

Candidates from North East Somerset and Wells constituencies taken on awareness tour of potential North Somerset gasfield

In early December, local resident and caver Mark Lumley invited candidates from all political parties on a brief tour of the Mendip Hills and Somerset Coalfield, visiting stream sinks, resurgences and mines of PEDL 227 in particular the East Mendip region, believed to be the source of the water for Bath Hot Springs. The trip included a short visit to the magnificent Shatter Cave between Stoke St. Michael and Oakhill.

The intention was to ensure that candidates were aware of issues particular to the cavernous, fractured geology of the Mendip plateau and Somerset Coalfield. In particular the possible dangers to our reservoirs and water supply if drilling were to take place amid the area's countless underground streams. The hydrological link between this area and Bath Hot Springs was

discussed at length, together with worries about methane leakage to communities above old mine workings if the government were to override concerns raised by Mendip and B&NES councils, and give the green light to fracking or drilling for coalbed methane in this fractured, cavernous, heavily mined area.

Previously Mr Lumley, an advisor to Somerset County Council's East Mendip Strategic Groundwater Study and a cave explorer for over 45 years, took Wells Constituency Conservative candidate **James Heapey** down Swildon's Hole at Priddy. **Tessa Munt MP** (Liberal Democrat) has been caving before and is aware of the issues. A trip is planned shortly for **Chris Inchley** (Labour).

Todd Foreman (Labour NE Somerset), **Wera**

Hobhouse (Liberal Democrat NE Somerset), **Dr. Gordon Ingram** (Green Party NE Somerset) accepted the invitation and the trip took place on December 5th.

The visit was a great success with all three candidates finding the trip constructive, leaving them with a clearer understanding of the delicate relationship between the Mendip Hills and the surrounding area and the way that this might be damaged by drilling and by human error at the wellhead and in transportation of polluted fluids leading to widespread consequences.

Unlike his fellow candidates **Jacob Rees-Mogg MP** (NE Somerset) declined the invitation. In his response to **Gas Field Free Mendip** who helped to organize the trip the MP declared that he was 'aware of the work of William Smith'.

William 'Strata' Smith was a geologist who lived from 1769 to 1839, working on the Somerset Coal Canal as well as part of the Somerset Coalfield. In 1799 Smith produced the first geologic map of the area around Bath.

Alongside his work on the coalfield, William Smith was the expert called in by City of Bath officials in 1810 to investigate the failure of part of the Hot Springs complex. Although it proved not to be the main contributory factor, Smith was successfully able to demonstrate that pumping operations at trial coal shafts more than 4km away at Bathampton were having a significant detrimental effect on the refill rate of the famous baths. The situation only returned to normal when mining operations ceased c. 1813. This discovery, reinforced by a similar unfortunate event involving

a brewery well some twenty years later, has uncomfortable parallels to current concerns raised by B&NES and others about the impacts of drilling for coalbed methane above the catchment for Bath Hot Springs, which are estimated to bring £12.3m p.a. to the local economy.

Mr Lumley was disappointed by Jacob Rees-Mogg's absence, stating that the invitation, accepted by other invitees from parties of many colours, was a well-intended, non-party-political attempt to ensure that candidates were well informed on these crucial, local issues.

It is well known that Mr Rees-Mogg is an enthusiastic supporter of fracking, with a family history in mining on the Somerset Coalfield, a founding partner of **Somerset Capital Management** which has interests in fracking overseas,

who recently stated that Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty might be fracked in 'exceptional circumstances'

Candidates of all parties would be well advised to research beyond the work of a fine geologist from a time when it was believed that the world was created as described in the book of Genesis, when Mendip's caves were unexplored and were considered to be the abode of evil spirits, an era before Darwin, when the vicar of Banwell, the Reverend Dr. Francis Randolph, believed that the bones discovered in Banwell Caves were the remains of creatures that had perished in Noah's flood.

A fuller understanding of the issues is provided by the British Geological Survey and specialist local expertise is freely available to all with the **Mendip Cave**

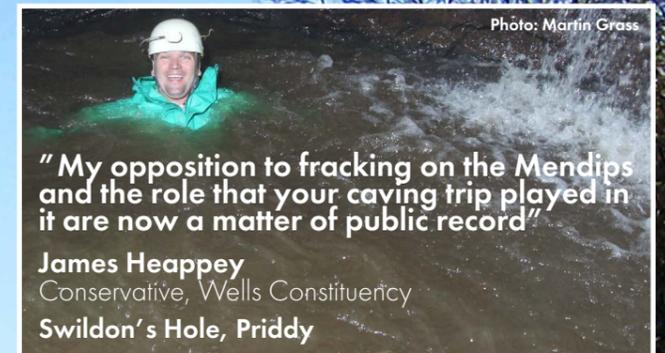


Photo: Martin Grass

" My opposition to fracking on the Mendips and the role that your caving trip played in it are now a matter of public record"

James Heapey
Conservative, Wells Constituency
Swildon's Hole, Priddy

Registry & Archive mcra.org.uk, an independent organisation founded in 1956 and recognised by both Somerset County Council and the regional District Councils as holding the most comprehensive database regarding caves, springs, stone mines and stream sinks in the affected region.

Local geologists have also been urging our politicians to discuss these local issues far more thoroughly before any decision is taken on drilling.

UK Methane have renewed their licence for PEDL 227 (Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence) which runs from Clutton and Timsbury in the North close to Shepton Mallet and Downhead in the South.

An application for an 800 metre borehole and over 20 kilometres of seismic surveys in the area are anticipated.

" I am a strong supporter of renewables and an opponent of fracking because it is a fossil fuel. But until the caving expedition, I hadn't understood the complex geology of the Mendips. Nor had I realised the big gaps in our understanding of how water reaches the hot springs in Bath. Seeing the way water flows through the rocks underground, and the way nature has twisted and contorted the geological strata, I cannot believe that any fracking company is going to be able to predict how drilling will affect our water supply."

Wera Hobhouse Liberal Democrat Party candidate for North East Somerset

"It has just reinforced that here is not the appropriate place for fracking."

Todd Foreman Labour Party candidate for North East Somerset

" It seems ridiculous that the licence has been granted at all."

Dr. Gordon Ingram Green Party candidate for North East Somerset

The Somerset Coalfield

At the heart of PEDL 227

From the slopes above Marsh Lane Drift, Ruett Pitt and Farrington Pit looking towards Paulton and Midsomer Norton over the Old Mills Colliery, Springfield Pit and beyond.



Photo: Mark Lumley

Politicians from North East Somerset in Shatter Cave, East Mendip

From left to right:

Dr. Gordon Ingram
Green Party candidate

Todd Foreman
Labour Party candidate

William Hobhouse
Liberal Democrat

Wera Hobhouse
Liberal Democrat candidate