Plymouth Caving Group

Newsletter and Journal
November 2016



Ali Neill (1960-2016)

Issue Number 162

Editorial

This newsletter marks the passing of another stalwart of the club Alasdair (Ali) Neill. Over the years, since the formation of what is now the Plymouth University's Adventure & Expo club but was back then in Ali's days the Plymouth Polytechnic Caving Club, Ali Neill has become somewhat of a club institution. So it is fitting that this Newsletter, a journal that Ali himself has edited and contributed to over a number of years, should be a means of remembering him.

Since the last Newsletter, a number of us have been to Spain and France, which resulted in a BBQ and Powerpoint presentation at the Pengelly Centre which was enjoyed by quite a few of us. So it is appropriate that some memories of this wonderful summer trip should be included, especially as, in the early years when I used to organise what became known as Jean's Tours (never ABTA regulated!!) Ali frequently accompanied us on our journeys.

Ali's last article for this Newsletter, The Three Amigos, is also included. It covers work he has done over a period of many years in South Wales but has only just finished writing it up. It provides good evidence of Ali's work with many people across many clubs and it is fitting that it should be included here.

I am writing this just before we go to on our annual pilgrimage to North Wales, thanks to the organisation of Alex Heath and to Dave Warne for providing the necessary permits, although the Newsletter will not appear in your in mail boxes until after our return but hopefully, that trip will generate further articles.

Also in this Newsletter is the menu for our Christmas Dinner at the Dartmoor Lodge. Those of you going please let me have your choices along with any money owed by Saturday 3rd December as we have to pay in full before the dinner.

As well as the normal Tuesday evening trips, further trips are planned to return to Mendip and to the Llangattock Escarpment in South Wales as well as North Wales and, hopefully, Nenthead. So there is plenty going on and plenty to fill the pages of the Newsletter, if you provide the articles and photos. As always it would be good for more of you to get involved in deciding the trips and leading them. This is beginning to happen with Steve Coombs and Alex Noot stepping up to the breach.

Anyway, do continue to enjoy your trips underground.

David Jean

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Alasdair (Ali) Neill 1960-2016

Ali grew up in Shropshire attending Ludlow Grammar School. As well as mountaineering he soon developed an interest in exploring mines of which there were plenty in Shropshire. In 1978 he moved to Plymouth to study Earth Sciences at Plymouth Polytechnic (now University) and continued his interest in exploring underground sites with the Polytechnic Caving Club (now the University's Adventure & Expo Club). Very soon he joined the PCG, along with quite a few friends from the poly which significantly boosted our numbers.

Despite having no car Ali was soon out and about either using public transport or persuading friends to take him all over Devon and Cornwall. Ali was a good persuader. Always looking for something new Ali was keen to start a dig at the back of Dog Hole. He was convinced that he would soon be through into Prid. On more than one occasion I joined him on this dig famously nearly getting pinned to the back of Dog Hole by a rolling boulder.



In the mid 80's I ran a number of foreign trips for the club to localities such as the Dordogne, Pyrenees and the Vercors. Quite often Ali joined us on these trips. I remember once, after quite heavy snow on one of our trips to the Vercors, we decided to search for the entrance to the Gouffre Berger from the Engins side. Leaving our cars parked just above the village of Engins we trekked up an almost vertical path towards the woods that contained the entrance. Near the top Ali had, unusually for him, had enough and so we left him in the sunshine while we carried on into the wood. We came to a small clearing and saw a Hansel and Gretel type wooden cabin in the middle of it. We thought we would ask the way as there was smoke coming out of the chimney. Politely I knocked on the door and it was answered by an almost naked young lady. We were young ourselves then and thought our luck was in until this hairy great naked chap stood behind her. With a quick pardon we hastily retreated. We found the entrance and retraced our steps, giving the cottage a wide berth, finding Ali where we left him. Not sure he ever believed us.



Another time, still in the Vercors and over Easter when there was even now a good amount of snow on the mountains to the east of Villard de Lans. Ali, always full of good ideas, thought a walk up to the summit was in order. Off we went, sometimes almost wading through deep snow but, back in the campsite, we thought we had achieved something. That night there was an almighty roar and next morning we emerged from our tents and looked up to see that an avalanche had swept right across the area where we had been the day before.

More recently Ali spent practically every holiday in Matienzo, Spain discovering and surveying new cave systems and passages. He wrote up many of his reports in previous editions of this Newsletter. However, he still found time to carry out work more locally, especially in Cornwall.



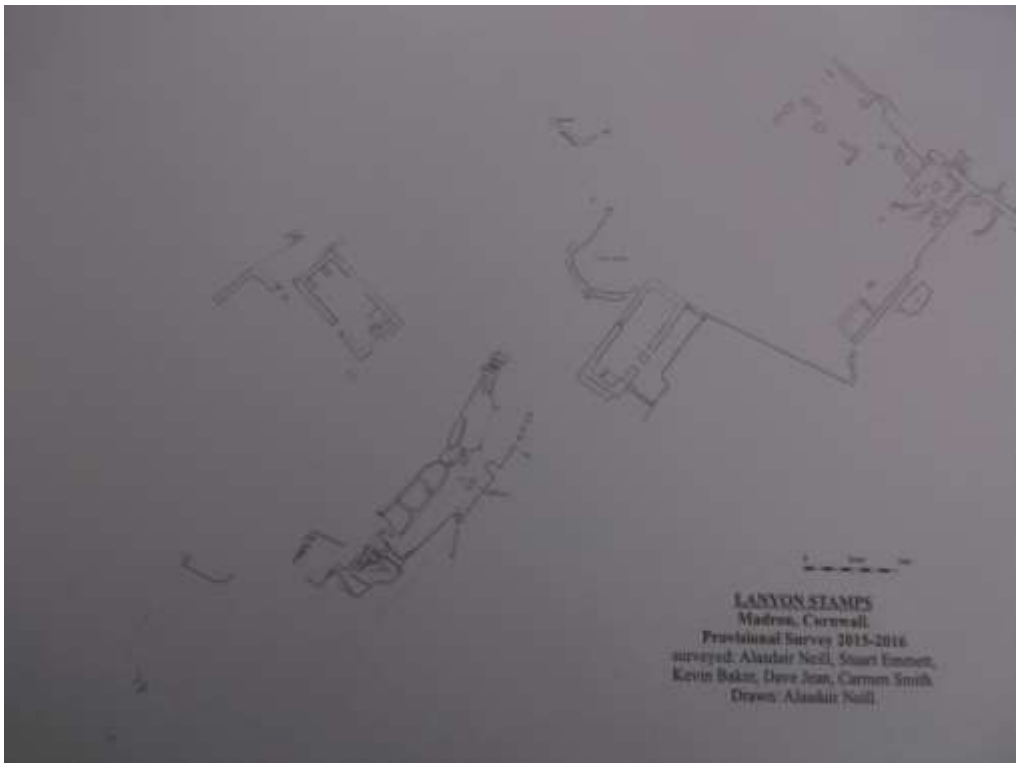
Ali has been a part of running the club for as long as I can remember. Always a familiar face at our committee meetings almost to the end – he didn't attend the last two although he was still a committee member when he passed away. Whilst on the committee he held a number of posts including editor and chairman. Most recently he was the librarian but resigned this position at the last AGM.

It came as quite a shock back in July to learn that Ali was suffering from cancer and that it was terminal. He suffered his treatment stoically and didn't let it stop him carrying on with his work. He completed his survey of the Lanyon Stamps (Tye House), where tin streaming and separation took place, at Madron in Cornwall just before he passed away. In the meantime he had a few days out. Richard and I took him to Minions in search of the infamous Man Engine but we were too early! We dropped down to Liskeard and Richard dropped Ali and I off in the town centre where the Man Engine was performing before parking the car and rejoining us. Ali took a number of photos and was pleased to have seen it. He remained active up until the last few weeks before he died. His passing has meant the loss of valuable knowledge on underground sites in Devon and Cornwall as well as elsewhere. He couldn't write everything down but what he did is destined for the West Devon and Cornwall Record Offices.

It goes without saying that Ali will be sadly missed by a lot of us and our condolences go to his mother and sister, Brigid.

David Jean

Ali's Survey of the Lanyon Stamps (Tye House)



Cornish Man Engine

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the award of UNESCO World Heritage status to the Cornish and West Devon Mining Region it was decided to build the largest mechanical puppet ever to be seen in Britain in the form of a Cornish Miner.

The actual design remained a secret as it was built over a period at the old Holman boiler works in Camborne. Christened the man engine it began its tour of the West Devon and Cornish mining areas in Tavistock and finished up at Geevor. We caught up with it at Liskeard where many hundreds of people filled the main street.



A Reminder of Summer

This summer a few of us decided to go to the Matienzo area of northern Spain, the French Pyrenees and the French Vercors following in the footsteps of many Jean's Tours back in the 80's. Ali was involved and, as would be normal for Ali in the summer, expecting to go to Matienzo himself. Ali helped us with some of the planning suggesting places we could visit, particularly in northern Spain. Six of us were to take part in this trip with the first 4 us arriving in Santander, Cantabria in mid June. These were Bernard, Richard, Dan Church and I. Later in the Vercors we were to meet up with Alex Heath and Lydia who had organised a splendid gite for us to stay in at Villard de Lans.

Our first stop was Matienzo where we met up with Pete Smith, a long standing Pengelly member, at the caver's bar, Germans. We had just 3 days here and so it was decided to do two trips, Cueva de Agua and Reñada.



Richard and Dan outside Agua

As well as the caves we enjoyed the seaside at Noja and, enroute to France diverted west for a few miles to the see the paintings in the caves at Altimira.



Outside German's Bar



A nice day at the seaside, Noja



Painted ceiling in Nuevocueva, Altimira

Our first port of call in France was in the Pyrenees where we were to visit Pierre St Martin (PSM).



Entrance to Pierre St Martin



Chevalier, PSM

Leaving the Pyrenees we crossed France from west to east arriving in the Vercors and joining up with Alex Heath and Lydia. Here we would concentrate on just three caves in the Bourne Gorge. The first of these was Bournillion which has the biggest cave entrance in Europe but, due to the flood levels of the river, can be extremely dangerous. Alex, Dan and Richard went into the cave and soon found themselves rescuing some children who were in the cave with no lights and no proper clothing.

Then we visited the showcave at Choranche and obtained permission to do the Gournier the next day. This would involve using our inflatable boat to cross the entrance lake before climbing up to the passage which was full of gours with routes down into the streamway.

The last of our trio of caves was Grotte Favot, which was situated high above the gorge and it was quite a climb to reach it. We also visited the Petzl factory near Grenoble.


Entrance to Bournillion


Lydia, Dan, Richard and Alex ready to set off across the entrance lake of Gournier



Lydia climbing from the boat into Gournier's main passage

On the way back from the Petzl factory, where we were made most welcome and were shown the test area where they can rig for anywhere at all. We've been invited back to try it ourselves in the future. Anyway on the way back we called in at the Café de la Resistance just outside Villard. This is well known to those, including Ali, who were on the original Jean's tours. It has changed and been modernised but we still stopped off for what was, for me, a nostalgic drink.



All six of us at the Café de la Resistance. Bernard's hat is hiding behind Richard.

David Jean

Plymouth Poly Caving Club

This is how it all started in Plymouth for Ali and Ali's membership of the PCG brought the two clubs close together. We still had our own identities though and here is Zippy, Ali's former landlord, sporting the Plymouth Poly (note the parrot logo) Caving Club T-shirt.



Ali's last article for this Newsletter was completed at the end of July although he started it much earlier. It is reproduced here although Ali did not have enough time to source the illustrations he wanted. It also contains a challenge for our younger members!

THE THREE AMIGOS

Anyone keeping aware of the progress of discovery in Ogof Draenen, will be aware that it is probably the second longest explored cave system in the British Isles, with perhaps well over 70km or more of surveyed passage (although the exact length has not been released). After some years digging the main breakthrough was made in 1994, and in the years that followed a series of further discoveries by various clubs gave major extensions. Some of the largest passages and most stunning formations in Britain were revealed, particularly in the further reaches of the cave. Having been involved in a few surveying, taping and photography trips into some of the extensions within weeks of their discovery, it became obvious that there was abundant scope for further exploration. A couple of sites have been attacked by quite a number of PCG members, joined on various trips by cavers from the DSS, Chelsea, Croydon, Wessex, and Craven. So far this has revealed a small amount of new passage, but there appears to be quite a lot of potential for something much better, bearing in mind the combination of perseverance and luck usually required to achieve any worthwhile cave discovery.

I first visited the relevant part of the cave with Mike Bennett on 30th December 1998. We were aiming to try to find the way into Big Country, but being armed with just a description from *Descent* this was not straightforward. Leaving the round trip route at Perseverance II, and taking the route through Rift Chamber and Elliptic Passage ends at a choke which was the end of initial exploration in this part of the cave. The choke was soon passed by Lucky 13 Passage, a series of digs and crawls, which soon broke out into larger passage at Big Beauty Junction. This pleasant strolling passage, Gone with the Wind, was to lead to the major discoveries of War of the Worlds and Dollimore Series. We had both been this way a number of times before. However the way to Big Country is a very short distance from Big Beauty Junction, where a smaller passage leads off through some short crawls which join Gone in the Years. From here, being just aware that the way was a crawl off on the right, we spent some time checking out all the possibilities. The way on involved a number of digs and short crawls, and eventually reaches a point where a steep climb down drops into bigger passage in lower beds, the drop being about 15m. This area is the Three Amigos. However before taking the route down we had a look off to the right, where a chamber is met with water cascading down from a higher level and runs off down a rift. The high level passage had been explored by Chelsea members, but was not very extensive. Several passages led off the chamber, one leading to a draughting choke (which can be passed to a chamber which we didn't get into at the time), while on the right an awkward passage led up after 18m to a point where a narrow rift led off left. This point had been reached by the Chelsea surveyors, and was later remembered by John Stevens as a possible lead. I was able to detect a faint draught here, & managed to get into the rift

headfirst. An awkward downhill squeeze which required care not to slip down and get jammed in a floor slot was pushed to where the rift closed down after a couple of metres. Managing to stand on my head and eventually turn round allowed me to get into a position where it was a distinct possibility that I would be able to get back through the squeeze, and more importantly revealed the draught emerging from an opening a few inches wide under the right hand wall.

We then carried on down into the lower passages. The water from the rift in the chamber just mentioned cascades out of the roof, after which a junction is reached at some nice stal. One way a passage was followed carrying a stream which disappeared into boulders on the left. Back at the junction going right leads to the crawls which are the way into Big Country. This extensive area carries a fair stream evidently draining the northern slopes of Blorenge, and contains the largest passage in this area of the cave. However we were feeling it was time to start heading out, so just spent 10 minutes or so exploring the main route downstream, where lack of footprints on any of the mud banks passed indicates this part of the cave must flood quite frequently. We were out of the cave after a good eight hour trip.

Having been inspired by the possibilities of the tight rift, I was back on 13th March, with Keith (Keef) Jackson, and Imo and Keith Pearson from the DSS. We were able to dig out the floor of the rift to gain easier access to the low arch. The spoil was used to fill in the awkward slot in the floor of the squeeze. Keith managed to enlarge the low arch so as to make a metre or so of progress along a body sized sandy tube to where a bank stopped progress. This looked like it could be dug through in an hour or so's digging. A six hour trip. The next visit was on 4th April, with Keith and Adrian Paniwnyk (Croydon Caving Club). As predicted the bank was soon passed, and an open rift about 0.5m entered. After 6 metres this opened into relatively comfortable passage nearly 2m square. This soon split up, with a dig on the right and a slot on the left dropping into a rift which briefly enlarged before closing down. As such passages which at first sight appear to just end are very unlikely to do so in reality, a probe around in the floor revealed an arch buried under the right hand wall which would need digging out. Leaving this for another day, we surveyed the extension, which totalled just 30 metres in length. At first we were unable to locate exactly where we were in the cave, but John Stevens kindly provided copies of the relevant Grade 5 survey data and a print of the finished survey for this area. With this we were able to send the data to the Pwll Ddu Cave Management Group in accordance with the access agreement, and also the prospects were greatly improved by the fact that this passage was shown to be heading into Blorenge rather than towards the surface.

The next trip was on 19th June, Tom Miles, Adrian Parsons, Annabel, Patrick Hanlan and myself. At the squeeze at the start of the extension shattered left hand wall was easily opened up making the squeeze much easier. Tom and myself then dug the two sites in the extension, either of which was thought to be possible of extension.

There followed a break until 18th March 2000, when the chamber beyond the choke in the passage straight on from the waterfall chamber was visited with John Stevens, Paul Stacey and Annie Wakeham. The most likely possibility here was a corner opposite the way up into the chamber, which would require hauling out large boulders, possibly requiring some means of breaking them up. That Easter, while I was in Spain, Keith Pearson and Andy Heath (Cerberus) returned to the extension. Our last dig at the end was pushed round a bend where the passage is deflected by a barytes vein. Beyond the passage sloped up to a lowering but appeared to continue. On May 20th I was able to visit this with Keith, Dean Perry, Richard Green, John Milborrow and Geoff Dommett (DSS). The floor at the end was dug out as far as a large block, which we were able to bury in the floor. At this time digging was generally easy, but at least three people were required to pass the digging tray round bends to the nearest stacking space. Beyond the block the passage got higher, but involved a too tight rift which opened out in the roof but was too tight, while a wider section in the floor required digging out to make progress. It appeared that passable passage could be seen about 2m ahead. The next visit on 9th September was an 11 hour trip, with Keith, Keef, and Lee Knight. I went with Lee to the chamber visited in March, where a number of large boulders were pulled out. Then we replaced Keith and Keef digging out the floor at the end of the extension. Unfortunately a block on the left hand side prevented us from making easy progress. Lee managed to squeeze round this and reported the chamber visible beyond contained no way on.

This obviously suggested there was no point in returning to this location, but the dig in the chamber was still felt worth pursuing. On 23rd March 2003 Colin Smith, Rupert Goddard Dave Warne and myself went in, but Dave found the squeezes in the entrance series a bit of a challenge and left for the joys of the area on surface. We had hoped to do a smoke test, as a noticeable draught was present in the climb up through boulders on the previous trip. This time this was virtually absent, so we were unable to ascertain if we were digging in the right place. We carried on, pulling out three big blocks and much small stuff. The trip out was quicker than expected, so we made a detour to Tee Junction and Gilwern Passage. Nearly a year later, on March 27th 2004, Colin, Rhys Davies and myself returned again. We managed to get down another 2 feet through mud and rocks to a large boulder requiring more technology to remove.

I was not totally convinced that the extension should really just end, and felt it might be worth a trip to check out if digging under the walls at the end might reveal a way on, as had happened at the start of the previous dig. This really required somebody pretty small, and on 21st January 2006 I went in with Carmen Haskell (Wessex),who fitted the bill, Pete Smith (Bob Cawthorne's cousin, then recently returned to the UK after many years residence in Spain), and Patrick Warren (Craven Pothole Club). A bit of hammering enabled both Patrick and Carmen to pass the squeeze which Lee had been through; beyond the passage did not end, but a further two squeezes were only passed by Carmen. These were followed by about 100m of open passage, with branches heading both north and south. Carmen was able to carry out a

very rough survey. She reported the passages quite wide but low – all pleasant sandy crawling. On 1st April a large contingent was expected to try to cap out the squeezes, but this team eventually was whittled down to four, Mike Bennett, Rup, Keith and myself. Several parts of the previous digs were opened up a bit to make them more comfortable, although a number of spots remain which could easily be enlarged to make them a bit more hospitable. We were able to enlarge most of the first squeeze by demolishing the block already mentioned. A rib in the roof was drilled, which when removed on a future trip would allow the squeeze to be easily passed. A lot more progress could have made, if we had planned the logistics of getting kit to the right place better, and hopefully we have learned a lot for future trips. The trips in and out on this occasion took four hours each way.

The next trip on 17th June saw Keith, Lee, Lionel, Tom Thomson and myself returning. The whole cave was draughting strongly due to the hot weather, so on the way in the dig in the chamber was looked at. A strong draught was entering the chamber, but not the dig so it appeared the draught was going somewhere else. A smoke test in hot weather is really needed before there is any point in returning here.

Lee managed to get through all the squeezes, & quickly checked out the passage beyond. He entered at one point a 6m high rift, it is uncertain if Carmen had been into this. He reported plenty of easy digging opportunities. Meanwhile the rib in the roof was removed. Lee then returned, finding the remaining squeezes quite intimidating. The next obstacle was a flake in the roof, easily removed, and followed by a slightly wider spot where it was just possible for two persons to pass (although this was a very intimate experience). From here a keyhole shaped rift extended for a few metres, bending to the right, from which we removed several bulges in the first part, which should make progress much easier. This process required to be continued along the rift but by now we had run out of energy. Once the rift is enlarged, Lee thought there was just one last tight squeeze requiring opening up. We cut the trips in and out to three hours each way. Tom recorded the first part of the dig with a few photos.

The last trips were in March and May 2009, both myself with Lee and Keith Pearson. On the first, the corner was removed with cordtex araldited into drill holes; we also dug out the floor. The fumes from this rapidly flowed out showing there was a good draught, and were walked straight into by a party of Oxford University CC, who were not best pleased. Lee later smoothed things over with them. On the second trip I was able to get to the corner, at this point the passage is a tight keyhole shape leading to a drop into a tiny chamber, beyond which is the last (and probably tightest) squeeze. I felt that if I didn't get stuck in the keyhole and got into the chamber it would be probably impossible to turn round so reversing the move might be next to impossible for someone of my height. Keith got into the chamber but found the last squeeze too intimidating, but was short enough to turn round. These last two trips took 11 hours and 8½ hours.

As PCG now seems to have some young, fit, and most importantly small newer members, it would be very nice to see them taking on the challenge of seeing what lies beyond. It would also not take a huge amount of engineering to remove the remaining squeezes, allowing average sized cavers into the further extension. Anyone interested would be recommended to contact Keith or Lee (Devon SS), also John Stevens (Chelsea Speleological Society) I am sure would help with guidance on finding this so very small part of a very big cave. There is a huge amount of space under Blorenge for finding much more cave, most of that known being in geologically lower beds.

Alasdair Neill.

Club Information

Advance notice of the AGM which will be held on Wednesday 15th February 2017 at Moorcroft starting at 19.30. It will be followed by a presentation of the club's activities in 2016 by Keith Coventry. Further information will be distributed to members nearer the time.

Membership is now due. The Committee has decided this will remain the same for 2017 as it was this year. This is £9 plus the BCA insurance element of £17 making a total of £26 unless you pay your insurance direct to BCA. Students are half price at £4.50 and £8.50 respectively giving a total of £13.

You can pay this by cheque or by BACS straight into the club's account at the HSBC. The sort code is 40-36-23 and account number 71222791.

Please use your surname on the transaction and email both Tara (membership secretary) at tara.beacroft@plymouthcavinggroup.org.uk and Rupert (treasurer) at Rupert.goddard@plymouthcavinggroup.org.uk to the let them know that you have paid your subscription along with the amount paid.

Our Christmas Dinner this year is at the Dartmoor Lodge, Peartree Cross, Ashburton, TQ13 7JW. It is on the evening of Saturday 17th December at 7.45pm. Accommodation is available at the Pengelly Centre which is free for those who are members of Pengelly. Before we have our dinner Tara has agreed to remind us of some of the great time those who went to North Wales had. This will be at the Pengelly Centre at 6.30pm.

The cost of the meal is £22.50 for 3 courses or £18.50 for 2 courses. If you have already paid your £10 deposit, this should be deducted from the final amount owed. I need your menu choices please by Saturday 3rd December and, as the venue wants payment up front I also need your payment either sent to me by cheque (payable to David Jean) or by BACS to Natwest Bank, sort code 56-00-63 and account number 89580516. You can then email me at davidjean1@btinternet.com to confirm payment and to let me have your menu choices.

Christmas Fayre Menu 2016

Butternut Squash Soup Served with granary bread
Smoked Salmon Rillettes Served with Melba toast
Tomato and Mozzarella Bruschetta with Green Pesto
Cranberry Glazed Chicken Wings With a light aioli Prosciutto Ham,
Mulled Poached Pear & Goats Cheese Salad
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Roast Turkey with Chestnut Stuffing, Pigs In Blankets, Roast Potatoes,
Parsnip Crisps & a Rich Turkey Gravy
Honey Glazed Salmon Fillet with Braised Fennel and Garlic Roasted New
Potatoes Roasted Pork Tenderloin With Crispy Black Pudding, Creamy
Mashed Potatoes & A Red Wine Jus Pan
Seared Duck Breast with Burnt Orange Sauce & Sauté Potatoes Spinach
And Feta Pie With a Tomato Salad and Crispy Croutons
****
Chefs Christmas Pudding with Brandy Sauce
Salted Caramel and Chocolate Truffle Tort
Baileys Cheesecake
Vanilla Rice Pudding Topped With Strawberry Compote
Cinnamon Spiced Fruit Cocktail with Vanilla Ice Cream