

COUNCIL OF NORTHERN CAVING CLUBS

Important safety information about using CNCC descriptions and rigging topos

This MUST be read and understood by anyone using a CNCC-provided cave description or rigging topo

These descriptions and rigging topos are provided by the CNCC for use by experienced cavers only in assisting with trip planning and route-finding on some of the popular sporting routes in our region. They are not exhaustive, they do not cover every passage or feature, and details may have been greatly simplified to try to keep them concise and clear.

Great efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the information. Nonetheless, there are likely to be errors and (over time) an increasing number of inaccuracies due to changes in the caves and the replacement of resin anchors. The descriptions may also contain subjective viewpoints which could be open to misinterpretation. It is entirely incumbent upon all cavers to exercise appropriate care and caution when going underground using these topos and descriptions, and to have researched the trip from several other sources. Never make any safety critical decisions based on the information in these descriptions or topos.

Pull through trips must only ever be undertaken by cavers who are confident in finding the lower route out of the cave without a description, and who understand the extra precautions demanded of such trips (e.g. carrying multiple ropes).

The rope lengths stated in the rigging topos are considered the minimum length required based on average rigging. There may be errors, or your rigging may use more rope than anticipated. Therefore, it is critical that all ropes that are deployed for use have two tightened knots in both ends, to mitigate against the risks associated with the ropes not reaching the bottom of pitches.

Difficulty ratings, or 'grades' have been omitted from these descriptions. All cavers must make their own informed judgements of whether the cave is suitable for their capabilities, backed up by thorough research into the nature of the cave from numerous sources and an understanding of the capabilities of others in your group.

Many in-site ropes and ladders are mentioned throughout the descriptions. These should only ever be considered navigational markers and not safety critical belays. The CNCC does not install or maintain any fixed aids in caves other than the resin anchors shown on the topos. Never trust your safety to a rope or ladder which is left in a cave. For resin anchors you must understand the importance of belaying your rope to multiple anchors, including full traverse ropes leading to pitches, and always performing a pre-use inspection on every anchor. If any resin anchor shows movement, or fracturing in the nearby rock, it must not be used.

Rigging must always be performed to avoid any rub points or other hazards. Rigging exactly as depicted in the rigging topos does not guarantee a rub-free descent; this must be assessed and ensured by each individual caver on each pitch in every cave.

Many caves which are susceptible to danger from flooding have been highlighted in the descriptions. However, all caves, even typically dry ones, can flood in various circumstances, and it is therefore critical that the experienced caver using these descriptions makes their own judgement based on experience, extensive research and weather forecasts. Decisions to descend any cave after or during wet weather, or when wet weather is forecast, should be made based on an informed judgement backed up by thorough research from multiple sources. The critical moto which should be adhered to is "If in doubt, stay out!"

Although warnings are provided where there are some specific known hazards, the absence of a warning does not indicate that there are no hazards. Caves can (and do) change over time. Furthermore, the CNCC does not perform routine inspections or surveys of caves to look for specific hazards (e.g. loose rocks). All cavers are strongly advised to view the webpage on the CNCC website for their chosen cave to check for any warnings that have come to our attention. Experienced cavers using these descriptions must make their own evaluations for hazards throughout the duration of their trip and act appropriately to mitigate any risks.

Neither the author of the descriptions/topos or the CNCC will accept any responsibility for any damage, injury or loss (however caused) resulting from the use, misuse or misinterpretation of information in these cave descriptions or rigging topos.

BIRKS FELL CAVE

Sept 2019

Birks Fell Cave is one of the most magnificent and varied trips in Yorkshire. However, it is extremely flood prone. During wet weather the canals before the first pitch will flood severely, as will several wet sections further down the cave. A few days of dry weather before your trip is essential to ensure water levels are sufficiently low, and dry weather during your trip is required.

Parking: Park in Buckden village car park (fee payable).

How to find: Follow the minor road west out of Buckden for 500m and take the track for Redmire Farm on the left. Follow the winding track to the top of the hill and pass through two gates. Depart the path after the second gate and ascend the steep (and possibly overgrown) embankment, keeping the wall nearby on your right. At the top of the hill, the wall turns, and 60m ahead is a limestone gully with the cave entrance on the left at the bottom of the gully.

Rigging: The rigging topo is available on our website. Additional detail below:

First pitch; 15m rope (can be bypassed by a very exposed step across the top of the pitch and then a short crawl to a parallel rift and chimney climb down; not recommended).

Water Cascades; Cascade beyond Slipped Floor Chamber, usually free climbed and not shown on the topo, but 10m handline may be useful (natural belay).

The Block; 10m rope for abseil from the top of The Block (mentioned on topo but not shown pictorially). Alternative tight/exposed bypass climb under The Block.

Cascade Pitch (just after The Block); Earlier guides recommend a very exposed free climb down immediately after or below The Block, thus avoiding the need for the 12m rope on the topo. However, it is recommended to use the route described below which uses this rope and avoids the exposed climb. The 17m rope for Cascade Pitch follows immediately. A 35m rope will cover both pitches with spare to continue down some additional cascades immediately beyond Cascade pitch.

Shale Pitch: 35m rope as per topo. **Slimy Slit:** 10m handline suggested (not shown on topo).

Recommended Total: 15m + 10m + 10m + 35m + 35m + 10m

Navigation (Recommend SRT kit carried in bag until first pitch, after which the cave becomes mostly spacious):

Inside the entrance, follow downstream for several minutes until the water is lost and just around the corner is a small cobbled chamber and the start of the Bradford Crawl. This is a 7m long flat-out crawl over cobbles which will probably require slight excavation. The passage soon enlarges and a 4m cascade is reached dropping into Tree Chamber. Beyond Tree Chamber, the passage narrows into a canal. This is typically easy crawling in approximately 30-40cm deep water for five minutes. At the end of the canal is the 20m long Connection Crawl, which is flat-out and awkward especially at a left bend, but soon enlarges at the first pitch.

Follow the water downstream from the first pitch in some fine stream passage. Soon you are forced up and out of the water into a long chamber with a block floor (Slipped Floor Chamber); a few metres before the end of this, on the left, is a small hole (The Dig) leading back down to the stream. Take note where you have come from as this hole is not obvious on the return journey. Downstream is an excellent stream passage with some cascades, one of which benefits from a 10m handline. The water then disappears into a low bedding crawl (easy bypass just a little beyond) and then Shooting Box Aven is reached. This aven is 25m tall and features a magnificent waterfall entering from a higher passage that contributes significantly to the water volume in the cave.

Downstream of Shooting box aven, another aven is soon reached. Beyond here, a slope of blocks is ascended a short distance to a narrow wriggle down a small hole dropping onto some jammed blocks above the stream. Once again, take note as this hole is not obvious on the return. Descend to the stream and follow downstream through some fine passage which becomes well decorated, before the way on at stream level is blocked by a boulder choke. There are a few ways to navigate this choke, but the best way is to ascend a gap near the left wall into a high-level blocky passage, and at the end of this, climb back down to the stream.

Easy caving continues downstream including a pretty grotto. After this grotto, the First Wet Bedding Cave is reached; a 10m long low crawl in the stream, which can be bypassed on the left. After this, a large chamber is entered with a floor of large dark coloured blocks (take note of entry point for later). Climb down the blocks to rejoin the stream at the Second Wet Bedding Cave. This gradually lowers to become another crawl in the stream (the roof is highest on the right). About 15m along, a crawl up on the right leads out of the water into a small chamber, beyond which the water is rejoined and 10m more low crawling in the water is required.

At the end of the wet crawling, a route up blocks leads into a long dry chamber, at the end of which is a flat-out but wide crawl leading to a 2m drop into a blocky passage. Once again, turn around and take note of where you have come from, as this crawl is not obvious on the return journey. The passage eventually enlarges into a long and tall hall containing one of the more memorable obstacles in the cave; The Block, best rigged via two anchors above it (see notes above).

Beyond The Block, ignore the holes in the floor and continue to the end of the rift, where anchors provide an 8m abseil, passing a false floor of boulders half-way down (avoid knocking them). This drops into the water only a few metres from the top of Cascade Pitch. Cascade pitch itself is spectacular but drafty. Anchors on the left wall provide a traverse out to avoid most of the water. If enough rope remains spare at the bottom, stay on it for the following two free-climbable cascades.

Beyond Cascade Pitch, follow the water downstream into a tall rift passage involving some chest-deep water. This soon leads into the Grand Gallery, a magnificent stomping river passage, and then Whitehall where there are some excellent flowstone formations. If you were starting to feel a little glum or homesick, then this part of the cave should provide some cheer, as it is Yorkshire caving at its absolute finest. Just keep following the water downstream in easy passage.

Eventually, a very prominent left bend (Elbow Bend) is reached. Beyond here is a chest-deep canal and some easy stream passage. The character of the cave starts to change to very slippery (care!) black rock. The Thrutch is then reached, a narrow traverse for 3-4m before dropping back down to water level just before Shale Crawl. The next several minutes involves wet crawling in the stream in ominous dark tubes, with several dry oxbows (although it is easier just to keep following the water). This enlarges (and is very slippery) shortly before Shale Cavern is reached, a fine chamber, and the head of Shale Pitch where a wet descent is guaranteed.

Beyond Shale Pitch, the route is under the waterfall, and down to the streamway. Easy traversing and walking precede the water departing to the right into a low crawl leading to a sump; the way on is to stay in the main passage to a small chamber. Then, a narrow rift leads for several minutes to a short drop and then a crawl to another rift where a climb up at the far end of the rift leads to an awkward sideways crawl to the restricted head of the Slimy Slit; usually just handlined or free climbed. This drops into the Sewer Series. Downstream offers several minutes of deep canal passage to the final sump. Most cavers, having been influenced by thoughts of food, beer and warmth, will have turned around some time before this point. For those who haven't, the long journey out now begins.

