

first time, and decided he hated it, yet now he's hardly ever on terra firma. "About five years ago, I took over the role of rescue controller, and have caved all over the UK, as well as abroad," he said. "Most of our members have a similar breadth of experience."

"Devon has two main clubs that are caving-based: the Devon Speleological Society, who focus on caves, and the Plymouth Caving Group, who also explore mines. Some of our members have come from these groups, but not all. We're completely voluntary and all have various day jobs. Our employers understand that we are likely to be called up at any time, and must be prepared to down tools."

It's rather surprising to learn just how many opportunities there are to disappear down a hole in Devon. In fact, it's a wonder that not more of us are regularly slipping into crevasses. "We have sulphur, arsenic, tin and slate mines scattered around the county," said John. "They're mainly around the Tamar Valley, Dartmoor and up in North Devon. A call-out before Christmas took us to Barnstaple, where a group of youngsters were suspected of coming a cropper in a large water culvert, which runs under the town."

Across the team is a vast knowledge of almost every cave and mine in the region, information that certainly comes in handy in emergencies. Every volunteer is First Aid trained by DCRO casualty care officer Guy Risdon. "I'm an outdoor instructor who teaches remote and immediate care through my company Adventure First Aid," he said. "That was how I first got involved with DCRO, and we provide the team's training free of charge. When faced with an emergency, we'll send a fast response down into the cave to give initial care, so there'll be someone at the casualty site as quickly as possible. The rest of the volunteers follow with the equipment. That's the easy bit - the problem is getting the casualty safely out on a stretcher."

There are three call-out lists organised around the skill levels of the volunteers. "The last one involved just three of us sent to retrieve a dog that had fallen down a mine shaft. One of us stayed on the surface while the other two went underground to retrieve the body," explained Guy.

With the general hazards of the job combined with some of the terrible things faced on reaching the incident site, the volunteers sometimes need therapy. "Shock is part and parcel of the task, and we have access to counselling if necessary, but because we're voluntary we don't have to do anything we don't want to - those that choose to be involved are prepared for the worst. We support each other and, in extreme cases, ask for back-up from the fire service."

On this particular training session, the combined strength of the Devon Rescue Group and DCRO meant that 60 rescuers were ready to scour the surrounding area (Chudleigh Rocks) to retrieve the casualties.

As rescue controller, Jon's job is to oversee the operation, making sure everyone knows what to do and when, and make decisions on the surface. "In an underground rescue

we'd also have an underground controller, to organise things from there, and keep us informed and updated," advised Jon. "We use a special link called a Heyphone, which allows communication up to several hundred metres. These were developed just four years ago especially for UK cave rescue operations - and are quite incredible. They communicate through solid earth via magnetic waves. Technology like this means we are far better prepared on the surface."

If all this sounds terribly exciting, you'll be glad to hear that prospective volunteers are requested to get in touch immediately. "We love to see new people," confirmed Jon. "Some who come to our training sessions aren't actually on our call-out list, but they still benefit from the skills that we teach. There are alternative ways that people can help: fundraising is the bane of our life, so if there are any generous companies out there who would like to support us and donate, we'd be very grateful - please put that in!" he laughed.

"No one individual runs the team," continued DCRO chairman Brian Johnson, who works as a therapist. "I happen to be the chair of DCRO, but that's more to do with my age - I've been put out to grass! I wouldn't say I control anything. I've just been doing it for a long time and I'm still alive!"

"Historically, cavers have always had to rescue each other because no one else is equipped for it. Therefore, if you're an active caver, there's an expectation that you will avail yourself of the responsibility of emergency missions. As equipment has developed, we've tried to get local cavers together twice a year at least, to practise using it so they work well as a team, but their endeavours are always backed up by other cavers who happen to be in the area at the time. So if I were in Yorkshire next week, I'd be expected to muck in."

Standard issue essentials all depend on the situation. All are responsible for the upkeep of their personal items: oversuit, gloves, boots etc. In addition, some volunteers will have the necessary equipment for complex rope rescues. Most of the vital equipment, such as React stretchers, ropes and hauling equipment, the Little Dragon - a casualty warming device - and the Heyphone is coordinated and looked after by the team's equipment officer Dave Warne, who retrieves it from the central store and issues it as needed.

Off duty, the team is relaxed and in good spirits - it seems more like a social outing in fancy dress. "People often find they take an immediate liking or disliking to caving," said Jon, as I handed back my loaned cavewear after a short spell underground. Known to suffering panic attacks in confined places, this was one of my finer achievements. I don't mind Kents Cavern, nor Cheddar Gorge, but the idea of scraping through jagged, unstable territory at a moment's notice, leaves me cold. Best leave it to the experts.

*To apply for membership to the DCRO, contact chairman Brian Johnson on 07966 338828; email chair@dcro.org.uk; or rescue controller Jon Whiteley on 07748 762580; email res-con@dcro.org.uk. Visit www.dcro.org.uk for information. DCRO gives presentations on the operations of the team, and volunteers are always willing to share their experiences with interested groups. This is on a no-cost basis but donations are always appreciated. For more details, contact Jon as above.*

