

For they know not what they do:
Speedwell to Peak via White River 18/11/17

by Alexander Ried

They came to a place called Speedwell

I can smell faff a mile off. Some, particularly those of the student persuasion, have an almost magical ability to misplace items, ranging from the inconsequential cereal bar to the slightly more important helmet. But fear not, this was to be an adult trip, no faff! No, not that kind of adult trip, this is all clean fun in dark, wet holes; safe for work. The plan was to meet at the TSG around 9 am, where I would meet Natalie, Helen, Kathryn (all SUSS), Jess, Martyn and Ben. The latter four I saw, the former two still slept the sleep of the just and the gin enthusiasts. After having a quick chat with the others, I went to gently rise Helen and Nat from their slumber with the aid of two pans, always a pleasure. In a futile attempt to avoid undue delays I sorted out the ropes, hangers, water, *etc.* and got into my undersuit. Now, Nat has written a trip report on this as well, in which she wrote “We missed the first boat due to disorganisation and a late start”. Her words, not mine; I will leave it to the esteemed reader to decide on the source of these delays. Nat and Helen had enjoyed an exuberant night, the price for which Nat carried with a practiced air, whereas Helen was visibly suffering.



Getting ready at Speedwell

We did, eventually, come to a place called Speedwell. There I was laden with Rob's four bottles, plus ropes for Moosetrap, with ~~the criminals~~... err... the other carriers on my right and left taking the remainder for Jess, Ben and Martyn. There was a nice moment when I wanted to drink from a water bottle in Nat's car, which contained at least 60 vol% water. The remaining 40 vol% were of a more volatile nature. For boatride shenanigans I refer to Nat's account, suffice it to say the isolator switch probably did not switch itself off.

Aquatic Ambulation

Having gotten off the boat at the not so Bottomless Pit, it was time for our merry crew to wade on to The Whirlpool. Which gave me time to ponder on the irony of being drowned by the weight of dive bottles, nailed to the bottom of the shallow canal like a tortoise on its back. At least I got to unload the pesky ropes and SRT kit at The Bung, despite already being pretty wet I still monkeyed along the Whirlpool ropes rather than taking the plunge. Now came the payoff for taking Rob's bottles intended for Cliff cavern: Despite offering, no one wanted to get rid of their bottles, so I gallivanted down Whirlpool Passage (WP) sans tackle sack. WP counter: 1. A hilarious changing ritual at the sump was next as the divers got ready for their descent, and soon us mere mortals set off to transport bottles to Cliff Cavern. WP counter: 2. For some stupid reason we only brought two of the empty tackle sacks, so it was two bottles for me, one for Nat and Helen each, and the burden of having to listen to our bitching for Kathryn. We made decent time to Cliff Cavern, enough to have a look at Main Rising which seemed somewhat opaque that day. Rob's bottles deposited and back at Whirlpool Rising the divers hadn't emerged yet, so we snuggled down for the wait. Nat immediately worked on activities for her class, *i.e.* us, but her "10 green bottles" as well as my related "99 bottles of beer on the wall" were unfairly shot down despite their cultural significance. So "I spy" it was to be instead; Nat not only immediately found the "grey... limestony grey" object I'd chosen, but also delivered a fascinating lecture on the workings of the minds of children. No irony here, genuinely very interesting.



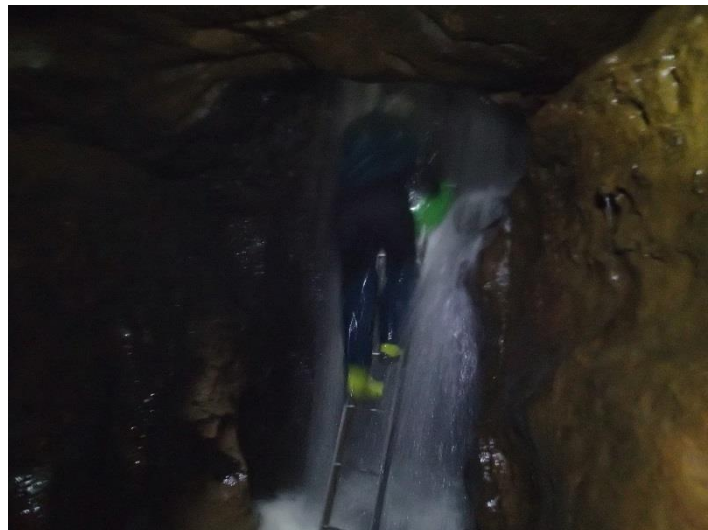
A happy Nat at Whirlpool Rising

Eventually the first neoprene monster emerged from the depths, and as you cannot hear much under a diving hood, we may or may not have had some fun testing the limits of Martyn's current auditory abilities. Martyn then contrived to put his hand between Nat's legs to "get off the diving suit". Just as long as it was the only thing getting off. Helen and I started ferrying bottles back to The Whirlpool, WP counter: 4. It's one of those easy passages not worthy of a second thought when done once, but significantly more memorable when done a couple of times with dive bottles. One more trip back and forth, with the final WP count on 6 for Helen and me. Neither of us hanker after a repetition in the near future, I think.



Hänsel and Gretel moment in Far Canal

If I recall correctly, all four of us sherpas had opted for normal undersuits rather than wetsuits, reasoning that we all hate SRT in wetsuits. That being said, after another wade to the boat to unload kit we were all pretty keen to get going for our actual trip: White River and Moosetrap. Some poor sod had to come back to the gate with us, and Jess (TSG) volunteered like a champ. Whereas it was back to daylight for her, Kathryn, Ben and Martyn, Helen, Nat and me were just getting started. Nat in particular was super keen to get back into the canal, and released her customary battle cry of “I hate caving!”. We had a nice Hänsel and Gretel moment as the gate was locked behind us, it felt somewhat like the prelude to a horror movie. We didn’t stick around to watch Jess’s light vanishing down the canal: We were too keen for the ceremonial dousing!



Nat enjoying The Bung

River of White, Piton of Rust, Passage of Mud

Don’t like The Bung. Never have. Never will. Let’s leave it at that. In Block Hall Nat quickly and craftily donned her SRT kit, leaving Helen and me with the two tackle sacks, crafty little ray of sunshine that she is. Whilst trying to get some feeling into her hands on the first pitch, I encouraged her with a hearty “Come on!”, being keen on some vertical movement to warm up. That gave me time to ponder on whether or not I’d hit the opposite wall if I’d just swing onto the first pitch; it was time for my customary Indiana Jones moment (I love swinging on ropes). This turned into a parody as my

impeccably recited title music was rudely interrupted mid-swing, not by smashing into the opposite wall, but the rope behind me becoming taught. Very rapidly. Luckily I didn't get the full force, as there was a built-in dampener. Unfortunately for her, that dampener was Helen. She was attached to a loop on the same rope I was swinging on, so before I got a chance to shock-load the anchor, I shock-loaded her. I apologise. It was not one of my proudest moments. Adding insult to injury, Helen dropped her tackle sack down the first incline, and had to go back to get it. It made a very impressive sound on the way down, and both Nat and I were relieved to find out that it had been the bag rather than Helen herself. Having never been in White River, Block Hall is a nice prelude, with more and more formations coming into view, and some really beautiful ones at the top. Here I found Nat filling the entrance to Watts Passage, where she had adopted a foetal position. Looked quite cosy, really. With Helen in earshot, she scurried off, soon followed by myself. Watts Passage is not particularly tight, but it is flat out crawling for a while, a good opportunity to fill various bits of kit with clay and give them a good scraping. An antidote to The Bung, one might say, just in the wrong order. What followed has to be the prettiest bit of cave in the Peak; White River is truly spectacular.



Helen in White River



The eponymous calcite flow

After having passed the Nameless Pitch, I made a critical mistake in trusting Nat as she pointed me down a tight, loose, grotty hole to Moosetrap. I'm sure it wasn't done for personal amusement. Having encountered significant difficulties in kicking the tackle sack through it, I expressed some doubt whether my bigger-than-tacklesack-proportions would allow passage. In a spark of genius, we then went down the correct way, which starts as an unassuming, slightly constricted streamway which opens up to the bottom of the pot you traverse over when going east in White River. We followed the water over a jammed boulder to the first assortment of spits and bolts, where my mountaineering heart leapt higher at the familiar sight of a piton. I gave it a friendly wriggle, under which it promptly came off in my hand. Spits it was. The rigging was really good fun, in an analogy to climbing it's like alpine multipitch. I always felt P-bolted caves are like sport crags, everything there, just employ some sense in rigging and enjoy the speedy progress. In rigging on spits, particularly those of a certain vintage, all but the most optimistic souls will seriously consider what anchor failure will do to your chances of survival. Moosetrap is a happy medium: Spits in between, through-bolts at most pitch heads. Tremendous fun to rig with less brown pants potential. That being said, there is a healthy amount of water, comparable to a classic Yorkshire pothole before somebody got sick of being pummelled by water and put deviations in. Some spits at the bottom enjoy the constant cleaning action of this water, getting the bloody thread to go in whilst you're literally standing in a waterfall was character building.



Helen and me at the bottom of Moosetrap

The penultimate pitch was immediately followed by a quick crawl to a chamber above the final sump, where Helen joined me soon after. We waited around for a while and shouted for Nat, but eventually made our way back up. Against my normal derigging practice I couldn't be bothered to take out the knots, so ropes went straight back in the tackle sacks, hangers and all. Some sort of cuff seal would have been really nice, as every time we raised your arms on a prussic cold water flowed down our arms and body. Back at the top Helen and I encountered a very cold Nat, who'd turned around before getting to the bottom on account of getting colder than a koala in a snowstorm. So we quickly made for the Ventilator, where Nat had some fun getting on the traversy pitch (better described in her trip report). All that was left were The Trenches; keen to get out of this filth and under a shower I steamed on ahead, ultimately to listen out for the arrival of disgruntled moaning from the top of Fawltly Tower. With one of the tackle sacks, I'm not a monster. With the three musketeers reunited, it was time to bomb it out of Peak and back to the TSG, where we arrived after 11 hours underground. An immensely clever combination of 5h of damp wading and waiting, followed by 6h of wet and droughty caving. Excellent trip, would recommend! Make sure to ask somebody for some dive bottles for the full experience, I heard Rob has a masochistic desire to dive the sump at the bottom of Moosetrap.

Epilogue

Arrival back at the TSG was made all the more pleasant for an extremely helpful and caring Alastair. He not only supplied us with hot tea, but even helped us to wash all the muddy ropes (more like doing it by himself, really). I'd cleverly left my socks in Nats car at Speedwell, fortunately she had two sets and graciously provided me with a particularly festive pair I have yet to return. There was also a general feeling of near starvation, and whilst I had no luck in persuading our merry crew for Chinese in Hope, I was in turn persuaded for a curry in Sheffield. Lucky Helen was home, but Nat and I split for our equidistant journeys north and south to Halifax and Nottingham, respectively.