

THE CAVING DIARIES OF LUKE DEVENISH



4 Notebooks 1940 to 1947

Vol. 1: 1947 – 1949

Vol. 2: 1949 to 1951

Exploring Ores Close Mineshafts 1957

Transcribed and Edited by P.G. Hendy

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LUKE WILLIAM ENGLISH DEVENISH FIE_{xp}E.

From the late 1940s until the 1980s, Luke Devenish was one of Mendip's more colourful characters, known to farmers and landowners as well as to cavers.

He was born in 1920, the youngest of five boys. Although Luke was born in Wales, at a holiday cottage built during the First World War, the family lived in Addington Palace at Croydon (formerly the seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury) and Lanzarac, a wine-producing estate in the Jonkershoek Valley near Stellenbosch in South Africa. This had been bought in 1922 by an aunt, Mrs. English. It was she who insisted that her surname was given to each of the boys. Both parents died while Luke was quite young; he was then brought up by his aunt. Luke was educated at Oundle, and then attended the Swiss finishing school of D'Oex, near Gstaad. By 1939 he was destined for Oxford, but at the outbreak of war joined the Royal Armoured Corps. He refused to take the officers' exams, and so it was as a private that he saw service in the Western Desert

After the war, Luke settled on Mendip. Having private means, he did not need to work, but fell under the influence of H.E. Balch, the cave pioneer and founder of Wells Museum. Balch was at this time in his late seventies, and had long since ceased caving. He was, however, still the active curator of the museum, and was engaged in archaeological digs in Badger Hole and Wookey Hole Cave. Luke spent many months working with Balch digging, and then at the Museum, restoring and displaying the bones and other finds from the digs; today he would be called a conservator. The first volume of Luke's diaries (and to some extent the second) describes the work he did at the Museum, and at the Badger Hole dig. At this time, the Mendip caving clubs were still recovering from their enforced closure and loss of members due to the war. Several people arrived at the Museum to request access to caves, and one of Luke's duties was to guide them, usually into Swildon's Hole.

After the war, Luke lived for 8 years at Chapel House, in Nine Barrows Lane at Priddy. This then had no electricity or mains water – at times, this had to be collected from the village pump. He then tried to buy a patch of land to build on. It was not possible for him to acquire the site of Balch's railway carriage retreat at Rookham, or the quarry below the glider club on Draycott Steep. His plans to build at the end of Pelting Road at Priddy above Deer Leap were dashed when he was asked, at the planning enquiry, why he wanted to build there. "So I can have drunken parties." was not deemed a good reason, and permission was denied. In 1956 Luke, by then married to Norma, bought Washingpool near Chilcote, finally moving to Bradley Cross near Cheddar in 1981. They had two daughters.

Luke was using 'banger' in cave digging by 1947; explosives were much easier to acquire in those days. Before long, his expertise was being called on by farmers wishing to remove trees and hedges to increase the size of their fields. He devised a 'back-scratcher' for the back of his Jeep (the most memorable of a series of vehicles he owned) with which he could level gruffy ground and even round barrows. It was a time when the archaeological and historical significance of such structures was not considered;

agricultural production took precedence. Luke also invented a device for removing tree stumps. This work started as fun, but it soon became lucrative. It pleased him to be able to earn money with little capital outlay. However, he soon tired of felling trees and levelling Mendip's history, and became a full-time demolition contractor. He went into this with his customary enthusiasm, and in the 1960s was a pioneer member of the Institute of Explosives Engineers. He took a diving course at Dartmouth (having had some diving experience with the Cave Diving Group in the late 1940s and early 1950s) in order to use his skills underwater. He was an early advocate of public liability insurance for his profession. It is ironic that the escalating cost of premiums was a major reason for him retiring in the 1980s.

The Museum and Mendip Nature Research Committee were closely linked, and Luke joined this body in order to cave with other like-minded individuals, such as the Kenney brothers, Howard and Richard. As pupils of Wells Cathedral School, they had started caving during the war, and as Luke was a little older than most post-war cavers, they found in him a willing mentor – with the added bonus that he had motorised transport! The Kenneys and Colin Vowles, another MNRC member, feature regularly in the diaries. By 1950 Luke was a committee member of the MNRC, and in the annual report described his dig at Middle Down Drove Swallet near Cheddar Head. It is usually referred to in the diaries as 'MDDD'. though Luke always affectionately referred to it as 'Tiddle Tum-Tum'. He also wrote about Sump II in Swildon's Hole, which he investigated in September 1949. However, he had also joined the Wessex Cave Club in August 1947. Luke left the MNRC around 1973, but remained a member of Wessex until his death on 23rd February 1994, aged 73.

It was during his work with Balch at the Badger Hole dig in 1947 that Luke became involved with the Cave Diving Group, which was beginning to explore Wookey Hole. It did not take him long to become enthused with this new sport. He combined this with his love of photography by inventing a waterproof housing made of Perspex for his camera. Some of these early underwater photographs appear in Volume I.

By 1952 Luke was a warden with the Mendip Rescue Organization, a post he held until his 50th birthday, whereupon in a typical gesture he resigned, because he felt that wardens should be younger, more active men. His involvement with caving continued and in 1982 Luke was invited to become the third President of the Wessex Cave Club. Herbert Balch was the Club's first President on its foundation in 1934. Previous Presidents had remained in the post for the rest of their lives, but by 1993 Luke felt that age and ill-health were not allowing him the involvement he desired, so he resigned to give another a chance. This generosity and public-spiritedness surfaced time and again in Luke's life.

In so many ways Luke was larger than life. His enthusiasm for new projects, and his inventiveness in solving problems led to many stories, some no doubt apocryphal, about his antics. He was a keen photographer, and in the early days experimented with underground flash photography, using magnesium ribbon and powder. Some details of these tests are recorded in the diary. In one incident, Luke wanted to take a picture of the second vertical in Eastwater Cavern. The ladder was rigged, with Colin Vowles at the

top, Howard Kenney on the ladder, and Luke at the bottom with his camera. Luke had devised a flash system using a 12v light bulb with the glass carefully removed. The filament was then heaped with flash powder, and the device was fired electrically. There was an almighty bang, and the party's carbide lamps went out. Rapidly switching on their electric back-up lights, they found that there was so much smoke that by holding their hands in front of their faces, only a dim yellow glow could be seen. They made a rapid exit, meeting another party in the Canyon. The visitors were in a state of confusion, for only a few minutes before, suddenly and inexplicably, all their carbide lamps had gone out – this was of course due to the blast of air from the detonation of the 'flashless smoke powder'.

For many years Luke, with his distinctive and (at that time outrageous) tartan or Hawaiian shirts was keeper of the MRO's stock of rescue gear, which he kept at Washingpool. Enthusiasm was what Luke was all about, but unfortunately, on one Swildon's Hole rescue, he skidded his jeep onto Priddy Green, having rushed up from Chilcote, to find that he had left all the rescue gear behind. At one time, the Deer Leap road from Wookey Hole to Priddy was unfenced opposite Primrose Wood, but there was a gate across the road near the bottom. On one occasion Luke completely forgot about this gate, and tearing down the road (he never did things by halves) smashed straight through it. Of course, he replaced the gate, but the incident did not prevent him from doing the same thing some time later.

This diary, in two volumes and with four earlier notebooks, gives a detailed insight into caving in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It describes the tedious work conserving archaeological material at Wells Museum and also caving in all its aspects – digging, exploration and 'tourist' trips, as well as field walking. Luke describes the 1947 International Caving Conference in France, as well as caving in Wales, Derbyshire and Yorkshire. There is also a poignant description of the incident in Wookey Hole, when John Marriott drowned while cave diving.

Luke's photographs enrich and enliven the diary; many of them have never been published before. Luke writes clearly and entertainingly, though there is no indication that this diary was for other than his own use. Some of the people he caved with are well-known. Coase, Powell, Mason and the Kenney brothers all feature extensively, dominated by the father-figure of H.E. Balch. Others are more peripheral, though no less interesting. This diary will be a good read for anybody interested in caving, as well as cave historians.

Phil Hendy
18th February 2010

SYNOPSIS

This synopsis gives a brief overview of Luke's activities as described in these diaries. They are printed chronologically, though there are gaps and overlaps. Some minor events have been omitted. There is great attention to detail – every caving companion and item of caving tackle used is recorded. Luke comes over as an able but cautious caver, whether digging, caving for sport, exploring new passages or simply guiding parties of novice cavers round (usually) Swildon's Hole or G.B. Cave. These guiding duties would have been at H.E. Balch's request. It is noticeable how often Luke and others go to Balch for approval of their projects, or simply to show him photographs or finds, or describe their discoveries.

BROWN NOTEBOOK

A description of the journey from Great Chesterford (near Saffron Walden) to Bury St. Edmonds, then to London via Gedding. Journey to Mendip, with cycling and walking in Cheddar Gorge and camping at Burrington, Caving in Burrington, Eastwater Cavern and Swildon's Hole. Journey to Cirencester via Bath and Malmesbury, then train to Oxford, cycling to Wheatley and Cambridge, then Great Chesterford via Saffron Walden. There are detailed descriptions of most meals.

COVERLESS BOOK 1

Journey to Wells, meeting H.E. Balch. The search for accommodation. Meeting Richard Kenney. Photography at Barton Rocks and walking on Mendip. Digging at Badger Hole and visits to G.B. Cave and Eastwater Cavern. Swimming in Minneries Pond. There are detailed descriptions of most meals.

COVERLESS BOOK 2

Visit to Swildon's Hole and digging at Badger Hole.

HARDBACK NOTEBOOK

Diagrams and descriptions of ladder making. Gases in caves. Checking supplies at WCC Eastwater Hut. Conservation work in Wells Museum. Detailed records of photographic exposures, and what appears to be survey data.

CAVING DIARY VOLUME 1

Conservation work in Wells Museum. Archaeological digs in Badger Hole and Wookey Hole, also digging in Barrow Rake Swallet, Hillgrove Swallet, Middle Down Drove Swallet and Nod's Pot. Caving in August Hole, Brownes' Hole, Dallimore's Cave, Eastwater Cavern, G.B. Cave, Lamb Leer, Stoke Lane Slocker, Swildon's Hole, Wookey Hole (including diving with CDG) and mineshafting at Ores Close. Walking at Cheddar, Dulcote, Eastern Mendip and Hillgrove, and fencing the Cuckoo Cleaves depression. Caving in Wales and the Quantocks, and the 1948 International Congress of Speleology in the Vercors, France.
Wessex Cave Club AGM, and huts at Beechbarrow and Eastwater.
Diving fatality in Wookey Hole

CAVING DIARY VOLUME 2

Conservation work in Wells Museum, and archaeological dig in Badger Hole. Digging in Downhead Swallet, Jeep Pit, Middle Down Drove Swallet, Nod's Pot and Reservoir Hole. Levelling Waldegrave Swallet. Cornish mines and sea caves. Caving in Burrington and Cheddar caves, Eastwater Cavern, G.B. Cave, Lamb Leer, Ludwell Cave, Swildon's Hole (including the discovery and exploration of Black Hole Series) and Willet's Lane Hole.

Exploring mineshafts at Buddles Wood, Green Ore and Tynings Farm

Two expeditions to the Pyrenees (including the invitation for Norbert Casteret to become a Vice President of Wessex Cave Club) and caving in Devon, Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Wales.

Removal of the Hokerstone to Wells Museum.

PEOPLE REFERRED TO IN THE DIARIES

Of the characters with whom Luke caved, some are mere names, but others are much better known. Richard and Howard Kenney were choristers at Wells Cathedral School, falling under Balch's influence and then the mentorship of the older Luke. Richard spent some time with the Antarctic Survey, being an active caver and digger until his untimely death in the late 1990s. His younger brother Howard was also an active caver, but sadly he died young in the 1970s. A contemporary, William (Willie) Stanton was only 19 when the main diaries begin. He went on to become an eminent geologist. He sadly died in February 2010 after a long illness, but will long be remembered for his persistent and idiosyncratic approach to cave digging, and for his meticulous research into Mendip caves, geology and hydrology. Vowles was a chemist in Wells; his son Colin was Luke's frequent caving companion.

Gerald Hodgkinson (the Wingco) developed Wookey Hole as a tourist attraction; Guy was his son. E.J. (Ted) Mason was a well-known historian and archaeologist. Hucker, one of the regular diggers at Badger Hole, was an accountant in Wells, later to employ the young Howard Kenney. Stalwarts of the early days of cave diving at Wookey Hole were Graham Balcombe, Don Coase and Penelope (Mossy) Powell, with 'Dan' Hasell and others. S.J. (Alfie) Collins was a member of the BEC, famed for his songs and Speleodes. Eric Hensler was a hard caver, who pushed Hensler's Crawl in Gaping Gill. Mary Hazleton was the niece of Brigadier E.A. Glennie, another well-known caver of the era. Eric married Ruth (Pudge) Murrell, widow of Hywel; after her death he married Mary Hazleton.

Gerard Platten is famed for his publication 'The British Caver', which until recently distilled news and comment from various caving sources, much like a speleological Readers' Digest. Frank Frost was the Secretary of the Wessex Cave Club, holding the club together during the war years only to be 'kicked upstairs' by a new generation of cavers. He became President of Wessex after Balch's death.

Farmer Main (Albert) was at Manor Farm Priddy, and took a keen interest in Swildon's Hole, which lay on his land. The family still farms the land, with his great-grandson currently in charge. Harry Savory was of Balch's era. An expert photographer, many of his underground photos are regarded as classics. Professor Edgar A. Tratman was professor of Dentistry at Bristol University, but was also a very good caver and amateur archaeologist. Max Unwin was one of the founders of the Cerberus Speleological Society. Norma Oates later married Luke.

Explorations and new digs, Devenish Diary Vol. 1

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