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REPORT OF THE SOUTHERN GENERAL MEETING OF THE CAVE RESEARCH GROUP OF GREAT BRITAIN, 1966

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The Southern General Meeting of the Cave Research Group of Great Britain took place during the weekend 18th - 19th June, 1966, at Wells, Somerset.

The meeting and lectures were held at the Kennion Road Secondary School. The Chairman, Mr. W.H. Little, welcomes members and guests, and the Hon. Editor, Dr. T.D. Ford, reviewed publications issued during 1966.

The first paper, by Dr. W.I. Stanton on 'The Impact of Quarrying on Mendip', was read in his absence by Dr. K.K. Tratman. Quarrying of limestone on Mendip had risen from an output of 1.2 million tons in 1947 to 3 million tons for the year 1965, representing an increase of 6% per annum compound. Large areas have been exploited for small reward, since quarry regulations limit the height of the working faces, and the excavations are comparatively shallow. The destroyed and threatened caves on Mendip were reviewed.

There are two usual methods of quarrying - 'destructive' quarrying, which is the easier and cheaper method, and 'constructive' quarrying, in which the stone has to be raised from deep workings and the resulting cavities filled later with rubbish. Most of the quarries on Mendip are of the 'destructive' type. Dr. Stanton considered that the most suitable method on amenity grounds was the 'constructive' stone mine method, and that sub-water table working could provide reservoirs, boating lakes, etc.

Several points Were raised in discussion. Poor access roads, often the stand-by of planning committees, were not always a deterrent to quarry companies, since many companies improved the roods. Quarrying by means of stone mines introduced a risk of surface collapse. Positive planning of limestone mining was carried out in the Peak District National Park. The value of limestone as a road-surfacing material was queried.

The second paper was presented by Mrs Ann Mason Williams on 'The Wall-fungus found in many South Wales caves'. The energy sources in the cave environment were described, followed by the necessary steps in the sampling of biological specimens in caves. Samples must be collected aseptically in sterilised containers to make sure that the native bacteria are collected, not chance contaminants from outside the cave. Spores are brushed on to the sterile glass containers or dishes. Growths form in the dishes after incubation in the laboratory. Steel ammunition boxes are useful for transport of the fragile dishes.

The wall-fungus from the South Wales caves, notably the most frequented parts (it is mainly absent from the new series of Dan-yr-Ogof) has been suggested by various workers to be a number of possible forms of life. The first suggestion, that it is an inanimate (calcareous) formation; has been proved incorrect. The second, that it is a lichen (combination of algae

and a fungus) has been discarded because this form of life derives energy by photosynthesis, and light is not present in the cave. The third, that it is bacterial growths, is the most probable suggestion. There are three types of growth, white, yellow and blue in colour respectively, of which the first two are most common. Soil debris has proved an embarrassment in the analysis of the samples. The yellow colouration has been proved to be of carotinoid type, but the pigmentation varies with the laboratory culture. Perhaps only mixed bacterial growths are pigmented. Experiments have been carried out in cave repopulation, by re-seeding a cleaned section of cave wall with the pure laboratory cultures. It my be that draughts are a factor in the occurrence of the natural fungus, or the spores may be carried in by cavers. The food source for the bacteria has not yet been identified.

The third, and final paper was presented by Mr. M.J. Walker on ‘Spelaeogenesis in the Cantabro-Asturic Mountain Chain (Spain)’. Mr. Walker opened with a brief history of cave exploration in Northern Spain. There have been British expeditions to the area in each year since 1961 (the report of the first Oxford University expedition to the area in that year has just been published by C.R.G.). It was suggested that expeditions from this country are too easily discouraged.

There is a thickness of 3000 metres of limestone in the mountains, but the tectonics have not been worked out in detail. It was postulated that there have been two cycles of erosion in the Picos, Riss-Jurm interglacial and Holocene. ‘Inverse erosion’, the filling of cavities with mud from standing water, and perched caves above the ice level also received mention. The formation of caves underneath glaciers and ice sheets was discussed.

Mr. David Cons proposed a vote of thanks to the speakers and host club (Wessex Cave Club), and the meeting then adjourned to an informal buffet at the Sherston Hotel, Wells, an idea which may well be copied for future meetings, since it promotes the singling of new and old friends and acquaintances alike. A number of underground and surface trips took place on the Sunday.

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