

**Chairman's Report to the AGM**  
**Dean Field Studies Centre, Parkend Forest of Dean**  
**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2018 – 10.30 am**

Well, this will be my last BCA report as Chairman. I have now done 3 consecutive, 3-year terms, 9 years really is enough for anybody. When I took over from Mick Day in 2009, his final report wished me well and hoped I would look forward to a less stressful period of 'peripheral participation'. I am not at all sure that's happened.

In 2009 Damian Weare's AGM report amounted to 14 pages, Damian's last AGM report when he finished in 2016 went to 64 pages and last years' report was slightly shorter at only 48 pages. This could be an example of the increase of complexity that has gone on within the British Caving Association over these 9 years.

Interestingly, in 2009 - 23 people attended the AGM, in 2017 - 47 people attended, and finally for those of you who think the BCA members have gone down, in 2009 we had a total membership of 4,803 members, in 2017 we had a total membership of 6,148 members. Everything in BCA has increased significantly over the 9 years I have been in office, particularly the complexity! There clearly is a need to look at the British Caving Association in a different way: not many organisations of this complexity are operated purely by voluntary personnel and there is definitely a case for a review of BCA's structure.

When I started 9 years ago, my first major problem was the North/South divide over techniques, particularly ladders, bolts and SRT. Eventually common sense prevailed and new bolts were introduced which I am sure is to everybody's advantage.

Later there were a number of problems with professionally led caving parties and a number of accidents resulted in some very difficult situations. It was clear training needed a revamp and people had to view liability in a different way. I think it is resolving itself with the split between QMC and recreational training. Although there has been lack of understanding of how this split is set up, I think it is now clear that one organisation handles the training of trainers and the qualifications involved with this. The other organisation handles recreational training at general club level and also reports separately directly to BCA Council. Representatives of each organisation will sit on both committees as they decide between them.

The search for a good database for training is still continuing after many years. As many people will know an organisation called Tahdah was selected but looked financially risky and indeed recently part of their organisation has gone bankrupt, luckily before BCA got involved with them. QMC are now researching a selection of the databases and will go through the appropriate channels in BCA using the IT and financial expertise to try and get an effective long-term solution.

There is a lot said about problems with encouraging young people to come into caving and there is a worry in this regard. However, looking at the figures there is definitely a situation where people cave before starting families and then they have a sabbatical while the children grow up and then go back to caving again. If you look at the numbers in age, there is a drop between 30 and 50 years of age. I suppose this is inevitable, however, there is in my opinion an increase in night caving trips over what there used to be so there may be more people active in this age range than we realise.

Similarly, we are trying to bring young people into BCA Council, however this is always going to be very difficult because anybody with the right experience and ability who is working full-time is going to have a lot of trouble devoting adequate time to the British Caving Association matters. Looking back over the history of the BCA and similar organisations they are predominantly composed of retired people.

We should however undoubtedly make every effort to encourage young people, and there are situations where people are not working full time and we have had some excellent BCA officers in that situation, a recent example being Damian Weare.

There have been other notable events over the past year. The Ghar Parau Foundation continues to have a number of good quality expeditions applying to it and I am sure the encouragement it gives makes a lot of difference to the success of British expeditions around the world.

Hidden Earth was again a great success under the leadership of Les Williams, he is capable of a high level of leadership and Chairmanship.

The Royal Geographical Society event in December was a great success. All the talks have now been edited by Sid Perou and will be available very soon online. The quality of the talks was fantastic and my great thanks to everybody involved. Virtually all the speakers who were approached agreed to give their lectures and it was very much a showcase of British caving success over the last fifty years. The number of attending delegates over the weekend was a little disappointing, although the sell out to the general public on the Friday night and the Royal Geographical Society on Monday night was very rewarding. I don't fully understand why cavers don't attend their own bespoke event, but the redeeming feature is the excellent lectures will soon be available online.

Current situation - access to caves continues to be a serious ongoing problem and indeed there are signs it is getting worse and could indeed into the future get worse still. We have a certain number of professional bodies who don't understand caving and would be delighted if nobody ever explored or enjoyed themselves in caves again. We must be mindful of this and particularly when we think of the situation with radon and carbon dioxide in caves. We need to have a professional front to make sure there's no problem in this connection. Anything we can do to help the general public and the aforementioned organisations understand that our sport is enjoyable, safe, sensible and pushing forward the boundaries of human knowledge both in pure exploration and scientific terms should be encouraged.

I am sure in the fullness of time the CROW Act will be seen to apply to caves, however we need to have a very robust access and conservation programme in place when that happens.

We talk about bringing BCA administration into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and using electronic means to distribute information and receive back information from our members, all very good indeed and it is starting to happen, however we must be mindful of the recent Data Protection Regulation which again means we need to keep our professionalism at a high level.

As mentioned earlier, we do need to encourage young people into caving. We must avoid putting unnecessary restrictions but similarly we must avoid subjecting young people to unnecessary risk. The Council of Higher Education Caving Clubs (CHEC) has come into action during my term in office and this is a very worthwhile idea and although I don't really want it to suffer any more regulation, keeping a relationship with BCA is a good thing for both organisations.

Similarly, establishing a Youth and Development organisation within BCA is a great idea!

Other organisations under the BCA umbrella are of course BCRA with its library. These continue to do very well, and I am grateful for the amount of work put in by its volunteers. John Gunn, Chairman of BCRA is doing an excellent job and I think there is a lot of evidence that the scientific reputation of BCRA is going from strength to strength. There's a lot happening in this area which is very exciting for the future.

Going forward I intend to keep an involvement with BCA Council and I would like to continue to help Dave Rose with his CROW campaign working with Andrew Hinde in Conservation and Access.

In addition, I have been talking to Ric and Pat Halliwell in connection with a group to look at constitutional changes. I hope under Ric's direction a group can form that invites comments and suggestions helping in constitutional and possibly structural changes to BCA. Circulars will go around on this topic and preliminary ideas will be put forward at each of next year's council meetings.

Having spoken to most people involved in the Ogof Draenen discussions I would also offer my services to try and help get a solution to that problem.

I would like to offer my assistance in setting up the next AGM weekend. Of the nine I have been involved with over the years I have been instrumental in organising six of them. If we are going to have another AGM in the North of England it will require the same amount of organisation as the previous ones.

Finally, I would like to say how incredibly grateful I am for all the help I have had over the last 9 years. Going through a list of names is dangerous but somewhat in chronological order I would say that Mick Day initially gave me a lot of mentoring; Dave Cooke has been helpful throughout the entire 9 years; Paul Ibberson came in at a difficult time and did an excellent job as Treasurer; Nick Williams has supported throughout my 9 years and for an awful lot longer he has helped BCA Council generally, Nick I am extremely grateful. Robin Weare continues to be extremely helpful; Bob Mehew has continually tried to be very helpful over the years in his own special way; Jenny Potts has been a stalwart throughout the entire period of BCA's existence and indeed continues to do so into the present time; Andrew Hinde has brought a professionalism into BCA which has been warmly welcomed and he has been a worthy partner to Tim Allen. I have valued the connection between Descent Magazine and BCA I thank Chris and Judith for their help and patience. Of course Les Williams has done a huge amount and will continue into the future, thanks to you Les.

Final thoughts are, an organisation is only as good as its members. BCA has some wonderful people, however more of them need to get heavily involved with helping the organisation. It is no good to stand on the fringe criticising, people have to get stuck in to help our national association. Constructive criticism and rolling up of one's sleeves is extremely helpful, other approaches could be seen as self-interest.

Finally, I wish the future Chairman, who I sincerely hope is Les Williams, every success and hope he can get as much out of the job as I have done.

**Andy Eavis**  
**1 June 2018**