

Ronan's Well (St. Ronan's Well)

Anthony Hitchcock, November 2003

Introduction

There is no known record of the discovery of this cave, but it was probably known well before John Meyer's time. It is situated at the top of the 'Main Valley' where it is impossible not to see its large slot-like entrance in the cliffs of Ridge Peak. The first mention of this cave was by John Meyer who painted the name St. Ronan's Well at its entrance on the 11th February 1924. It is likely that he gave this cave its name.

The name is probably derived from the novel called St. Ronan's Well by Sir Walter Scott. The tale is based on the communities living in and around the villages of Peebles and Innerliethen 28 miles south-southeast of Edinburgh. One of the attractions of the region was an insignificant spa, which became known as St. Ronan's Well. With remarkable and unaccountable suddenness the well became celebrated in Edinburgh and throughout the south of Scotland as a place known for the healing properties of its waters. 'In 1824, the publication of Sir Walter Scott's tale of St. Ronan's Well, greatly enhanced its celebrity, and poured down upon it some rays of that lustre which popular opinion then assigned to 'the Great Unknown'.' Little did Meyer realise at the time what lay hidden in the depths behind the constriction at the 'end' of the cave?

Meyer also painted the names of some visitors on the wall of the passage immediately before the narrows. This was as far as he and many others managed to explore until 1955/6 when a local schoolteacher, Michael McAdam, and a schoolboy managed to squeeze through the narrows and enter the magnificent corridors beyond. The Cape Times records the following on the 18th August 1956, 'D.M. McAdam, with schoolboy help, has recently opened up a 'big new cave' beyond the squeeze in Ronan's Well.'

This discovery increased the length of the cave from 70m to over 700m of passages and chambers. It is a magnificent cave and speleologically significant for the size and volume of its lofty halls and corridors not so commonly encountered in crystalline quartzite rock.

Description

Ronan's Well is by far the largest and most magnificent cave on Kalk Bay mountain. Its large keyhole like entrance is found in the low cliffs of Ridge Peak at the top of the Main Valley. The floor descends a slippery slope to a small stream at the bottom. The way on is however at ceiling level requiring a short climb up and around a small crumbling buttress. A low crawlway leads into the mountain and soon overlooks a series of pits. It is possible to climb into Pit 1 and past the second. The third presents a more challenging obstacle where one has to traverse a small ledge over an exposed pit. Pit 4 and 5 are easily avoided and the passage gets smaller as one approaches the 'narrows'. Pit 5 is the main pit or Ronan's Well after which the cave is named. It is worth a look as it is the biggest pit and sports a small waterfall in winter.

The next obstacle is the notorious 'Narrows' consisting of 30m of tortuous passage where the rock appears much harder and consists of numerous sharp projections. The passage is a vertical slot that pinches above and below, which makes it possible to get wedged in the lower crack. It is an advantage to be fairly agile in order to get through the constrictions. The last tight section in the narrows presents the biggest challenge as it is the narrowest and has a nasty deviation from the normally straight passage.

Just as the explorer is beginning to despair one emerges into a lofty corridor with lovely white walls. For the next 50 m one walks in wonder along this passage and then enters Junction Chamber. This chamber marks the junction between the main or 'master' system and the passage leading to the second entrance called Robin Hood Cavern.

This passage is initially too narrow at stream level so it is necessary to traverse along the upper level for a short distance before dropping back to the stream. A sharp turn to the right leads to a lovely chamber adorned with white rock curtains. The passage continues for a few meters and then becomes narrow and difficult to enter. A right-turn immediately before this leads up a sandy slope to the base of the boulder passage. This is the bottom of Robin Hood cave. The way out is by crawling up the small passage between the boulders and sliding through a low section until one reaches the shaft. It is easy to climb out using the ample ledges and handholds. The shaft emerges in a large semi-lit chamber from which an easy scramble leads out to the Amphitheatre.

From the junction Chamber it is possible to continue further into the main system. A second shorter narrows must first be negotiated whereafter the passage presents a short obstacle course of climbs and descents. This section opens to the Main Chamber, which is approximately 20 by 10 meters in dimension and the ceiling is about 6 meters high. A forty-meter long dogleg passage off the Main Chamber ends in a terminal boulder filled chamber that is dripping wet in winter. This chamber is situated below some smaller caves such as Styx Dungeon and thought to receive the water that flows down through the floor of this cave.

The main passage however continues for a further 200 meters beyond the Main Hall. It consists mostly of lofty passages with sandy floors and embankments with some rocky breakdown in places. In one place it is necessary to clamber up to the ceiling level and slide along a short tubular passage before dropping back into the main passage beyond. The passage doubles back on itself at a place called 'Dog Leg Pass' and slowly becomes narrower. It splits into two with the main passage continuing upstream into tight cave and small crumbly chamber. The last few meters are extremely tight and continue for about 20 meters beyond the crumbly chamber. The stream issues from this narrow crack, but cavers have not managed to progress further.

Opposite to this is a dry, high-level passage that can be entered for approximately 20 meters, but appears to become too tight.

Exploration and Discovery

Anthony Keen wrote the story of his exploration of the passages and chambers beyond the narrows in the 1958 SASA bulletin. He mentions that he heard a rumour in early 1956 that Ronan's Well 'went on'. So he set off with a companion to investigate. The rest of their story records their battle to get through the narrows and what they found beyond. He also mentions that others had succeeded in breaking through the narrows and exploring the new passages before them. He tells us that Michael McAdam made the initial exploration in the latter half of 1955 and early 1956. McAdam noted the stream and a draft issuing from the crack at the 'end' of the cave and so forced his way through the small crack and, feet first, over a large slab of rock lying vertically in the crack. He only managed to progress a few feet the first time and on subsequent trips opened the rest of the narrows. This required removing many 'bits and knobs of rock' that barred progress indicating that no human had previously passed through.

The discovery of the greater Ronan's Well system prompted Keen and his associates to explore the surface for features corresponding to the new cave. They were looking for a second entrance. They were rewarded by the discovery of a new cave in a depression to one side of the Amphitheatre. They widened the entrance and with the aid of a ladder entered a new cave which they called Drip Water Pot. Their discovery was interesting, but failed to secure for them a second entrance to Ronan's Well. They then decided to survey the cave and use this to correlate the cave system with features on the surface. Louis Du Plessis, Anthony Jones, John Grindley and Anthony Keen completed the survey using

prismatic compass and tape. **(incl. Orig. survey?)** From the survey they determined that Ronan's Well is the master-drainage system for a number of small caves in the Amphitheatre. **(See second article satellite caves of the Ronan's system still to be written), (Include line survey of all relevant caves)** Most significantly they discovered that Robin Hood cave lies over the end of one of the side passages in Ronan's Well. This prompted some probing in Robin Hood Cavern. They cleared some boulders and with the aid of a ladder descended into a new part of the cave. The area was very unstable with rock being dislodged as they progressed. Superficial exploration of the lower reaches of Robin Hood revealed no further descending options. They decided not to enlarge the opening from within Ronan's Well because of the unstable nature of the boulder choke below Robin Hood. With this ended the initial exploration of the new system.

The Second Entrance

Frank Coley records in the 1969 Speleo bulletin the breakthrough that linked Ronan's Well with Robin Hood Cavern and so opened a second entrance to the system. No mention is made of which year this took place, but it must have been somewhere between 1966 and 1968.

I remember visiting Robin Hood Cavern with my father during the late 1960's and meeting SASA members working on opening the connection. I recall that they were using some sort of communications equipment to aid the breakthrough.

The equipment they used was called magnetic induction, direction-finding and communication equipment (MIDAC equipment). This system was built by Bob Flack using information published in the April 1966 edition of the Bulletin of the National Speleological Society in the USA.

A radio transmitter was placed underground near the end of the side passage off Junction chamber where they detected a faint draft through the rubble pile. A receiving set was then placed on the surface approximately above. The underground set would send out signals to be picked up by the surface team who would be able to plot the depth and direction of the transmitting device. Two teams were formed one of, which went underground to the end of the side passage. They immediately made radio contact and worked out that the vertical difference between the two teams was 69 feet. Having determined their close proximity a small team was sent down into Robin Hood to attempt to establish a voice connection. They were soon rewarded as the underground team heard boulders being moved. Both teams worked feverishly removing rocks and boulders until the party was able to squeeze through a corkscrew and make their way to the surface. The breakthrough team included Bobby Flack, Digby Ellis, Simon de Villiers, Ken Smith and Frank Coley.

Pressing on

Many years later in June 1980, Dave Eckles and I effected a breakthrough into new passage at the end of Ronan's Well. The crack above the stream was widened after four weekends of concerted chiselling and we managed to squeeze through this incredibly tight passage by inching along and slowly making progress. We entered a twenty-meter long passage that leads to a small crumbling chamber. A narrow passage continues, but as we had exhausted our efforts, we could not find the enthusiasm to chip away for hours in the next tight section.

2002/3 Greg Waller and Peter Swart spent some time pushing the final passage and with considerable effort and minor excavation managed to progress a little further. Greg lopped off a bulge in the rock that stopped progress and managed to squeeze a little further. The passage kinks slightly left and then continues straight ahead as a very narrow vertical slot. Greg managed to look into this passage, but as

yet no further. The extension amounts to about 5 meters beyond the broken chamber. One can see into a canyon type stream passage, but it is very narrow.

Updates

Peter Swart, 2025

Someone has been going around the caves and carefully repainting Meyers cave names. The name "Ronan's Well" is one of the names that have been updated.

In addition to the mouse that Anthony saw at the very end of Ronan's Well, last year I found a spider. It was thin and weak. I suspect that it found its way into the cave via an entrance that we have not yet discovered.

References

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