

The General

As Dick Willis wrote in *Descent* (273), Dave Checkley has left us. Colin Boothroyd and Howard Jones add their tributes to a long-term, highly respected caver who over the years has contributed so much to our sport.

DAVE Checkley (DC to many of his vast circle of caving friends) is no longer with us, having passed away on 20 February. For most of his life Dave seemed unable to act his age – he had the character, enthusiasm and twinkle of those twenty years younger than him and then, as dementia starting grasping him over his latter years, he stepped into the shoes of a far older man.

Dave was born in Manchester on 9 April 1948. His parents, Norman and Jean, worked in the railways and the post office respectively, and



DC in Ftfagos Pot (Grizedale Hole), Malham, in 2007
Photo: John Gardner

Left: In the days before Petzl, experimenting with SRT in northern Spain in 1971. Photo: Tony Coghlan



he was either leading from the front or pushing from the back on expeditions to northern Spain. The discoveries were initially somewhat spartan, but one notable exception was the investigation of a site of significant archaeological

interest in Cueva de Coimbre on the northern fringe of the Picos de Europa. Of the discovery, one of the expedition members, Tony Coghlan, noted that despite the group's inexperience with all things Palaeolithic, 'D.C. assumed the identity of "expert" and set about digging for remains in ten different sites in the main chamber.' One of Dave's finds was a harpoon in perfect condition that is thought to be unique. Thankfully, the caver's lack of expertise was quickly overtaken by Spanish archaeologists who have subsequently conducted thorough and delicate excavations and truly established the significance of the site in archaeological terms.

On their expedition in 1974 Dave heard talk among the local people of caves in the heart of the Picos de Europa mountains where the locals placed their cheeses to mature in the cold, draughting air. They were directed to go to Tresviso the following year.

A large group of LUSS cavers descended on the sleepy mountain village the next summer and started the love affair with the Tresviso people and their surrounding caves that continues to the present day. The team entered Cueva del Nacimiento (then called Cueva del Agua) and Cueva de la Marniosa and broke through to an extensive series of passages. Following a short series of expeditions exploring these systems, Dave focused his interest upon the deep shafts that peppered the high peaks above Cueva del Agua. He spearheaded the caving club's understanding of SRT techniques and encouraged

university cavers to look beyond ladders and lifelines – making ascenders and descenders, learning to place bolts, and to carry enough carbide for 24-hour trips!

His enthusiasm was infectious and some of the annual expeditions attracted over fifty students. Dave was affectionately titled The General and he would encourage everyone to push hard and exhaustively in the pursuit of greater depth. Once the cavers returned to the surface they, somewhat understandably, expected to then have a rest day. To many students this equated to lying longer in their pits, cooking chips, drinking wine and playing cards. General Checkley had different ideas. Rest days were for cleaning ropes, drawing surveys or surface prospecting. We all loved him for his enthusiasm, but we took it in turns to want to hit him.

Beyond Europe

THE seventies were punctuated for Dave with two other significant expeditions beyond Europe's shores.

In 1973 Dave led an ambitious six-month expedition to explore and scientifically research caves in Falcón State and Cordillera de Mérida in Venezuela. Laden with supplies, the team of eight cavers travelled for three weeks on board a freighter as they crossed the Atlantic. Their discoveries were hard earned but notable, among them being the exploration of Haitón del Guarataro with its intimidating 168m entrance pitch. The cave ended at a choke at 305m depth and it retained its status as the deepest cave in Venezuela for many decades.

Three years later Dave stepped aside from the annual Spanish caving trip and went to Ecuador as a speleological member of a large expedition to explore and survey the Cueva de los Tayos. The caves had already gained some notoriety as they had been detailed in *The Gold of the Gods* by the maligned Swiss author, Eric von Däniken. He claimed finding evidence of artificial tunnels, gold, extra-terrestrial relics and a library of metallic tablets. Dave, together with a group of selected British cavers, photographed and surveyed the caves and, surprise, surprise, found no evidence of anything unusual. The patron of the expedition was Neil Armstrong – apparently, he had

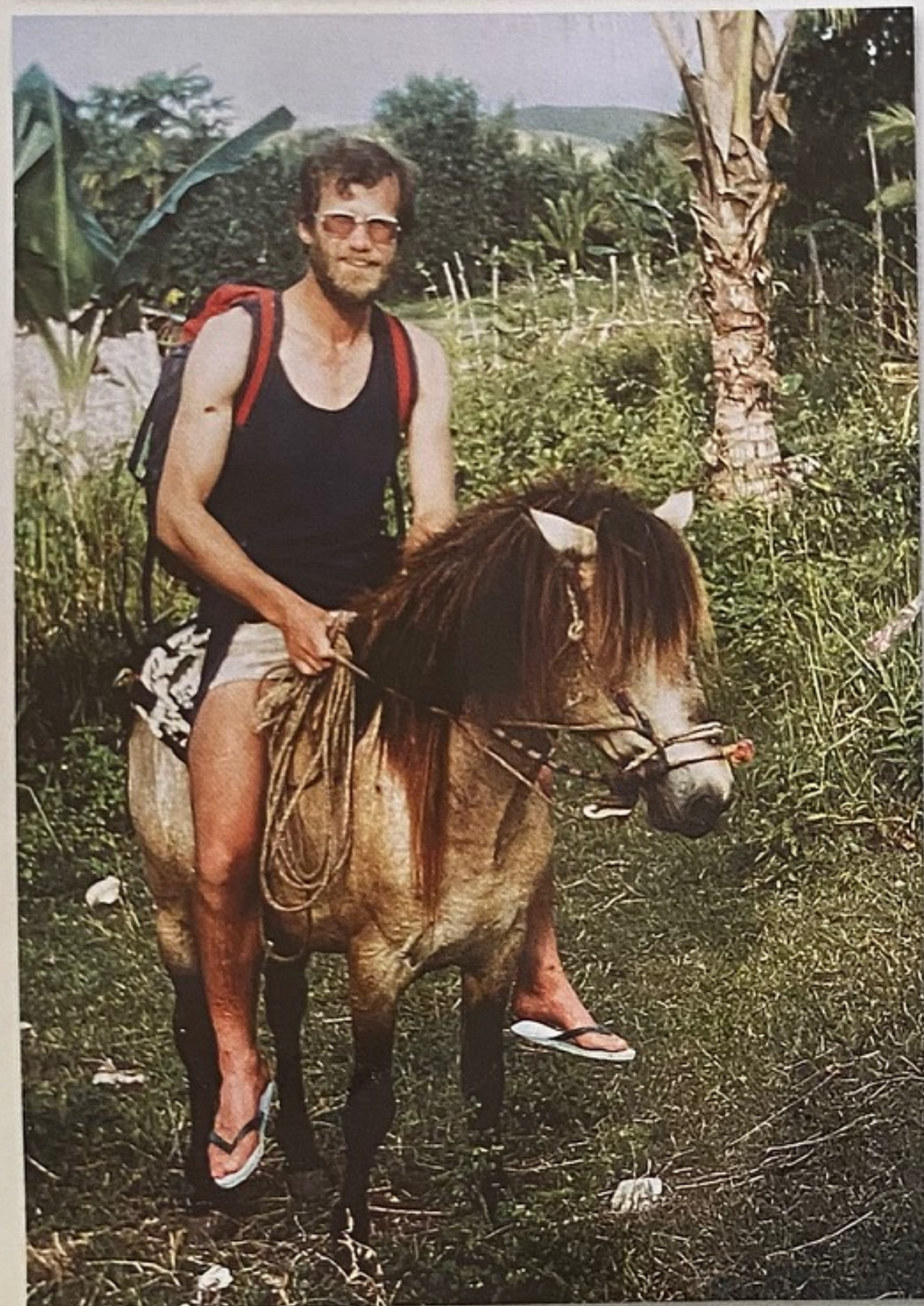
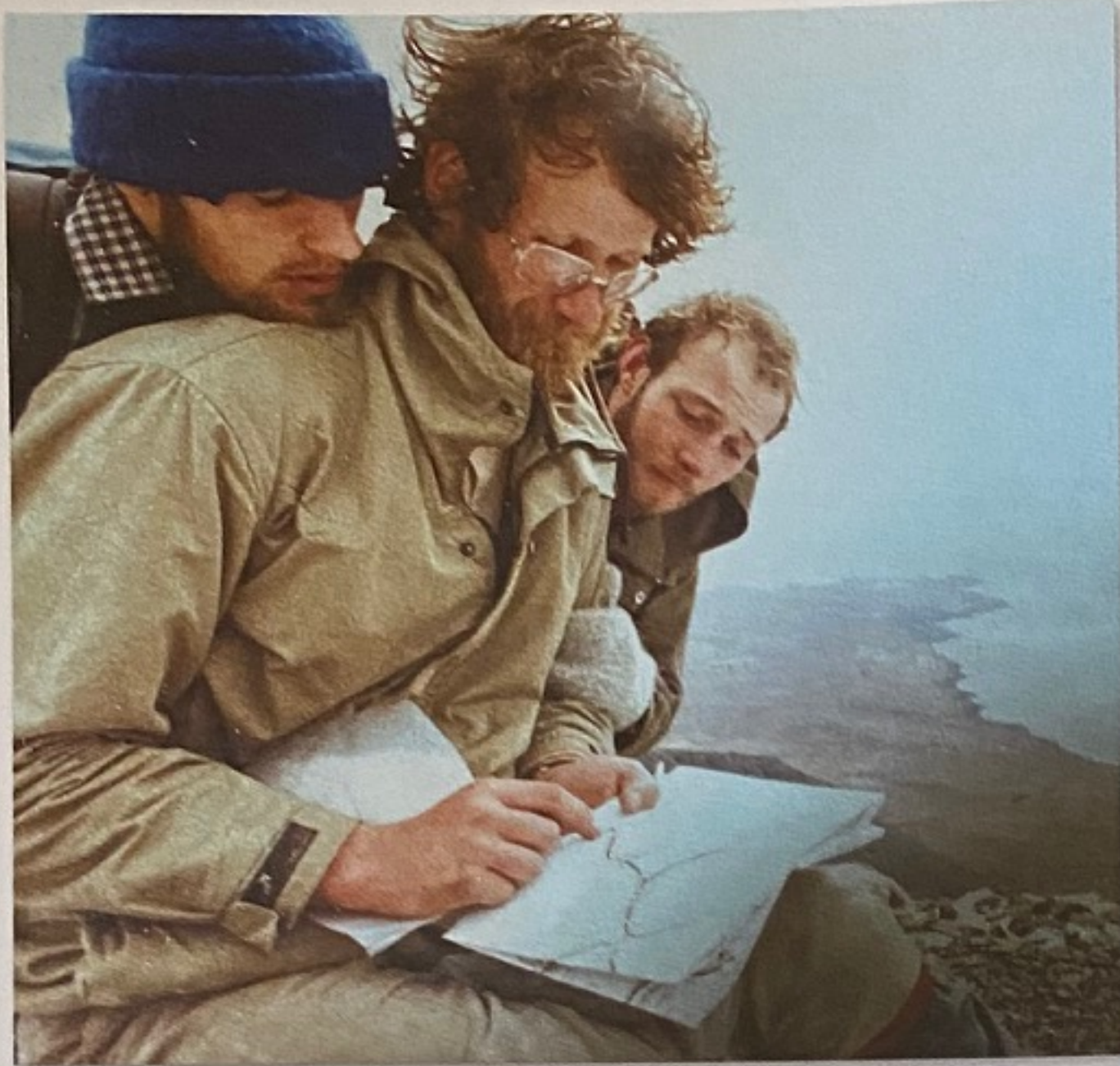
together with his elder brother John and younger sister Jean, they lived in Bramhall and moved to Hale when he was a teenager. When he was eighteen Dave left home and studied nutrition as an undergraduate at Queen Mary College in London. He was in London and it was the swinging sixties: Dave's eyes blinked open and his shackles were cast aside. He really enjoyed his years in London.

Once Dave graduated he headed to Lancaster University to focus on a PhD on nutritional balances in sheep. He had his own small flock of sheep and he would put a plug into the side of them so he could test the contents in their stomachs. Unfortunately, or perhaps unsurprisingly, following five years of prioritising caving over academia, his PhD defence did not go well; he received an MSc and moved on.

LUSS and expeditions

DAVE arrived at Lancaster University in 1969 when the speleological society (LUSS) was in its infancy. With John Gardner, Mel Gascoyne and a wide group of enthusiastic students as members, LUSS rapidly made its mark on the Yorkshire Dales caving scene. New explorations in East Kingsdale, Notts Pot and Far Waters in Gaping Gill, together with countless other projects, filled their time and led to a selection of LUSS journals (Dave's article into his research into the causes of IBS – Itchy Bottom Syndrome – is a particular treat!).

Exploration overseas was quickly in Dave's sights and each summer throughout the seventies



Despite taking riding lessons in advance, in 1985 we instantly discovered that local travel in Sumba, Indonesia, was not going to work for us
Photo: Colin Boothroyd

Top: DC (centre) with Colin Boothroyd (left) and Martin Walters studying a map in the early seventies
Photographer unknown

some links with extra-terrestrials ... Dave proudly retained his blue caving suit that he had loaned to Neil when he headed underground.

Dave had to drop out from joining the ground-breaking British expedition to New Guinea in 1975 – he had run out of money and Lancaster University's professors were beginning to question his priorities. But he was first on the list when Andy Eavis and Ben Lyon started pulling together a team for a large speleological expedition to Mulu in 1980. The expedition logged an incredible 50km of new cave and Dave was fortunate enough, together with Andy and Tony White, to be on the first trip into Sarawak Chamber which was, amazingly, over three times larger in volume than the previously known largest chamber in the world. Interestingly, Dave was not totally at ease as the small team explored

the blackness of the chamber they had entered. Andy Eavis remembers: 'Dave was not comfortable with the enormity of it all – he had discovered "Cave Explorer's Agoraphobia".'

Following further trips to Spain and Mulu, Dave joined the first British speleological expedition to China in 1985. The doors to this mysterious country had only been opened a few years earlier and in many senses the trip was truly pioneering. That first expedition and the various subsequent expeditions that Dave joined each provided great rewards and clear glimpses into the potential for so much more exploration that could be achieved. As ever, he was always biting at the bit.

Through the eighties, the nineties and into the noughties, Dave was on an expedition every year. His appetite for exploration, the joy of working within an equally passionate team of friends, and the novelty, rewards and experiences that each new destination provided filled his life. He went on expeditions to Uzbekistan, Madagascar, Sumba and Kalimantan in Indonesia, Thailand, Irian Jaya on the island of New Guinea, and Mount Suswa in Kenya.

Back home

DAVE'S keenness did not stop at a cave entrance – he was eager to support and drive change with the caving fraternity as a whole. His deep interest in international cave exploration and science led him to his role as BCRA Foreign Secretary for many years and, in parallel, he was a key member of the Ghar Parau Foundation committee that supports British caving expeditions. Like everything he did in life, he took his roles very seriously, with lengthy correspondence with cavers around the world and proactive support for pioneering expeditions.

He became BCRA President and convenor of the BCRA research fund

in June 2004 and served until June 2009, when he became BCRA Chairman and stayed in the position until December 2014. He continued as an active member of the BCRA Council and trustee until 2016.

During his tenure as president and chairman of BCRA he devoted considerable time to setting up an archive for Eli Simpson's photographs and journals, and developing the Cave Science and Research Technology Fund to grant money to those conducting speleological-related research. He also spent considerable energy in helping to establish a new British Caving Library and put many lifting and shifting hours into creating the new library home at Glutton Bridge in Buxton.

Digging in the Dales

THROUGHOUT his life Dave maintained an unrelenting fervour for digging in the Dales. He always had a project on the go and, in almost all cases, these proved to be completely fruitless. Either the location or potential was poor, the draught that he raved about was non-existent, the technical support that he promised was woefully inadequate or the overall squalor of the site was

way beyond acceptable limits. But a Checkley Dig had his name on it and that was enough to ensure that each weekend, or mid-week evening, he could reliably muster a group of cavers to drag buckets, lie in flat-out crawls, shiver in alcoves or bale out pools. Somehow, the fruitlessness could be set aside as the prospect of the tantalising breakthrough was etched across Dave's face and it was impossible to avoid being drawn in by it (well, it was in my case, anyway)

Later years

IN 2001 Dave casually told me that one of his legs occasionally started twitching for no clear reason. This later developed into lengthy spasms and in 2003 he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The news was devastating for Dave and those who loved him. For a while his head dropped and the bounce in his metaphorical and physical stride lessened, but instead of fighting it or getting angry or welling up in self pity, he simply chose to ignore it. He simply carried on. Expeditions, digging trips, mountain biking, climbing and ice climbing, canyoning and long distance walking would continue as usual. And so they did. Very slowly, over the years his conditions worsened and the long walks to the cave entrances started proving more difficult than the passage through the caves, but amazingly over a period of almost twenty years he was lucky, and also casually determined, to keep the disease at bay.

He was a research scientist with AstraZeneca for the last twenty years of his working life. He worked on many projects and, in particular, focused on the analysis of the effects of new drug developments with the benefit of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). Sometimes, just for fun and out of curiosity, he would scan parts of his own body. I recall one day as we were walking over Ingleborough he told me that he had noted a small, 'mushy' zone in his brain; he had spoken to doctors about it and they told him not to worry but to keep monitoring it. In 2011 he was diagnosed with dementia.

Dave managed this distressing news with the same tenacity that he had possessed when he learned of his multiple sclerosis – to carry on regardless. He had joined the Yorkshire Subterranean Society and enjoyed the club trips and their weekly digging sessions, he became a regular contributor at the local creative writing group and he was pleased to self-publish a book of his poems.

Life beyond caving

A FEW years after Dave and Margot married in 1998 they both retired and moved to a beautiful barn conversion in Low Bentham in the Dales. This escape from South Manchester really suited the two of them – they immersed themselves in the local community and, with the help of many caving friends, converted the garden and neighbouring field to a market garden, an orchard and home to Dave's family of hens.

Despite Dave's desire and motivation to do so much within the caving world he was, in fact, actually normal. He loved life. And he loved sharing his love for life. His girlfriends, Fran and Sheila, his wife Margot, and their many friends all enjoyed joining Dave on his climbing club excursions, birdwatching trips, delighting in the theatre and jazz and classical concerts, throwing parties, countryside walks, meals with friends and holidays around the world.

Dave was the absolute epitome of an all-round caver. His passion for caves and the caving community stretched in all directions and with a



Lancaster company who gave us some bulletproof material with which to make a bivi that we could hang from bolts in a shaft (thirty years before portaedges were available). We made one and took it to Bar Pot to try it out. It weighed 25kg, it was bulky and by the time we got it down the entrance pitch I think we both knew it was a nonstarter, but we persevered (another DC trait) and spent an awful night suspended in the material. The good news is the bullets did not get through; the bad news is that it's still there.

DC was one of the guys who discovered the (then) largest chamber in the world in Mulu. He became interested in how to photograph such a space and hence we took magnesium strips and rockets and parachutes into a large chamber in the Ease Gill System and experimented. After ten minutes we had achieved several burns to hands and a loss of eyebrows, but we had in fact lit up the chasm. Unfortunately, we also filled it full of smoke, a fact we realised when another party arrived and inquired why we were ruining their trip.

DC was incredibly generous with his time and as a mentor he was excellent, though you didn't want to let him down. I led the Tresviso 1979 expedition, so in preparation each weekend we

conviction and energy that was difficult to follow. He was happy taking novices caving, digging in squalid digs, measuring scallop marks, carrying divers' bottles, organising expeditions, rigging undescended pitches, writing reports, taking cave photographs, drawing surveys, attending committee meetings, driving change to the structure of our national bodies, seeking funding for cave science projects, arguing about caving politics over a pint and partying to the early hours.

There is no question in my mind – I was completely drawn in. I was in awe and significantly influenced by his 'glass is half full' approach to life. I just wish I had told him.

Colin Boothroyd

Reflections

In the 1970s and '80s Lancaster University SS was one of the leading clubs engaged in worldwide cave exploration. It produced and

encouraged many good cavers, but in my opinion only two great ones: Dave Checkley (DC, as he was known) and Colin Boothroyd. These two had more energy, more ambition, more drive and more competence than the rest of us. If you were in a tight spot (pun intended) you wanted to be with at least one of them, though if you were in the shit you were probably with Colin anyway!

Rather than again cover DC's many expeditions and the caving bodies he served, I am going to reflect on why I spent so much time with him and why I will remember him so fondly. DC had enormous curiosity and hence was always trying new ideas out. Here are a few examples:

Along with Angus Wood, Dave designed and manufactured a multisender, a gadget with which you could go both up and down ropes. For some reason I was volunteered to test-drive this contraption and ascended six metres into the air in a tree behind Clapdale House on the flank of Ingleborough. It was an excellent ascender. Unfortunately, it was a frictionless descender and I hit the ground with some force and little style. Many years later a commercial device was produced that looked a bit like his original; I didn't buy one.

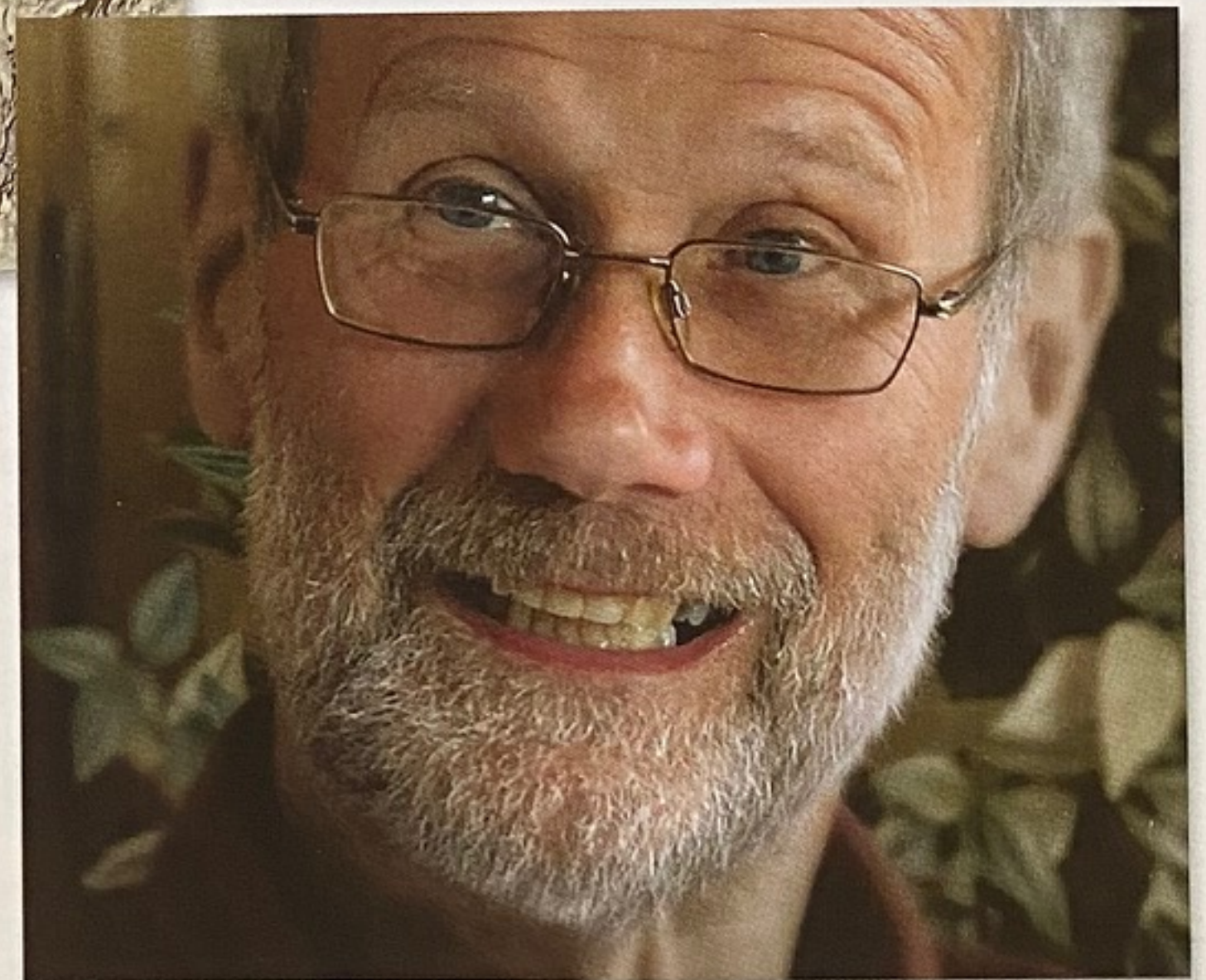
While exploring nasty deep caves in the Picos de Europa we realised that campsites would not always be pleasant. So DC approached a

would cave together on the Saturday and on the Sunday would go through the list of tasks he had set me previously, to gauge progress. I did this homework more diligently than that of my degree. He had an edge to him that you didn't want to test and that almost had disastrous consequences when DC sent Dick Willis and me to look at an objective in the Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary in Thailand. An hour into the walk we became involved in a gunfight with some poachers, who fortunately ran off without hitting any of us. Dick was keen to return to camp, but I wanted to go on as I didn't want to tell DC we had failed. Dick muttered about wife and kids and so won the argument.

Being a friend of DC occasionally had its moments. He was involved in an experiment looking at the effects of garlic on sporting prowess – this meant he would eat lots of garlic, work up a sweat and then measure the effects, one of which was smell. My job was to stick my nose in his armpit and on a scale of one to ten tell him how smelly he was. Thankfully, the experiment didn't survive long and he moved on to more socially acceptable work.

I have been fortunate to cave with some of the best cavers the UK produced in the 1970s and '80s, but being around DC was always challenging, interesting and mostly fun. I miss him tremendously.

Howard Jones



*Top down: Dave in Flowerpot in 1981
Photo: Mark Sefton*

*Dave Checkley
Photo: Jerry Wooldridge*

*With Colin Boothroyd and Brian Judd at Janet's Foss in 2018
Photo: Colin Boothroyd*