

MEMORIES OF ROGER BIDDLE



Roger approaching Creag Dubh (3050ft), Torridon,
19th September 1977

Roger passed away on 20th June 2024 at Bridgwater Hospital, aged 83. I am uncertain when exactly we first met, but it must have been around 1963 and through the Scouts and Quantock Seniors. We both joined the Shepton in 1964. The AGM was Saturday April 11th at the New Inn, 13 new members were elected. I was member No. 99 and he No. 100. Thus, we were at that time pretty close! He remained a member until 1971 and was caving secretary April – September of that year when he moved up to the frozen north. Thus, I have been privileged to know him for some 60 years. This was not a continuous friendship as he kind of drifted into and out of my life.

Scouting Origins

Apart from a partial exploration of Aveline's Hole, Burrington, on a Scout hike, 23rd November 1958, my first caving trip was Holwell Cavern in the Quantock Hills on 3rd January 1959. Three years later I paid a second visit and encountered Somerset Scout Caving Group members and by later in 1962 I had



found out about their training courses and enrolled for the second. Seven weekends between March and September with evening lectures, all under the guidance of Fred Davies (SMCC) and based at Scout HQ (now gone), Chamberlain Street, Wells, and concluding with an end of course and reunion weekend dinner in November. The annual reunion dinners became popular events and were

Burrington, 1st September 1963 with 67th Hackney Scouts. Roger on Right with ladder and carbide light, Milche on knees on front.

reported in the local press. That for 1964 was at the Red Lion Hotel, Wells, the principal guest was Mrs Olive Hodgkinson of Wookey Hole Caves. In the group photograph in the Wells Journal for 27th March, Roger is 4th from the left, crouched down behind two Rangers. Roger did not, however, go the caving course route but as a result of the amount of caving he/we were doing he appeared on the list of approved scout caving leaders as at December 1963 and subsequent years. His address was then Weemeare, Duke's Meadow, Cannington. By that date we were also taking Scout groups from outside Somerset (mainly the Home Counties) and even running training courses for them. On the weekend 5th/6th October 1963, with Dick Ivens, Roger and I manned an exhibition on caving on the Somerset Scout Caving Conference, somewhere in West Somerset (Blue Anchor?). I travelled in Roger's open motorcycle sidecar and as it was very wet I was wearing a "goon suit" (orange coloured waterproof ex-military survival suit, entered through a lace-up neck and with rubberised wrists).

Halcyon Days on Mendip

Isn't it interesting when looking back over the decades one only remembers the glorious warm sunny days. Such is the fickleness of the/my mind? In the year 1964, caving really gathered pace and Roger was all over Mendip and beyond. Fortunately, we have the Shepton Hut Logs which record many of the exploits. Never underestimate the importance of records and write it down. As St Cuthbert's was a BEC controlled cave until guest leadership was introduced in 1968, Swildon's provided much of the fun – digging Terminal Chamber, South East Inlet, and enlarging a squeeze to gain a small chamber; ascending 22nd November 1964 Blue Pencil Aven to discover 70 – 80 feet of new passage (my first discovery); installing a semi-rotary pump at the First Mud Sump and when this was abandoned due to priming problems, building the first of several versions of dam; pushing North West Stream Passage; and above ground recommencing digging at Priddy Green Sink. I also remember going through Paradise Regained singing the rhythm of Ravel's Bolero.

Elsewhere, in late 1963, we visited Holwell Cavern in the Quantocks and found passages not on the Wessex Cave Club definitive survey of 1955/58 which led to the piecing together and exploration of the East Series, not to mention the complete resurvey of the cave. In July/August 1964 we were at Cannington caves (now destroyed). Back on Mendip he was down Primrose Pot in Eastwater, and surface digging at Sandpits Hole. Off to Steepholm on a club trip in September 1964, and climbing on Brean Down in August 1965.

There were occasional Yorkshire trips: Grange Rigg/Christmas Pot exchange; Rowten Pot, where he freeclimbed the ladders on the big 110 foot pitch as the lifeline had, in the downdraughts and torrent, got wrapped round the ladder. He was caving in Derbyshire in 1965 and Yorkshire at Easter 1966.

He had a fairly dominating attitude at that time and once or twice there were personality clashes at the old hut and he left. On one occasion he abandoned a nest of three aluminium billies at the hut which I borrowed and added to my limited hoard of kit. For nearly half a century we as a family utilised these while camping and they became reverently known as the Roger Biddle Memorial Billies. We had talked about returning them to him but somehow never got round to it. He resigned as Caving Secretary in September 1971 when he moved to Edinburgh.

Contrast this with an overnight trip, 22nd/23rd August 1964, to the 20 ft pitch in Swildon's with the tools to remove a chain and stemples, recently installed by Willie Stanton (WCC) to facilitate getting young schoolboy labour from Sidcot School to his latest dig in Sidcot Passage! The metalwork removed was parcelled up and returned to the WCC cottage. I was in the hut living room when Willie appeared at the front door. He attempted to pull rank starting "I've been caving on Mendip for x decades..." to

which Roger calmly replied something to the effect “What’s that got to do with anything. It doesn’t give you the right to desecrate a fine cave...”

This incident was later recorded by a verse in the cavers’ 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 was not a prolific writer but he did write up the Blue Pencil Aven exploration in Swildon’s in the May 1965 SMCC Journal. He edited SMCC Hut Logs Vols 1 & 2, published as “Extracts from the SMCC Hut Logs” as SMCC Occasional Publication No. 4, August 1968; and jointly with Bryan Ellis Hut Log Vol. 3, published as Occasional Publication No. 5, April 1970. I find I assisted in both publications by tracing the surveys. Another item I remember was “So you think you’re hard!” in Shepton Lifeline No. 3, December 2000, p. 2. This recounts how after being prevailed upon by Oliver Lloyd in The Hunters’, with Barry Lane, taking Eric Hensler (of GG and Yorkshire fame) around Swildon’s on his 50th birthday on Sunday 25th October 1964 after a WCC dinner. It was alleged to be Hensler’s first visit to Swildon’s but Ken Dawe subsequently revealed that Eric had been to Swildon’s 5 on 17th June 1961. After Swine Puke they laddered down into Shatter Pot, did the whole of Swildon’s 4, went round the Troubles at breakneck speed and out through Sump 1. Eric never lost breath and smoked his pipe throughout, even through the sump and promised them a trip down Stream Passage next time they were “Oop north”. Somehow they never took him up on this!

Social Events

On 3rd April 1964, my 21st birthday, I received a “tiger” climber themed card from Roger and Liz and which I still have (sad git that I am). On 17th October 1964 he organised a “Grand Autumn PU” at the Shepton Hut (as beer was involved you can guess what the PU stands for); and another, this time called “Grand Vernal PU” on 1st May 1965, followed the next day by the second fancy dress trip in Burrington in which he was dressed as a surgeon. He was also at the first fancy dress trip the previous year wearing a fez with Grampian Speleological Group member/s. On 23rd November 1964, I drove up to Dursley, (Glos) taking his gear to his lodgings as he was training with Lister Marine.

I have recounted before how after work on Saturday mornings in Bridgwater, I cycled the 25 miles to Mendip and The Hunters’ trying to get there before lunchtime closing and how Roger would pass me on the top slope in Rookham in his Ford Popular and shout out “I’ll get them in!” This will for me forever echo down the decades.

Roger announced his engagement to Nicky on 6th/7th May 1967 and both moved to Edinburgh. They were married in December 1967 and their son Steven was born 8th November 1968. Although Roger had left Mendip this was not a farewell, far from it!

Moving to the Frozen North

When Roger moved to Edinburgh in 1967, he joined the Grampian SG and much of his cave doings were largely invisible to me. January 1967 saw him with Alan Jeffreys (Goon) and Eric Glen surveying to Grade 4 a limestone mine at Easthouses, Dalkeith. Later that year the same three made a through trip in Smoo Cave. In August 1967 he began banging his dig on Cnoc an t-Sasunnaich in Sutherland. On 11th August 1967, with George Alden, he made the first full exploration of The Firehose, Traligill, and followed it up with a solo survey of the cave in September, which was published in the March 1968

GSG Bulletin. In early April 1969, with Goon, investigated the Eriboll Sea Caves, Sutherland, reported with surveys in a 4 page article in the July 1969 GSG Bulletin.

When not investigating caves in Scotland, he was in Yorkshire: March 1967, with Goon and respective girlfriends to Alum Pot; again with Goon, July to Gingling Hole, Fountains Fell; August with GSG to Kingsdale Master Cave and Alum Pot. And when not there he was on Mendip: February 1967, with Goon, Swildon's and St Cuthbert's. May 1967 Stoke Lane Slocker and Eastwater; SMCC fancy dress trip to Goatchurch; Autumn 1967, with Nicky, to North Hill Swallet and the 20 ft pitch in Swildon's; June 1969, dam building in St Cuthbert's, trip to Sump 1, Swildon's with the BEC, a mini rescue and the new Shatter Cave; 4th September 1969 I took Roger and his brother into Shatter Cave.

There was another incident that I almost forgot to mention. In October 1967 Roger appeared on Mendip with a fine bottle of whisky. On the Saturday evening he took it to the then Mansfield residence, Tiny Cott, Little London, Oakhill, where an atmosphere was developing. In the early hours Bob Craig and Phil Romford decided to clear their heads by going for a walk. Crange dropped something (probably a cigarette lighter), bent down to pick it up but couldn't get up again. Phil sat down beside him. Unfortunately somebody behind curtains rang the police who arrived and took them into custody overnight and they were charged with being "Drunk in a Public Place" (sleeping on the verge of the A37). The club newsletter referred to the establishment of a "Drunken Cavers' Defence Fund". They were convicted and fined, including doctor's costs, at Shepton Mallet Magistrates Court.

In July 1970 I took Roger and nine members of the GSG with 2 cwt. of cement down St Cuthbert's. 31st May 1970, along with Goon to Shatter Chamber, Swildon's, digging; 5th June 1970, the three of us to Cuthbert's 2 extension (Whitsun Passage) and the following day the three of us and Bob Mehew to Shatter Chamber, Swildon's.

Movings Abroad

In August 1970, he and Nicky moved to Melbourne, Australia where Rebecca's birth was announced in early 1971. He remained there for four years. I only recall one tale from that era which was that Roger and Sue(?) were trekking in the mountains and failed to complete the route before being benighted. If that wasn't bad enough, it was in clear view of the illuminated entrance of the local bar so they could see all the comings and goings and jollity without being able to join in!

He retired in Autumn 2005 and bought a Dutch barge (Harmonie) to travel the waterways of Europe. In Spring 2019 he and Sue relocated to New Zealand.

In God's Own Country

Roger returned to Edinburgh from Australia in 1974. The GSG Dinner, 25th October 1975, was held at the Inchnadamph Hotel. As a prelude and as the weather was brilliantly fine some of us decided to traverse the Ben More Coigach Ridge which rises to 2438 feet. We started from the Stac Polliadh road and finished near Culnacraig at the end of the road south east of Achiltibuie, some seven to eight miles



Roger playing the harmonium at GSG Dinner, Inchnadamph Hotel

of difficult going. This was also the day when the hut harmonium was taken to the hotel and Roger pumped all evening for the singing. No wonder he complained that his legs ached.

I also remember an incident when in his big heavy company car we attempted to drive to the Old Man of Stoer(?) taking a track from Culkein which was very narrow and on the return one of the rear wheels slipped off the track. This was all pre-mobile phone and therefore no chance of calling out the RAC/AA rescue. We eventually solved it by building a ramp of rocks in front of the dropped wheel so the car eventually climbed up and back on to the track – phew!

After his return from Australia, things soon fell back into that old routine, including trips to Mendip. On 7th August 1976, I took Roger and Sue to Swildon's Sump 1. On 12th March 1977, with Goon, we had a trip to the newly opened Tynings Barrow Swallet. 7th August 1978 I took Roger's son Steven and Sue to Column Chamber, Shatter Cave and on 22nd December that year took Roger and Steven as far as the Double Pots as

Steven had had a helmet and carbide lamp for Christmas.

15th April 1979, we took a tourist trip with Roger, Sue and Steven to the upstream sump in Cnoc nan Uamh (Sutherland).

Prior to my moving to Edinburgh in December 1978, Roger occasionally brought Kirsty to Mendip for the weekend. She remembers on one occasion when his company car burst into flames when leaving Edinburgh. Fortunately there was a broken down bus just in front. Roger jumped on to it, grabbed the fire extinguisher and put his car fire out. The bus driver went berserk but Roger said he would be in touch on the Monday morning. They arrived on Mendip somewhat late that night.

On New Year's Day 1980, we were at Roger's basement flat in Northumberland Street when JRat phoned to report that the MCG cottage, then under construction, had been destroyed by a gas explosion overnight.

When we were married in Cupar, Fife, on 10th March 1979, he was our Best Man as the official photograph evidences. During our residence in Edinburgh there were occasional Sunday lunchtimes spent at the Brown Cow, on the Cowgate and in the early days we again occasionally had lifts to Mendip in Roger's company car when we could leave Edinburgh at 5.00 pm sharp and be in The Hunters' for closing time. Covering in the comfortable back seat we could watch the speedometer registering 130 and the fuel gauge visibly dropping. Those were the days!

Final Occasional Encounters

We shared a table with Roger and Sue at the BEC 75th Annual Dinner at Webbington Hotel, Loxley, on 2nd October 2010, where I delivered a toast and Roger tinkled the ivories for the inevitable singsong. We were at Priddy Village Hall on 2nd August 2022 with others for a recording session which I wrote up as "Probably the last Mendip Cavers' Songspeil" in the December 2022 Newsletter. I had a feeling it

was not the last (see later). In that article I also recounted how on 3rd April 1976 I encountered the launch of the GSG "Caving Songs of Mendip" at The Hunters' edited by Roger. A subsequent revised edition was published in April 1990.

I last met Roger on 6th December 2023 at Jackie Dors' funeral in Priddy.

Roger's committal was at Yeovil Crematorium on Thursday 18th July. Amongst those attending was a decreasing number of stalwart Mendip Cavers (12). We had been previously told that we were expected to sing cavers' songs and "Down Below" had been mentioned so we came armed with the song books. However, it turned out that there was an interval with a montage of his photos, accompanied by songs recorded in Priddy Village Hall on 2nd August 2022, which included "The Amalgamation Song" and the "BEC Song". It was impossible for the cavers assembled to restrain from joining in which started off very quietly and gradually built up to a crescendo. I am sure he would have approved of this. The celebrant afterwards said that she had never heard the word "rectum" so many times at a funeral! We then retreated to his favourite hostelry in South Petherton where he and Sue had run a high-class delicatessen for some years, to continue to reminisce. We understand that there is to be a barrel provided at the Shepton Hut sometime in the Autumn when I have no doubt a few songs will be sung again.

Farewell Roger. It was good to know you.

Another light goes out and a keyboard falls silent

Our thoughts are with all the family.

MTM
August 2024