

The Netherworld of Mendip



Photo Steve Sharp



Photo Clive Westlake



Photo Sir Lancelot



Photo Alan Gray

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Photo Mark Lumbly

Museum Admission:
 £3.00 adult, £1.00 child or student
 £6.00 family single entry ticket
 Friends (annual) £7.50 adult and £12 family

Open Mon - Sat 10am - 5pm Sun 1:30pm - 4pm

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Photo Mark Lumbly



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A New Exhibition

The **Netherworld of Mendip** is a new, permanent exhibition at the **Wells & Mendip Museum** portraying the fascinating world of caves that lies hidden beneath the Mendip Hills and charting the development of caving and cave diving that has led to their discovery and exploration.

In the first room, a series of illustrated panels **Follow the Stream** tells the story of the caves at Priddy and the 150 year quest to follow their underground streams down to Wookey Hole, where the combined waters emerge as the River Axe. Swildon's Hole, Eastwater Cavern and St. Cuthbert's Swallet now comprise many thousands of metres of varied and often beautiful passageways and chambers, but the link with the flooded passages in Wookey Hole has still to be made.

The second room explains how the geology of the Mendip Hills creates the conditions for caves to be formed, carving out the stream passages and chambers that eventually re-emerge into daylight at the foot of the hills through resurgence caves such as those at Wookey Hole, Cheddar and the great springs that gave the city of Wells its name. The room is dominated, however, by exhibits illustrating the history of cave diving which began in Britain in the Mendip caves in the 1930s. On display is the very first piece of diving equipment designed for the exploration of flooded underground passages or sumps - the **Bicycle Respirator** - which was used by Graham Balcombe in Swildon's Hole in 1934. Another striking exhibit is the representation of a diver of the mid 1950s, cumbrously kitted out for bottom-walking, upstream exploration in Wookey Hole. Alongside is a recreation of an underground sump pool surrounded by modern day diving equipment.



CAVES & CAVING BENEATH THE MENDIPS

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In the third room, something of the atmosphere of a Mendip cave is recreated. The walls have panels describing the techniques used to find new caves and extend known ones, and illustrate some of spectacular chambers and stalactite formations recently found in the Cheddar and Charterhouse caving area west of Priddy. An interactive computer screen allows visitors to "fly over" the Mendip Hills to check out the many areas where caves occur.

There are exhibits showing the evolution of caving equipment over the last one hundred or so years. Lighting and headgear have moved on from flat caps and candles through carbide lights and miner's helmets to the present day purpose-built high strength helmets and very long lasting LED lights. Climbing gear is also shown from early 20th century rope ladders to the latest Single Rope Technique or SRT devices.

In one corner is a scene commonly found under Mendip – a cave dig or excavation in the search for new passages. Using techniques akin to early mining, cavers have to clear mud, silt, and boulders that block the way on in the hope of finding cave where no human being has ever been before. Adjacent to the dig is a view through a passage into an enticing underground streamway where the sound of running water beckons the explorer on.



Photo Peter Clavel

Photo Ed Waters

Photo Mark Lupton



Wells & Mendip Museum are grateful to the following for their generous support:

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