

COUNCIL OF NORTHERN CAVING CLUBS

British Caving Association

CNCC Access Officer Application: May 2014

A statement by Les Sykes to support his application to perform the co-opted role of Access Officer after the 31st May 2014 Committee Meeting.

This document should be reviewed by The Committee ahead of this meeting

My own personal view on access and the countryside is one of open access for all with no restrictions. However, I am more than aware that large areas of the countryside are privately owned, commercially farmed and that there are other user groups and ecological/conservation factors which put pressure on our access.

Over the past years I have always strived for greater access and this has always been at the forefront of all negotiations I have been involved in. CNCC has often been criticised for preferentially opting for access agreements with permits. This is far from the truth. In all negotiations CNCC has had a starting point of open access for all cavers and have been forced towards permits by those with whom we are negotiating. However, it must be noted that over the years CNCC has managed to reduce some of the access restrictions and even cancelled the requirement for an agreement; for example the land previously owned by the Gillibrand family.

It may be that a recent re-examination of the CROW Act 2000 could have indicated some loopholes that can be exploited by cavers to obtain greater access; I do know that I have been using this Act to attempt to get greater access on Leck Fell for Lost John's Cave and also the removing of the closed season requirement from the agreement and currently I feel positive that if I am able to continue as Access Officer, I will achieve this.

Over the years I have successfully negotiated access for exploration on private lands with some very difficult landowners and agents. Since I have been negotiating CNCC access, we have never had access refused (with the exception of Dale Barn Cave). I have also been instrumental in re-opening caves closed by the landowner as a result of either walker or caver infringements on their land (Gatekirk, Skirwith caves for example).

As part of my Certificate of Management (CMI) I have received extensive training and assessment in negotiation skills and conflict resolution; these skills I use in meetings and during negotiations with landowners and their agents.

Over the years I have developed a good professional working relationship with all the large landowners in the Dales, and contacts with other land agents across the north of England; this has resulted in the CNCC and member clubs being able to ride the problems that others create so that our access is unaffected (commercial centres using permitted caves). Again this put CNCC in a bad light with recreational cavers many of who thought that the CNCC was negotiating for commercial enterprises; this was far from the truth, CNCC was only involved because the landowners asked CNCC to try and resolve the issue and get access for everyone.

Some major exploration work has in the past been negotiated with both the Kay-Shuttleworth and Whelprigg Estates which I do not think would of been possible a number of years ago. Digging is something that, even if cavers are successful at having caving recognised under CRow, will not be recognised and will still be dependent on the good relations with landowners.

As Access Officer I have managed to get permission to improve parking on Casterton and Leck Fells, improved access to Nick Pot and associated caves.

In March 2013 I spoke with both the land agents for Leck and Casterton Fells to discuss the access outlines of the 2016 European Speleological event. Both land agents gave their approval to access for the event. As soon as I have confirmation of details and possible numbers from BCA I will consult all parties to produce a working document on how access will be managed throughout the event.

If co-opted as Access Officer it is my intention to maintain the excellent working relationship CNCC has with the landowners and land agents and continue to provide them with the support that we currently give them. If there are loopholes, or there is re-defining on the CRow legislation, then I will meet with the relevant landowners whose land is CRow mapped and try and re-negotiate the access agreements to reflect this.

I will continue to visit the majority of farmers, landowners and tenants whose lands we use for recreation and exploration to resolve the day to day problems that land users create.

It always has been and remains so, that I will continue to work in the best interests of all cavers regardless of affiliation as I firmly believe in open access for all.

Les Sykes 9th May 2014