

# *Heroes* of the Dales

The world's first cave rescue team was formed in the Yorkshire Dales 75 years ago this year.

Terry Fletcher finds a lot has changed in three quarters of a century

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE FINCH



**I**t is the stuff of nightmares. To be trapped, injured, cold and wet, deep underground behind tight crawls and narrow, twisting passages rapidly filling with water. It is a risk no caver can ever totally eliminate but those exploring beneath the Yorkshire Dales at least have the comfort of knowing that if something goes wrong the world's most experienced rescue team will be on its way to get them.

This summer the Clapham-based Cave Rescue Organisation (CRO), the

world's longest established team, celebrates its 75th anniversary, an event marked with a royal visit from the Duke of Kent and the prestigious Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

Since it was formed in 1935 the CRO has been to the aid of almost 3,500 people in more than 2,000 separate incidents and, in common with other teams across the country, it is now busier than ever. At peak periods they have dealt with up to six rescues a day and sometimes as many as four at once. Last year the team which, despite its name, undertakes mountain rescues on the felltops as well as underground, was called out a record 88 times, though only 15 of those were to help cavers.

The CRO is one of only three teams in the country to undertake cave and mountain rescue and in 2009 most call-outs – 59 incidents – involved walkers and another five were for climbers.

Others were 'Dr Dolittles' – rescuing farm animals which had become stuck on crags or down holes, including a distinctly ungrateful highland cow.

Even so, it is the caving calls which stick in the team's minds. CRO chairman Jack Pickup, a team member since the 1960s, says the confined, claustrophobic nature of caves and the constant risk they entail make underground rescues particularly intense.

'On a fell rescue there is space to step back but underground it is always





up close and personal. The sounds are amplified and you are very close to the casualty.' In addition, the emotions are all-too-frequently intensified by rescuers knowing the victims personally in the still relatively small world of caving. Over the years Jack has saved several friends and, even more traumatically, recovered the bodies of others who were not so lucky.

In some cases even that is not possible. In 1967 he was part of a group trying to open up Mossdale Cavern, near Conistone in Wharfedale, but because he and his wife, Sue, had just moved into a new house at Ingleton he stayed at home one fateful weekend to work on the property. That decision almost certainly saved his life. The cave unexpectedly flooded after torrential rain and six of his friends were drowned. Despite a massive operation lasting several days it was too dangerous even to recover the bodies and the cave was sealed.

But a successful rescue gives immense satisfaction. 'It's hard work for hour after hour but when it's over there's a tremendous buzz,' he says. 'You can't stop thinking about it. Many a time I've gone home completely shattered but unable to sleep because I was still buzzing.'

The team's 70 members come from all walks of life including teachers, engineers, artists, electricians and even professional caving instructors. Some have been involved for decades. All must be experienced cavers or mountaineers before they can join and then they serve a six month probationary period during which they have to learn new skills such as first aid, communications and stretcher management, practised on regular training exercises. It's a far cry from the early days. Before the team was formed a call for help would see a search party assembled from whoever was available. Cavers, climbers and walkers would be roused from their tents or summoned

Such incidents can take a heavy toll on the rescuers. All are volunteers and receive no pay for their efforts, which often involve gruelling hours underground or out on the fells in all weathers.

from pubs to make up the numbers. Brawny locals, some with little or no caving experience, would help to manhandle cumbersome stretchers through passages and down hillsides.

Today's team is much slicker, better trained and infinitely better equipped. It has specially adapted Land Rovers to get to incidents and to act as off-road ambulances as well as radios that can work through hundreds of feet of solid rock while improved clothing protects them from the worst of the cold and wet. Their base in Clapham, recently extended thanks to a bequest from caving pioneer Jack Myers and help from Masonic charities, has a computer data base of all the known caves in the area. Controllers can call up diagrams of passages, complete with notes of particular hazards and records of previous rescues there. Hard lessons learned in earlier incidents can be instantly incorporated into the plans.

Running the operation costs thousands of pounds a year, not least to replace equipment ruined on rescues. To keep going the team relies on donations and events such as the annual Three Peaks Challenge on the neighbouring fells of Ingleborough, Wharfedale and Penyghent and the Game Show at Broughton near Skipton. More is always needed.

But whatever happens the team will keep turning out because, despite the risk and the hardships, cavers will always go to help other cavers. They have to. No one else knows how to. 🏔️