

Far Sump Extension - Part 3 of Peak Cavern.

See Part 1 for an overview of the entire system, access and location.

Introduction

The passages collectively falling under the heading **Far Sump Extension** used to be among the most remote in the Peak District. They were once only accessible by diving through the 385-metre-long Far Sump, through which any rescue attempt would have been very problematic. Regular exploration in and beyond Far Sump began over 20 years ago, with about 1.5 km of passages and over 400 metres of pitches being explored by cave divers between 12th January 1980 and 15th July 1996. Many of the pitches were explored by bolt-climbing from bottom to top on trips which often went round the clock and well beyond. Some of these shafts provide the finest examples of Derbyshire vein cavities in the area. Throughout these years, when the only route here involved a dive through Far Sump, the area remained very much as when first found. Modern cavers are asked to do everything possible to preserve these fine passages in an unspoilt condition.

Since non-diving access was established in 1996 (via the Speedwell Boulder Piles and James Hall's Over Engine Mine, or 'JH' for short) divers have continued to make a few discoveries. However, major digs such as that which broke through into the Titan shaft have been pursued by non-divers when dry access made such projects logistically possible. Thus, the most helpful references for exploration in this area up until 1996 are the detailed dive reports in Cave Diving Group Newsletters from No 55 (April 1980) onwards. However, as most of the divers involved are also TSG members, there are some useful longer articles and surveys in TSG Journals, especially No.12 (1986) pages 15-19, No.13 (1988) page 13, No.14 (1993) pages 14-19, No.15 (1996) pages 21-22 and No. 18, pages 39-41. Post-1996

exploration has been less well documented so far, with various disjointed references having appeared in assorted publications. Certain new discoveries have yet to be properly described in print.

It is perhaps worth noting from the outset that some writers in the past have referred to this area by incorrect names such as 'Far Peak' and the like. This has mostly been by people who were not involved in exploration of this area of the system at the time. Using the wrong name should be avoided because it would cause confusion when future cavers are searching the literature. The correct name remains 'Far Sump Extension'. The description which follows is the first to give detail of Far Sump Extension from the modern cavers' entry point (via the dig from JH) as opposed to all others which start from the upstream end of Far Sump (i.e. from the divers' perspective).

WARNING! A lot of the ropes, bolts and other fixed aids in various parts of Far Sump Extension have been in place for many years. A significant number of these were only intended as exploration aids and NOT for regular caving 'traffic'. Do NOT use ANY fixed aids in Far Sump Extension without first discussing which are safe for use with those cavers involved in explorations past and present.

Stemple Highway Area

From the base of the **Leviathan** shaft in **James Hall's Over Engine Mine** (or '**JH**' - see separate guide), a short gravel slope downwards (with Armco retaining barriers) reaches the formerly choked downstream sump. Thanks to water diversions, about 30 metres of crawling or stooping through this passage, followed by an ascent of a gravel slope emerges from the old **Stemple Highway Inlet Sump 2**; you are now in **Far Sump Extension**. A further 60 metres or so of rough hands-and-knees crawling on bedrock ends at a short flat out section (the former **Stemple Highway Inlet Sump 1**), entering the side of a handsome phreatic tube: **Stemple Highway**. The passages described so far are generally wet but easily passable due to most

of the JH water having been piped away to Speedwell. However, in very wet conditions excess water can reinvade this passage, sumping the low sections. Thus, it is essential that all cavers are aware of the FLOOD RISK! Additionally, red worms have regularly been spotted in the first pool from JH, suggesting farm effluent may collect here, so please be aware and do not swallow the water! A strong smell of oil is also sometimes present, and the mud is usually black, so please be careful.

Almost immediately above the entrance to Stemple Highway is **Muddy Aven**, aptly named, and is a narrow corkscrewing free-climb of about 30m to an equally muddy dig. The route to the left in Stemple Highway is described below under the heading 'Higher Level Passages'. To the right Stemple Highway takes the form of a beautiful echoing tunnel, giving easy walking to the first of two pitches down, linked by a traverse. Various other avens are passed beneath on the way; some are blind, but the 18m-high **Coral Aven** and an adjacent unnamed aven are linked at the top by a group of small pitches and tight bedding crawls. Above these rises another 15m-high aven and further associated passages, **Second Look Passage Extension**. This aven ends at a rift choked with rocks and is almost certainly the base of the floor-chokes in Fingernail Chamber situated roughly 6m above it and described later.

Over the top of the first down-pitch, the Stemple Highway tube continues (unexplored) to merge with the huge dark expanses of phreatic rift leading to Salmon's Cavern, access to which is gained as described below. Both the pitches (6m and 9m) are fitted with iron ladders, and a short crawl beyond enlarges at a junction. Straight ahead is the base of a large aven (where the Ride of The Valkyries (see below) pitch lands), beyond which is a further short crawl (or a climb through a window) to a 9m upward pitch. The latter reaches a col with a 6-metre downward pitch (muddy handline in place) immediately beyond into the lofty **Salmon's Cavern**.

The main aven here is the base of a pitch 72m deep, reached by traversing over the top of the Ride of The Valkyries in the high-level passages (see below). The smaller aven near the far end of Salmon's Cavern once had many old miners' stemples jammed across it; this is 27m high and is totally blind. The ropes here are very old and should not be used. At the far end of Salmon's Cavern is a low arch leading to a slippery 6 metre ascending tube gaining a short crawl and the tiny **Hypercapnia Sump**.

The other passage (from the junction just beyond the Stemple Highway pitches) is a crawl of about 50 metres in length which gradually increases in size and emerges into the impressive **Af Passage** opposite a mud ledge which was once the site of the divers' camp, the start of the 'Lower Level Passages', for the purposes of this description. The initials of a miner, 'Af', were found scratched in mud here when the passage was first entered by divers, indicating a previous dry route existed, and later proved to be the JH connection.

Lower Level Passages

Turning left at this junction allows easy walking, stooping and a short crawl ending at some boulders, where the route leading (eventually) into Titan leads off upwards. Crawling through these boulders at floor level for a few metres leads to the upstream end of **Far Sump** (see Peak Cavern part 1). In normal winter conditions this is a large pool sumping under the far wall but in drought the water level falls such that the first 150m of the sump can be followed via various pools without breathing apparatus. The low inlet on the right 15 metres into the 'sump' is **Far Sump Inlet Sump**, also known as 'Far Sump Left Hand Branch'. This emits a very strong flow of water in wet conditions and is in fact the main Peak Cavern stream seen downstream of Far Sump. The passage above the 5m cascade at the upstream end of Far Sump is some 30m long to a choke of huge boulders - the lowest known point of the choke at the base of the Titan shaft (see below).

From the boulders just upstream of Far Sump (described in the above paragraph) a 4m scramble upwards enters a large rift passage with a sloping silt floor. The far end of this is terminated by an easy but slippery 5m climb (care!), at the top of which is a monumental choke with ways along the left and right walls, both having been dug previously. To the left soon ends in dribbly cavities, probably located above the choke terminating the passage above the 5m cascade at the upstream end of Far Sump (see above). To the right is an uneven crawl via various digs to a narrow upward slot emerging into a chamber, **Blarney's Breakdown**, with a floor of sloping boulders. At the head of this slope is an extensive dig upwards through further massive boulders (care!) which suddenly emerges part way up the sloping floor of a gigantic aven - this is **Titan** (see separate Titan guide).

The opposite direction from the divers' camp (in A1 Passage) continues upstream in fine style with large breakdown blocks scattered about. The water is normally static but in flood there is a very large stream here. Easy walking leads to an obvious T junction, where the left-hand option involves stooping and crawling (generally downhill) in a tube which ends at the normally static **Minor Sump**. This is the source of the floodwater referred to above. There is an interesting draughting tube on the right near the start of this passage but is unfortunately too tight to follow beyond a few metres. If the water is very low then Minor Sump recedes, exposing another low crawl at roof level on the right. This gives 60m of flat-out, sharp and wet going, emerging in **The Rasp**, a slightly larger streamway associated with a minor pipe vein. To the left is a choked sump, but upstream to the right is a few metres of jagged epiphreatic passage to a further sump. This has been emptied after some difficult bailing and leads to two more sumps, passed by round-the-clock pumping operations to a fourth, impenetrable sump. The whole of this area is very flood-liaible; in fact, for long periods it remains sumped.

Back at the T-junction in A1 Passage, the other way is a major tunnel floored with fine sediment and gypsum crystals (care!) - i.e. this now never

carries a stream. Easy walking leads via fine cracked mud floors (care!) and the not-so-easy **Lake of a Thousand Banana Skins** (you have been warned!) to a large canyon section, terminating at a boulder pile. Scrambling up through an obvious hole leads to a large platform looking down into the impressive **Major Sump**, 7.5m deep and solidly choked. A small tube in the left wall just before this point is the site of an abandoned dig.

Higher Level Passages

The brief description below follows a circular route, starting from the entry point into Stemple Highway (from JH as described above), with detours to other sections of passage along the way. On emerging from the old (now dry) **Stemple Highway Inlet Sump 1**, turn left at the T-junction with Stemple Highway to follow a phreatic rift passage of comfortable walking size. For a few metres this is downstream as far as an immature sink under the right wall (tested to a submerged impenetrable inlet on stream left in Far Sump about 240m from base).

The continuation of the rift is now upstream and leads (via a slightly narrower section) to the base of the very fine **Calcite Aven**. Great sheets of hydrothermal calcite are in evidence here, as are housebrick-sized calcite rhombs littering the floor (evidence of the proximity of New Rake). A fixed rope leads up a slightly wet pitch of about 45m (the large void on the opposite wall is blind) to a short walking canyon streamway and a junction. To the left is **Cascade Aven**, a 30m upward pitch in three steps entering the 15m high **Donatella's Aven**. A smaller passage at the top is the source of most of the stream; after a further 4m aven, this ends at a mud sump about 130m above the level of Far Sump. The sump was siphoned and passed by SUSS in 2008, leading to an awkward passage **The Shredder**, 80m long to a chamber at the end. An adjacent aven has both an inlet and outlet sump, with the outlet sump at the base of a 5m climb down. This was dived in almost zero visibility to a penetration distance of 8m.

A few metres up in the wall of Donatella's Aven is a washed-out bedding plane; following the trickle emerging opposite the entry point from Cascade Aven soon becomes too low. In the opposite direction (i.e. back over Cascade Aven) is a dry crawl becoming too low very close to The Total Perspective Vortex (see below). This bedding plane is believed to be the same as that forming the upward limit of major development elsewhere in Far Sump Extension, in the roof of the first Miners' Workshop of JH and the large passages above Speedwell's Cliff Cavern.

From the base of Cascade Aven the other route is a dry walking-sized rift passage, then a short climb up flowstone into the boulder-strewn **Fingernail Chamber**, with various routes leading off. To the left, just after entering is an unclimbed aven, some 12 metres high, connecting with a ledge on Balcombe's Way Aven (see below). A circular window at floor level part way along the left wall gives direct access to **Fingernail Chamber Pitch**, a 12m descent into the impressive **Balcombe's Way** (one of two main routes on the round trip back into the lower level series). Straight ahead is a 6m pitch up a loose (!) wall of boulders to gain the start of **Western Highway**, at first almost 15m high.

Proceeding upslope in Western Highway soon encounters a rope hanging out of the roof - this is **Vortex 2**. Beyond the foot of this pitch is a large, still rising passage which then descends maybe 30m to end ignominiously at a sand choke. This is laterally close to but vertically separated from the main development in the nearby **Joint Effort** choke above Speedwell's **Cliff Cavern**. The Vortex 2 pitch is a vertical-then-traversing section of rope (totalling about 23m) emerging in the horizontal development of **The Total Perspective Vortex**. To the left from the pitch head is **Vortex 3**, a wet 30m pitch (with an awkward take off) past dangerously poised boulders to where the water is lost in a floor choke. To the right from the top of Vortex 2 a short crawl leads past a deep pit to the right (**Vortex 1** - a 45m pitch dropping into Balcombe's Way) to a boulder-strewn chamber. Straight across this (care - the floor is jammed rocks over fresh air!) enters a short

low crawl visually connected with that leading out of Donatella's Aven (referred to above). However, immediately to the right at the entry to this chamber is the loose take off for **Balcombe's Way Aven**, a 30m pitch down into Balcombe's Way. Just over halfway down is a ledge, the back of which overlooks the 12m aven in Fingernail Chamber.

Balcombe's Way Aven touches down at the head of a boulder slope entering the side of Balcombe's Way, a very fine phreatic trunk route. To the right passes below a high aven (the base of Vortex 1) then ends soon after at the bottom of the 12m Fingernail Chamber Pitch. Shortly before this point is a dig low down on the left where stones can be thrown down a narrow shaft - though this is right over the avens in Stemple Highway.

In the opposite direction a short pitch down over some boulders is followed by uneven going in a large passage. Soon a trench begins to cut down in the floor - this is the head of **The Ride of The Valkyries**, a fine airy shaft of about 60m landing between Salmon's Cavern and the crawl from Stemple Highway into At Passage. Perhaps 15m down this a small window enters an alternative shaft via which stones fall into the aven where the At Passage crawl leaves Stemple Highway.

By continuing in Balcombe's Way, a rising traverse over The Ride of The Valkyries reaches another large unnamed shaft some 72m deep which enters Salmon's Cavern (referred to above) directly via the main aven in its roof - another magnificent descent. Shortly before the end of the traverse (i.e. rising from Balcombe's Way level) is a smaller aven in the roof which has been partially climbed, but the existence of what looks like a passage at the top has yet to be confirmed.

Description Notes:

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