

University of Bristol Spelaeological Society

History

The University of Bristol Spelaeological (UBSS) Society was founded in 1919, but its origins stretch back before World War 1 to a group known as the Bristol Spelaeological Research Society (BSRS), made up mainly of academics and students at the university who came together to study and explore caves and their contents. Before the war, the BSRS started an archaeological dig at Aveline's Hole in Burrington Combe on the Mendips which quickly revealed a large quantity of human remains. Work ceased with the advent of war.

After the war, the landowner, Sir George Wills agreed to the dig resuming, but due to the likely importance of the site, he wanted the work done under the aegis of the university, so the group was reformed as the UBSS with a membership consisting of staff, students and some external members as the constitution was drawn to allow all members of the BSRS to join on equal terms. Since then the constitution has always reflected this.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of the UBSS have always been the exploration and study of caves and their contents and the maintenance of a museum and library, which over the years have always been housed by the university in a variety of locations. The collection is currently housed in the Stables, behind 21 Woodland Road. Due to long-standing links with the Geography Department, our Site Technical Advisor for the Stables is Dr Stuart Bellamy of the School of Geographical Sciences.

The library is one of the most comprehensive specialist caving libraries in the country and the museum collection is of national importance. The UBSS also produces an annual peer refereed journal known as Proceedings and has produced several guidebooks to caving regions in Ireland, where the society has been at the forefront of exploration and cave surveying for the past 60 years. The most recent book, The Caves of Mid-West Clare was published in the centenary years and a new guidebook to the caves of southern Ireland is in preparation at the moment. Student members of UBSS have played a very active work in the fieldwork for these books over a long period.

The society celebrated a very successful centenary year in 1919, starting with a dinner held in Wookey Hole Caves attended by around 140 people, including Sir David and Lady Paula Wills and Denis Burn, High Sheriff of Somerset (and former Chair of the University Board of Trustees). In November, the centenary symposium Travels Beneath the Earth held in the Geography Department attracted an audience of over 100 people.

Alumni and Students Working Together

Caving is a relatively expensive sport in terms of both personal and group equipment and it is not a sport that has ever attracted high numbers of participants, however university clubs such as UBSS are one of the most significant feeds of new members into the caving community. The UBSS has always been able to meet the minimum number for affiliation and over the years student numbers have been anything between 30 – 50 members. Alumni numbers grow steadily as the society always hopes to retain as many members as possible to continue to

support the student activities. Those students who retain their membership tend to remain members for a long period, as caving is an activity that has always fostered lifelong friendships and this is reflected in the strength of the commitment to the society. The UBSS only very recently lost its last remaining link to the pre-war years with the death of Desmond Donovan at age 98, who joined the society before the war and remained a member throughout his life. This level of commitment is not unusual.

As alumni and students have always interacted on equal terms as members, this has provided continuity and stability over the society's 100 years of existence and has enabled alumni to provide continued support to its student members in their activities, both in terms of experience and financial support. To enable the UBSS to attract new members to a sport that is not always immediately attractive (strangely, not everyone seems to like the idea of dark, muddy holes in the ground!), student subscriptions have been kept as low as possible, whereas alumni members pay a much higher subscription (currently £24, with a recent graduates' rate of £15, to encourage students to retain their membership). All members receive the annual Proceedings, and for the majority of the non-student members, this is the only tangible benefit they obtain from the society. Active cavers, mainly drawn from the younger non-students, provide support in terms of safety and experience by caving alongside student members and helping to introduce them to the sport and extending their experience both underground and in the rope and ladder practice carried out in the stairwell of the Richmond Building. This mentoring and support is necessary to the safe running of the society and is a huge contributing factor to UBSS's excellent safety record over its past 100 years.

The other areas of the society's work in which non-students play a major role are primarily in the museum and library and in its publications.

The work of editing an academic peer refereed journal is, in practice, not something that can be done by students, but there is a long history of students publishing papers in Proceedings, many of which concern cave exploration in Ireland, but the most recent of which is a paper on the recent oral history project conducted over the centenary year, co-authored by two students members, Lena Ferriday and Nick Stomberg along with history lecturer Dr Andy Flack. An article on this project by Nick was also published in Epigram last year. Student members have also been closely involved with the fieldwork for the various Irish guidebooks.

Museum & Library

The current UBSS museum curator, Linda Wilson, has worked closely with a number of extremely engaged student curators, most recently Alan Summerfield (Department of Anthropology and Archaeology) and now Nathan Cubbitt. The student curators are closely involved with all aspects of the collections care, including conservation work, collection archives and the preparation for and supervision of research visits to the collection which, pre-Covid-19 averaged one a month, for between one/two days and a week.

Following discussions with Jo Elsworth (Director, Theatre Collection, Director of Cultural Collections) the UBSS intends to pursue the accreditation of the collection under the Arts Council scheme, something that, if successful, will be hugely beneficial to the long term management of the collection, opening the doors to grant aid and other support. At present, the Theatre Collection is the only museum within the university to have achieved this status, but we believe that this is an achievable aim for the society with the next few years and

preliminary discussions have already been held on the subject with the appropriate bodies and the UBSS's governance procedures have already passed the necessary scrutiny to enable the process to commence, which will hopefully re-start when we are able to access the collection again following clearance from Estates to return to the museum. When examining the UBSS's eligibility to apply for accreditation, one of the influencing factors was the continuity provided to its governance structure by alumni members with an extensive knowledge of its collection and its history.

Finance

In terms of finance, the society's sources of income are members subscriptions, gift aid on non-student subscriptions, donations from members and sales from books and Proceedings. The student subscriptions are largely spent on the specialist insurance needed through caving's national body, with whatever is left contributing to tackle and equipment, however the majority of the money spent in this area comes from non-student subscriptions. Caving kit needs to be replaced regularly for safety reasons and in the past three years, in the region of £6,000 has been spent in this area, all of which has been funded by the alumni members. This is a particularly important area of support as internal sources of grant aid such as the Alumni Foundation are not able to support ongoing expenditure and even when support has been obtained from them (such as for the wet gear cage under the Richmond Building), matched funding has been needed, which has come from the Society's own alumni.

Due to its various sources of income, the UBSS finances are complex and UBSS received approval to maintain its long-held external bank account under the policies and procedures approved by the UBU Board of Trustees in November 2015. This is handled by the alumni treasurer, who works under the direction of the committee, with the student treasurer handling all the student finances and the union internal account.

Student Led with Alumni Engagement

The UBSS committee is student-led, with students holding the majority of the voting positions on committee. There is some alumni representation among the officers, and the honorary president (who since the society's formation has always been either a senior academic within the university or a senior and well respected person in the caving world) and alumni treasurer are non-students, as are a limited number of other non-portfolio positions. The day to day running of the UBSS is in the hands of the students who always have the majority vote.

The UBSS has always had an exemption from the application of the two-thirds rule as the society has had a continuous existence for 100 years, pre-dating the formation of the Students' Union and the introduction of this by-law as applying this to UBSS would disenfranchise its other members.

The role of the non-students on committee is to provide long-term continuity, mentoring and support in the necessary areas (collections management, publications, finance, liaison with outside cave access/conservation) bodies on which UBSS is represented). It is vital for the continued strength of the society to be able to maintain this balance, while always ensuring that the society remains student-led and student focused. The continued strength and health of the society over 100 years is evidence, we believe, that this continued relationship between student and non-student members provides an example of how a society such as ours can

continue to thrive and development in an increasingly challenging world, and can provide an important example of how to build and maintain an engaged and supportive alumni community as well as ensuring the best possible outcomes for student members.

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16 July 2020