

OBITUARY

JOHN KENNEDY PITTS
6 October 1925 – 25 October 2016



With the loss of John Pitts, one of our few remaining links with the Society's wartime history has been broken and we have lost the last of those pioneers who, in the late 1940s, started our long connection with Co. Clare in Ireland.

John was born and brought up in Trowbridge, the second son of Thomas and Kathleen Pitts, and attended Trowbridge Boys School until 1943, when he was awarded his Higher School Certificate. His ensuing time at University (1943-45 then 1947-48) was interrupted by National Service in the Royal Navy, as was that of his close contemporary and friend Bob Bendall (ApSimon and Pitts, 2004), but he returned to Bristol in early 1947 and graduated with a B.Sc. (Hons.) in physics in 1948.

His return to Bristol also saw him take up caving again, but the perspective of those returning from active service made him and his contemporaries somewhat dissatisfied with student life. This part of the tale is probably best told in his own words, from the speech that he gave at Ballinalacken Castle in 1998 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Society's first trip to Co. Clare.

"I came out of the navy early in 1947 but Bob, who was in the Pacific, did not come home until later. The UBSS was in a state of change. Opportunities for exploration were few and far between. G.B. had been explored, surveyed and studied. The only recent discovery by the Society was Rod's Pot, a small and unexciting cave. Rhino Rift was being excavated yet again, every cubic inch of the cave so far excavated by hand. To make matters even worse, the discoveries at Longwood made by the Stride brothers while they were at Sidcot school were being treated as their private preserve even after one of them had become the secretary of the Society. This led to factions and quarrels.

"Charles Barker, who with Francis Goddard had discovered G.B. Cavern, had returned to an academic post at Bristol from his wartime work on explosives. He also was frustrated by the lack of exploration opportunities and found the atmosphere in the Society of squabbles and backbiting uncongenial for grown-ups. We decided that we would have a holiday in Ireland. We would go to Mitchelstown and Dunmore to see some caves, then on to the south west for some sightseeing and gluttony and finally up to Lisdoonvarna for more caves. The plan was for

the two of us to travel on Charles's motorbike together with all our kit. We had to make the latter as compact and light as possible. We made a ladder of wire and duralumin tube tailored for the pitch in the Old Cave at Mitchelstown. We spaced the rungs as far apart as we dared in order to reduce the weight and took the minimum amount of rope that we hoped would be enough for tethers. Rope in those days of course was hemp.

“All went well until we got to Rosslare. The first problem was that the vital petrol ration coupons, ordered well in advance, had not arrived. My recollection is that after the best part of a day spent telephoning Dublin, or more correctly waiting for telephone connections to come available, we only got as far as Wexford on the first day. The more serious problem was that whilst the bike, with its heavy load, had withstood Welsh roads it was no match for Irish roads. After the third tyre failure we decided that Co. Clare was not for us that year. After visiting Mitchelstown we returned to England.

“By the following year, 1948, Bob Bendall had returned from the navy and the three of us decided to renew our attempts to get to Co. Clare. Charles had more time (and money) than us to devote to this trip. He got in touch with Jack Coleman and Norman Dunnington, who were planning to continue their work in Poulmagollum that summer, and arranged to join them at the Irish Arms in Lisdoonvarna, which was their preferred base in Co. Clare. The rest of us joined up with them two weeks later. Charles had given up motor bikes, following a serious accident, and my attempt to acquire some wheels had failed when I discovered why the ancient motor bike I had bought cheaply was so cheap. Public transport was the order of the day. I stayed at the Irish Arms with Charles and Bob camped at Poulmagollum with Mike Gummer who had joined us. We spent a lot of time in Poulmagollum and thereabouts and did some minor exploration. Bob and Mike had the interesting experience of having a party from the Wiltshire Caving Club led by Adrian Hopkins camping not far away. It was a mixed party. After they had been there a week a sermon was preached in the church in Lisdoonvarna condemning the sinful behaviour of the people camping at Lismorahaun. Charles and I lost no opportunity of accusing Bob and Mike of damaging the public reputation of cavers by behaving sinfully in their tent.

“Probably the most exciting event was descending Poll Elva. We had taken the light ladder from the previous trip and had made a second one like it. Together we hoped they would bottom the pitch. They did – just. But we sadly underestimated the amount of rope needed to tether the ladder. As a result we had no lifeline. We went into Lisdoonvarna but failed to find anywhere that sold rope. Finally, we bought a couple of clothes lines. Tied together they provided a bit of psychological support, particularly when negotiating the join between the two ladders half way down the pot. We had forgotten about that when we made them. There was a gap of over three feet with no rungs.

“Next year, 1949, Bob and I decided that the cave with the most potential was the Coolagh River Cave. It looked as though it was an important part of a complex underground drainage system with a large catchment area. Charles had told us that he had seen a sign advertising food and drinks near Ballinalacken Castle so I wrote to the ‘Tea Rooms’ at the castle and asked if we could camp anywhere in the vicinity. I had a charming letter back from Maisie O’Callaghan saying she would be delighted if we camped on the lawn. The letter head showed clearly that this was no tea room but a hotel, possibly a grand one. In our indigent state this was a matter of some concern. However we need not have worried. Six of us, Bob and I together with Joan Light (later my wife), Noel Blackwell, John Nash and Hubert Wright, camped on the lawn up by the castle and the O’Callaghans treated us with the greatest kindness and generosity. They sold us food, provided us with water and gave us turf to light huge fires in the castle to dry out our caving clothes. On our last day, when we were packing up to leave, one of the maids came up to the lawn to tell us that Maisie wanted to see us down at the hotel. We

wondered what heinous offence we had committed, but when we got there we were ushered into the dining room and given a meal. Maisie would accept not a penny piece for it.

“It is not surprising that on all future visits we stayed inside the hotel, not outside in a tent. Ballinalacken Castle Hotel was much the best discovery we made in Co. Clare. Nothing, today, would persuade me to go down any of the caves again but I will go back to the hotel whenever I can find an excuse. With Maisie’s granddaughter, Marian, looking after the guests upstairs and Marian’s husband producing superb food down in the kitchen, this hotel, with its magnificent unspoiled views in every direction, is hard to beat for any cave or karst enthusiast with a taste for the good things in life.

“That first year we decided right away that we had to tackle the exploration, survey and study of the cave as Coleman and Dunnington had tackled Poulmagollum, and as Glennie and others were currently tackling Ogof Ffynnon Ddu. We had to do it systematically and thoroughly. This we did, and it took us three years. Of course we took time off occasionally and looked into various other holes, known and unknown. But we did not let them distract us from the job in hand.

“During our last season in the Coolagh River when we were completing the, by then, rather boring task of following the individual beds through the cave, two members of the team, Kay Dixon and, I think, Noel Blackwell, went off to look at a new area with attractive geology and topography but no known caves. This was the west side of Poulacapple and they discovered the Cullaun series of caves. The cave they entered and partly explored was Cullaun 1, the cave which subsequently earned the nickname ‘The Teenagers Cave’. The reason for this was that this year, 1951, was the first on which some of the older members of the Society came to Co. Clare to see what we were up to. Trat, Bertie and Marjorie Crook, Molly Hall and Frank Frost of the Wessex Club came to Ballinalacken while we were there. The discovery of Cullaun 1 greatly excited them and they seized it with enthusiasm, taking it over completely. In no time at all Trat was striding through the cave pontificating and producing theories. I think it was Molly in her gently mocking way who christened her older companions the ‘teenagers’ because of their rather juvenile behaviour.

“That really established Co. Clare as a major caving area for the Society. Not only had members surveyed and studied a major cave in a way that added substantially to the understanding of the hydrology and spelaeology of the area, but they had also discovered a completely new series of extensive caves that were waiting to be explored and studied. Little did they know that, thanks largely to Trat’s newly aroused interest in the area, half a century of underground work lay ahead! (Bendall and Pitts, 1953).”

After finishing the work on the Coolagh River Cave, John largely moved away from caving and concentrated on his business career, though he and Joan (née Light) who had been on all the early Clare trips except the first and who he married in September 1957, did return to Ballinalacken with the Society in 1962.

John had a long and distinguished career in the chemical industry, rising to be Deputy Chairman of the Agricultural Division of ICI and later Chairman and Chief Executive of the Tioxide Group. In 1984 he was President of the Chemical Industries Association and in 1988 he was appointed Chairman of the newly formed Legal Aid Board, a role in which he served until 1995. His team were credited with improving the quality of the administration from that of the previous management by the Law Society.

Joan passed away in 1986; in 1990 he married for a second time to Julia (née Bentall) with whom he stayed happily married until his death.

Although he did little caving after the early 1950s, John remained a member of the Society and could not resist the temptation of attending the anniversary dinner held at

Ballinalacken in 1998. This was the occasion when the speech quoted above was given and was thoroughly enjoyed by all those present. In 1990, at the suggestion of Arthur ApSimon, John was elected as Vice-President of the Society, a position which he held until 2010, when ill-health caused him to stand down. With his death we have lost an important link with our history, a wise counsellor, an ardent supporter and a source of wonderful anecdotes.

RJR & GJM

REFERENCES

- ApSIMON, A.M. and PITTS, J.K., 2004. Obituary - Robin Anthony Bendall. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. **23**. 1. 6-7.
- BENDALL, R.A. and PITTS, J.K. 1953. The Coolagh River Cave. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. **6**. 3. 228-245.