

Conservation & Access Report CSCC Annual General Meeting 14 May 2022

The Covid situation and lockdowns certainly has had a major impact on everything and making progress with C&A business has been a challenge. A lot of this last year has been trying to play 'catch up' as things have only been very slowly retuning to some sort of normality.

Maybe it was frustration or forgetting that it is relatively easy to get access to many sites but there is no excuse for the number of break-ins we have had. What these people don't grasp, and probably don't care about, is the high amount of work and cost rectifying the situation and negotiating with landowners who wonder why they should give us any access when we can't control access as they require.

Earlier in the year I wrote the job description for the C&A position and really quite surprised myself how much is involved. OK I have the time to do it and have a very strong team of helpers from Cerberus and MCG but it still surprised me how much time the job takes. It's difficult to estimate; but probably an average of 2 days a week is needed as a minimum commitment.

This report covers all C&A business (in no particular order) either pending, ongoing, in progress or complete. Some of the text is reproduced from past reports and updated where applicable. Apologies for the length of the report but this is a useful means of keeping everyone fully updated.

In addition to the items listed I have dealt with a number of miscellaneous enquires relating to CSCC and C&A matters.

Cheddar Cave Access

In 2020 a new Estates Manager was appointed at Longleat and he became aware that CSCC had not entered into an agreement for access to the caves as they had requested in 2017. Butch and Les had been handling the negotiations and a draft agreement was agreed. Longleat wanted the agreement to be entered into by named individuals but no one would agree to signing and Butch was to investigate setting up a company to take on this responsibility. Longleat believed that everything had been agreed and that they had been waiting for over a year for the signed agreement to be returned. They had no response from CSCC on record and took the decision to close the caves and terminate all access until an agreement was signed.

Unaware of what had led to this situation I opened negotiations with Longleat. There was a major lack of information available and no one was clear as to what had happened or where we were, however initial talks were held and with a willingness to move forward on both sides things looked positive - and then the Covid happened. Longleat Estates staff were furloughed and they continued with a skeleton staff. They closed down their entire Cheddar operation and progressing an agreement on access to the caves was a very low priority.

I maintained regular contact with Longleat in the hope that they would progress the matter however they had other financial priorities including preparing the Cheddar operation for reopening in 2022. I passed on a request from Wessex for permission to remove of their kit from Spider but received no response. In October I managed to reopen negotiations, however they raised a number of major issues that needed resolving.

Liability and insurance was by far the biggest. I believed we had this covered in that I arranged for them to speak directly to the BCA insurance brokers, however that was all related to visiting the caves in their 'natural state' and they weren't aware, and there was a lack of understanding that in the process of digging and exploration we build walls, fit steelwork, install bolts etc etc. The caves manager specifically mentioned the 'walls' in Reservoir as an example. This immediately caused panic and raised a number of questions with respect to who does the work, materials use and inspection. Steelwork was also mentioned ... and then the discussion moved onto bolts and the installation, inspection and testing that they regularly undertake on the ones they have installed for their climbing (abseiling) wall.

As a direct result they required lists of all fixed aids and installations in all the caves, and detailed records kept of everything. They wanted to know the approval process and inspection requirements etc. Martin Grass provided an inventory for Reservoir and one was prepared for Spider. Lists are also required for all other caves. This is all new and Longleat wanted the agreement modified to include this and an additional clause was added. This also raised additional insurance questions and discussions were held between Howdens and BCA. A basic format for recording this information was prepared and when access is restored detailed lists will have to be prepared and maintained.

Who will sign the agreement is still to be resolved and Longleat are still working on the basis that it has to be in the name of individuals, however they agreed to refer this back to their solicitors.

I managed to get agreement for the Spider diggers to retrieve their equipment from the cave and a Longleat representative met us on site to give us access and confirm compliance with their requirements.

Unfortunately we suffered a possible setback recently when the Estates Manger left and it was necessary to go over much old ground with the person who is temporarily in post. Many of the issues he raised have been addressed and the main one, which has not been raised previously, is the provision of a RAMS. I am currently preparing something which will hopefully satisfy their requirements.

Notwithstanding the considerable problems in dealing with this matter I am hopeful of bringing it to conclusion relatively soon.

Stoke Lane Slocker

Following the fencing carried out around the collapsed stream sink to make it safe, measurements were taken for the replacement gates on the stream and quarry entrances, and the gates ordered.

Due to the heavy work load at the fabricators the main stream entrance gate wasn't finished until February when it was collected and fitted. The Parish Council were notified and were pleased that the entrance was now 'safe'. They queried when the gate on the quarry entrance would be fitted as this was potentially more dangerous to inquisitive children. The fabricators were asked to give this priority and the gate is currently being galvanised. In the meantime preparatory works have been done on the entrance ready for fitting as soon as it is available.

Originally the Parish Council asked for the entrances to be locked and the proposal was to fit a standard CSCC lock. However discussing this with the Council I have agreed that locks shouldn't be necessary as the gates are quite heavy and should in themselves be a deterrent to inquisitive children. For the quarry entrance the gate bolt has been fitted with a heavy duty spring so when properly closed it requires some degree of strength to open.

The possibility of a contribution towards the costs from the Parish Council was discussed, and subsequently a grant application submitted. Applicants are required to attend the meeting of the Council when it is considered and I am awaiting confirmation of the date.

Having visited the site a number of times to carry out these works, it has become obvious that the new sink and fencing need regular monitoring and the original sink may well need clearing of debris. Ways of facilitating this are under consideration.

Stoke Lane / Browne's Hole Access

I finally managed to meet someone from County Highways on site and although he didn't appear very positive about responsibility, the large rocks preventing parking on the roadside above Brownes Hole have since been removed.

There have been no further reports about anyone been approached by security guards.

Manor Farm Barn (Swildon's Changing Barn)

Having received a call from Robin Main to tell me that repairs to the roof had been carried out, the new flooring has been ordered. A team of volunteers has been organised to do the work.

In preparation, please could I ask for some volunteers to clean out the barn and remove all rubbish ready for the work. Thanks.

Box Mines

I have made some effort to communicate with Hanson regarding access to the moine but have made little headway. I was given the name of the 'correct' person to contact but having made approaches it appears that it is someone else's responsibility and he has passed on my request for the opportunity to discuss access. It seems to me that no one in particular wants to take any formal responsibility for the site. I will continue to pursue this but at present there seems little hope of getting anything sorted.

Star Shaft

Persons unknown have broken into the mine despite the measures taken to keep it secure pending fitting of the new gate. The landowner has had the entrance welded shut and is not happy. It is uncertain at present if we will be able to regain access. The new gate is being made and fitting will be discussed with the landowner when it's ready.

When visiting, the householder at the end of the lane expressed concerns about parking. I reassured him that our access guide stressed the need to park sensibly and not restrict access to the properties and limit the number of cars to two. He has obviously had problems in the past and I won't repeat his comment.

Singing River Mine

After many delays and complications, I would stress not through any fault on our side, the requirements of the landowner were finally agreed and they are satisfied with the insurance with the proviso that all visitors have full insurance cover. There was also a problem as to availability of keys as the landowner only wanted a single key to be held by CSCC. There was a lack of understanding how caving is organised and eventually he agreed to clubs with premises holding keys on the basis that keys would not be held by any individuals. Maybe difficult to administer, but this clearly defined which clubs could be keyholders.

His requirements was discussed iwth tyhe landowner and draft access arrangements were made available to the proposed keyholding clubs and others, regarding how trips would be booked etc and this fed back to the owner for agreement. Keyholding clubs have all nominated someone to take responsibility for bookings, and in most cases this is the caving secretary. A problem occurred when a well known caver told the landowner that it was normal for cavers to pay a goodwill fee, when it had been previously agreed with him that there wouldn't be a charge. How to administer this and other arrangements on how the new system would work took some finalising and it had been hoped to have everything up and running by the end of February but there were delays due to admin issues within some clubs primarily related to the booking system..

A web page was created outlining the access procedure specified by the landowner and this used as a basis for discussion with the clubs that were to be keyholders. Prior to finalising arrangements the opportunity was given for all member clubs to view the draft details of the new arrangements as notified in my report to the February Council meeting, but no one asked to see the details and therefore failed to take the opportunity to comment.

It's not been easy sorting this one, however after many complications we are finally there and the new access arrangements are operational, although there are a few admin issues still to resolve.

Full details of how to arrange access will be found on the CSCC Access Guide, however in essence there will be eight keyholding clubs through which access can be arranged following the procedure agreed with the landowner.

A copy of the new key has been provided to MCR.

Measurements have been taken for the new gate and this will be organised as soon as possible.

Daffodil Valley Mines at Shipham.

Some clearing and preparatory work has been done on the entrances. Shipham FC will be transporting some rock down valley so some preliminary works can be carried out on the Daffodil Mine entrance ready for the gate to be fitted. A gate plus a grill for the rift, is also being made for Tin Can Alley but the entrance will have to be cleared of branches etc placed by the FC as a safety measure, before the gate is fitted.

Other mines at Shipham:

While dealing with Daffodil Valley and SRM I was asked about a couple of other sites in Shipham where it would be good to have access. Both were located (after some difficulty) and found to be gated. The gates are in very poor condition and the locks seized. One site is currently up for sale and the agents will pass my contact details to the new owners if the land is purchased. With some help from the FC I found out who owned the second site and visited the owners. They were not aware there was an entrance on their land. They asked that I write to them which has been done, but to date no reply received.

Manor Farm Swallet

Following completion of the foundation work last year, the external reinforcing wall was constructed to support the grill and gate. Upon completion, due to the size and complex shape I asked the fabricators to measure, make and do the fitting.

A new lock was fitted and the keys given to the landowner. A copy of the key has been given to MCR. The new gate is a standard CSCC design which can be opened from the inside without a key. The key should now be returned to the farm after opening the cave and not at the end of the trip as was previously the case. The Access Guide has been updated to reflect the change regarding opening and returning the key, although it has always stated that visitors must call at the farm for a key.

It concerns me that there has been criticism about the cave being locked and the 'new arrangements'. These are not new arrangements and the CSCC Access Guide has always given the same access procedure. I asked if a standard CSCC lock could be fitted with a box for trip fees at the farm, however he would not agree to this as he wanted to know who was going down, and was unhappy about the number of visitors in recent years who have not called at the farm for permission - remember they could be seen from the house!

An adjustable belay bar has been incorporated into the frame and set at the lowest position. Initial feedback is that this may need raising which can be organised, but before this is done it would be useful to receive comments from users. Visitors were asked to provide me with feedback on this but nothing has been received. For safety, and to aid getting on/off rope or ladder some eye bolts have been obtained and will be fitted in the blockhouse as soon as possible.

Compton Martin Ochre Mine

Replacement of the gate on Compton Martin Ochre Mine has been pending for a long long time. One was made prior to Covid but it was stolen along with others gates, however it has now been necessary to give replacement very high priority following complaints from local residents that the open entrance that anyone can crawl into, presented a real danger to children who regularly play

in the area.

Strangely these complaints were received following a message in a similar vein being received from some cavers. Apparently the locals had been referred to me by the landowner.

The mine is gated as a requirement of the landowner for safety reasons and to protect the bat population. The mine is an important bat site and when visiting care must be taken to avoid any disturbance. The mine is closed and visits are not permitted during January.

The main purpose of the item is to give advance warning a new gate has been made and will be fitted in the next few weeks so please do not visit without the key.

The villagers also have concerns about parking. There is very limited parking in an obvious area on the left in front of Feltham Lodge before the end of the road. If no spaces are available you may have to park some distance away, taking care not to restrict the road or access to any properties.

Please note that if you try to find the mine using the description in Mendip Underground you are likely to have major problems. The easy route to the mine is to take the footpath on the left hand side just to the side of the last house at the end of the metalled road. Yes, this may appear to be taking you away from the combe but after a short distance a less defined path on the right can be followed up the hillside. When a flat area before the brow of the hill is reached you can cross the fence to the right into the wooded combe and the entrance will be found a short distance ahead on the left.

Maesbury Swallet

The new gate was fitted but some work at the entrance remains to be completed.

Pressure Washers

The donated Peli cases were fitted out with padding to accommodate the pressure washers partly funded by the generous donation from Pete Glanvill. Additional batteries and wide neck water containers were purchased and tubes made up to transport the lance; before making the kits available for loan. The kits can be borrowed, normally for one month, and a deposit is charged. Contact me to make arrangements.

Loxton Caves

Persons unknown broke into both Loxton Cave and Loxton Cavern. The lock was damaged on the main Loxton Cave gate and this was replaced. At the top entrance they dug a hole to the side of the gate gaining direct entry into the shaft. The hole was temporarily covered with a stone slab. At Loxton Cavern they have damaged the gate by cutting off the lock cover with an angle grinder so they could gain easy access to the lock to remove it. The entrance was temporarily secured whilst the gate was repaired.

The upper entrance to Loxton Cave had to be completely rebuilt as a result of the damage. As expected the Parish Council who own the land, were none too happy about this and it has involved some diplomacy to maintain access and the status quo.

Loxton Cavern

Following completion of the entrance rebuilding by Cerberus, taping was started prior to Covid, and recently recommenced with a view to reinstating access as soon as possible. So far the taping work has required four visits and there is still some to do plus figuring out a way to install some protective measures for some important floor imprints.

For anyone not aware, this is an incredibly important historical / industrial archaeological site that was discovered (reopened) by the BEC who set up an access arrangement to protect the site. This

was then passed to CSCC for implementation and administration. Specified clubs were invited to name leaders and the keys given to CSCC for distribution and to organise leader familiarisation days etc. All leaders were required to sign an undertaking that they understood the responsibilities involved in being a leader and would abide by the access rules and protect the cave and mining remains.

Chris Binding (then the C&A Officer) has provided me with details of the access procedure and the original leaders list. I have been in contact with all the clubs with leaders and some leaders will continue and some are being replaced. When I have a full list of leaders (who will be referred to as wardens from now on) I will arrange familiarisation days as necessary and distribute the keys. Not previously specified, I have added a condition that being a warden also involves a willingness to take trips requested by anyone that is not a member of their own club and to this end their contact details will be published on a Wardens List.

There is a 'fixed' knotted rope handline on the climb up to Harfords Landing. I have supplemented this with another rope that can be used for the descent. Something safer and more permanent needs installing.

Ubley Warren Pot

Little progress on this. Early in the year a visit was made to assess the amount of scaffold required to build a tower but alternatives are under consideration.

Ubley Warren Reserve

A number of the entrances have suffered with attempted breakins resulting in damage to locks and gates. Most of these locks are in exposed positions and some housings which can be bolted in place, are being made to protect them. They have had a go at six entrances during the past year. Two more entrances were located that need to be fitted with standard locks. This will be done as soon as the existing locks can be forcibly removed. The bat survey as required by SWT was put on hold due to Covid and will be reorganised as soon as possible.

Cow Hole

Following another change of ownership it was possible to renegotiate access to Cow Hole and the cave is now available for visits.

There is no requirement to call on the owner, however the following procedure must be followed.

The entrance is located in the field one removed from the road. Park neatly on the verge in Ubley Drove taking care not to obstruct any gateways, leaving plenty of space for tractors with large trailers to manoeuvre.

Follow the track across the first field from the gate situated at ST 51534 57093, which is between Ubley Barn and Ubley Hill Farm. This field is effectively part of the garden of Ubley Barn and it is essential that the gates at both ends are shut. There is a right of access across the field and no need to obtain permission to use it.

The cave is located at ST 51963 567643 in the second field.

The entrance is not very visible and a GPS is useful to locate it. If the field is planted with a grass crop for hay it is essential to take a direct route to the entrance and avoid excessive damage to the grass. If the field is in use for grazing and animals are present, it will be necessary for one member of the party to remain on the surface to safeguard the entrance.

To solve these problems I propose that the gate is replaced with one that has a single lock, can be locked and still opened from inside and has a belay for ladder incorporated as per the standard CSCC design. I also propose fitting marker posts at the edge of the field to aid location. The cost

is probably in the region of £1000.

WARNING. Please note that the route from the bottom of the entrance shaft and the pitch into the Main Chamber is of questionable stability and appropriate care must be taken. There is very limited space at the head of the pitch which is fitted with resin anchors. The pitch is not suitable for SRT.

Heale Farm Cave

The situation here is somewhat confused at the moment. This seems to have resulted from a total breakdown in farmer family communication. The cave was closed for some years whilst in the ownership of Aggregate Industries, however a few years ago the land was acquired by Green Farm. This gave the opportunity to try and regain access and agreement was reached for CSCC to hold a key and control access. The entrance was overgrown and blocked with fallen trees. The site was cleared and made accessible and the farmer cleared a footpath along their specified approach route from the road. A new lock was fitted and CSCC were given a key for use by visitors following an agreed access procedure.

Prior to Covid a visiting party could not get in due to the key not working. The lock had been changed by persons unknown without the knowledge of the landowner. With the onset of Covid the landowner did not want visitors and the issues with the lock etc were left pending. At the same time, the farmer was in the process of retiring due to ill health and the farm was being transferred to his son. I have now met with the son and found him totally unaware that there were any caves on the land. There are three others in addition to Heale Farm Cave. Running a dairy farm is a bigger challenge than he realised and he is currently in the process of selling all the stock. As soon as this is sorted he wants a tour of the entrances to know where they are and will discuss future access arrangements.

Hobnail Hole / Thrupe Lane Swallet

Due to an unstable boulder in Black Pot, Hobnail Hole was closed for a period. ATLAS carried out the necessary stabilisation work and the entrance is again accessible and fitted with the standard CSCC lock. A standard lock was also fitted to the Thrupe entrance.

Access Guide

Throughout the year I have continued to keep the online Access Guide up to date and have started adding additional sites which need to be included. A major concern of mine is that people don't seem to use it! A number of times I have received queries about access and have to refer people to the guide, similarly I have been made aware of complaints about changes in access whereas if those complaining had referred to the guide they would see there hasn't been a change at all! Use of the Access Guide needs to be promoted.

I have made a request to MCRA that access information is not included in the next edition of Mendip Underground, and that readers are referred to the Access Guide. Much of the access information in the current edition is incorrect and out of date and this does cause problems. All access information needs to be available in one location, although of course it is vitally important that this is kept up to date. This will be discussed at the next MU editorial meeting.

Ubley Hill Pot

Further to the initial discussions with the new landowner, he was visited in mid 2021 and although he would not allow access at the time he said he may be amenable to access in the future. Another meeting was held with him in March 2022 and although he was friendly he declined to allow access for the time being. I explained that we had funds approved to replace the gate and carry out associated landscaping work providing he would allow access. He said he would think about it, but not immediately, and to come and see him again next year. A date for the diary!

Caves on land at Pondsmead, Oakhill

Major rebuilding works were undertaken on the Stout Slocker entrance, necessary as a result of the damage caused when the gate was stolen. The replacement gate, and the new gate on Lady Of The Lake, were both fitted by the end of May deadline as required by the landowner as a condition of keeping the caves open.

Mine at Manor Farm, Charterhouse

Stabilisation work on the top of the shaft was completed and the entrance raised above ground level as requested by the farmer. A gate was installed and fitted with a CSCC standard lock..

Waterwheel Swallet

I received a report that Waterwheel had been broken into. Apparently others had seen it earlier, but not bothered to report it. Immediate action was taken to secure the entrance due to it's high profile location. The gate was taken away for repair and a statement issued on the situation:

"Waterwheel has recently been broken into and the gate vandalised. The gate has been removed for repair/replacement and the entrance has been secured with a non-removable grill. Everyone will appreciate that it is not possible to leave the entrance unsecured due to the caves high profile location on a popular nature reserve. Repairs to the gate will be carried out as soon as possible. Until the gate is replaced the cave is not available for trips.

If anyone has any information on the persons responsible or would like further information, please contact me."

Repairs were carried out on the gate but unfortunately it could not be refitted. It was returned to the fabricators and the entire gate and frame had to be reconstructed. This needed high priority and delayed work on other gates awaiting construction.

The new gate was fitted as soon as it was ready, and the cave reopened.

Five Buddles Sink

I received a report that there had been a collapse above ground at one of the entrances and that the gate was buried. Initial investigations have failed to locate either entrance. Steps are being taken to find them and works will be organised to make them accessible.

CSCC Locks

I would like to apologise if anyone finds an old style lock on a cave. It is possible with some of the less visited sites. Prior to Covid we had a programme for replacing all the locks and a number of people volunteered to help and were given the locks to do this. Whilst I was grateful for the offers of help unfortunately due to the restrictions some people forgot, mislaid the locks, or can't quite remember what they did. Fortunately this shouldn't be a major issue as I asked everyone to keep the old key on the ring. If an old lock is found please report it so that it can be changed.

There haven't been any reports of inoperable locks except those that have been damaged by attempted breakins.

All official keys are stamped 'CSCC' and these are the only one that should be in use. Recently I was asked to exchange a key that didn't work properly. It was a copy! Poorly cut copies cause damage to the locks and should not be used. All member clubs are eligible for a minimum of two keys and replacements if needed can be obtained from myself.

Although new gates are designed with consideration to protecting the locks, those that are in exposed situations or have been operated with muddy hands can sometimes be a problem. It is

sometimes useful to have a suitable lubricant such as GT85 or specialised lock lubricant available to help. The use of WD40 is a problem in that it is not a lubricant, but a water and oil displacing solvent. It can certainly free up a seized lock but will remove any lubricant already in the lock and leave it dry and susceptible to jamming.

Gate Fabrication etc

Further progress on various sites including Star Mine Shaft, Daffodil Mine, Tin Can Alley, Fern Mine, Singing River Mine etc is pending manufacture of the gates by the fabricators. Unfortunately making cave gates is lower priority than more profitable work, however I would like to thank them for acting quickly when it has been necessary. During the past year I think I have probably visited them every couple of weeks.

The fabricators have told me that the cost of steel has gone up dramatically since the beginning of the year, as have all other costs, and the cost of our gates will likely be £100 to £150 more per unit. This needs to be budgeted for in our costings and BCA need to be made aware of the probably increase in the costs of projects already approved.

We need to order more pigtail risers. The last batch of 100 cost £210. Considering increased costs a new batch of 100 is likely to be more like £300. I would suggest purchasing 200 if possible. New supplies of tape and fixings are also needed. Approximate cost £100.

Mendip District Council - Landscape Character Assessment Consultation

Comments were submitted to MDC prior to last years AGM and although an acknowledgement of receipt was received there has been no further correspondence from them. As some very important points were made in the submission I have tried to find out what happened to the consultation and if our comments have been taken into account. So far I have not been able to obtain a response other than the normal email acknowledgement. This is being pursued.

Comment

I am worried that the current problems we are suffering with break-ins may result in the loss of access to some sites. I have spoken to various landowners and it is becoming clear that they are not happy with what is going on. This is involving CSCC in extra and unnecessary work, considerable expense, and some very delicate negotiations. I don't think that all the attempted break-ins are necessarily to gain access, or even by cavers as some seem utterly pointless and would appear to be pure vandalism for the sake of it. It would be helpful to catch someone so we can get a better idea of what is going on.

I have reviewed the access document presented by the Chairman and feel that this is possibly more applicable to a corporate environment where employees may be held accountable for anything and everything they do. In essence the document outlines much of what is already done and doesn't need defining in such detail. It could potentially remove any degree of flexibility which may be essential in some instances and could open the relevant person negotiating access to criticism for not following a procedure defined in the document that someone else might consider to have been a more appropriate way to deal with a situation. I wonder if an access strategy can be adequately defined by a brief statement along the lines 'The objective of the CSCC is to make access to all caves and mines in the CSCC region as freely available as possible taking into account conservation, safety and insurance interests, and the requirements of the landowner.'

Graham Price
Conservation & Access Officer
May 2022