

VALE: ROGER BIDDLE

Roger Biddle was born in Castle Bromwich in 1940, but later relocated to Somerset. He was in some ways a force of nature. Roger had commenced his speleological career in the early 1960's in concert with Martin 'Milche' Mills, joining local scout groups on Mendip where they became accredited cave leaders. They both gravitated into the (then) rather exclusive Shepton Mallet Caving Club where a great deal of excellent exploratory caving was achieved, particularly in Swildon's Hole. Mendip was still fairly insular at that time, and the weekend gatherings at the Hunter's Lodge Inn were the locus of much in-house speleological singing along, inevitably, with 'rugby' songs - 'I don't want you using *They Words*' (Ben Dors) - and Roger, being a talented pianist, became a fixture at the piano in the corner, joining Alfie Collins on banjo. He arrived in Edinburgh in 1967, as Scottish representative for Lister Blackstone Marine Engines and, given his attachment to caving, rapidly sought out and joined the GSG. His translation to Edinburgh resulted in

a northern revival of all the caving songs which eventually led to the GSG publishing '*The Caving Songs of Mendip*' in 1976. Roger enlivened several Annual Dinners at the Inchnadamph Hotel, after we transported our harmonium from Knockan for the occasion.



It has to be noted that Biddle could have an abrasive attitude toward his fellow cavers, which quite a few took as a personal slight, but many of his comments emerged from a strange sense of humour - not appreciated by the targets in question! His obvious close connection to Mendip, coupled with possession of a company car (rare at that time), resulted in many head-long dashes from Edinburgh down the

Roger seated at our harmonium in the old Knockan hut. (Andy Reid? on left)

Photographer unknown

partially completed M6, always on his terms - if he took umbrage, you were banned from the car. His claim to leave Edinburgh on Friday evening and be in the Hunter's in time for last orders was no hollow boast; petrol consumption courtesy of Lister Engines. His Mendip adventures were forever enshrined in song when in 1964 he removed a stemple and chain from Swildon's 20ft Pot in a fit of rage at such desecration and dumped them back at the Wessex hut from whence they had originated. *Vide* this verse from the song 'Down Below'

Willie Stanton had an itch, Down Below.
 To improve the Twenty Pitch, Down Below
 But his efforts were in vain,
 with his stemple and his chain.
 Roger's sent them back again, Down Below

He and I enjoyed many potholing epics together. I especially recall our trip down the freshly extended Gingling Hole in early 1967, where we ran out of tackle at the 7th pitch (of 10), having forced our way through almost virgin territory, down tight rifts and profusely decorated passages. Another fine day was had transporting diving bottles to Sump 2 in Swildon's for Mike Boon in the morning and spending the afternoon exploring the whole of St Cuthbert's Swallet, including September Series (I have never found



Roger, standing right, with ladder, and Milche, kneeling in front of him, with 67th Hackney Scouts, at Burrington Combe, Sept. 1963.
 Photographer unknown

the way to that area since). Back home, Roger, Eric Glen and I surveyed around the main workings of Easthouses Limestone Mine, Dalkeith. My drawing of this foray fitted almost exactly over the later sourced closure plan. (My surveying technique then was obviously better than it is today!) In Assynt, Roger and George Alden (founder member) were first to explore Firehose Cave to the bitter end, and with myself shared a first visit by the GSG to the sea caves at Freisgill on Whiten Head northeast of Durness, all in the mid-1960's.

Roger was married first to Judith (Nicky) Nicholls and then Sue Monk, the latter from New Zealand, where they eventually emigrated in 2019, having by then effectively given up caving in favour of hill walking and other activities. Regrettably, the demon cancer caught them both. Sue died in her home country, leaving a bereft Roger to return to his native Somerset, for a while in remission. He maintained contact with several old-time GSG members, especially Murdoch McLeod, and I had the pleasure of meeting up with them both in 2022 for a good old memory lane session in Leslie's Bar. Such a dash through a life, as this is, gives little indication of Roger's rich history, embracing at different times, living on a large canal boat in Europe ('Harmonie II'), and running a specialist provender delicatessen in South Petherton, Somerset. He had also founded a company, Ulstein UK, whilst living in Edinburgh, an associate business linked to Ulstein of Norway, manufacturing gear-boxes and other marine fittings from a factory in Fife. This latter he left after a failed buy-out attempt having served 16 years in post.



Roger (left, with fez) and Eric Glen at a Shepton Fancy Dress trip down Goatchurch Cavern, Mendip 1967
Photo: A. Jeffreys

It was always Roger's ambition to preserve audio renditions of the Mendip caving songs, leading to a couple of sessions in Priddy Village Hall in 2022 where

he arranged for a professional sound engineer to record same. Given the advance of ignorance, it was down to a gathering of 'old sweats' to perform the necessary but almost inevitably, matters declined into 'mucky' songs, and in any case, the quality of recording left a lot to be desired! Readers can 'swot' up on these songs by visiting Roger's website www.harmonieII.co.uk where melody lines are shown and played, accompanied by the words. Note: a source of many 'mucky' songs follows on!

Whatever one's judgement of Roger was (and he certainly had a talent for dividing opinion), it cannot be denied that his contribution to British caving was colourful. He spent four years in Australia in the 1970's, but I cannot find any evidence that he ever caved there or indeed in New Zealand, although the latter stay must have been restricted by the Covid epidemic. He passed away at Bridgwater on 20th June 2024, aged 83, silencing forever the wonky piano installed in the Hunter's Lodge Inn back room.

The Hunter's Lodge on Mendip is the scene of many wrongs,
but worst of all its vices are the filthy caving songs.
The speleo-musicians are a bloody-minded crew,
and castigate proud caving names with stories most untrue.

Song by Roger Biddle

So, farewell to Roger (arr, clever bugger 'e were!)

Alan Jeffreys