

The Discovery of Ariel Cave, Portland 18th December 1974

In 1970 Hardye's was a three form entry grammar school of about 550 boys. It had an enthusiastic Combined Cadet Force (CCF) with Naval, RAF and Army sections led by teaching masters who held officer ranks. It was part of the school curriculum, and Wednesday afternoons were allotted to CCF training for those in the third year (Year 9) and above. The Army section with two officers was the largest group who learned drill, map reading and fieldcraft work as well as camping and trekking.

In 1970 a new Head of English was appointed to the staff. He was Andrew MacTavish who had been commissioned in his National Service in the Royal Artillery. For a period he had been attached to the Army Outward Bound School where he was trained to instruct in mountain activities. He joined the army section and soon became aware of the potential that Portland offered. Small groups were taken for rock climbing and abseiling instruction. Then two senior boys introduced Andrew to caving and he became enthusiastic. The CCF purchased ropes, helmets, carbide lamps and electron wire ladders. Soon Portland activities became an integral part of the Army Section's training. All learned to abseil, to climb and take top ropes, and to experience the caves. As boys grew older and more skilled with high degrees of proficiency, they were taught to teach the younger ones.

Weekend expeditions were started. It was clear that Portland had caves that had yet to be found and the spirit of adventure gripped the imagination. Sandy Hole had been discovered not long before, and to their pleasure a Hardye's group found the link between Gold & Silver and Argonaut passages. Steve's Endeavour and Gemini were investigated, Anniversary Rift was dug fruitlessly for three sessions, and Sandy's North Passage likewise. The Army Section was honing its skills, and its team work. In September 1974, a particularly keen group of 15 year olds were thirsting to find a new system, no matter how small, that they could call their own...Flippantly someone wrote a humorous article for the Dorset Caving Group's journal that the school would one day find - in a tone of wild exaggeration - "6000' of tunnel"...

...and little did the writer know...

In July 1974 the CCF had its annual inspection, and when parents joined the Inspecting Officers to watch the different sections displaying. The Army Section prepared a number of stands. It was clear that Portland activities were to be on show, and boards of photographs were prepared. As a heading, what was needed was a photograph of the Blacknor area to indicate where climbing and caving took place. It needed a panoramic picture taken from out at sea, so Andrew contacted the Royal Navy's helicopter school on Portland who were happy to oblige. But when the film package arrived, instead of one big panoramic picture, thirty small pictures of sections of cliff tumbled out. There was some chuckling as they shuffled through useless blank sections of rock - but suddenly the chuckling stopped. One picture, now very famous, showed a dark square immediately below the Whit bed on the highest point of Blacknor cliff.

Was it a shadow? Or a bush? Or a tunnel entrance? No one could tell. On the next Wednesday, they broke off the training early to investigate. They could not see the dark square area from the top of the cliff. It was just as impossible to see it from the bottom. When they scrambled down to the sea, they could see the shadowy area, but it was still not clearly discernible. Anyway it looked impossible to get at. And it remained just an interesting possibility until the Dorset Caving Group had a rope skills training session in the autumn of 1974. A number of the Army Section's members had joined the group and one, Ian Wolff, persuaded them to put a rope over Blacknor for him to abseil down.

Andrew remembers Ian's excitement the next day as he stopped him as he was on the way to teach an English class. "It *is* a tunnel. And It looks as if it goes straight in!" The news travelled fast round the cavers. At lunchtime in the Army Section office they pored over the picture again and started planning. Ian reckoned that getting off an abseil rope safely into the entrance would be too risky as you would not know how secure the rock was. Elektron wire ladders would have to be used. Also someone on a ladder would be out of touch with the people at the top. Signal radios and telephones would be needed. The two main points that came out were that gaining the entrance was going to be extremely difficult and complicated, and that all the effort might turn out to be a complete waste of time if the tube was immediately blocked.

On 18th December 1974 the party assembled on the top of Blacknor. Two signallers with a Type 31 radio set went down to the sea below where they

could see the entrance. They radioed directions to a signaller with another set at the top: "Go left more. And more. That's it. You're above the entrance". Earth anchors were driven in with a sledgehammer. An Elektron ladder was rigged. "Too short. Add another section" came over the radio. Then "That's good. But the ladder's blowing in the wind. Can you weight it?" It was not far short of a gale that day. No one had thought of that possibility and a mattock was lashed to the Elektron. "That's fine. It's hanging well".

Everyone was silent on the top. The ladder was disappearing over a cliff that was chillingly vertical. It was reaching less than half way down and swinging in the strong gusts. The steep slope of the undercliff made everything more frightening. Andrew belayed himself to a picket. "I can't go as I am in charge. Who feels like it?" A pause (Going down a ladder dancing crazily in mid-air was bad enough. Entering a totally unknown cave was another). David Churcher, the most experienced and most senior boy present casually said "I'll go" with a forced nonchalance. He put a sling over his head, felt his helmet and lamp were secure, and tied himself on to the safety rope. He was checked by the top roper. He knelt down, edged backwards, fishing for the ladder with his foot, made contact and slowly disappeared from view. The frozen silence on top was broken by the signaller repeating the messages from down by the sea: "Ten feet...fifteen feet...he's on the second ladder". Everyone was watching the man on safety slowly paying the rope out. "He's at the entrance....He's swinging...He's got a grip...Give him slack...He's on the entrance floor...More slack....He's belayed himself on and waved OK".

There was a united release of breath. "Telephone, please signaller" but he was already there, lowering a field telephone on its cable. Very soon David's voice came from below: "Incredible. Unbelievable. It's flat, solid, good belay points."

Precise memories of that day blur at this point. Two other people went down, one stayed with the phone while David and the other crawled down the tunnel. They came back. "Amazing! It's like Piccadilly Circus. Rifts and tunnels in all directions." (unconsciously, he gave the first name to a feature). "We can get some more down here". So during the rest of the day, all the party visited the new cave, carefully examining the side passages, checking the floors and climbing up to higher levels. They had brought a compass and 100' tape with all the other equipment and were able to make a rough first survey. At the end of the afternoon they were all exhausted with the excitement of

discovery, with the fright of the laddering, and with sheer muscular exertion. They had measured between 500' and 600' of previously unknown cave and realised from what they had seen that this cave was undoubtedly the biggest system on the island. They were elated. The jokey 6000' of tunnel in the DCG magazine suddenly had become a reality.

“The boys were a highly trained team, forged through the general CCF training and specific work on Portland. Most were 15 years old though one or two were older. They watched each other, trusted each other and achieved a remarkable outcome with each other. We had all shared in this wonderful experience and it remains vivid in our memories”.

Ariel Cave (aka Blacknor Hole) was first entered on 18th December 1974 by N. Avery, G.Brake, D.Churcher, C.Churchill, P.Mauger, O.Pugh, T.Sage, M.Taylor, A.MacTavish all of Hardy's School CCF Army Section.