

John Harvey MBE

John Harvey's long and varied life sadly ended on the 7th September 2024. He was 83. He had been seriously ill for some time, with an illness which he bore with his characteristic bravery and strong determination that he would get the better of it.

John had always enjoyed the company of a wide circle of friends, mostly with connections to the South Wales Caving Club, to the Forest of Dean or to mining.

His first contact with SWCC was as a result of the discovery, in 1962, of Tooth Cave at the top of Green Cwm in Gower by John and his lifelong friend Roy Morgan, both from Brynmill in Swansea, along with friend Geoff Richards. Not far inside they found a human skull.

A subsequent detailed excavation, led by SWCC archaeologist Derrick Webley and in cooperation with the National Museum of Wales, revealed further human remains, Bronze Age pottery and other items. Beyond the archaeological section the cave continues and, at about a mile, is the longest cave in Gower.

In 1964 I had a tip off that a scrapyards in Llanelli had a large pile of Nife nickel cadmium cap lamps from a colliery that had closed. A friend and I went and bought some for ten shillings apiece. I alerted Dick Baynton, a caving friend who was in SWCC (I joined two years later) and soon John and his then wife Clare picked me up from home in Swansea in their Morris Minor van which, at the scrapyards, was filled to well over capacity with the heavy Nife lamps. They went back for more. SWCC sold the lamps to raise funds for the first Balinka Pit Expedition to the then Yugoslavia later that year. Demand was high; until then, most SWCC cavers had used small carbide lamps with, at best, a half inch flame. Easy access to electric light was a revelation!



John Harvey at the 1964 Waun Figen Felen Dig



On the 1966 Balinka Expedition

SWCC organised two major expeditions to Balinka Pit, in 1964 and 1966. The aim was to recover the remains of partisans, anti-fascist resistance members, who had been thrown down in 1942, during the war. The Pit was a shaft of unknown depth but, before SRT, it was obvious that it was beyond conventional caving techniques. Consequently, a winch was designed and constructed. In 1964 a ledge in the shaft prevented the winch cage from reaching the bottom but in 1966 an improved design led to the shaft being bottomed at 328m with the last 90m being a slope and a few short pitches. The human remains were recovered successfully but there was no onward cave system. John was very much involved in the mechanical aspects on both expeditions and in the recovery work at the bottom.

The theme of digging – which had begun at Tooth Cave, was always a part of John's caving life. As a coal miner he was expert in timbering. He played a major part in SWCC's 1963-4 dig at Waun Figen Felen, one of the main sinks for Dan yr Ogof, which dug a timbered shaft almost 100ft deep but with no obvious way on. John masterminded the generator

used in drilling shot holes, as well as making full use of his timbering expertise. In a subsequent SWCC attempt in 1970 we found and explored a possible way on but were stopped by a small, extremely unstable, chamber. Recently an independent team has pushed this successfully.

In 1972 we dug the Chasm, a gritstone collapse in the forestry behind the club. It involved sinking a shaft through large, loose, gritstone boulders to reach the limestone and, hopefully, the cave below. Keeping the shaft stable was a real challenge, which John achieved with a combination of railway sleepers and wire rope. Sadly, however, it defeated us in the end, becoming far too risky. John was also involved in many other digs, including Engine House and Cwm Dwr 2.

One evening, as was habit in the early 1970s, SWCC members were enjoying our Saturday evening in the Gwyn Arms when word came that David Judson had been trying to dig a bypass to the Long Crawl in Dan yr Ogof and a rockfall had come down behind him, trapping him. Somewhat inappropriately, perhaps, this caused much mirth! Nevertheless, John and Gwynne Sanders, who also had mining experience, took up the challenge, leaving their beer, and timbered their way through the rockfall, extracting David remarkably quickly.

John played his part in SWCC Committee and when I was Secretary in the 1970s he was the superbly efficient Assistant Secretary.

In 1976 an Expedition set out to explore the cave of Los Tayos in Ecuador, prompted by a book by Erich von Daniken, an author known for bogus claims, which asserted that the cave contained "mounds of gold". Given the near inevitability that this was untrue, there was also a strong (surface) scientific angle, with about 20 zoologists and botanists, including SWCC's 'Jeff' Jefferson. John Harvey, Pete Cardy and David Judson were the SWCC contingent in the underground team. Logistic support was provided by the Ecuadorean army with their helicopters. Largely for publicity and to help with raising funds, they recruited Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, who joined them on the expedition. The cave entrance was described as 'Gaping Gill in the jungle' though the shaft turned out to be only about 150 feet deep. Of course, there was no gold but they explored and surveyed large chambers and an extensive system, while struggling with life in a jungle camp in torrential rain and copious mud.



*John (R) with John Frankland on the 1976
Los Tayos Expedition*

John's early career as a coal miner led to him becoming manager at a major mine in the Neath Valley. He then exploited his technical expertise and safety experience to become a factory inspector with the Health & Safety Executive. He was based at first in Wigan and then in Bristol, at which point he moved to live in the Forest of Dean. There he met and married Sally.

John and Sally lived in the Forest of Dean for many years where, in due course, John became self-employed and undertook various tasks. He worked a private coal mine (the 'New Found Out') with fellow club member Rod Stewart and with a local Freeminer. He assisted RFODCC member John Elliott in his heritage building firm, and he also acquired a drilling rig to sink boreholes for water supplies, with guidance from a diviner.



1John (L) drilling in the Clydach Gorge with Paul Taylor

John's (and Clare's) son Owain, when possible, joined him in some of these activities, including as a young lad underground at the colliery or tipping trams on the surface. Accompanying John on building jobs he learned many of the techniques and John also gave him a solid foundation in mechanics, as well as a strong work ethic. In his business, Owain uses all the skills learned from John and he held his father in high regard as a great teacher and role model. In turn, John spoke proudly of Owain's abilities and of the very high quality of his work.

John then teamed up with the late John Lister, another prominent SWCC member and mining engineer. They pursued various freelance mining engineering projects, including blasting a tunnel at Dan yr Ogof to enable installation of a radon extraction fan, and stabilising old mine working in the Forest of Dean. Also at Dan yr Ogof, they engineered a walkway along the cliff face to provide visitor access to Ogof yr Esgyrn (Bone Cave). This entailed a very large quantity of concrete blocks and other materials having to be carried up there by hand. They recruited anyone they

could find, paying by the load, and Owain and some of his student friends skipped lectures at Cardiff University to help out and to earn some cash!

John and Sally expanded their range of outdoor activities to include cycling in Norway and sailing around the Hebrides with Bob Hall and family. John and Clare having been to the top of Kilimanjaro with an SWCC group in 1969, in the 1980s Sally re-introduced John to the mountains, with many exploits in Scotland, including snow and ice climbing with the valued guidance of Pete Francis. John progressed to enjoy trekking in the Himalayas and, in 1998, based on his exploits there, he was invited to join a team seeking to retrace the path of famed mountaineer and explorer Eric Shipton who, in the 1930s had sought to rediscover an ancient route that crossed the mountains of the Chaukhamba range to connect two shrines. The team battled jungle, glaciers, treacherous icefalls, and crossed several ridges at an altitude of 4500m. They took almost two weeks and ran out of food before the end! John, looking back, took immense pleasure and satisfaction from his mountaineering.



John and Sally in 1982

In lighter vein, John also trekked to Everest base camp while assisting former SWCC member and photographer Glyn Genin who was doing an advertising shoot for Guinness!

In 1999 the two Johns, Harvey and Lister, became joint mine managers for the ten-year duration of a project at the Combe Down stone mines on the outskirts of Bath. The mine spanned an area of 25 hectares and had been worked much too close to the surface, endangering over 700 properties in the village above. To prevent collapse, the project filled the mines completely with 600 cubic metres of foamed concrete using a workforce mainly of former south Wales coal miners specially

selected by John for their abilities and work ethos. The successful project was the largest project of its type in the world.

For many years, until 2011, John held the part-time role of Deputy Gaveler for the Forest of Dean, responsible for administering the Free Mining activity in the Forest and allocating gales (areas) for coal mining. John was the deputy – the Gaveler was HM the Queen!

In 2007 John Harvey was awarded MBE for services to the mining Industry, having been nominated by Tony Forster who, at the time, was Her Majesty's Principal Inspector of Mines and Quarries.

At the completion of the Combe Down project John and Sally moved to a farmstead on the banks of the Teifi in rural Ceredigion, along with Owain and his family. John and Sally lived in a barn conversion, converted by Owain to a very high standard. There, John continued his outdoor life, making the most of mid-Wales on his mountain bike along with Sally, John Lister and Roy Morgan. On one memorable day Roy's expensive bike was swept away while they were attempting a river crossing!

John became seriously ill in 2021. With Sally's help, and exemplary care from the staff at Glangwili hospital in Carmarthen, he bore his illness and intrusive treatment with characteristic bravery and with determination that it should not get the better of him. He had lived a very full life and had achieved a very great deal. Sally had provided constant and unstinting support during his long illness, together with Owain and Belinda and their three children, of whom John was an extremely proud grandfather.

*Compiled by Jem Rowland at John's request,
with input from Sally and Owain Harvey,
Clare Binnie, and Bob Hall.*