

Conservation & Access Report

CSCC Annual General Meeting 14 May 2021

Everyone will appreciate that the Covid situation and lockdowns has had a major impact on making progress with C&A business. Work has been accumulating and it may take some considerable time playing 'catch up' when things return to some sort of normality.

Notwithstanding this there has been a considerable amount of work has been done and on average I would estimate up to two days a week has been spent on CSCC business during the lockdowns. Since the easing of lockdown this workload has increased significantly and in particular over the last couple of weeks where most days have been taken up with C&A matters.

This report covers lists all C&A business (in no particular order) either pending, ongoing or in progress. Some of the text is reproduced from past reports and updated where applicable..

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

Notification was received from Longleat that all the caves on their property at Cheddar were closed and that access was denied for the time being. Notification was issued to the caving community in general and to the digging teams active in Spider Hole and Goughs, as well as the CDG and the administration for Reservoir Hole access.

The reason given for the closure was that CSCC had not entered into the formal access agreement which Longleat had requested in 2017. Longleat were of the opinion that everything had been agreed and that they had been waiting for over a year for the signed agreement to be returned. There is clearly considerable confusion as to the exact position, in that we believed we were waiting for feedback on a revised draft that we had sent to them. The person initially dealing with the matter at Longleat moved on sometime ago and they are investigating further and reviewing their position, however irrespective of this, access will not be reinstated until an agreement has been finalised. Longleat have clearly stated that they would like to see access for cavers but it has to be on their terms.

We are in continual contact with Longleat and are working toward resolving this matter as soon as possible, however Longleat have said they have done nothing since notifying us of the closure as most of the staff in their Estates Department were furloughed. Normally they have ten people in the department but are currently operating with only two, and they cannot guarantee being able to make any progress until sometime after things get back to normal. In the meantime they have said the they would like their own locks fitted to the gated caves and this is being discussed with them

I would like to thank Butch for all the work he did previously trying to sort this out and to him and Linda for providing me with all the information they have available.

CSCC Locks

As reported previously most sites have been fitted with the new locks although I am awaiting confirmation from certain 'helpers' that sites they volunteered to do, have been done. There has been a setback to this process due to the Covid restrictions.

A CSCC key with a distinctive tag was found on Priddy Green. I have twice emailed all clubs but no one has yet claimed it.. Keys were issued to member clubs that requested them.

One problem occurred when it was reported a club could not open a lock, however there was no

problem with the lock and it transpired that they were either using the wrong key or a copy. Note that all keys for the new Abloy locks, which are widely and freely available, are stamped CSCC, and are guaranteed to work. Please do not use copies.

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.

Please report or return for replacement any problem locks.

A further supply of locks has been ordered.

I received an application for a key from a Christian Riley Duddy who wanted to visit Balch Cave. I suggested he borrowed one from a club. He said he was not a member of a club. He later came back and said he was a member of BCA. I check this and there was no record of him and dealt with the request accordingly.

Stoke Lane Slocker

I had a look at the entrance and found no evidence of any issues that had been reported by a dog walker, however some weeks later I received a report from the Parish Council that a dangerous hole had opened in the streambed upstream of the entrance. They also noted that the 'grill' from the cave entrance was missing. They wanted the new hole and the entrance made safe and asked if we could deal with it or if not, then did we have contact details for the landowner and they would approach him. I had a look at the collapse which was approximately 3m across and 1.5m deep and taking the entire stream, which was considerable. I discussed this with the other CSCC Officers and we agreed that we needed to take quick action so fencing materials were purchased and the Cerberus digging team spent a couple of evenings fencing and making the collapse inaccessible. This is not to say 'safe' as the stream was undercutting the sides of the hole and there is a wall and concrete structure overhanging the hole which has been temporarily supported with an Acrow.

The Parish Council have expressed their gratitude for this being dealt with quickly. They have asked when we will be able to replace the 'grill' on the cave entrance which went missing sometime ago, as it is highly visible and close to a footpath. They subsequently asked that the quarry entrance was also gated. Funding for the fencing and gates was approved by BCA.

Stoke Lane / Browne's Hole Access

Somerset County Council were approached but were not very helpful about the pull-in which would appear to be part of the highway. If it can be confirmed that it is part of the highway the quarry owner has no right to stop people parking there. I have queried if he was given permission to place the large boulders there no response has been received. The hope is that if he is approached by SCC he won't be aware of our involvement to avoid raising the profile of the caves. I recently met with the local highways maintenance engineer and he said he would try and find out. I have not received recent reports of any issues involving cavers but am aware of some walkers having had problems with his security guards.

The position of the land boundary on the ground was looked at but is difficult to confirm an exact position. The Land Registry maps that were provided by Linda Wilson did not help clarify the location of the boundary, however I managed to track down plans that were originally submitted with the planning application for Stoke Lane Quarry some years ago. These show Brownes Hole within the boundary of land owned by the owner of Stoke Lane and Stoke Lane Quarry so it seems

clear that Mr Massey does not own Brownes Hole.

It is helpful to have the information available should problems arise but it is not intended to otherwise take any action other than pursuing contact with SCC.

Caves on Access Land

Due to possible or potential issues associated with the BCA and CROW the Chairman asked that we have available a list of all CSCC area caves on 'Access Land' should we need it. I have this list available if needed.

Aveline's Hole

I received a report that the gate had been damaged. Details were forwarded to UBSS for them to deal with.

Pressure Washers

At the suggestion of Pete Glanvil and further to his kind offer to donate proceeds from the his Reservoir Hole publication toward the cost, pressure washers were purchased and will soon be available for loan for conservation projects. Peli cases were donated by Peli UK. The cases have been fitted out and instructions for use prepared. Due to the size of the filter on the hose water containers have purchased with a large enough opening for the filter to fit. A single container will be provided with each kit. If additional water is needed borrowers will have to make their own arrangements for supply. The equipment will be available on a time limited basis and a to ensure its return a deposit will be payable.

Cave Fest

There were discussions with the organisers of Cave Fest and it was agreed that in future any profits will be split equally between CSCC (for conservation work) and Rescue (previously the sole beneficiaries). They have suggested that we might like to give a presentation on cave conservation during the Cavefest weekend and I provisionally accepted this invitation.

Gate Thefts

Along with other steelwork the new gate that was to be installed at Compton Martin Ochre Mine, the old Hunters gate that was earmarked for YAH at Blakes Farm, and some specially made scaffold fittings made for Ubley Warren were stolen from the Cerberus hut. The theft was reported to the police who were not helpful and seemed reluctant to pursue this despite any sales to scrapyards having to be recorded by law. I highlighted the issue with BCA and additional funds to cover replacement costs were approved.

Manor Farm Barn (Swildon's Changing Barn)

The floor in the barn is in very poor condition and changing covers keep putting their feet through it. Part of the barn is above the milking parlour and recently someone put their foot through collapsing the ceiling below. Obviously this is not good and could have resulted in major damage to the tanks. I met with Robin Main and if it wasn't that he is incredibly caver friendly we could have had major problems. He is happy for the barn to continue in use providing the floor is replaced. A new floor was laid 20+ years ago by overlaying the original floor with standard chipboard flooring

sheets. It is surprising how long it has lasted considering how wet it gets. The proposal is to replace the floor with water resistant chipboard at an approximate cost of £1000.

Although some individuals have volunteered to help I would welcome a single club/group who uses the barn regularly to come forward and volunteer to take this on.

As an interim measure, following a discussion with Robin, I put up warning signs asking cavers to take appropriate care.

BCA approved funds for replacement of the floor.

It is not sensible to replace the floor until holes in the roof are repaired. This was discussed with Robin Main and he agreed to carry out the repairs on the roof. Repairs to the roof are pending and the floor will be replaced when these are completed.

Box Mines

Following a rescue I was asked if something could be done about access to Box Mines. In 2005 CSCC negotiated an agreement which was terminated by Hanson in 2017 when they decided to close the mine and stop all access. This was a knock on effect from the sale of their Bath Stone quarry interests to Johnston's Quarry Group. Johnston's were not interested in taking abandoned mines as part of the deal so this left Hanson's with a liability.

I managed to track down and speak to their Landscape Manager who is responsible for the site. He informed me that to stop the continued illegal access, Hanson were planning to permanently seal all the entrances with mass concrete. He said that this was being done in liaison with Natural England to maintain bat access. He further said that Hanson were not aware of any interest in the mines by cavers and that he was not aware of any contact from CSCC.

As far as I can determine, we did not have any contact with Hanson in 2017 when they terminated our access agreement and closed the mine. The situation was discussed in detail with their Landscape Manager, and at his suggestion I put forward a case in writing for maintaining access to the mines for cavers. He said he would pass this on to the relevant people in their management structure. In my discussion with him it was not clear who was ultimately responsible for the mine and it seemed there were a number of possibilities, which is why he said he would get it to the right person. He did say that one of the managers at least, would not be sympathetic to any sort of access.

No formal response to my submission has been received to date but as with everyone else they have a number of furloughed staff and are concentrating on operational aspects of their business so this may be very low priority. Through various contacts I am trying to find out who it may be worth approaching at higher management levels but it is critical to make approaches to the 'right' individual.

Star Shaft

The gate on Star Shaft failed completely. It is at end of life and not repairable and needs replacing. As a temporary measure the entrance is not accessible and has been secured with a chain. Info has been posted on the web site and Facebook. This is also an opportunity to deal with replacement of the belay points for the pitch which has been an ongoing issue for some time. It has been suggested that the belay points could be incorporated in the gate which seems very sensible. Considering the additional work required with the belay points and the replacement of the fixed ladder will cost a minimum of £1000. Funding has been approved by BCA.

Singing River Mine

The mine is under new ownership. I have tried to make contact with the new owner via a friend of his but with no response so far, however I am informed that they are happy with continued access to the mine and cavers have been visiting. A number of attempts to contact him were made without success and a key with details of the published access procedure were posted to him. He has not responded. When in Shipham dealing with other matters I will visit again.

Mines at Shipham.

There are three mines (Daffodil Mine, Tin Can Alley, and DGW Mine) on land owned by Shipham Football Club. As the land is regularly visited by children they asked for the entrances made safe and secured. A site meeting was held with the the Chairman of the football club. One entrance requires capping and gating , the second some fencing and a gate, and for the third some fencing will suffice. The FC is quite happy for access to be available via the CSCC locking system. A copy of the new Somerset Underground book was given to the club as a goodwill gesture and I would propose to do likewise and give copies to other landowners as appropriate. The estimated costs for two gates and the fencing is approximately £1800. The funds were approved by BCA. Some of the fencing work has been done.

Manor Farm Swallet

The landowners insurance company required the shaft to be grilled. A meeting was held with the landowner to discuss his requirements. The Council agreed that to fit a grill the walls would need reinforcing with an outer skin of block or stone work. Further discussions were held with the landowner as to how this could be achieved and what his requirements were. A provisional estimate for a grill was obtained with some complications due to the contractor not being paid for a previous invoice. This was subsequently resolved. A temporary grill was placed over the entrance pending permanent works. Funding for the works was approved by BCA.

With the assistance Cerberus and MCG members a foundation for the new wall has been dug and a concrete foundation laid. Concrete blocks have also been transported to the entrance and construction of the wall will begin next week.

Maesbury Swallet

A response from Dinder Estates is awaited however the Trustees haven't held a meeting. Surface works are still to be completed.

Loxton Cavern

Some minor building work is still needed to finish stabilisation work underground. The surface needs clearing of debris and the assistance of someone with a large trailer would be appreciated. The right hand series (Catcotts Chamber etc) has been retaped. The left hand series could not be done due to running out of tape, a supply of which has now been sourced.

Not Loxton Cavern but **Loxton Cave** and **Loxton Quarry Cave**. Attempts to, contact the Clerk of the Parish Council to issue them with a new key to the caves had not been successful, however the reason for this was that he had sadly died and the new Clerk did not have our contact details and correspondence was not being passed on. This has since been rectified and a new key has been provided.

Ubley Warren Pot

With the use of an extending ladder purchased for the task and some careful climbing, it has been possible to get close to the roof of the main chamber to investigate how to stabilise the boulders. Measurements were taken at this level and the chamber is too wide to span with anything that could possibly be taken underground. The only solution is to build a scaffold tower to access the roof safely before determining the work necessary. An alternative of fixing scaffold to the walls using specially made brackets was going to be tried but the brackets were stolen with the gates (see above). A new supply of brackets is being sourced.

Ubley Warren Reserve

The access agreement is still to be arranged however work has been done on maintenance of the entrances and replacement of damaged and forcibly removed locks. A recent inspection identified a further four entrances that need standard locks fitting. The existing locks on these are inoperable and will need forcibly removing which may not be an easy task in two cases. Continued break-ins and damage to the gates may cause problems with finalising the access agreement

The bat survey was put on hold due to the Covid situation but will be organised as soon as possible.

Cow Hole

Stabilisation work has been delayed due to Covid restrictions. Completion of the bolting is pending availability of bolts etc.

Elm Cave

Installation of the proposed gate by third parties is pending.

Heale Farm Cave

Reopening will be discussed with the landowner when all Covid restrictions have been lifted.

Blackmoor Reserve

The proposed meeting with the ANOB Manager was cancelled but will be rearranged when possible.

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 Database

Following editing facilities being organised the database has been brought up to date. A great deal of information in the database was outdated. Updating the database is an ongoing process. Please notify me of any incorrect or missing information and I will update as necessary.

Ubley Hill Pot

The land is in the process of being sold. The new owner is proposing to build a property on the land and has a portable home on site. He has carried out work on the adjoining field where the cave is situated, clearing vegetation and improving the grass to near lawn quality. He was not aware of the existence of a cave and had not been told about it by the vendor. He was aware of pipes in the ground and a metal lid which he has tried to make inaccessible. The existing gate is in very poor condition and is not lockable. An initial discussion with him suggests that he may be amenable to allowing continued access, however this is subject to confirmation. If access can be maintained it will be necessary to replace the gate and I propose that funding is made available for this.

Caves on land at Pondsmead, Oakhill

In Oakhill on land at Pondsmead there are four caves including Stout Slocker, Slim Slocker, and Lady Of The Lake. There are also two artificial lakes separated by listed grottos. The lakes are fed from a spring with the water, originally diverted through culverts for other purposes, now sinking downstream of the lakes in 'Lady Of The Lake'.

The owners also owned Pondsmead Care Home and had no interest in the land which had been acquired as part of the original estate. Access to the land and the caves was denied by the owners due to liability concerns. In 2018 the land was put up for auction and purchased by local residents and it was possible to negotiate access to the caves. The arrangement was that there would be restricted access and that the existing gates, installed by Cerberus Spelaeological Society some years earlier, were maintained and the entrances locked. The entrance to Lady Of The Lake was a collapse in the stream bed. The entrance was cleared and a shaft installed to the surface.

The owners have done considerable work renovating the grottos and lakes and clearing the land, and are proposing to use it for camping / glamping commencing in June.

Very recently the gate on Stout has gone missing and the landowners were considering sealing the entrance permanently. I met with them and said that we could replace the gate. The entrance to Lady Of The Lake was also looked at and as this is an open shaft, albeit temporarily covered with boarding, they have cleared all the vegetation and removed the fencing from the immediate area and were considering covering the entrance and backfilling the area. I said that we could raise the shaft the remaining distance to ground level and install a gate. They were provisionally agreeable to these proposals providing that the work is completed by the end of May and that they have approval of the gate design for Lady Of The lake as it is now in a highly visible area.

Normally I would have brought this to a meeting of the Council but this wasn't practical within the necessary time scale, so following approval by the Officers funding was sought from and approved by BCA.

There was a lot of damage resulting from removal of the Stout gate and the entrance rift was found to be unstable. Considerable preparatory work has been necessary prior to fitting of the new gates. The gates have been made and will be fitted next week, ahead of the end of May deadline.

Mine at Manor Farm, Charterhouse

A mine shaft was revealed on land at Manor Farm when the entrance collapsed after the landowners son drove his quad bike over it. The mine is situated above the Longwood Valley in an area that is known to have been mined, but where no mines have been previously accessible. With the help of MCG members the accessible part of the shaft was stabilised and the shaft temporarily covered. The bottom of the shaft is blocked with collapsed material. The landowner is

agreeable to the mine remaining accessible but requires the shaft to be raised above ground level to be visible to tractors etc, and a gate to be fitted. Recently some work has been done toward raising the existing ginged shaft to ground level and funds are required for completion of the building work and installation of a gate.

Mendip District Council - Landscape Character Assessment Consultation

A Landscape Character Assessment has been carried out by consultants Macgregor Smith on behalf of Mendip District Council. The results were published online for public consultation sometime ago but there appears to be very little publicity about this. I became aware of the consultation via a random 'Tweet' by MDC on 19/2/21 with an invitation to submit comments on the consultation by the closing date 28/2/21.

Unfortunately just over a week gave very little time to thoroughly go through the document and comment in detail. Such short notice of the closing date for comments is totally inadequate, particularly when this is unlikely to reach the relevant interested parties via a Council Tweet. Additionally, to view and comment on a document of this nature and complexity viewing it online presents major difficulties. The document really needed to be available as a hard copy to be given proper consideration.

Despite the time limitations, and the difficulty working with a disjointed online document, it was clear there were major issues with the content. For the purposes of the Assessment the Council area was divided into six geographical areas. Only two of these have any relevance to us - Central Mendip and East Mendip, and these were the only areas considered. Any content relating to the other areas was not looked at.

I must make it clear that the document contains many inaccuracies, many significantly important features are missed, and not enough importance is given to many aspects of the landscape and possibly the most important and significant features of a karst landscape are barely noted.

The comments were submitted but no acknowledgement has been received.

A copy of the submission is attached.

Graham Price
Conservation & Access Officer
May 2021

Mendip District Council - Landscape Character Assessment Consultation Comments submitted on behalf of Council of Southern Caving Clubs

Unfortunately, we only became aware of this consultation a week ago upon receipt of a MDC 'Tweet' and this has given very little time to thoroughly go through the document and comment in detail. A weeks notice of the closing date for comments is totally inadequate, particularly when this is unlikely to reach the relevant interested parties via a Council Tweet.. Additionally, to view and comment on a document of this nature and complexity viewing it online presents major difficulties. The document really does need to be available as a hard copy to be given proper consideration.

Taking into account the time limitations, and the difficulty working with a disjointed online document, we have some comments which need to be taken into account. Our comments only refer to the two geographical areas - Central Mendip and East Mendip. Any content relating to the other areas has not been looked at.

As a general point the document contains many inaccuracies, many significantly important features are missed, and not enough importance is given to many aspects of the landscape and possibly the most important and significant features of a karst landscape are barely noted.

The comments below roughly cover the document sections indicated, but there may be some overlap. Also, they should not be considered to be fully comprehensive due to time limitations.

Section 5 - Area 1

Statements about caves are inaccurate.

Not enough emphasis on this being a karst environment which defines the nature of the landscape.

The Mendip landscape exhibits a range of 'Karst' formations such as sinkholes (not spelt 'sink hole'), swallets, caves and resurgence springs and streams.

It is difficult to differentiate between sinkholes and swallets. Swallet would normally be a term defining an active stream sink, and abandoned swallet used to indicate one that had once taken a stream. Active swallets are rare and the vast majority of these features on Mendip would be more appropriately termed sinkhole (not usually a term used for these features on Mendip) or more commonly shakeholes, or depressions, or dolines; and occasionally on eastern Mendip as slockers.

Other than dry valleys, not mentioned and a major exclusion are the sinkholes (see above); which should be recognised as one of the primary features of a karst landscape. The text needs to clarify that 'sinkholes' are in reality the depressions or hollows that actually define a karst landscape. Their importance cannot be understated.

A survey of the central Mendip plateau completed in 1988 identified 2245 shakeholes of varying size and depth. These were, and still are to a large extent the most significant feature of the landscape that gives it its identity. Less than 20 years later more than 60% had been filled and the ground levelled. This process is continuing today and quite possibly the most significant feature of the Mendip landscape is rapidly disappearing. The ongoing destruction of the karst landscape is unacceptable and needs to be stopped.

All the shakeholes identified in the survey were previously accepted by MDC to be important landscape features and were put onto the MDC GIS so they could be identified for planning and other purposes. This resource needs to be recognised.

Section 5 - Area 2

Much of Area 2 comprises a karst landscape that was originally not dissimilar to Area 1. However

many of the karst features have been significantly altered as the area has been intensively farmed since the land was enclosed following the Enclosure Act commencing in 1773. A very limited number of shakeholes remain unfilled and need protection. Streams have been artificially kept on the surface to supply water for agricultural needs, water supplies and for industrial purposes, the original swallets having since disappeared.. The location of some are known and ideally need to be excavated. It needs to be recognised that the East Mendip landscape has been significantly altered by people and many of the natural features have disappeared or are difficult to identify.

The text mentions 'smaller cave systems' suggesting the caves that are presently known are of less importance than those on central Mendip, however this is far from the truth. The area has a cave with a 60m deep shaft being the longest single underground drop on Mendip, and caves with some of the best formations in the country. These sites are of major importance and significance.

Section 6 - 6.1

The text says that the most significant caves systems are located around Priddy. This in itself is not accurate in that most of the caves lie to the west of the village. There are also caves of major significance at Charterhouse.

There is no ruin in Harridge Wood forming a small cascade - there isn't a stream in Harridge Wood and possibly no ruins.

Karst is misspelt.

The term 'karst geology' is used incorrectly. Karst is a term that describes the topography. Geology relates to the physical structure of the rock.

Although mining and mining remains are mentioned, it is given nowhere enough importance. Much of the central Mendip plateau has been considerably affected by mining activities and this has significantly shaped the landscape. There are a few areas of mining activity still apparent and these areas need protecting as they are the Mendip landscape and a very important part of it. Large areas of central Mendip now show no sign of past mining activity as the land has been reclaimed for farming purposes. This reclaimed land is not natural and should not be regarded as such, and therefore justifies no lesser protection than the areas where mining remains still exist. Areas where all the mining landscape have been obliterated include Green Ore and Hillgrove. The longest known lead mine on Mendip is located at Hillgrove. There are regular collapses revealing shafts at both locations and the importance of these discoveries should be noted and an opportunity given for them to be fully investigated. They are an importance feature of the landscape and when revealed need to be protected.

Section 6 - 6.2

Only one 'small area of ancient woodland' (Ham Wood) is mentioned. Why is Home Wood not also included?

The sentence "... Maesbury and Beacon Hill attracted Bronze Age monuments and Iron Age Forts" is incorrect Maesbury is Iron Ages and Beacon Hill is Bronze Age - incorrectly stated in the text.

The statement "Oakhill has a few more substantial buildings including the former brewery and Oakhill Manor" is partly incorrect and partly misleading. The original Oakhill Brewery buildings were demolished some years ago and replaced with a housing development. The buildings most likely referred to were maltings and not the former brewery. The house currently named Oakhill Manor was never a manor house and has only relatively recently been given its current name, originally being called 'Hillylands'. To name it in the text is misleading, and in any case 'Pondsmead' would be more appropriately included.

Slade Bottom is mentioned more than once - where is this - do you mean Stoke Bottom?

No mention is made of the highly significant Ashwick Grove with remains of old house, fish ponds, caves and risings etc

What about the mill and abandoned village at Stoke Bottom.

What about the abandoned mill and iron works at Stoke Lane

Where is the semi ornamental reservoir that is mentioned.

There is no such thing as Coleford Coal Canal - this was the Dorset and Somerset Canal - the aqueduct was at Coleford so could be called the Coleford Aqueduct.

In conclusion.

Although Mendip is clearly a karst landscape it must be recognised that many of the natural features have been modified by man and this is what has shaped the landscape in many instances.

On Central Mendip the landscape has been gradually changed from early times by mining activities which have taken place over a large area, and more latterly by agricultural activities and forestry which have obliterated many of the historical mining remains. Features that define the karst landscape are continuing to disappear at an alarming rate.

On East Mendip the landscape has been greatly modified commencing with the enclosure of the land and the change from open forest to farming and changes to support this; and more latterly from industrial and quarrying activities.

Graham Price
Conservation & Access Officer
February 2021