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The Lancaster Cave and Mine Research Society 1967 – 1980:

Achievements and legacy

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The Morecambe Bay karst area has been and remains a minor caving area meriting a single chapter in the latest caving guide (Allshorn and Swire 2017 pp438 - 462). The area is however one of considerable natural beauty and geological interest attracting visitors seeking the picturesque and romantic during Victorian times. The caves received attention from antiquarians and “bone hunters” around the same time.

After World War 2 the area attracted the interest of cavers from clubs across the north of England including members of the Red Rose Cave and Pothole Club (RRCPC) which had a membership focus in the Lancaster area (Ashmead 1973), the Furness Speleological Group (FSG), the Black Rose Pothole Club (BRPC) and others. A rush of discoveries was reported in a number of caving club journals resulting in a confusion of names and poorly described locations. Ten caves in the area are mentioned in the first edition of Pennine Underground (Thornber 1947) though very little information on location is given and a number of sites described show little relation to any caves known today. The expanded second edition, named Britain Underground (Thornber 1953), lists more sites but all the National Grid reference points for the Morecambe Bay caves are incorrect and several sites were renamed. Two editions of a guidebook with different but overlapping coverage to the area were published by Eric Holland (Holland 1960 & 1967) covering both caves and mine workings. Moseley (2005) has claimed that much of the new text of the 1967 edition was the unattributed work of Peter Ashmead and based on fieldwork by the RRCPC, BRPC and others. Since then various cave finds have been recorded in caving club literature and a chapter covering the area has been included in the Northern caves series of guide books.

The Lancaster Cave and Mine Research Society (LCMRS) was founded on the 22nd March 1967 by Pete Cumpsty (BRPC) and Peter Ashmead (RRCPC) with the intention of providing much needed clarity and structure to cave exploration and recording in the region. Cavers from several clubs and also non-cavers with useful relevant skills and expertise such as photography and illustration were recruited and brought together, modelling (as the name suggests) the aims and organisation of the already well-established Northern cavern and Mine Research Society.

The society intended to avoid a purely sporting caver image but to have a more scientific, archaeological and exploratory approach and thus began a programme of investigations into the mines, caves and karst features of the area. It was never a large club having a maximum of about twenty members but was a club member of the Cave Research Group of Great Britain and applied for membership of the Council of Northern Caving Clubs in 1973.

One of the stated objectives of the society in its constitutions was “to maintain and develop a Field Research Centre”. Just such a centre was developed at Crag Foot on Warton Crag, the site of the most intensive area of mining in the eastern side of the Morecambe Bay district (Moseley 2010). A lease was negotiated for the sum of £5 per annum for a period of seven years with the Leighton Hall Estate. A wooden building scheduled for demolition at a local holiday camp was dismantled, transported and re-erected at the site (Ashmead R F 1974). The hut was erected at NGR SD34924740 (Fig.1) without having obtained planning permission thus a retrospective planning application was undertaken. This was initially refused and the club was informed of the need to remove the hut. Planning permission was granted by Lancaster Rural district Council on the 24th March 1972 (application no. 2/4/5957) though gaining this permission had required an appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment. A campaign in support of the field centre included letters from the University of Bradford, the NCMRS and the eminent karst scientist the late Dr Marjorie Sweeting of Oxford University.

The field centre consisted of a laboratory room, a tackle store, workshop, changing room and kitchen facilities. It included a museum containing mineral specimens and numerous pieces of mining gear, tools, bottles and other artefacts salvaged from the adjacent mines (Ashmead R F 1978). No accommodation was provided but camping and car parking was available. Construction was completed and the building was in use as a base for the exploration and recording of Warton Crag Mines by 1972 (Green 1974).

The society was in many ways a head of its time in using local and regional media for publicity including regular mentions in the Lancaster Guardian and the Westmorland Gazette. The society and its activities were featured on the BBC’s northern regional news programme Look North on the 7th February 1974 (Figs 2& 3). A journal was also produced titled North West Speleology running to three editions which are still standard reference works for cavers and karst scientists interested in the area. The first edition was co – badged as North West Speleology volume 1 number 1 and Red Rose Cave and Pothole Club Journal number 4.

Following the untimely death of Peter Ashmead on the 2nd Jun 1977, one of the leading lights of the society (Moseley 2019), and the subsequent loss of many of the society’s records, library and collections, activity and membership dwindled. The final record in the minute book is of the annual general meeting held on the 13th April 1980. The last rent demand from Leighton Hall estates land agent before termination of the field centre tenancy is dated 14th October 1981. A further letter from the same dated 26th August 1982 says the building should not be demolished. Whatever happened to contents is largely unknown though the winch used while clearing out the mine shafts was sold to the estate and some documents were transferred into the Leighton estate archives.

That a small but very active speleological society managed to develop and maintain a field centre which supported a burst of speleological research in the area for nine years was an achievement which deserves recognition from the cave and mine research community. The legacy of recording and publishing their efforts, largely in their own society journal but also in wider caving literature which provides the basis for ongoing research and exploration today, shows how important maintaining the tradition of caver publications by today’s caving clubs will be for future generations of cave explorers and scientists.

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Much of this note is based on letters, minute books and other papers in the Ashmead archive. Grateful thanks is given to the family and estate of Peter Ashmead and especially Sue Kennedy for access to these resources.

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Figure Captions:

Figure 1. The field centre at Warton Crag with some of the mining artefacts recovered from the Warton Crag mine workings.

Figure 2. LCMRS members being filmed by the BBC leaving the rear of the field centre.

Figure 3. Peter Ashmead being interviewed by the BBC.