

OREAD HALLS

Anthony Hitchcock, November 2003

Description

Oread Halls is the third largest and one of the finest cave systems on Kalk Bay Mountain. It is situated on top of the Cave Peak Ridge near Devil's Pit. There are two entrances. The top entrance is a hole that is partly obscured by boulders, which is a good thing considering it is a 10m vertical pitch requiring climbing equipment. The main entrance is a narrow slot about 3,5m deep with plenty of footholds to aid decent. It gives access to a large chamber called Annie's Hall. This chamber is low and wide with a sandy floor. It extends to the right for 20m and is worth exploring. The way into the main cave is straight ahead as if you are following the left-hand wall. Soon you will find a low entrance to a small passage that changes direction sharply left and then right into the main stream passage. There are places in this section that require crawling on your stomach which is unpleasant in winter when the passage is wet. A little further on is a branch to the left that extends for 20m and terminates in two narrow parallel passages. The main passage continues as a crawlway for a short distance until there is a side passage to the right. At this point you will notice light ahead. If you go straight you will enter the lofty chamber with the skylight entrance (top hole). John Meyer, who discovered the cave, recorded the first exploration and names of early explorers neatly on the wall.

The passage beyond the Skylight chamber is low and wide with a sandy floor and rocky breakdown in places. It soon bears left and becomes tight and broken up in places. Caution should be exercised when exploring this area as it appears unstable. The passage continues and becomes increasingly constricted until it is too narrow to proceed further.

The passage before the skylight chamber is low (1m) and undulating with a small streamlet that has cut a furrow in the sandy floor. The corridor becomes wider and soon opens out into a 20m long by 6m wide and 3m high chamber called the Grand Hall. This chamber is unfortunately defaced with ugly graffiti. This destroys what would otherwise have been a lovely sandstone chamber. A two meter climb at the end of the chamber leads into a square rocky crawlway that soon bears sharp right and becomes very low and sandy. The sand partially blocks the route, which becomes a labyrinth of interconnected passages and low shelving chambers mostly less than 40cm high.

Discovery and exploration - the first generation

John Meyer's discovery of Oread Halls satisfied his long held dream to find one more major cave before his climbing days were over. The discovery and exploration of Oread Halls is probably the best documented record of cave

discovery in the area at that time. His record of these events is best left unedited. They read as follows:

12th November 1941, 'Went up the mountain and repainted the name "Mooi Uitsig", (Lovely View). Lunched at Twin Caverns. Had tea at Comm Hall. On my return discovered a "well"* near Devil's Head. (*Oread Halls).

Phil Hitchcock and Meyer attempted to descend the well on the 18th November, but their rope ladder was too short.

20/11/41: Meyer, Phil Hitchcock and Basil Harris managed to descend the well by adding a second section to the ladder. They explored the two passages, one at either end of the well.

27/11/41: Phil Hitchcock and Basil Harris and I visited the new cave today. At The bottom I painted the name "Oread Halls" and "J.G. Meyer, Phil Hitchcock, and Basil Harris descended by rope-ladder 20/11/41". While I was painting these words, Phil and Basil numbered the chambers (1 to 5) in the right passage, and, coming back measured the length, 42 yards. Then I joined them. I painted the letters A to I in the chambers of the left passage. We measured the length of the left passage, 78 yards, but right to the end of the floor of the well, 84 yards. In chamber G, which was particularly fine, I painted the name "Grand Hall".

The well is 32 feet deep at the lower end. The floor is about 24 yards long and from 8 to 10 feet wide.

23/01/42: Annie Hefer, Phil Hitchcock and I paid a visit to Oread Halls. After decent we took an hour to explore the two passages and their chambers. At the end of the right-hand passage Phil struggled through a very narrow passage and came into a big chamber (Annie's Hall). Then we followed him. At one spot we could see daylight. The opening was too narrow for us to get through. So we turned back.

27/01/42: J.G.Meyer and Phil Hitchcock opened the "Lower Entrance" by means of hammer and chisel, also widened the narrow spots between Annie's Hall and Chamber 5. Meyer painted the name "Annie's Hall" on the ceiling. A sketch of this cave was found amongst J.C.W.Moore's papers. It is not at all accurate merely recording Annie's Hall and chambers 1 to 5 and A to J. His note also tells us that he had only been in Annie's Hall. The drawing was probably made by Meyer as Moore borrowed maps and other noted from him in order to prepare his article that was published in the Mountain Club Journal.

Discovery, survey and exploration - the second generation

Dave Eckles and I completed the first survey in 1979 using compass and tape. During the process we found that there is a connecting passage between Oread Halls and April Grotto. This passage is too narrow to crawl through, but a stream flows from April Grotto though Oread Halls towards Annie's Hall.

Some years later Peter Swart and Jean-Paul van Belle attempted to prove that there is a connection between Oread Halls and Take Breath. Take Breath is a small dusty grotto with its entrance at the base of the upper cliffs above Echo Halt. It is found to the right and on the same level as Step Aside. Peter lit a saltpetre smoke bomb near the end of Oread Halls while Jean-Paul waited in Take Breath. The smoke was swept along the passage and a cursing Jean-Paul reversed at record speed out of Take Breath engulfed in smoke. All attempts to find the connecting passage or establish a voice connection between the caves have proved fruitless.

Peter Swart and I decided to survey the cave again to bring it up to publication standard and at the same time find out how close the passages of Oread Halls and Take Breath are to each other. The new survey was begun at the end of April 1998 and was done in stages. April Grotto and the passage from the well towards April Grotto were mapped first. The next section from the lower entrance at Annie's Hall to the well was surveyed on the 28th February 1999. Peter pushed down a passage under the entrance and found a tight passage that carries the Oread Halls stream down towards Clovelly. He could not proceed beyond 8m. It is thought that this water emerges from a shelf at the top of the cliff above Mystery Grotto. The end of the left-hand side passage just beyond the S bends showed a very narrow passage that continues for 4m and may go further, but curves out of view.

The passage to the Grand Hall was surveyed in March and the remainder to the end of the dig in April 1999. Digging commenced again at the end of April and on the 2nd May we managed to enter a wide sand filled passage sloping upwards. Progress was made up the slope by moving sand to either side until we managed to pass a constriction at the top of the slope. This allowed access to a sort passage heading left and right and ending in a small choke. A narrow passage leads back into the ridge at this point.

On the 9th May the new passages were surveyed and Stephan Moser entered the furthest passage discovering a small terminal chamber. This is the end of the system. Peter Swart re-surveyed Take Breath during these last two trips. The Oread Halls system has been thoroughly explored and surveyed and it adds up to over 300m of accumulated passages.