

John Wilcock's address to OUCC 12th October 2013



Note “middle age spread”.

As you are aware, Steve has not been able to be present this weekend. Therefore old lags have been called upon to undertake the necessary tasks that Steve would have performed, and I have been “elected” as the oldest member present to give the “President’s Address”. We have other volunteers: Jim will do the accounts, and Tom will take the group photograph.

I’ll begin by giving you a bit of my caving history. A native of Bradford, Yorkshire, I was inspired to go caving by a magic lantern lecture given by Milton Shackleton of the Bradford Moor Cave Club which met in Willy Gott’s greenhouse, later the Bradford Pothole Club. I first caved with the Scouts in 1953 (yes, it’s actually my 60th Anniversary). We caved in a sliprift cave on Harden Moor near

Bingley (not even a limestone cave) using a hemp rope that we tested by tying it round a gatepost and doing a tug of war on it, thinking that would be sufficient. After the trip we entertained our girl friends with tales of our exploits. After that I did several limestone caves with the Scouts in the Horton and Birkwith areas of Ribblesdale. Rather belatedly I thought I ought to do things seriously, so I joined the White Rose Pothole Club, based on Bradford and Leeds. These were the days of old ex-army woollens, boiler suits, ex-miner's lead acid cells and rope ladders with wooden rungs. A typical trip was: get up at 0500, walk two miles with kit to the centre of Bradford (because the old electric trams with overhead wires had not started yet); pickup by a converted bread van; eating pork pies for breakfast in Settle; then the caving trip; change out of sodden gear, visit the pub on the way back; and join the traffic jam through Skipton, several members jumping off to get fish and chips while the van was stationary.

I studied at Bradford Grammar School. The Lady Elizabeth Hastings owned land near Leeds under which coal was discovered, and with the money she endowed Scholarships to The Queen's College, Oxford for deserving students from a list of schools in Yorkshire, Cumberland and Westmoreland (schools were removed from the list if they did not succeed in providing students of sufficient calibre over a number of years, and were replaced by other suitable schools). I applied to the Hastings Foundation, and one November in Oxford had to take college-designed written examinations, practicals and interviews. These, together with my A* Levels were sufficient to get me a Hastings Scholarship – at the interview the dons remarked “Well, you seem to have done pretty well with these, so let's look at the outside interests section of the form”. So I spent most of my interview talking about caving. The Scholarship was to be taken up two years later, since Queen's had a policy of their students doing National Service before Oxford.

After square bashing at Bridgnorth, I trained as an Air Radar Fitter at RAF Yatesbury. There I found a corporal who was also a caver, and we had several trips to Mendip by motor bike. Cider was then only 6 old pennies per pint!

Back at Queen's, called “The Northern College” (because of the large number of students from Yorkshire, Cumberland or Westmoreland courtesy of the Hastings Foundation) I found 16 undergraduate old boys from Bradford Grammar School. How different Oxford was then (1958): all colleges were single sex; one had to get permission to have a young lady in one's rooms; college gates were locked at 2300 (of course we climbed in); tutor's permission was needed to be away from Oxford for a weekend; and no undergraduate could keep a car within the City of Oxford. So what did we do for caving trips? – These were mostly coach trips to the Mendips, often to Goatchurch. In 1961 an expedition to northern Spain was promoted: the fact that the Vice Chancellor at the time was an old boy of Bradford Grammar School helped, and we were finally granted the title “Oxford University Expedition to Northern Spain 1961”.



Michael Walker conceived this as an archaeological expedition to record petroglyphs (rock carvings). However, some of these were in caves, and there was no Cave Rescue in Spain, so it was decided that two thirds of the expedition members would be cavers capable of mounting a cave rescue if it became necessary, and I led the caving contingent. Hence the archaeologists departed looking for petroglyphs, and the cavers awaited a thankfully unnecessary rescue call in the Picos – the first OUCC expedition to the Picos had become a reality. The tradition of having unreliable vehicles had begun, in this case ex-army vehicles, requiring serious repairs of brake master cylinder and split cams en route. To get to Spain required one week from Calais because of the poor roads in France and Spain, and customs problems at the Spanish border meant that we had to spend the night sleeping under the vehicles. Even though ferries and planes now mean that the journey can be done in less than 24 hours, the Yellow Van, Red Van and countless other unreliable vehicles have followed the tradition.

Next I will speak of “The State of the Nation” or rather of the state of the club. It’s lovely to see all my old friends again, but I have been informed that the club has recruited no freshers in 2013 as yet! Although we all know that the strength and experience is supplied by the old lags (old members of the University), undergraduates must be the life blood for the future of the club. The President is traditionally a teacher in the University: some of you will remember :



Marjorie Sweeting, the famous karst geomorphologist from St Hugh’s, affectionately given the nickname “Fanny Haddock”



and Professor Steve Roberts currently fills the bill.

The Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer, who do the work in preparing the social programme in Oxford and all the weekend caving trips, must be undergraduates, cutting their teeth for the future – but if there are no undergrads?

Now I want to speak about “The Expedition”. Traditionally this is led by undergraduates supported by the old lags. The undergraduates must be trained in SRT, certificated in First Aid, and must have taken part in a cave rescue practice. SRT practice at night from a viaduct would be good, or perhaps we should make or hire an artificial cave rather than using pub chairs or squeeze machines? In 1961 we fought for University recognition, but in 2013 this was not possible, because with no suitably-qualified undergraduates the conditions for University recognition (and the consequent red tape) could not be met.



We must thank Steph Dwyer for successfully taking on the 2013 Expedition, but I hope that this is only a temporary expedient, a hiccup in the series of undergraduate-led expeditions with full Oxford University recognition. We’ve been back to that fantastic row of peaks, tinged pink in an alpine sunset, most years since 1961, and the 50th Anniversary was in 2011. Hopefully the club will very much want to continue indefinitely with the exploration of deep caves in the Picos that could break speleological world records.

I want to finish with some practical arrangements and thanks.



Jim has volunteered to do the accounts, so please do not fail to visit him tomorrow and pay your dues.



Tom has volunteered to take the group photograph tomorrow.



I must thank them, and also all the people who bought food and did the cooking.

Now, please raise your glasses to the toast of “The Club” – long may it continue!

Finally, let us remember those members who are no longer with us, or have been unable to attend this gathering for various reasons. We must specifically mention Pod, whose collection of gear is to be sold off, with monetary donations to either the club or to Pod’s charity. Please review the pictorial catalogue of the gear items and take actions as necessary. The final toast is to “Absent Friends”.