

Cave Photography Group

Newsletter 1 (December 2000)

Welcome to the first edition of the Cave Photography Group's quarterly newsletter. The idea of starting an organisation in the UK for cave photographers has been talked about for several years now. However nobody has stepped forward and expressed an interest in organising one until recently. During the past few years there has been an annual cave photography field meet held in the Dales, organised originally as a joint event by Underground Photographer magazine and the BCRA special interest Cave Radio and Electronics Group (CREG).

It is now two years since the last issue of Underground Photographer magazine was published, and this year the field meet was organised and run solely by CREG. At this meeting the subject of starting up a group focusing on cave photography was discussed again and a number of those present felt that the time for action had come. In the absence of a regular specialist publication there was no forum for cave photographers to exchange ideas and keep in contact. Therefore it was decided that one of the primary aims of the group would be to publish a regular newsletter containing news and features of interest to cave photographers.

This newsletter is not intended to replace Underground Photographer, which we hope will reappear before too much longer. Our intention is to produce a small scale publication which will enable cave photographers to share views and experiences, and to provide a place where events of interest to cave photographers can be publicised. We will not be able to reproduce quality photographs in a low budget publication such as this. However once the group has become established there is a possibility we may produce an annual photographic publication to showcase the work of our members. We aim to be a non-profit organisation run by volunteers for the benefit of the cave photography community and look forward to welcoming you aboard.

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Cave Photography News

Future plans for the Cave Photography Group

- By Footleg

Now that we have taken the first steps in setting up a cave photography group where do we go from here? Well firstly there is the newsletter which you are reading. We will be publishing four issues a year to keep you informed about what is going on in the world of cave photography, and hopefully help you to improve your own photographic efforts by sharing tips and techniques through short articles. We can't do this without your help, and we are actively seeking contributions from all cave photographers for future editions of the newsletter. We would love to hear about your experiences of cave photography, whether you are a well seasoned veteran or have just dipped your toe into the darkness. The deadline for submission of articles for the next issue is Wednesday 31st January 2001 so pick up a pen (or keyboard) and let's hear from you!

We are aiming to publish the next issue of the newsletter in late February, and subsequent issues will be produced in May, August and November of each year. This issue and the next one are being produced free of charge while we are getting the group off the ground. You can sign up to receive copies of future issues on the website at www.caves.org.uk/photography/ or by completing the form which accompanies this newsletter and returning it to David Gibson. The newsletter can be sent to you via email, or we can send you printed copies by post if you prefer. A contribution of some stamps to cover postage would be appreciated as we do not have any funding at present. Details of membership and subscription costs for future issues will be published in issue 2.

The main aims of the Cave Photography Group are to provide a means of communication between members of the cave photography community, to promote all forms of underground photography and imaging, and to encourage people in their underground photography. The group will also be organising field meets to enable you to meet your fellow photographers. These events provide an excellent opportunity to show your work to others, see other peoples work and to exchange ideas and techniques. Further details of the next field meet can be found in a separate article in this newsletter.

Hidden Earth 2000 Photo Salon

- Report by David Gibson

As usual the BCRA ran a photo salon as part of the Hidden Earth national caving conference in September 2000. This year, there was little advance publicity and so, once again, the number of entries was not great. The monochrome print category was particularly poorly represented with only two entrants. Having said that, there were some excellent colour print and slide entries; notably Gavin Newman's portfolio, which won him the Premiere Trophy.

Entries were received from Chris Binding, Ashley

Burrows, Martyn Farr, Terence Fitch, Paul 'Footleg' Fretwell, David Gibson, Paul Gladman, Peter Glanvill, Fay Hartley, Lee Hawkswell, Clare du Heaume, Chris Howes, Andy Jackson, Tony Merino, Alasdair Neill, Gavin Newman, Hugh Penney, Brian West, Ian Wilton-Jones, and Neil Wooldridge.

A full list of the winning shots, and the prizes will appear in *Caves & Caving*, and on the Hidden Earth web site. Here, I will just briefly mention some of the winners: Best transparency – Tony Merino (two prizes) and Martyn Farr; best colour print – Gavin Newman, Andy Jackson, Peter Glanvill and Footleg; best monochrome print – Chris Howes and David Gibson; and the best newcomer award – Alasdair Neill.

The judges this year were Sheena Stoddard, Graham Crisp & Paul Mann. A brief extract from their report says that "once again, the judges were impressed by the overall quality of this year's entries, and found some of the decisions very hard to make. Interesting techniques noted by the judges were David Gibson's stereoscopic recording of a fossil specimen, and Brian West's portfolio montage of a Romanian cave entrance."

Once again, the SpeleoTechnics prize was on offer. This was a single cash prize of £100 for the best colour print or transparency of a SpeleoTechnics product in use. However, since the conference organisers did not really promote this prize, it is not really surprising that it was not awarded. Perhaps it is now time to re-assess the merits of offering a prize like this?

In their preliminary report the judges made some comments about digital photos, which I was not sure how to interpret. As this newsletter goes to press, I do not know what the judges' final report says – but you will be able to read it in *Caves & Caving*. The rules of the Photo Salon say that digital photos are allowed, and need not be declared. The inference is that if a photo is not obviously digital then the photographer should *not* be penalised for declaring it. Perhaps the subject of digital photos is something to be discussed? This needs to be done soon, if any changes to the rules are desired for next year's competition. Maybe we could have a special category – as the Irish did in their competition – for 'digital effects'?

The Giles Barker Award is presented annually by Red Rose CPC and Morgannwg CC to a person associated with any aspect of cave photography in recognition of his or her excellence and contributions to the field. This year the award went to Paul Deakin. The official citation reads "Paul is well known in cave photography circles and bibliophiles will recall his involvement in 1975 in the production of *British Caves and Potholes*, one of the earliest British caving coffee-table books. More recently he has created memorable audio-visual sequences, shown at local and national events, and is particularly known for his fine colour prints of mines and caves (including the modern classic of Titan shaft). Paul is therefore a worthy recipient of the 2000 Giles Barker Award for his continuing excellence in underground photography." The award itself is a figurine, hand-crafted for the occasion by Ceris Jones.

Cave Photography News (cont.)

Cave Photography Field Meetings

The Cave Photography Group will be organising a Spring field meeting in the Yorkshire Dales for the weekend of 24-25th March 2001. See the article on the following page for full details.

We are also working on a field meeting in Devon in conjunction with the DSS. The date to put in your diary is *provisionally* the weekend of 19-20th May 2001. This will be an opportunity to visit some caves in one of the less visited caving regions of the UK and to photograph some interesting mineral formations. This field meet coincides with the CREG field-meet in Cornwall, so some of the organisers may be attending both events. Look out for further details in the next issue of the CPG newsletter.

Irish Caving Conference – Photography Competition

– Report by David Gibson

I was invited to attend the Irish national caving conference last month, in Co. Clare. The conference is run, jointly, by SUI and ICRO; and is an excellent event, as the many English cavers there will be able to testify. Together with Hugh Penney, the news editor of *Caves & Caving*, I judged the photo competition, which is on broadly similar lines to the BCRA competition.

Like the BCRA Photo Salon, this competition also suffered from a lack of print entries. I think this is not because people are not taking photos; but because they do not find the time to print and mount the entries properly (myself included). Also, people do not seem to be confident enough to want to enter their shots in the first place. In the event, we awarded the first prize in the colour print category to an unmounted enprint because – although we made the point that it would have been much better enlarged and mounted – it was nevertheless a good photo. (In fact, it was taken using a simple point-and-shoot camera, so it proves that you do not always need expensive equipment!).

The organiser of the Irish competition, Ernest Lawrence, thought that the aims of a Cave Photography Group should include the publication of hints and tips on how to present photos; and that a Group could perhaps loan out guillotines, art knives and tools to allow people to cut their own cardboard frames. This sounds like a good idea, and perhaps we can do this?

It is also worth mentioning the category of 'digital effects'. We had three prints to choose from. Although some time and effort had gone into all three images, we felt that two of them looked too much like 'run-of-the-mill' effects. The winning shot, by Adrian Thomas (in fact, all three entries were Adrian's), was an impressive use of a computer to enhance a caving image without giving it that obvious 'Photoshop' look!

Whatever Happened to underground photographer?

– David Gibson reports

It is now over two years since the last issue of *Underground Photographer* was published in Autumn 1998. Many of you have asked what has happened to this widely acclaimed magazine. Well, as some of you know, the editors Kym and Paul put the magazine on hold due to various crises at home, including family illness and redundancy. They are now working freelance, trying to set up their business, and *Underground Photographer* (which was produced in their spare time, as a 'voluntary' activity) has had to take a back seat. Having been involved in several voluntary groups myself, I know only too well how difficult it is to keep the momentum going; and when things start to slip what an uphill struggle it is to keep going.

Kym and Paul say they have not given up with *Underground Photographer* and are intending to produce another issue – perhaps along the lines of a 'journal' rather than a news magazine. Hopefully the Cave Photography Group can help to encourage *Underground Photographer's* re-appearance, since I expect that some of the impetus in writing articles and supplying photos has now been lost. In fact, the magazine could probably do with a larger production team than it had previously. Hopefully, we can report further in the next issue. In the mean time if anyone would like a refund of the unused portion of their subscription to U/P, they should contact Kym, who will be happy to deal with this. Kym can be contacted by writing to *Underground Photographer*, 40 Buckingham Road, Petersfield, Hants GU32 3AZ or you can email her at kym@dhios.demon.co.uk

A Winter Cave Photography Tip

- By Footleg

On a recent weekend in the Dales I had plans to do some cave photography. Unfortunately I failed to get any pictures taken on the Saturday caving trip. The reason was that I had left my camera in the car overnight and night time temperatures are getting pretty cold now. This meant that the camera was much colder than the air in the cave. As soon as I took it out of the bag condensation began to form on it. Wiping the lens in this situation does no good because the cold glass just fogs up again as more moist cave air passes over it. The only answer is to warm up the camera. This can be done by putting it inside your clothing, but I didn't have enough time to warm it up from so cold. Saturday night I made sure the camera was kept indoors, and on the Sunday I got some great pictures in the same cave as the day before, with no fogging problems. So remember to keep your camera somewhere warm before taking it underground this Winter. That way you will have one less thing to worry about when trying to take photographs in the caves.

Cave Photography Group Spring Field Meet – March 2001

The Cave Photography Group Spring field meet is due to take place in the **Yorkshire Dales** over the weekend of the **24th and 25th of March 2001**. Following on from the successful photographic field meets held over the last few years, the CPG are putting together a weekend aimed at cave photography and all things relating to image capture in the underground environment. In addition to taking photographs underground this includes a whole raft of other aspects of underground imaging, such as lighting, modelling, video, film, digital, post processing etc.

Over the last few years we have had presentations from professional cave photographers such as Chris Howes, John Forder, and many others who have helped to pass on some of their tips on producing high quality photographs and images. We have had workshops on darkroom techniques as well as on a modern digital approach. We have visited some outstanding caves on field trips such as White Scar Cves and Illusion Pot, to allow those participating to experience some stunning scenery – then capture it on film. In the case of White Scar, we even had a lake to contend with. All this was based in the beautiful surroundings of the Yorkshire Dales.

The Weekend

Saturday will be an ‘above ground’ day, based in the comfort of a local conference centre, where workshops and slide shows will be held. We will also hold a mini salon to exhibit your work to others, which will be an ideal opportunity to gain advice and experience before taking the plunge into exhibiting at the BCRA conference. As in previous years we will award a prize for the image judged to be the best entered.

Sunday will be dedicated to an underground activity in a local cave. This will give you the ideal opportunity to try out some techniques and effects under the guidance of experienced underground photographers whilst being in an actual cave environment.

We Need You

You can help to make the weekend a success by volunteering to give a short talk, a slide presentation, or a demonstration of a photographic/image capture technique – basically anything which you would like to share with your fellow underground adventurers. If you have any equipment that you could bring along to the weekend, such as a Digital Camera, Computer, Darkroom Kit, Camera, Lighting etc. then Richard Rushton would like to hear from you. Please bring along some examples of your work to show to others and to enter into the mini salon. Even if you don't feel you can give a presentation then we would still really like to see you and have you participate in this weekend.

What To Do Now

If you would like to attend the weekend then please fill in the form accompanying this newsletter and return it to Richard at the address given below. If you have any questions relating to the weekend and the intended caving venue then please do not hesitate to contact Richard by letter at my address or by e-mail (cpg-meetings@caves.org.uk). We have to make a small charge of £5.00 to cover the cost of room hire and administration for the weekend. Camping and B&B style accommodation will be available at the venue.

Richard Rushton, 18 Long Meadow, Skipton, North Yorkshire, BD23 1BH

Readers Letters

Seeing as this is the first issue of the CPG newsletter, we have not received any letters yet. We hope this will have changed by the time we start putting together issue 2! We are planning to have a regular letters page in future editions to give you the opportunity to have your say. We would like to hear your views on anything to do with cave photography, but we would especially like to hear what you think of the Cave Photography Group and the newsletter. What sorts of features would you like to see? What sorts of events would you like the group to organise for cave photographers?

You will have noticed that we have not included any photographs in this first newsletter. We do not currently have access to the equipment required to print high-quality photographs. The inclusion of pictures would increase the production costs, which we want to avoid while we are producing the first two free issues. Would you prefer to see some pictures at the cost of us having to charge a higher subscription price once we get up and running? Alternatively we could include colour pictures in an electronic version of the newsletter and put pictures on the website. What do you think? We hope you will let us know.

Do you have a question you would like to put to the membership of the CPG? Maybe you are looking for another cave photographer near you to arrange photographic caving trips with? Whatever you want to ask or tell us, the letters page is here to provide you with somewhere to let yourself be heard. We look forward to hearing from you.

Letters can be posted to the Editor at 29 Gledhow Park Grove, Leeds LS7 4JW or emailed to cpg@caves.org.uk

Short Pitch Composition

- by Richard Rushton

I recently had a project to photograph the gully pitch in Marble Steps pot. Two of us rigged the pitch and I started to take photographs at various locations on the pitch, using my friend as the focal point and to provide scale. Some shots were taken looking up the pitch and others were taken looking down the pitch, but all with the subject (my friend) on the rope. When I examined the prints I have come to some conclusions that may be of interest to others in taking photographs of similar pitches.

The focal point of the picture will probably be the person on the rope, which suggests that the shot should follow some of the rules of portraiture. The pitch itself will then become a backdrop for the subject and should be lit to enhance the subject and to heighten the dramatic impact. Given that the person on the rope will be the most important part of the picture then they should be in focus and properly lit to separate them from the background. Eye contact can give tremendous strength to a shot with the subject fully facing the camera, or alternatively the subject could be looking down into the mysterious depths of the pitch. Make sure that the subject is not just staring blankly at the wall or out of the side of the picture as this may lessen the impact of your shot.

I was less impressed with my shots looking up the pitch (and so looking up at my subject) than my shots looking down the pitch (and so down onto the subject). Although I tried to maintain eye contact in both cases there is no getting around the fact that the subjects bum is closer to the camera than the subjects face and so distracts and confuses the image I was trying to create. Bum shots are best left for Glamour photography and I have yet to see one that works well in a caving environment (but I will keep trying none the less).

With the subject below, and probably looking up at the camera, the lighting should concentrate on the subject and the surrounding section of pitch. Try not to light the base of pitch as this can reduce the drama of the shot – it is better to let the pitch disappear into the unfathomable blackness than show that it finishes a few tens of feet below the subject. Back lighting below the subject can help to separate the subject from the background particularly if the light is aimed towards the camera, but shielded from the camera by the subject. If this method is used then take care to ensure that the light is completely hidden by the subject to avoid flare or intrusive flash breakthrough. Beware of over lighting the pitch walls too close to the camera as this may overly distract the viewer from the subject on the rope. This can be a problem with tight pitch heads and camera mounted flashguns.

The above paragraphs may help in obtaining dramatic shots on pitches that may not appear overly exciting. The advice is meant as a guide, not a rule – you are in charge of taking your pictures. Finally, please take care when working on or near to a pitch. Always take the utmost precautions to ensure your own and your friends' safety – no shot is worth dying for.

A DIY Vacuum Cushion

- by David Gibson

In Issue 1 of Underground Photographer (Dec. 1995, now out of print), Chris Howes recommended the use of a vacuum cushion for cave photography. When I was organising the sponsorship for Hidden Earth 99 I tried to get hold of one of these, but Jessops told me they no longer made them (but instead they were kind enough to donate a tripod and some film). Since then, I have been wondering about making my own cushion.

A vacuum cushion is basically a sealed bag containing polystyrene beads. A valve allows air to be sucked out and, as the air is lost, the beads squeeze together and the cushion becomes rigid. The device is placed on a convenient surface and a camera or flashgun pushed into the bag, which is then made rigid in the desired position. It is a useful alternative to a tripod, and can also be used as padding in your equipment case, to protect your camera gear during transport.

Making one ought to be dead simple. I have a roll of waterproof breathable fabric left over from a previous project, and it should be easy to sew this together into a 'cushion' shape. An old bicycle valve ought to work too, I think. The fabric needs to be airtight of course, but I think that using a breathable fabric (if you have some to hand) might avoid possible problems with condensation and mould. With luck, I'll be able to show you my prototype at the field meeting next spring. I wonder if one of the caving equipment manufacturers could be persuaded to run a few off?

David Gibson's Flashgun Slaves

My high-performance slave unit, designed specifically for cave photography, is still available as a kit of parts for only £12.50.

As well as the basic unit – used by **Firefly** as the basis for their products – there is an enhanced version in line with Mike Bedford's concept of a "redundant array of little flashguns" (RALF) and – coming soon – a version with a built-in flashbulb firer.

In the near future the basic slave unit will be upgraded with a smaller circuit board and a more robust battery connector. The new unit will cost slightly more, but it will also be available pre-assembled.

For more information write to **David Gibson, 12 Well House Drive, LEEDS, LS8 4BX** or visit my web site at www.caves.org.uk/flash/

Basic features of Slave Unit

- Very High Sensitivity
- Infrared Sensitive for use with "Dark" flashguns
- Usable Underwater
- Not Sensitive to Caplamp Beams
- Not Adversely Affected by Ambient Light
- Fires Flashbulbs and Vivitar Guns
- Compact Design
- Low Current Consumption

Additional "RALF" options

- Adjustable firing delay for use with cascaded units, and master/slave electronic guns
- "fired" indicator
- manual firing provision
- disarm facility

Slave/Bulb-Firer: combined features

Features of basic unit, plus...

- Complete kit of parts supplied
- Unit fits in the same size container as the present unit
- No on-off switch required
- Red LED indicates 'bulb seated correctly'
- Green LED indicates 'unit fired' (useful for testing your set-up without wasting a bulb).
- Lockout disables slave for 10s after connection of bulb
- Unit runs off a single lithium battery, with a boost circuit to provide 12V for the firing circuit.
- Energy-limited capacitor-discharge circuit reliably fires bulbs without burning fusible links on 'flip-flashes'
- Design tested with AG3, M3, #5, PF50, PF200 and Flip-Flashes

CPG newsletter 1 is sponsored by David Gibson

Digital Corner – An Overview of Digital Photography – By Footleg

The past couple of years have seen significant advances in digital photography technology. The appearance of increasing numbers of products aimed at the consumer market has put digital imaging technology within the reach of amateur photographers. In this regular column of the CPG newsletter I will be covering aspects of digital technology of relevance to cave photographers. Some of the articles will cover more general areas of digital photography which are as relevant to cave photographers as to photographers from any other area. I will also attempt to answer any questions you might have about digital photography, so please email or write to me with anything you would like to see covered in future articles in the Digital Corner. Contact details can be found on the front page of this newsletter.

As this is the first issue of the CPG newsletter it is appropriate to provide a general overview of what 'digital photography' actually means, and why you might want to use digital techniques instead of traditional film. Digital photography is the storage or processing of images in an electronic form (actually encoded as a series of zeros and ones). You can apply digital techniques to all stages of the photographic process from the actual taking of the photograph to the final presentation of the image. Here we will take a quick look at each stage of this process and see how we might use digital techniques in place of traditional film photography.

You can do away with film right from the start and actually capture your images using a digital camera. The general workings of these cameras are essentially the same as conventional film cameras except that instead of the light falling onto photographic film, it is focused by the lens onto an electronic light sensitive device called a CCD (charge coupled device). This electronic component converts light into electrical charge which is measured by the electronics inside the camera to determine the brightness of the light. The CCD actually consists of an array of many sensors, each one detecting the brightness of the light for a small area of the picture. When all this information is reassembled into a grid of dots each with it's own level of brightness you get an image. These individual dots are known as pixels, and the more pixels that are used to make up the picture the more detail can be seen. The number of pixels is also referred to as the resolution of the image. More pixels gives a higher resolution. The current top of the range consumer digital cameras store between 2 and 3 million pixels per image, which gives enough detail to produce a full page A4 size print without the picture appearing blocky.

Alternatively you can still take your pictures on traditional film and then convert them to digital images once the film has been processed. This is normally done with a device called a scanner. Essentially these work by shining light through the film negative or slide (or reflecting it off a print) and measuring the brightness and colour of the light with a CCD. The information is then stored as a digital image in the same way as the images produced from a digital camera.

So why would we want to convert our images to digital format? Well there are two main advantages to be gained. The first is that once you have a digital image you can make as many copies of it as you want with no loss of quality. This allows you to protect your precious images by storing multiple copies in different places, or to send copies to other people which are the same quality as the original image. You no longer have to risk letting your only original copy of an image go out of your sight when you want to send a picture to someone else. The second big advantage of digital images is that you can manipulate them on a computer to improve the quality before printing or even to make changes to the image. For example you might decide you wanted to get rid of the unnatural plastic tape which was protecting the formations in a cave from careless footsteps. You could edit out the tape from the digital image before printing it.

The final stage is of course the presentation of the image. You may just want to produce a simple paper print of the image for display. This can be done with digital images by either printing them yourself on a colour printer at home, or you can get digital images printed through a number of high street photography outlets. But the world of digital images presents a number of other possibilities which are not possible with traditional film photography. You can display your images on a computer screen for example. This could be on a web site allowing people from all over the world to see your pictures, or you might want to mix together a sequence of your pictures with music on video tape to show to others.

Hopefully this brief introduction to the broad range of possibilities for digital photography has whetted your appetite. If you have any burning questions which you would like answering then please send them in and I will do my best. Next issue we will take a look at some of the more technical details of how digital images are stored and hopefully shine some light onto the bewildering array of different image file formats used to store digital images on computers.

Submission of Articles

We are actively looking for articles to go in the next issue of the newsletter. We can handle word processed articles in all Microsoft Word formats for IBM compatible PCs, Rich Text Format (RTF) or plain text. Articles should be between 250 and 1000 words in length. The editor reserves the right to edit articles to fit the page layout. Articles can be emailed to the editor or sent by post (addresses at the front of the newsletter). If you wish us to include illustrations or images then please email or phone the editor first to ensure that we can deal with the file formats you intend to send us. Please do not email large attachments to the editor without informing him first, and obtaining an email address from him which can cope with larger amounts of data. The deadline for articles to be included in the next issue of the newsletter is 31st January 2001.