

OBITUARIES

CHARLES ANTHONY SELF
5 November 1951 - 4 February 2016



Charlie was born in West Hartlepool on 5 November 1951. He was always proud of his roots in the North East and never forgot his early years there. Later, the family moved South and he got a scholarship to Brentwood School. He hated it and that was perhaps the origin of his profound mistrust of and antipathy towards any kind of authority.

Charlie was nevertheless an able student and did well enough to gain a place at Bristol University to read Chemistry and Geology. Though he enjoyed the geology and learned a great deal, when he graduated he found that there was no call for anyone with his qualifications and he began a series of jobs in order to earn a living. These included lab technician, van driver and street sweeper, which temporarily satisfied his socialist instincts to be in touch with “the people”. It was whilst working for the joinery firm Boulton and Paul that he began to develop the building skills that many of his friends have been grateful for. Members of the Society have particular reason to be thankful for this, as it was Charlie who solved that last great problem: the damp wall next to the fireplace in the Hut.

Caving was the defining activity of Charlie’s life. Actually, spelaeology is the more precise and accurate term. Whilst most cavers regard exploring caves as a sport, for Charlie it was a vocation and that extended to the science associated with caves, their formation and the minerals found in them. Perhaps this is best illustrated by a story from Sam Moore, who wrote:

“I also remember a classic remark of Charlie’s from the first or perhaps the second time that I went to Co. Clare. There was a bit of a mutiny going on, with a strong body of opinion that going to O’Connors was a much better idea than going down whatever cave it was that we were supposed to be doing. Charlie said, in all seriousness, ‘I didn’t come here to enjoy myself, I came here to go caving’. I think that he may even have shamed us into it.”

I first met Charlie in 1972, when he had recently returned from the UBSS expedition to Slovenia, which had involved some of the earliest British applications of single rope technique to descending big pitches. He subsequently took part in numerous expeditions to Ireland, a second Slovenia expedition in 1973 as well as trips to Spain, Turkey and the USSR.

His first USSR expedition was in 1989 to Kap-Kutan on the border between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This big system with its fabulous crystals is often compared to Lechuguilla in New Mexico. However, it was on the train going there that Charlie found his most precious jewel: his wife Galina. They were married in 1991 and Charlie followed her to Moscow, where he spent the winter of 1991/92. Soon after they returned to Bristol, their

daughter Antonia arrived. Unsurprisingly it wasn't long before she was initiated – still a babe in arms – into fire-walking at the Hut. Clearly it did her no harm!

Charlie's other caving expeditions in the USSR were to Promezhutochnaya in the summer of 1990, when the team found a long searched for connection between Kap-Kutan and Promezhutochnaya, and to Pinega near Archangel in the winter of 1991. A particular challenge of Pinega is that the caves are flooded all summer and can only be entered when the ground freezes in winter. To get there, he had to don skis and walk many miles.

Charlie was no stranger to snow and was also known as a climber. His early fame was achieved through his habit of climbing in a caving helmet wearing bendy walking boots instead of proper rock boots. He nevertheless achieved ascents of quite a few classic routes in the Avon Gorge, Cornwall and North Wales. He gloried in the unusual, choosing to climb vegetated rock in obscure locations like Goblin Combe. Alternatively, he would climb buildings around the university and other parts of Bristol. Some of the "problems" he put up were really quite hard.

In 1976 he was a member of a climbing expedition to the Indian Himalayas where he made two first ascents. It was on this trip that he got into a couple of scrapes with authority, beginning on the night before leaving England, whilst waiting at the ferry terminal in Folkestone. Feeling a bit bored, Charlie decided to liven things up a bit by climbing the wall of the Town Hall. The local constabulary did not immediately see the funny side of it but relented in time for him to catch the ferry. Reaching the Khyber Pass and having to stay overnight in a compound for trucks before joining an escorted convoy in the morning, he decided to take a stroll to a local village. It was when the compound's guard pointed his rifle at him and cocked it that Charlie realised that popping out for a quick one was not a good option. On the way back from India, he was sunbathing on the top of the Land Rover as the expedition drove though Kabul. Unfortunately this resulted in arrest for over-exposure in public even though he had his shorts on. Fortunately there were no charges laid. Marco Paganuzzi has also written:

"I have many nostalgic memories of Charlie, no more so than the experience of being arrested with him by the Turkish Military in 1986 and spending the night with him in a Turkish police station! Fortunately we were released without charge and didn't have to do time in a Turkish prison!"

Actually, he achieved his boldest jest without getting caught. In 1979 the Oxford Dangerous Sports Club achieved notoriety by bungee jumping off the Clifton Suspension Bridge. They were arrested because they had no way of getting off the rope. Charlie had already been there and done it 5 years earlier. He abseiled free down the 245ft from the bridge to the railway on the far side of the gorge and was able to get off the rope and walk away. A friend at the top released the rope, which hit the ground with a loud bang but nobody was apprehended.

Charlie's writing career began in 1976 when he edited and produced the report of the Himalayan expedition. A little later, in 1978, the UBSS decided that it was time to produce a new edition of Caves of County Clare, a guidebook to Ireland's best known caving area. Charlie took on the role of editor, a task he achieved with great pride. As well as writing significant parts of the book, he cajoled members of the society and many other people into producing descriptions and surveys of the caves. With characteristic modesty he did not refer to himself as the editor but as the compiler. Even so, his clear and lucid prose is to be found on every page.

His writing could be witty as well as factual. He was editor of the UBSS Newsletter from the Spring of 1979 until the autumn of 1980 but that was not the end of his contributions. After retirement from the official organ he began to produce his own, a parody of Private Eye, which he called Privateer, and which was printed along with the Newsletter. This contained

cartoons, jokes and scurrilous gossip concerning members of the society. We waited with bated breath for it to come out, partly in trepidation as to what might be revealed about our misdemeanours but more in anticipation and hope of getting a mention.

Charlie had a deep interest in caves, particularly cave mineralogy and pseudo-karst. It is testament to his enquiring mind that he sought to study something a bit different, something out of the ordinary. This he did with aplomb in the Cotswolds by studying landslip caves. Most cavers probably never understood his fascination with one particular small scrotty grot hole in the Avon valley near Bath. But he knew that Sally's Rift was unusual and he became fascinated with the place and other similar 'gull-caves' in the Cotswolds. The study of these landslip caves has provided some fascinating insights into the geological history of the Bath area, and revealed the capture of former River Thames headwaters by the River Avon. This work was written up in a series of publications in UBSS *Proceedings*. More recently some of the stalagmites preserved in gull caves along the escarpment have been dated. Much to Charlie's delight, some of these proved to be really old, over 350,000 years in fact. The implications of this on the landscape history of the region were published in the *Journal of the Geological Society*. He continued to study these unusual but fascinating caves and last autumn was mapping out gull caves in Box Mine.

His other passion was mineralogy. As a geochemist and a caver it was perhaps no surprise he was drawn to cave minerals. The unusual mineralisation in Pen Park Hole was one of his early interests. The inconvenient fact that the cave was officially closed didn't put him off, though he hid in the bushes while the rest of the party were questioned by the police. In 1989 he attended the Congress of Speleology in Budapest. It was here he met Vladimir Maltsev who invited him on an expedition with some cavers from Moscow to the Kugitang Ridge in Turkmenistan. This proved to be a pivotal moment in his life. He and the rest of the team spent a couple of weeks underground studying the exquisite mineralogy of these caves, similar to that seen in Lechuguilla Cave in New Mexico. This led to another trip in 1991 with fellow UBSS member Dan Harries, further collaborations with Russian cavers and mineralogists and the publication, in these *Proceedings*, of a number of papers translated from Russian.

Through his Russian contacts, especially Vladimir Maltsev, Charlie became passionate about the ontogeny of cave minerals; He was eager to make Western scientific society acquainted with developments of Russian scientists in this area. He was a member of the International Union of Speleology Cave Mineralogy Commission, and Chairman of a working group on Mineral Ontogeny, something I know he was very proud of. He presented his ideas at many conferences and symposia, not just in the UK but also overseas. He was author of over 50 scientific articles, including two papers at the recent Speleo-congress in Brno. His work on explaining Russian concepts of crystal growth, showing how they develop and form complex three dimensional structures, led to series of publications with the American mineralogist Carol Hill. Through his work on mineralogy, Charlie was well known and respected in the international scientific community, and often received requests to peer review articles.

Charlie was inspirational and a genuine enthusiast. He has given us all many memorable moments, both underground and over-ground. Whilst not suited to mainstream academia, he stayed true to his interests, and in this respect, he achieved much. We have lost a great character, a true friend, and a passionate scientist. A wonderful and loyal friend, he was completely honest and was the person who would literally go the extra mile. He shall be missed enormously

C.D.O. & A.R.F.