

The Great Northern Time Machine - image by Mark Lonnen

The Waters Under The Earth

Alan L. Jeffreys is a member of the Grampian Speleological Group, who for over 50 years have been at the forefront of cave exploration, revealing the hidden world beneath the Highlands ...

DIVING IN British caves is not for the faint-hearted and definitely not regarded as sport. Fundamentally, it is just a method of pursuing the exploration of passages previously thought impassable. Conditions are usually the reverse of delightful.

Flooded tunnels, or sumps, behave exactly the same way as their above-water kin; they can be tight, sinuous, low, jagged and boulder-strewn, with a killer additive – silt. First man in may have the luck of reasonable visibility. Those following may as well be swimming through strong, milky coffee. Guide lines are absolutely essential; lose your hold on one and disorientation may end in fatality.

Divers must possess a comprehensive understanding of caves and caving techniques, before they even think of plunging into their nearest sump. Definitely not sport and not for the faint-hearted, but entirely necessary if new discoveries are to be wrung from unforgiving limestones.

On the whole, Scottish caves are shorter and shallower than their English or Welsh counterparts, but their potential for extension has been proven many times, most spectacularly in North West Sutherland, where systems in Cambrian limestone now attain passage lengths

measured in kilometres. One major cave in particular, Uamh an Claonaite ('Cave of the Sloping Rock'), captured my attention. A sump at the end of this spacious, but quite short, river cave was passed by



The author posing outside a cave on Schiehallion, Perthshire, 1976 - image by Carol Jeffreys

Welsh cave diver Martyn Farr in 1976 to reveal a majestic extension leading, via another couple of dives, to a terminal point at sump 6, viewed as probably the most remote underground spot in Scotland. This discovery cried out for exploitation, which is why I was led to take up diving.

My first, tentative swims were in known Yorkshire sumps. A dive into Keld Head, Kingsdale, introduced me to huge underwater routes – quite intimidating – but gave me an urge to investigate Scottish sumps. After some solo attempts in small Perthshire caves (not very successful), and sundry holes on Skye, in 1977 I attacked the terminal sump in Argyll's multi-drop Uamh nan Claig-ionn ('Cave of the Skulls'). This was a small, awkward pool, which I entered feet first. The way on is shaped like a sharp V, and after passing under the crux, I shuffled up backwards onto a mud bank on the far side.

Elated at breaking out into air space, on this and subsequent trips I explored nearly 40 metres of waterlogged muddy passage before being stopped by a very low and narrow sump 2. Exiting sump 1 I encountered a hidden hazard: inwardly sloping sharp flakes in the roof which conspired to snag every piece of equipment as I struggled through.



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Suitably encouraged by my success, I later dived upstream in another cave further along the glen, Uamh Steal na Burich ('Cave of Roaring Waters') where a downward path was followed for eight metres to an ultimate depth of five metres. The passage continued, smaller, but I did not.

So, armed with some experience, I turned my attention to Claonaite. The first sump was reported as being just over 30 metres long, with a nasty, tight exit. This did not fill me with confidence, but on 21 April 1979 I submerged into a yellow-brown world of rocks and pebbles. After pushing some of these aside, I found an unexpectedly roomy void and 10 metres later, much to my surprise, I surfaced in Claonaite 2, having found an easier and considerably shorter route than Martyn's. Fellow diver Dave Warren joined me and we raced down a superb streamway until stopped by sump 3, a gloomy, almost static, pool at the bottom of a high rift (sump 2 is bypassed by an overhead climb). Later, a bypass was created for sump 1 which can now be negotiated by non-diving cavers.

Obviously the streamway continued beyond sump 2, so I tackled it a year or so later. A six metre dive led to a canal with minimal air space and a continuation sloping steeply down on the left amidst a profusion of sharp flakes. I left well alone, preferring the spacious 22 metre sump 3 where the river is rejoined anyway.

Beyond 3 lies really annoying territory. After dekitting, the diver must hump everything along angular irregular crawls also occupied by water, pass through boulder chokes, climb through an eyehole in the roof, finally arriving at sump 5 having detoured around the tiny sump 4. I've had quite a few trips down to this point. Sump 5 is an easy, shallow swim of about 20 metres (length varying with water conditions), but curiously, sump 6 seemed to be nothing more than an overflow point from sump 5. The streamway proper had disappeared and water only flowed along the

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The author commencing a dive in Kingsdale Master Cave, Yorkshire - image by Ivan Young



Pete Mulholland coming out of sump 6a, Uamh an Claonaite - image by Pete Glanwill



Mike O'Driscoll exiting sump 6b, Uamh an Claonaite - image by Simon Brooks

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Mike O'Driscoll at sump 7, Uamh an Claonaite - image by Ivan Young

modest passage beyond 5 in really wet conditions.

Determined to resolve this mystery I undertook a couple of solo trips to sump 6. In June 1992, in really low water, I entered a much reduced sump 6 (without a line reel, but in near perfect visibility) and explored a roomy passage for some 14 metres until it bifurcated into smaller tubes. Back at sump 5, also extremely low, I noted that a trickle of water was exiting from the left hand side. Could this answer the question of the disappearing stream?

A careful examination of the rocky fissure I was standing in revealed a tempting eyehole above head height, blocked with clean washed limestone fragments. Straddling the walls, I ascended and after some 20 minutes had cleared a hole big enough to wriggle into. Three metres of belly squirming ended when, to my elation, I entered a spacious cavern, 15x10x10 metres, with an obvious stream bed running across its floor. Although dry on this occasion, it evidently carried water in flood and at the end of the chamber, beyond a massive pile of shattered boulders, I could hear the magical sound of running water.

Fellow divers followed up on this discovery later the same month, digging a route down through the boulder collapse to find 16 metres of low streamway ending in another sump – sump 6b. The puzzle had been solved and the way on opened once again. Although I made several abortive attempts, it was not until May 1995 that sump 6b was passed by Simon Brooks. It comprises 13 metres of low, awkward passage, but what a breakthrough it proved to be! The exit pool lies in the floor of a massive boulder-strewn cavern, where easy walking downstream passes an airy shaft in the roof ('Belh Aven'), gradually gains size and culminates in a truly gigantic chamber, now called 'The Great Northern Time Machine'.

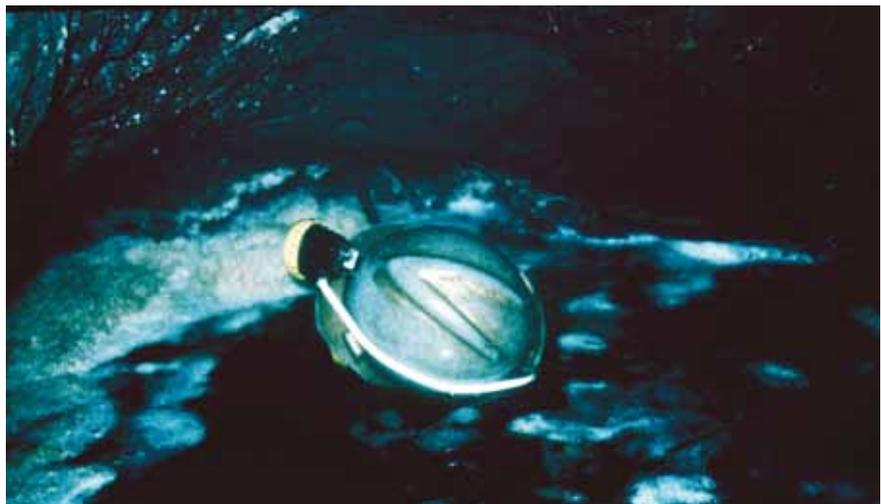
We explored downstream from here to yet another sump – sump 7 – where, whilst investigating a possible overhead bypass, I managed to dump several kilos of muck onto a colleague in the pool below. Sump 7 is short, leading to sump 8, the current end of the system. Here an underwater boulder pile currently prevents further penetration.

My fixation with Uamh an Claonaite has not been uneventful. During one trip to sump 6 the team was caught by a flash flood, and barely managed to escape with the loss of one ammo box filled with diving gear. Another, solo,

trip to Claonaite 7 by myself to collect some ancient animal bones for dating ended badly when a jagged, unstable boulder fell onto my right arm and leg, almost incapacitating me and making the several dives and ¼ mile of active cave to daylight a tortuous and painful affair, thankfully helped by comrades in the near series at the time.

Much of the diving is now rendered unnecessary due to a 12 year clearance of a sediment-filled shaft which intersects Claonaite beyond sump 6b, itself now bypassed by recent excavation through collapsed boulders. Only sump 3 remains an un-avoidable obstacle, the cave's topography suggesting it will never be redundant.

Claonaite's sumps are cold, mostly low and constantly flood prone. Sediment causes blockages and guide lines are frequently cut by strong currents. Even entering the cave is difficult – a corkscrew squeeze down through not very stable boulders, more difficult to climb out of than slip into. However, the lure of new territory coupled with the physical joy of traversing its beautiful stream passages means I shall always return. "Caves be where you find 'em" the adage goes, and there is undoubtedly more to discover. A link to another nearby system is a distinct possibility so there may well be more diving ahead.



The author commencing his breakthrough dive in Uamh nan Claig-ionn - image by Ivan Young

SCOTTISH CAVING

TO LEARN more about the activities of Scottish cavers, contact:
The Grampian Speleological Group
www.gsg.org.uk

Further information may be obtained from The British Caving Association
www.british-caving.org.uk