

The Pathological Potholer

by Alexander Ried

A Year, an Idea

It is the 15th of June 2017, which means I had so far managed to evade falling down a rock, mountain, or hole with terminal consequences for precisely 27 years. So far so good, says the guy sailing past the 25th floor after jumping off a building. I find birthdays a somewhat tedious affair; you ruminate on years past for a bit, take a tentative glance into the future, organise some sort of get-together with friends or family. Sometimes the former and latter even converge on a Venn diagram. As things were, it was ramping up to be a particularly uneventful occasion. Except, in the midst of thesis writing madness, a sneaky little thought made itself heard: Why not sack the day off and do something you like instead? Maybe a bit of a challenge?

First question: Caving or climbing? For various reasons, going underground won out over soloing a hundred VDiffs, not least of all for safety considerations.

I enjoy the social aspects of outdoor pursuits as much as the next person, but going solo brings a deeply rewarding clearness. Usually being the leader is a big responsibility, necessitating a carefully assessment of the ability of those entrusted into your care, ensuring their safety and wellbeing, as well as constantly shuffling contingency plans in your head. Which I find very fulfilling, otherwise I wouldn't do it. This does, however, partition your attention and mind. The level of reflection and focus I was seeking called for a trip on my own.

Caves offer an intensely rewarding environment, one I have been spending more and more time in lately. Aside from an intriguingly complex world filled with awe-inspiring formations, and caverns to rival cathedrals, I find myself drawn to the challenge of navigating an often adverse environment. Spatial constrictions seem less alluring, but overcoming vertical drops is a fantastic test of skill and creativity. There is nothing like the dark abyss below you to keep the mind focused, your actions precise. What you do

Thus the scene is set, the curtain drops. It is Thursday morning, I've packed and soaked the ropes last night, all I need to do is get everything into the car and set off. The callout is arranged with Will, whom I'll message when I make it out of a cave. Like every birthday in your 20s, and presumably thereafter, this day feels like any other. People are heading to work, but I have little regret forsaking a day of thesis writing for this. During the past few days, I have wondered whether I chose a good project, whether it is an achievable, realistic target. But now everything is on autopilot, and soon I am surrounded by the green rolling hills of the Peak District. The farmer is paid his dues, and I park my car in the usual layby. My state of mind surprises me, I'm not excited but highly focused. Some excitement would have been nice. The usual kit check reveals nothing out of the ordinary, I'm buffeted by strong winds as carabiners are counted, lights checked, surveys stuffed in the right pockets, and soon enough there is no preparation left. Just the caves now.



Setting off

Nettle

The stroll to Nettle, an old favourite of mine, is greatly improved by carrying 3 tackle sacks containing about 150m of ropes in total. Thank God for 8.5mm. Still, two full tackle sacks drag me down the narthex of the Narrows, headed straight for the Flats. Every now and then a gentle kicking is required to get them down, but gravity is very obliging.



The top of Nettle



The Narrows

As I'd assumed a 60m rope more than reaches the bottom, there would even be enough left to rig the traverse over to the Canyon, but that's hardly worth the effort. Another short pitch, now on less chunky rope, leads to the unassuming top of Elizabeth. Standing on top of the boulders, I wonder just how stable they are, and if I will see the collapse of Elizabeth's roof in my lifetime. Mind you, that could be quite short if you're there to witness it.

Elizabeth has got to be one of the finest pitches in the Peak, a 50m free drop that opens out beautifully; big enough to give a fantastic sense of space, but the walls around you close enough to give an aesthetically pleasing frame of reference. There's even a trickle of water, to remind you of the unrestrainable force which has formed these caverns, acidified by the lava bed above. I've now reached the same temporary destination as the water, a quick moment to appreciate the space above me, then it's hangers out and spits rigged to get me to the actual bottom. Rigging guide says three spits, so three hangers I've brought. Which is exactly one less than I need right now; after the first rift there is a small opening to the next chamber, and whilst I could just chuck the rope down, that

would involve a suddenly very skinny looking 8.5mm rubbing over a nice length of rock. I think not. Slightly disappointing, but time to turn around, I suppose. Maskhill and Oxlow are still waiting!



The beginning of Elizabeth, just before it opens up



The bottom of Elizabeth

Back at the top of Elizabeth I realise I've done exactly what I tell other people off for, left the ruddy tackle sack at the bottom instead of taking it with me. Bugger. So first I get to haul the ropes back, then stash it away. Oh well, onwards and upwards! Every time I go up the Narrows they seem to become a little easier, and this time is no exception. The tackle bags are waiting at the bottom of Nettle, hauling them back out is a task for future Alex. Except now I'm at the concreted top of Nettle, and future Alex has become present Alex. It's nice to be on the surface again, but I already have an inkling that hauling is not going to become more enjoyable. Although the Narrows turn out to be surprisingly well behaved, and the bags only snag once. Time to give Will a text and head over to Maskhill. One down, two to go.

Maskhill

A quick saunter over to Maskhill soon sees me at the entrance lid, I need a moment to rearrange some ropes. There is the designated 60m rope for the entrances, then another 60m and 20m in the second big tackle sack, and finally the 40m I'll need for the bottom of Maskhill. A further 20m rope I'd used for the Canyon in Nettle stays at the top, I won't need it until going over to Oxlow.



Ready for Maskhill



Showtime!

With all ropes stashed in the right order it's time to set down the entrance shaft, which has a nice gradient to it so you can practically surf down it. And I wonder why the profile on my wellies is gone. Initially I thought I could just do away with many of the Y hangs and use them as deviations, but it's one of those things that only look good on paper and would, in actuality, result in rope rub all over the place. No thank you, rebelay it is. A great advantage of going solo is that you can rig piano wire tight, which is a nice safety feature as well as saving rope. A quick scramble down the Jumbles, and back on the rope for Murmuring Churn. There's no real need to rig the traverse over Waterfall Chamber, provided you don't fall onto the deceptively solid false floor. Knowing how it looks from below, I'm really not keen on tempting the remnants of rotting stemples and rocks loosely held together by calcite glue. Here I cheat a little bit: Knowing Pool Chamber,

I'm unwilling to descend to it twice just for the sake of it. Something to look forward to for Oxlow. Time for a quick picture, let's get out of this hole!



At the bottom of Waterfall Chamber

On the way up Waterfall Chamber I get the only scare of the entire day; up until now I'd describe my mental state as one of even concentration, the constant task of rigging and keeping moving does not leave room for idle thoughts, it's like a peaceful trance. Until a rogue object rapidly comes into view on my left that is, aggressively moving towards me. My heart skips a beat, and the brain is a little slow on providing a causal chain. It's the tackle sack underneath me, tired of its existence in my shadow, sick of being kicked and dragged down passages, my trusty companion has gone into open rebellion! The pendulum swing is not quite enough to whack me in the face, but enough to nearly give me a heart attack. Once my heartbeat is back to normal I give it a hearty kick to remind that thing of its place and carry on. The way back to sunlight is an excellent chance to admire various bits of rock held together by not much more than good will, quite a lot of them are perfectly poised above your head, too.

Once again I win the lottery of life, elation is quickly followed by the realisation that this leaves me with 180m of rope to haul out of Maskhill. Fantastic. And Maskhill has a parting present: Where Nettle was surprisingly obliging with releasing tackle sacks, Maskhill has no desire to release them. The bags contrive to get stuck in a smooth shaft at least two times, requiring lowering and a lot of janking around. Heralded by the

sound of bashing and scraping, my toil and strife is over, for now anyway. I give Will a text, he replies an encouraging “Hardest bit over with!”, immediately followed by “See if you can bet an hour in and out of Oxlow”. I think not. Still, two down, only one left.



Rocks held by intense hope



The joys of hauling

Oxlow

On account of being the easiest of the trio, I've left Oxlow for the end. As I trundle over to the concrete square surrounding the entrance I allow myself a cereal bar, feeling as if on autopilot I don't really grasp that it will be the last cave of the day. A quick rope rearrange, and down the entrance shaft I go. In contrast to Maskhill I've always viewed Oxlow as quite a pleasant mine/ cave, it appears decidedly less hell-bent on chucking bits of rock at you and has some nice scrambling bits. Standing on the col between East Chamber and West Swirl Passage, water sounding a pleasant staccato on my helmet, I wonder whether I should have a quick poke down, but you have to leave some things for other days. So down to the west instead, Pool Chamber is waiting. After the ominous vastness of West Chamber, it feels slightly bizarre to look out through the Oxlow window into Waterfall Chamber; I can almost see the spectre of my former self being assaulted by a tackle sack. Now it is time to converge with the route taken only a couple of hours earlier, the place is the same, but still everything feels different. Time to immerse myself in Pool Chamber. Although there's not much there I've always liked its understated, protective atmosphere. It doesn't shout at you like the big chambers above, it just quietly declares: Here is the bottom, a little chamber with half a meter or so of water in it. No stemples rotting away in a cloak darkness above your head, either.



Pool Chamber

The journey up remains, but this feels like a conclusion. Of course, the momentary feeling of peace is diametrically opposed to the struggle up the slippery walls and

ancient calcite covered rope, the cave wants to see a little effort in my final journey back to sunlight. Soon I catch a glimpse of warmth above my head, and suddenly it's all over. One last hauling session remains before I can sit on the concrete enclosure and look out onto the green vista of Rushup Edge and Mam Tor. Will is relieved of his duty to find me stuck down some cave; I gather my tackle sacks and plod back to my car. It's been a good day.



Until we meet again

Epilogue, or: Conclusions and Future Work

As is usually the case with the completion of big goals, success is anticlimactic. This notwithstanding, where handing in *e.g.* a Masters dissertation simply provided an exhausted mind and a bit of paper in my hand, challenges of the great outdoors give so much more. Bruises, a satisfying sense of accomplishment, new knowledge of the self, as well as memories to cherish. Writing a PhD thesis may or may not sharpen the mind, but after months in an office I could feel everything else atrophy. Wonders we may create for the world to see and utilise, but not at the price of neglecting the marvels we are already surrounded by.

Initially, I had no idea how feasible this trip was, or how long it would take me. Coming out of Oxlow, there wasn't exactly a spring in my step, but I felt far from exhausted. Something longer for next year then.

Boring Stuff

Time car to car: 8h

Time underground: 6h 37min

Time spent hauling tackle sacks: An eternity

Vertical distance: 415m

Gear related: As I was constantly on the move, I opted for only wearing a thin layer of merino thermals under my oversuit. This worked great for heat management, but less well for padding. Would not recommend for crawly caves. I found it useful to constantly keep a sling with a revolver carabiner around my chest, ready for packing rope into tackle sacks.