

DAN-YR-OGOF CAVES

WALES

- Kent Henderson

In September, whilst again visiting England, and having previously visited a number of show caves systems in that country, I determined on this occasion to travel to Wales to visit the Dan-yr-Ogof Caves. It was thus that I caught an early morning train from London to Swansea, and a local bus north to the caves, arriving late morning.

Having previously communicated with the caves management, I was expected, and was well looked after – for which I was most grateful. I was in for a fascinating afternoon. What I found could possibly be described as a “caves theme park”, and I am not being in any way derogatory. Aside from three tourist caves, also on site is a dinosaur park, an Iron-age Farm, a Shire Horse Centre, and an artificial ski slope - not to mention the obligatory visitor’s centre, tourist shop, and restaurant et al.

Upon arrival I was met by James Price, the cave manager, who admitted me to the system, preferring that I explore myself, and chat to him latter. All three show caves are self-guided, and I headed off to follow the usual route, which firstly led to Dan-yr-Ogof Cave. The cave was discovered in 1912 by the Morgan Brothers, a local farming family, and subsequently opened to the public. Happily, the “late” discovery of the caves and subsequent protection has meant they have been preserved, unlike the historical fate of many other British tourist caves which have been known for up to centuries. Descendents of the Morgan family remain the owners and managers of the caves to the present day. The cave was further explored to the 1930’s and 1960’s, and presently the system boasts over ten miles of surveyed passageway.

Dan-yr-Ogof is a stream outflow cave with relatively narrow passageways. The streamway does appear in a few sections of the cave, but mostly the present watercourse is below the tourist cave level. Approaching the entrance, I passed an array of adequate interpretative signage, and opened three successive sealed doors before gaining access – very impressive management of the cave climate. The cave itself is quite wet, and bear in mind my visit was at the end of summer when one would normally expect such a cave to be at its driest. The ceiling “leaked everywhere”, and the pathways – mostly of well-constructed concrete, with satisfactory drainage – were nonetheless mostly wet as well. The tourist section extends 500 metres, with a large loop at the end, and the maximum cave depth is approximately 90 metres. The security of the cave is catered for by extensive closed-circuit TV cameras strategically located along the tour route.

During the self-guided tour, there are ten points of interest highlighted, each mostly adorned with signage, and a taped running-commentary set off at each location by sensors. The commentary is

“between the Morgan Brothers” and fictionally describes, sequentially through the commentary points, their discovery of the cave. The information provided is basic, but correct and to the point. It does stress *named formations*, and is necessarily designed to entertain, but nonetheless the patter does adequately present a reasonable historical and geologically-correct account (as far as I could tell) of what the visitor is viewing.

One thing I did personally find a problem was the volume of the audio. It was very loud, to the point where at some locations one could hear two different recordings. Clearly, audio interpretation of this kind has its limits and drawbacks. In querying this later, the managers advised that they had tried several different volumes, but that the one currently in use was best. I remain unconvinced. The cave, overall, is itself not profusely decorated, although in several smaller areas the secondary deposition is more than adequate, and provides the expected range of speleothems in a “normal” cave.

I thought that both the tracking and lighting in the cave were very good. Switching is not a big feature, although at most viewing-audio locations the lighting rises and falls to highlight points mentioned in the commentary. However, given the large tourist through-put of what is effectively a relatively narrow cave, the lighting is clearly on considerably more than not. That said, I noted no obvious *lampenflora* problems, nor any of the luxurious fern growth which unhappily abides in many other British Caves.

Each of the main decorations in the cave are protected with heavy gauge “chicken wire”, and invariably signposted with a name, such as *The Fingers*, *The Alabaster Pillar*, *The Flitch of Bacon*, and so on. The signage, in my view, is quite undesirable, unless of course, one takes the position – long since outdated in Australasia – that to give a decoration a name other than its geological type is the way to go. This is certainly taking “bet you can’t guess what we call this one” *interpretation* to a high level. Far better, perhaps, that we call a stalactite just that and let the visitors call it a “finger”, if they will. Be that as it may, Dan-yr-Ogof is a commercial “bums-on-seats” operation, and British traditions in showing caves are not what we in Australasia have now largely come to expect.

Despite my misgivings in some areas, I thought Dan-yr-Ogof Cave was quite well managed, particularly by British Standards, and its signage aside, it would fit happily enough into any Australasian tourist cave system. Necessarily, perhaps, one needs to compare apples with apples – Dan-yr-Ogof with other British Caves – and on that basis it is certainly near the “top of the tree”.

Leaving Dan-yr-Ogof Cave, I then followed the path back past the visitor's centre to the Iron-age farm – replete with thatched houses, and life-sized figures of people and animals. Here I was much more comfortable with the signage, and audio commentary, both of which I thought quite appropriate, and presumably historically accurate. Moving on, one approaches the dinosaur park. Huge full-sized dinosaurs of many descriptions loom up at intermittent distances from the path – there were far too many to count – all interestingly set in within the surrounding forest and flora. Quite imposing, and doubtlessly educational, although one suspects that the dinosaurs have a certain commercial perspective, especially with children. Many exhibits also had sound effects of various growls, groans, and roars – although just how one knows what noises various dinosaurs made several millions years ago is quite axiomatic, I should have thought. I overheard one tourist quipping: “I wish they'd feed them and shut them up”! Still, an impressive *theme park*, to be sure.

Upon ascending the hill past the numerous dinosaurs, I eventually came to the entrance of the second underground offering, Cathedral Cave. This cave was discovered in 1953, when members of the South Wales Caving Club pushed past a boulder choke. Subsequently, an entrance passage was excavated. Unlike Dan-yr-Ogof Cave, Cathedral is very voluminous indeed – magnificently so. The first section of the cave, secured by obligatory heavy gauge wire, is a mini-theme park of reconstructions of stone age man, with life sized models, fires, implements, and wall paintings, plus the now familiar audio commentary. Still, very well done.

Moving on, the rest of the cave is, mercifully, commentary-free, an extremely wise management decision. I was now entering possibly the most spectacular single show cave I have seen in Britain. A stream flows through most of the caves length, and the passageway is wide and high. Decoration is intermittent, but what exists is visually of high quality, and thoughtfully lit. The power of the cave is its water and its natural sounds, which certainly would have been spoiled by audio commentary. Halfway up the cave, to the left, is an extensive waterfall over many metres of flowstone – impressive. Perhaps less impressive is the “tap” clearly seen at the top, used to keep things flowing in drier periods. The cave from this point on becomes a *sound and light show* – the only sound being the water, plus classical music rising and falling in volume in concert with the lights, which also sequentially rises and falls highlighting another, larger waterfall near the cave's end, models of cavers descending from a hole near the ceiling, models of explorers in a boat, and various decoration clusters.

And it is impressive. Various lighting types and intensities, from para-floods to pure white light, are used most effectively, and the waterfalls beautifully back-lit – superb! I reflected on whether the experience would have been better without the dramatic classical music audio and just the sounds of the water. Frankly, I still remain undecided. This

is a richly-developed cave, although I do have one very major criticism – the tracking. In itself it is quite good, as such. However, the developers would appear to have encroached on and filled in at least half the stream to create the pathway – a major engineering modification which I consider is hard to justify. The cave lends itself to hanging pathways on its walls, I should have thought, with bridging where necessary – probably a more costly option than the stream in-fill approach used, but far more environmentally acceptable.

Upon leaving the breathtaking Cathedral Cave, I meandered through the dinosaur park and made my way to the park's third and final underground offering – Bone Cave. This small cave, high up in the karst, is effectively an *in situ* archeological museum. It was so named because over 40 human skeletons have thus far been found there, with many dating back over 3,000 years to the Bronze Age. The oldest bones to be found, of a red deer, have been dated to over 7,000 years old. Human occupation dates to the Roman Period, and finds include pottery, rings, and coins.

In entering the cave, all is in darkness save purposely-feeble track lighting. Various scenes are then sequentially lit with accompanying audio commentary, starting with archaeologists at work, burial scenes of a Bronze Age family, cave animals, and finally a Roman soldier. Many of the original skeletons and artifacts remain *in situ*. As a cave, it is *average*, as an audio-visual museum, it is outstanding. The lighting is constructed for dramatic effect, and compliments very thoughtful commentary. I actually re-entered the cave three times to repeat the lighting sequence.

Leaving Bone Cave, I descended back to the Visitor's Centre, the last section of the usual tourist route, and entered its Interpretation Museum. It is one of the better karst/geological/historical/faunal facilities I had seen, not just in Britain. The displays were excellent, well lit, well captioned, and well laid out. Very impressive. One exits into the mandatory tourist shop, where after a wander, I met and chatted to Ashford Price (father of James), the cave's owner. He is a most pleasant fellow, and we talked for some time, between his serving customers. He advised me that Dan-yr-Ogof had now been officially designated as *The National Show Caves Centre for Wales*. We talked about management issues, and research. The caves' management appears to have a good relationship with local cavers, and at least three PhD's have been completed as a result of on-site research. Ashford kindly presented me with the colour tourist book on the caves, together with copies of their Teacher's Pack, and pupil activity booklets. The book was very well done and not dissimilar in style to those of its genre available at many Australasian cave locations. The educational materials were the best I have seen (see my *review* elsewhere in this Journal).

Finally, I caught up with James again, who kindly took me into the cave's restaurant and treated me to lunch, whereupon I passed on copies of the

ACKMA journal. He was a bit nervous, I think, that I might recommend demolition of the caves, or something similar. Maybe my sordid reputation as a tough critic had preceded me? He was most interested to hear about ACKMA and cave management in our part of the world.

So, overall? In terms of cave management, about 7½ out of 10, and as a theme park and

educational/interpretative facility – 9 out of 10. I am most grateful to Ashford and James Price, and their staff, for their kindness and courtesy to me during my visit, and I warmly encourage any ACKMA member travelling to Wales to visit Dan-yr-Ogof. It is an excellent karst experience – particularly Cathedral Cave! Even the dinosaurs are friendly....