

# Subterranea Britannica



## Guide to underground access

### *“Health and Safety matters”*

#### **Welcome**

This leaflet has been produced to provide an overview to making visits underground. It is hoped that it will be particularly useful to new members and help everyone in their exploration of the world beneath our feet.

What brings Sub Brit members together is a common interest – one might almost say fascination – with man-made and man-used underground space. This covers a vast range of structures, from icewells to bunkers and from canal tunnels to gold mines.

#### **Undertaking an underground visit**

Before going underground, obtain copies of any plans of the space, where available. Alongside this, it is invaluable to talk to someone who has recently visited and can advise on current conditions. Make sure someone who is not going underground is aware of your intentions and of what to do if you don't reappear. Venturing underground alone is strongly discouraged; equally, very large parties can add their own hazards.

Make sure that anyone going underground is briefed and is wearing equipment appropriate to the site – particularly footwear, helmet and lighting. If you have any medical conditions which might hamper your visit, we suggest you make these known to the leader. Consider taking training in first aid, especially if you are a frequent visitor to sites 'off the beaten track'. On entering a site, take a headcount and nominate a 'back marker'. Agreement should be reached on the route to be taken and what to do if the party becomes separated.

Special care/consideration should be taken when entering sites with only one entrance/ exit. Large systems can be methodically explored by following the right (or left) hand wall. A good rule of thumb is to start the return trip after a third of the planned time underground or light endurance. For larger systems, carry appropriate emergency gear including spare lighting, food and water, first-aid kit, clothing and a compass. Although of limited use underground, a mobile phone is valuable for the surface.

#### **Potential Hazards**

These are too variable and site-specific to be completely covered here. If you encounter any of these hazards, then **warn** any other members of your party. Consider the following:

- **Gas/Air** – if in any doubt do not enter. Avoid disused coalmines and be aware of the signs of oxygen starvation.
- **Chemicals** – even if not contemporary with the site, many underground spaces have been used for tipping of waste.
- **Uneven/sharp floors & walls** – a common hazard; appropriate footwear / gloves should be used. Look out for holes or gaps in flooring.
- **Low ceilings** may be encountered. Hanging wires or brackets can provide eye-level hazards. A helmet is strongly recommended.
- **Water** – underwater shafts can cause particular surprise. Be aware of the weather forecast before entering any site where water levels could rise. Cave diving is enjoyed by some but needs to be properly taught by an approved instructor.
- **Asbestos** – many sites contain asbestos from the days when it was an acceptable (and fireproof) building material.
- **Structural stability** – take great care under any unsupported ceilings or roofs and observe any areas taped off for safety. Be wary of using ladders that may have spent decades gently rotting or rusting.
- **Lighting** – ensure you have adequate lighting (head-torches enable 'hands-free'). Carry a spare light and batteries.

- **First Aid** - a small kit may be useful, to slip into your pocket/rucksack.

Before any visit, it is strongly recommended that you conduct a Risk Assessment. This should already have been carried out by the owners of any public site such as a show mine or underground railway. Sub Brit's website shows a sample proforma but this should be adapted as necessary. This risk assessment can help ensure that appropriate precautions/mitigations are in place for any hazards and can act as a briefing for the visiting party.

### **Emergency**

Should an emergency occur then Cave or Mine Rescue can be reached via the police on 999. Be sure to give as much detail as possible including an exact grid reference and the number and extent of any casualties.

### **Sites and Access**

Sub Brit publishes a Directory of UK Underground sites – see website for details. Many owners are happy to permit access but any conditions they apply (eg not publishing site details or photographs) should be rigorously observed. Not doing so is both discourteous and may block future access by other enthusiasts.

You should never force entry to any site or trespass to gain access. Sub Brit's Articles are quite explicit that all activity must be fully within the law. Members should not claim to represent Sub Brit in gaining access to sites unless it is in preparation for an official visit that has been approved by the committee.

A good way to get access to sites is through fellow Sub Brit members. Many have knowledge of sites in a particular area or of a particular type. Members arrange informal trips, in addition to official Sub Brit visits. 'Open House' schemes and local mining societies can also offer access to underground space.

### **Bats Underground**

The UK has sixteen species of bats and all are protected. Underground space is vital to bats as they spend their winter months in hibernation there. Any disturbance can cause them to wake and put their survival at risk. For this reason, access to many underground sites is prohibited during the winter months (think of it as when the clocks are set to GMT). If you should come across any roosting bats, then leave them well alone and do not touch, illuminate or photograph them. Even a small change in temperature can rouse them and prevent them from surviving the winter.

### **Insurance**

Public liability insurance to third parties is included as part of Sub Brit membership. It is important to understand what this is (and what it is not). The insurance covers any claims from a third party (eg a site owner) against accidental damage by Sub Brit members on an **official** trip or event. It does not cover members for claims when underground on other occasions, nor is it in any sense personal accident insurance.

Members who want personal third-party liability insurance would be well advised to consider that provided by the British Caving Association (BCA). Many house contents and travel insurance policies include third-party liability but you are advised to check very carefully that the activities you undertake are within scope of the policy.

We would also recommend that members have appropriate travel insurance to cover personal effects and medical costs. The European Union Health Insurance Card (EHIC) is recommended for travel within Europe but its coverage varies by country and is unlikely to be sufficient in all cases.

### **Further Information**

Contact the society on [info@subbrit.org.uk](mailto:info@subbrit.org.uk). The website and our in-house publication, **Subterranea**, have information on hundreds of underground sites in the UK and some overseas.