of its secrets. At the

bottom of one of the passages the explorers, among whom were several ladies, found a curiosity—a nest of eggs, or what are known as cave pearls. These are formed by purely natural agency, in much the same way as

In the West Riding the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club has done much good work. One of its most striking, though not most valuable, explorations was that of Gaping Ghyll, Ingleborough. Seen after heavy rain—the swollen



(From a photograph by Bamforth, Holmfirth)

Lord Mulgrave's Dining-room, Blue John Mine

ordinary pearls, beginning with a grain of sand or other substance. Round this, by the ceaseless dropping of the sparkling water, the carbonate of calcium draws a covering of pure glittering white. This exploration, like that of the Speedwell Cavern, took place at night.

stream (Tell Beck) pouring into the chasm, the thunder of its fall reverberating in the enormous cavity below, and the fine, smoke-like spray rising from the mouth—this cave, among the six largest known to exist in the whole world, awes the most prosaic of Gradgrinds. Before 1895, when it was visited by

the famous French speleologist, M. E.-A. Martel, it had never been explored with any measure of success, and it was in the same year that the next effort was made by Messrs. Bellhouse, Booth, Grey, Green, Lund, Thompson, and Edward Calvert (the leader), all members of the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club.

The first attempt was a failure. Though half the party made a dam up the beck, and thus diverted the water into a trench, a considerable quantity that joined the main stream from a tributary could not be led into another channel, but had to be allowed to flow, with the leakage from the dam, down the hole. As a result the first man descended in a shower bath, and was drenched to the skin and chilled to the marrow. Nor was this all. On his reaching the ledge and being lowered over it, the rope began to sway against the loose rocks in a

obliged to fire his revolver—the usual means of signalling at the outset—to be drawn up, and to abandon the enterprise.

But the second effort, made under different conditions, and not down the main hole, was completely successful. In descending the leader again got a wetting. As he was being lowered down he encountered a stream pouring from a subterranean passage in the shaft side—the highest known waterfall in England—and, as there was no dodging it, he had the full benefit of the cascade. But he nevertheless accomplished his object; and on the following day all the party descended.

Triangulation of the cavern then showed it to be nearly four hundred and eighty feet long, eighty-two feet across at its widest part, and about one hundred and ten feet from floor to roof. On a slope at least fifteen feet



(From a photograph by Bamforth, Holmfirth)

The Arches and River Styx, Peak Cavern

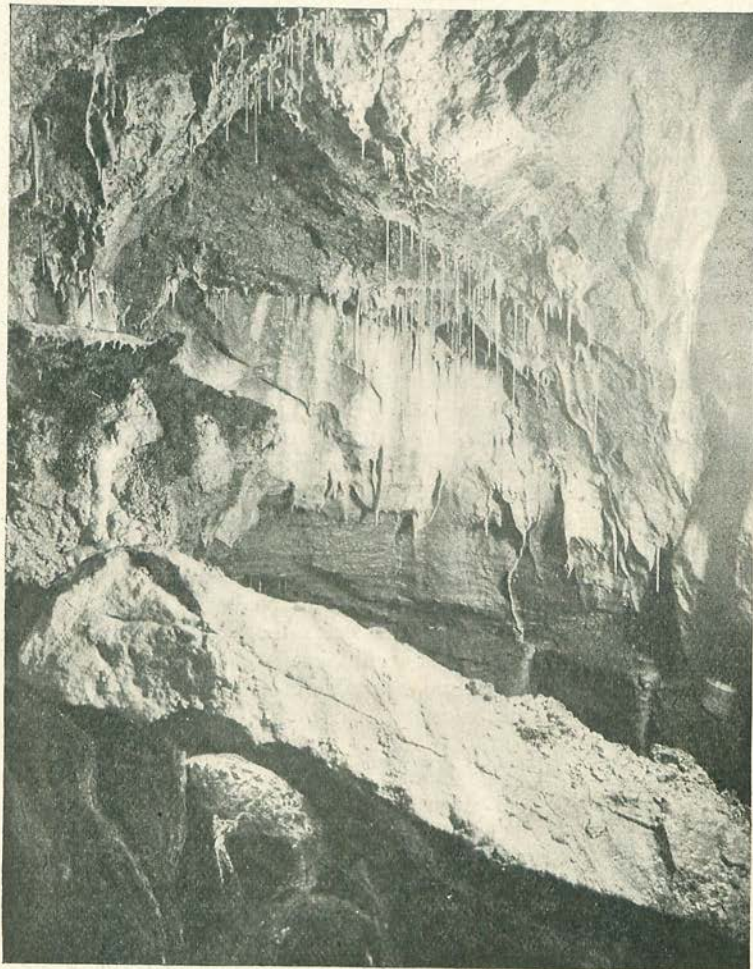
manner that threatened every moment to bring one down on him. So that, after vainly trying to keep it clear of them, he was

above the bottom lay the bones and wool of a sheep—a circumstance which seems to show that in times of flood the cave contains

a lake big enough and deep enough to float an ironclad.

With a view to discovering whether there is any connection between Gaping Ghyll and

came to a narrow passage, along which they had first to crawl, then walk in a stooping attitude, and then waded, standing upright, through eighteen inches of water. Presently



(From a photograph by Bamforth, Holmfirth)

The Fairy Grotto, Blue John Mine

Ingleborough Cave, some members of the Yorkshire Ramblers' Club afterwards penetrated into the unknown recesses of that chamber. This was an arduous exploration. At a comparatively early stage the party had to make their way through a pool about thirty yards long and two or three feet deep, with a slimy, sticky bottom. Later, they

the roof came down abruptly, leaving only about one and a half feet between the top and the running stream; but for all that the explorers pushed on, and were rewarded by finding that the height gradually increased to five feet. Soon, however, they were brought to a standstill. They began to go down—down—down; the current swirled by them

with an angry gurgle ; and, worst of all, the water rapidly rose to their necks. It was an exciting moment ; but they did not lose their heads. Finding, by careful probing, that an increasing depth lay in front of them, they reluctantly turned round and struggled back to their starting-point.

A fortnight later they again essayed to solve the problem. This time each man carried about fifty-six pounds of necessary material, and as a consequence progress was slow and difficult, the load proving a great burden to drag through narrow passages and over slippery stones. On reaching the spot where they had left off on the previous visit, the explorers made a raft, and launched Mr. Calvert on the stream, down which he floated away into the unknown. He was soon back, however, with the unwelcome news that they had laboured in vain. The canal was impassable, the roof gradually lowering and finally top and bottom closing in like a cigar end. Nothing more could be done ; so the men returned to the entrance of the cave.

From these brief stories of a few explorations it will be seen that speleology calls for no little courage and endurance. In some cases investigations extend over ten, twelve, or even fourteen hours, involving more or less strain of mind and body the whole time,

for there is much climbing, wading, and struggling through narrow passages and over slippery stones to be done in subterranean depths. It has, moreover, at all times, and especially when not carried out by a number of experts banded together, its peculiar dangers. Some years ago, for instance, two Yorkshire explorers, probably through neglecting the old precaution of paying out string as they threaded their way through a maze of passages, lost their way and narrowly escaped paying for their rashness with their lives. As it was, they were entombed for forty-eight hours.

But, on the other hand, speleology has its distinctive advantages as a sport. The air of most caverns, contrary to popular belief, is pure and exhilarating, while the range of temperature is very small. There is no season, therefore, for exploring, which can be carried on just the same in winter as in summer. And, as artificial light must always be used, it can be followed at any time that may be convenient. As a matter of fact, some of the most important investigations have been made at night. For these and other reasons speleology is a splendid sport. It grips those who take it up like Alpine climbing, which, once tasted, has an irresistible charm.



My Harvests

I thought to have gathered many a bloom
From a rose-tree I planted one sweet spring
day ;

Ah me ! I forgot
And watered it not,
And the soft buds withered away.

I thought as I looked at my heaped-up
corn

"I will sow it broadcast—this rich golden
grain !"

Ah me ! I let lay
And it withered away,
And harvest time reaps me no gain.

I thought that my friend would be mine
always ;

That his hand to my hand would cling close
and fast.

Ah me ! I loosed hold
On our friendship old,
And his fingers slipped at last.

I still wish for roses—my rose-tree is dead ;
I wish still for harvest—and hunger for
bread ;

I cry for the old love—the old love is fled ;
I sowed not—I reap not—God's Judgment
is said.