

## Oxlow Cavern, Castleton.

Grid Ref: SK 12412 82186 (GPS), Alt: 425m.

Length: 1.4km (4.75km including Maskill Mine & Giants Hole)

Depth: 140m to West Chamber.

Access: Call at Oxlow House Farm SK 12517 82502 first, do not go onto the farm land without permission. Small fee charged (£1 per head at the time of writing).

## Introduction

A fine "vertical" trip, relatively dry and relaxed, deep, and mostly in big passage formed within a mineral vein. Three pitches lead down to a coil 70m below the entrance where there are two ways on. To the East, another descent continues down into East Chamber (very big), and to the west, the impressive West Swirl Passage leads down at 45° to the 4th Pitch and West Chamber, which is massive. The far end of West Chamber links through to the bottom of Maskill Mine. From the bottom of the Forth Pitch, in the West Antechamber a pull-through pitch up reaches a crawl heading north away from the vein to reach the New Oxlow Series and the connection to Giant's Hole.

## The Cave

The entrance to Oxlow is a concrete capped mine shaft in a hollow with an old metal lid. Often hidden by nettles in summer.

### Entrance Pitch: (P1) 17.5m:

Tackle: **31m rope** (includes following slope and pitch) and **3 krabs**.

Rigging: Tie in to resin-anchor and rig the main hang from the removable belay bar.

A 17.5m deep mine shaft of small dimensions leads down past a short mined level (blind) to emerge at the top of a slope in a natural vein cavity.

From here the only way on is down slope in a large passage 3m wide and 6m high. Immediately, an eco-anchor in the right wall provides an attachment point for the safety-line leading after 5.5m to a **4m pitch (P1b)** 5m (bolts to floor). This is rigged from the left wall as a Y-hang from two resin anchors.

The passage continues on down slope for 15m then down to the left the passage instantly lowers and swings back on its self. After 13m there's a 1m step down with a huge fixed anchor in the right wall, usually used to protect the approach to the head of the.....

### Second Pitch: (P2): 11m (bolts to floor)

From here the head of the 3rd Pitch can be seen below and the black void beyond is East Chamber.

Tackle: **27m Rope** and 3-4 krabs. (to include the following headline to second resin anchor at floor level)

Rigging: Having tied directly in to the big anchor above the step rig a Y-hang from the resin anchors at the pitch head. There is a deviation cord in situ' 4m down but the functionality of this is questionable.

The landing is on a level floor but this soon drops away down a scramble leading after 13.5m to the top of the Third Pitch. This slope is best protected with a continuation of the P2 rope with a couple of resin anchors in the right wall providing attachment points.

### Third Pitch (to The Coil): (P3): 12.3m (bolts to floor)

Tackle: **20m Rope** (30m if going to East Chamber), **4 Krabs** and 1 deviation cord with krab.

Rigging: From the last resin anchor where the P2 rope terminates another in the right wall protects the approach to the pitch head and two more provide a Y-hang, again from the right wall. 4m down in the left wall, an old deviation cord rigged from a spit can be extended with a sling and krab to provide a deviation. The descent finishes on a coil with steep drops on each side. This point is 71m below entrance level. The end of the rope can be tied in to a resin anchor just down on the left wall of West Swirl Passage.

Down to the east is the impressive **East Chamber** and down to the west, **West Swirl Passage**.

If going down into **East Chamber** the 3rd Pitch should be rigged with a 30m Rope and the descent continued past The Coil for a further 7.5m down slope to the head of the East Chamber pitch, 5.3m (lip to floor). Out from the lip, a spit hanger can be placed to provide a deviation but this isn't really necessary if care is taken on the last 5m to avoid rubbing the rope.

**East Chamber** is some 7m wide, 24m long and 50m+/- high. At the far end two holes in the floor lead to aborted digs. The first has now collapsed and the second is somewhat unstable.

### West Swirl Passage and West Chamber:

From the coil at the bottom of the Third Pitch, West Swirl Passage descends steeply for 50m to the Fourth Pitch. The descent is protected but a 55m hand-line, attached to a resin anchor in the left hand wall and one

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11m further down. There is normally a rope in place but the safety of using this fixed aid can only be judged by the visiting party on the day. At the bottom a resin anchor in the right wall marks the head of the **Fourth Pitch**.

From the anchor point a short climb reaches the head of the pitch proper, rigged with a wide Y-hang as a 10m free-hang. A 25m rope and two krabs are required.

From the bottom of the pitch a very high steeply descending passage leads down towards the **West Antechamber**. After 17m a passage 8m up in the right wall lead to Pilgrim's Way and Oxlow's New Series, reached via a pull-through (described later). Opposite this in the left wall, a corresponding passage, reached by scaling, leads for 30m and closes down.

Continuing on down through West Antechamber a blank wall is reached. Here there is a small hole in the floor on the left and an inlet from a small stream passage on the right. The inlet passage is 35m of awkward thrutching to reach a sump. This has been dived for 43m (see Derbyshire Sump Index). The hole is a 2.5m climb down followed by a low arch leading into the impressive **West Chamber**, 85m long, up to 8m wide and very high. The slope at the end reaches a mined out level, 11m long to Oxlow's **Fifth Pitch** and Maskhill Mine.

#### **Oxlow New Series:**

This is reached by ascending the 8m high pull-through below the Fourth Pitch (23m rope and 2 krabs required). At the top is a 1m high tube with another smaller tube going off to the right (ignore). The main tube can be followed for 6m to a junction, right here, and immediately right again at a boulder is the main way on and into the **Pilgrim's Way**. Left leads to **The Flue**, described later. Pilgrim's Way is 265m of low meandering passage, generally crawling, with occasional stooping leading to Mecca Aven. Along the way several crawls lead off.

Crawl "A":

This is passed on the right after 12m from the start of Pilgrim's Way and leads back to the top of the pull-through.

Crawl "B":

This is passed on the right 14m beyond crawl "A" (26m from the start) and connects with crawl "C" to eventually reach **Suicide Chamber**.

Crawl "C":

This is passed on the right 17m beyond crawl "B" (43m from the start) and connects back to crawl "B"

"Immature Inlet":

This is passed on the left 90m beyond crawl "C" (133m from the start) and issues a very small stream which is followed for 36m to where it disappears down a small slot on the right (169m from the start)

Crawl "D":

This is passed on the right 28m beyond the small slot (197m from the start). Another small stream runs into here and can be followed for 15m to **Black's Folly**, an 8m pitch blocked at the bottom.

Crawl "E":

This is passed on the left 3m beyond crawl "D" (200m from the start). This is 3m long leading through to Castle Aven, 4m long, 2m wide and 15m high. This has been climbed to reach a small passage which soon closes down.

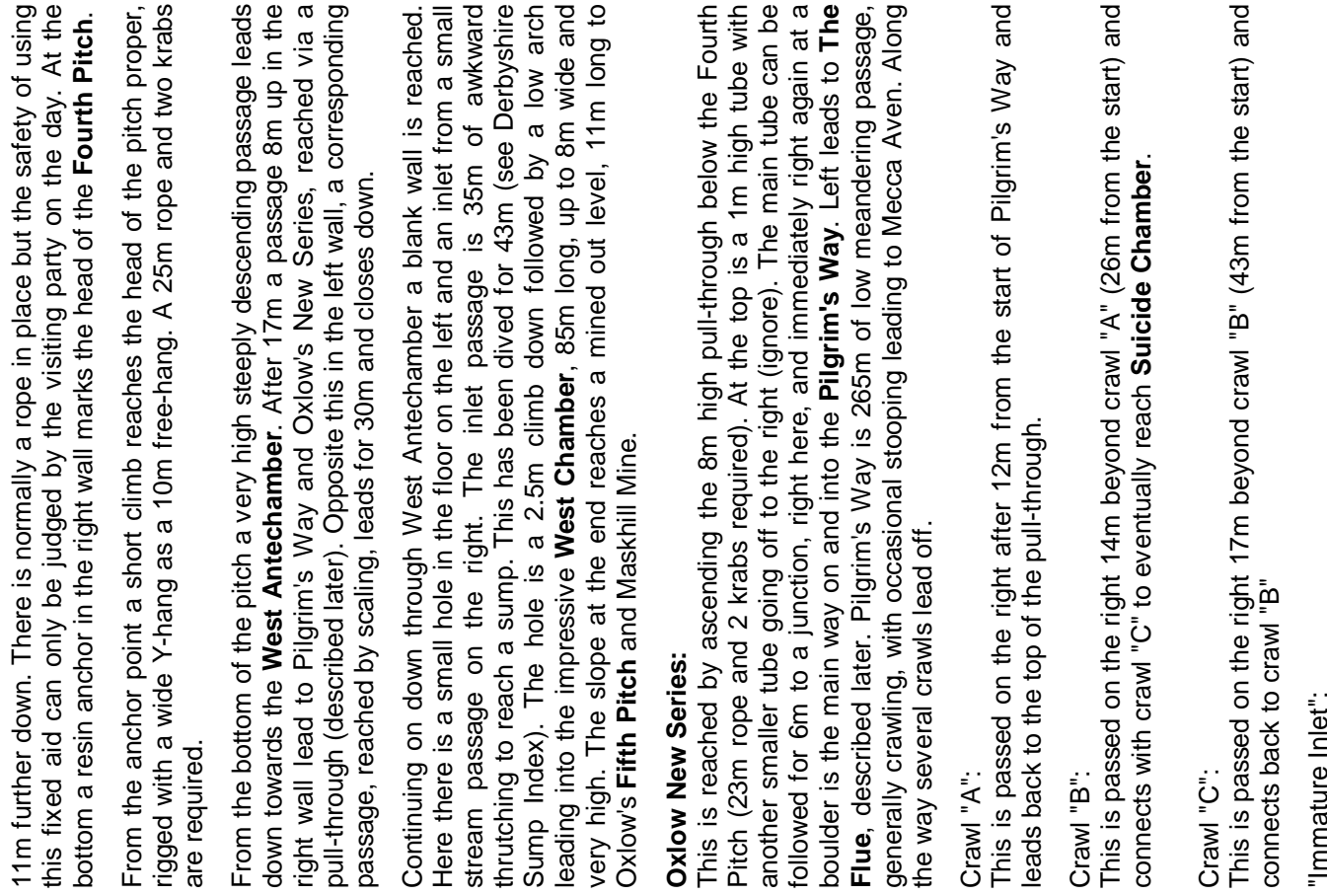
#### **Mecca Aven to P.B. Chamber:**

Mecca Aven was climbed for 40m to reach a small impenetrable passage. Across the bottom of the aven a low passage reaches a junction after just 2m. Left (described later) leads to The Chamber of Horrors and the Giant's Hole connection. To the right the passage enlarges to walking height soon passing under **Rainbow Aven** and 14m further on, **Icarus's Crawl** on the right (described later). After another 41m a stream enters from **Jacob's Ladder**, a clean washed aven on a sharp left hand corner. The passage continues in the same fashion for 36m [photo] to a 2m climb down into **North Chamber**, 4m in diameter and 12m high. The ascending muddy passage on the left is blind after 4m. The passage 6m up in the wall opposite the point of entry is part of the Main Stream Inlet Series which is described later.

From **North Chamber** large passage continues for 8m past an inlet in roof to reach the head of **North Pitch**. The small crawl on the right here soon closes down. An anchor in the right wall protects a climb down over boulders to a Y-hang and 6m free-hang to land on a rocky floor. The passage leading off from the bottom is 7m long to **The Portcullis**, a very low arch on the left leading into **The Sewer**, a low wet gravelly crawl. 5m in a cross rift is met with a high narrow passage off to the left. This is **Main Stream Inlet** (described later). The low wet crawl continues via a duck for 46m to a right-hand corner and larger walking passage. 5m on is **Boulder Chamber**, a 12m long descending boulder ramp (with aven above) leads into a walking size passage to reach the first of three concrete dams after 28m. The second and third are 15m further on. Immediately over the last dam is Oxlow's **Downstream Sump** (also known as 50/50 Sump). The dams were constructed in the 1970's and were used successfully to bale

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the sump and briefly explore the passage beyond before they overflowed. The sump was passed again in 1992 by diving allowing a more thorough exploration (CDG Newsletter p31-32).

The sump is 8m long but extremely tight with an awkward squeeze half way through and on no account should an attempt be made to free dive it. Upon surfacing the passage soon enlarges to enter **P.B. Chamber**, 40m long and up to 5m wide with avens in the roof. The first aven above the sump was climbed to 6m, the second to 16m over very loose ground and the third, the main aven, to 26m, all leads were blind. The floor of the chamber descends towards the far end where the stream sinks amongst the boulders and mud. Water level can be reached but the choke continues underwater with no passable way on. The water has been traced to Main Rising in Speedwell Cavern.

#### **Description Notes:**

Entrance to East Chamber: Oct. 2002, S Puckering & M Whitehead.  
The Coll to West Chamber (main routes): Sept. 2005, S Puckering & R Middleton.

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#### **Surveys:**

Published by JS Beck available from Hitch n Hike.  
CDG Newsletter #107 (p30) Apr. 1993 (PB Chamber).

#### **Further reading:**

- Crewe CPC Rigging Guide
- Caves of the Peak District (p86), DW Gill & JS Beck 1991, now out of print ISBN 1-85568-034-3.
- Classic Caves of the Peak District (p134), Iain Barker 1997, now out of print ISBN 1-86126-058-X
- Limestones and Caves of the Peak District (p14, & 325-330), Trevor D Ford 1977, out of print ISBN 0 86094 004 1 (paper) & 005 X (cloth)
- CDG Newsletter #107 (p30-32) Apr. 1993. (PB Chamber)

#### **Entries in Descent Magazine:**

- #37 (p12) Dec. 1977.
- #44 (p7) Jan./Feb. 1980
- #45 (p12) Mar./Apr. 1980
- #105 (p14) Apr./May. 1992.
- #106 (p19) Jun./Jul. 1992 (P.B. Chamber).
- #107 (p15) Aug./Sep. 1992 (P.B. Chamber).

Entries in Descent Magazine - continued:  
#108 (p8) Oct./Nov. 1992 (P.B. Chamber).

#### **Entries in Cave Diving Group Newsletter:**

#107 (p30-33) Apr. 1993. (Downstream Sump & P.B. Chamber).

#### **Contacts:**

- DCA Access Officer:  
Iain Barker, 56 Thornbridge Crescent, Birley, Sheffield. S12 3AE.  
Email: [iainbarker@peakland.freereserve.co.uk](mailto:iainbarker@peakland.freereserve.co.uk)

#### **Amendments:**

Amendments and additions can be sent to:-

[caveguides@peakdistrictcaving.info](mailto:caveguides@peakdistrictcaving.info) (any information regarding access or safety issues is automatically passed on to the Derbyshire Caving Association).

## **WARNING!**

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