

THE EXPLORATION OF GOUGH'S CAVE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT AS A SHOW CAVE

by

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ABSTRACT

The first part of the cave was certainly known early in the 19th century, and probably long before. It used to be thought that the cave had been first opened to the public in 1899, after the discovery of St. Paul's and the Diamond Chambers; in fact it was shown earlier than that, each new section being opened as soon as it was explored. This account has been based as far as possible on contemporary reports in local newspapers, pamphlets, and travel guides.

INTRODUCTION

The most significant, and probably the most important cave discoveries on Mendip during the 19th century, were those made by Richard Cox Gough at Cheddar.

Gough, a nephew of George Cox, the discoverer of Cox's Cave, moved to Cheddar in 1868 and by 1877 became proprietor of what is now known as Gough's Old Cave. During the next thirteen years he developed and extended the cave for public viewing in the face of intensive competition from the proprietors of Cox's Cave. Realizing that his cave could not compete with his rival's, Gough searched the Cheddar Gorge for promising sites. He dug at the Sugar Loaf Fissure in 1882, discovered and explored White Spot Cave in 1887, blasted at the Cheddar Risings in the hope of reaching the subterranean river, and even contemplated digging the Bone Hole.

In 1890, Gough commenced excavating a large cave entrance, near road level and some fifty yards to the east of the entrance to Gough's Old Cave (then known as The Great Stalactite Cavern). During the course of the next eight years Gough and his sons discovered and opened to the public the cave that is still shown today.

Being a man of his time Gough's aim was simply to discover caves for commercial exploitation, but his knowledge and the techniques he employed would be the envy of the modern cave explorer. There is little doubt that he must rank as Mendip's pioneer cave explorer.

The many, albeit brief, accounts of Gough's activities at Cheddar are often confused due to authors assuming that the 'old' and 'new' caves were the same site. The two caves are quite separate. A detailed history of Gough's Old Cave is being prepared by the author.

EARLY ACCOUNTS OF THE CAVE

Opposite the Lion Rock at the lower end of Cheddar Gorge are four caves. They are currently known as Saye's Hole, Gough's Cave, Gough's Old Cave lying some 15m above road level, and Long Hole higher still.

At the beginning of the 19th century all four entrances were known, though only two of the caves were open to the extent we know today – Saye's Hole and Long Hole. Balch (1947, p. 15) records that the entrance to Gough's Cave was formerly used as a gamblers' den, and a scratched inscription 'HH 1814' has recently been found in the First Cleft or fissure, some 4m above the present floor level.

The Reverend John Skinner, Rector of Camerton near Bath, provides the earliest known description of what was then known of Gough's Cave. He visited the site on August 30th 1816, and his unpublished diary (Skinner, 1816) records that:

On entering the Cave, each of us was presented, by the guides who attended us, with a lighted candle, they being also provided in a similar manner, to shew the way; indeed, the first part of our progress fully needed such assistance, as we were obliged to stoop low, and our passage continued for thirty or forty paces over rugged fragments, when turning off to the right, we were admonished to look up through a ravine in the rock; which excavation is nothing in comparison of the lofty chambers at the Peak, being not above 12 feet in width, and twenty in height. Returning sur nos pas, from this branch of the Cavern, we proceeded a little further, and again look up to a singular cleft, which may, I doubt not, formed in the first instance, and now is, enlarged by the action of the water filtering through the chain of the Mendip Hills, and collecting on the surface of a clay stratum, till finding a passage through the chinks and fissures, it gradually widens its channel, and in course of time forms the excavations as we now behold them. That this is the case, I am fully assured, by the appearance of an earthy deposit on the sides of the rocks, and the account of the guides, who say, in Winter, there is so much water in the cave, they cannot enter it.

This extract from the Skinner diaries clearly describes the cave as far as the two fissures. Skinner drew several sketches on the same day. One of them (PLATE 1) is the earliest illustration known of the cave entrance.

Another description of the entrance passage appeared in print twenty years later (Phelps, 1836, p. 16-17) and confirms the Skinner account:

These [caves] are situated in the defile of the cliffs, and are four in number, accessible without difficulty. The first [Saye's Hole] is on the right at the entrance of the gorge, and consists of a spacious arched vault level with the road, and contains nothing remarkable. The second [Gough's Cave] is further on, also by the road side, and closed by a door. A low natural arch forms the entrance; on proceeding further, the cave expands, and begins to ascend by a narrow fissure of considerable height. Several lesser openings appear on each side. At the extremity of the aperture, the fissure becomes enlarged in height and breadth, and seems to extend upwards. The roof and sides are covered with stalactite and stalagmite in grotesque forms. The distance from the entrance to the extremity is fifty yards. The third cavern [Gough's Old Cave] is elevated about fifty feet above the latter, having an opening twenty feet high and three wide. On entering, the cave expands and forms an area of twenty paces by thirty; the roof low, formed by the natural stratification of the superincumbent rock, and about five feet high. In the left angle an aperture leads, by a rude flight of steps upwards, sometimes expanding on all sides, and then nearly closed by the rocks. Here stalactite and stalagmite are seen encrusting the roof and sides of the cave. The fourth and principal cavern [Long Hole] is fifty feet above the one last mentioned, and is approached by some rude steps cut in the soil, which lead up to an arched gallery twenty feet wide, and one hundred long, under a projecting mass of rock partaking of the general inclination of the strata, at an angle of about 17 deg. towards the south . . .

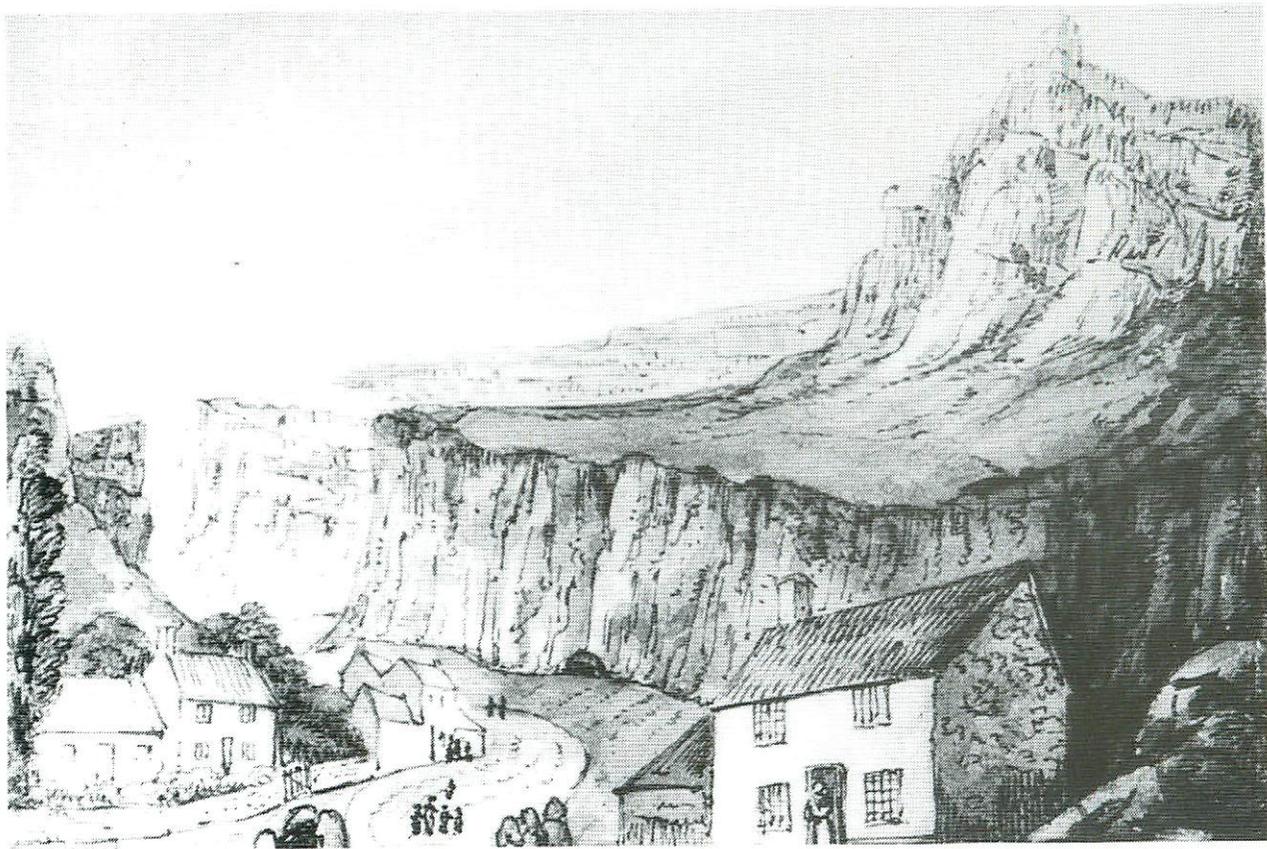


PLATE 1 — THE ENTRANCE OF GOUGH'S CAVE IN 1816, FROM A SKETCH BY THE REV. JOHN SKINNER.
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THE 1892 DISCOVERY

Until Gough's activities commenced at this site, Gough's cave extended to a choke just short of what is known today as 'The Fonts'. For a greater part of the 19th century the entrance to the Cave was gated and used as a cart shed. In 1880 the Geologists' Association paid a visit to it, removing a number of bones. Professor Sollas (1881) referred to it as 'The Cheddar Cave . . . which has not yet received a name . . .'

Why, in his intensive search for a promising site, Gough had not earlier attempted to excavate this large archway is unknown. Certainly Gough commenced excavations in 1890, the first breakthrough occurring on the 16th January 1892 with the discovery of the Fonts (Wells Journal, 1892, 28th January):

GRAND DISCOVERY – On the 16th. instant, at 4.15 a.m. Mr. Gough, the intrepid and persistent cave hunter and explorer, added one more to his list, after two years' toil and expense. This new cave is of colossal size, and contains much beauty, more especially in one chamber (from 200 to 300 feet high). It has seven fonts of Stalagmite, the semi-circle of some being 12 feet and marvellously perfect. They are one above the other . . . Prior to the above date, Mr. Gough opened up two beautiful rock-work chambers, in his search for the underground river . . . He is still proceeding, and says he has about 20 yards further to go before he reaches the river. He has got the gas laid on up to the last discovery, and will soon get it in the new caves, which he has named "Gough's Rockwork Caves," to distinguish them from his "Great Stalactite and Stalagmite Caves," [Gough's Old Cave] that are now visited by many visitors yearly. Mr. Gough has been highly successful in his excavations, having found a large quantity of bones and teeth of extinct animals, besides a lot of flint knives and bone instruments, on which he sets great value.

The 'Rockwork Chambers' are obviously the two fissures or clefts near the entrance and were named after the large scallops to be seen there. Gas lighting had probably been laid on to assist the numerous workmen employed to clear the passage of debris.

By November 1892 much of the cave earth had been cleared, for a concert was held in this passage on the 21st. The cave by now was known as Gough's New Cave. A report of this event stated (Weston-super-Mare Mercury, 1892, 26th November):

NOVEL CONCERT . . . The numerous audience was delighted with the cave and its decorations, which were profuse and tasteful, and the geni of the cavern came in for numerous and well-deserved compliments for the manner in which the novel concert hall was illuminated consisting of fairy lamps, Chinese Lanterns, gas and candles, the whole interlaced with hundreds of bannerettes. The devices were few but good, meeting the eye on coming up the cliffs was the "Setting Sun" at an elevation of 100 or 200 feet over the entrance. In the cave . . . at a height of about 60 feet over the placid water, was the "New Moon" and at the cave entrance to the left was the device "Praise God" illuminated in blue, red, and pink.

Apparently 600 people came to this event; the 'New Moon' over the 'Fonts' must have been quite effective!

1893 DISCOVERY OF GRAND GALLERY AND SWISS VILLAGE

On Wednesday, 12th April 1893 Gough made his largest discovery. The first public announcement appeared on the 15th April and a full report was published in the Weston-super-Mare Gazette on the 29th April:

. . . On Monday evening by the kind invitation of Mr. R. G. [i.e. R. C.] Gough, a small party of friends paid a visit to the new cave which was discovered by him a few days ago. The opening of the cave is situated near the Great Stalactite Cavern, so well known to visitors . . . After proceeding some two or three hundred yards, with occasional chambers on each side, the whole passage seemed to come to an abrupt termination, the rocks completely shutting off further progress. But on excavating below the level of the floor a small opening between the rocks was found and after a few hours of severe labour Mr. Gough and his sons were rewarded by the discovery of an immense chamber, the main passage extending in the direction of about 800 yards in the E. S. E. direction with various branches and chambers on either side. At some places the roof is of immense height and others the passage is of great width. To attempt a detail description of it, after so short a visit, would be impossible. Sufficient to say its enormous size and beautiful stalactites . . . stamp it as the finest known cave in the Mendips . . .

Gough had the passage cleared and made accessible to the public in a very short time, for an advertisement in the *Weston-super-Mare Gazette* on the 29th July said:

NEW DISCOVERY – The extensive and beautiful cave, several hundred yards long was discovered by Mr. Gough on April 12th 1893 and now shown to the public at a moderate charge.

This advertisement, together with one for the 'old' cave, continued to appear until 1899; Gough was now operating both caves.

1898, THE FINAL BREAK-THROUGH

During 1894 work commenced excavating the terminal choke just beyond the 'Swiss Village'. Digging progressed at intervals until the 14th November 1898 when (*Weston-super-Mare Gazette*, 1898, 26th November) Gough was

crowned with success . . . It was then, after removing some 1000 tons of rock, clay, and sand, which had to be tunnelled out from the extreme end of the cave discovered in 1893, that the new cave with all its magnificent formations was first looked upon, and is situated about half a mile from the main entrance . . . The floor is formed of stalagmite and the roof is adorned with stalactites, many of them several feet long and hung with festoons of various forms and brilliant appearance and in other parts immense columns descend to the floor, others present the appearance of mummies and waterfalls turned to marble . . . in these subterranean windings one beholds myriads of stalactites and stalagmites, all sorts of fantastic shapes and perfectly dazzling to the eye . . . one thing that is especially beautiful, and the visitor walks over what has the appearance of piles of driven snow. At the courtesy of Mr. Gough, two large parties of local residents have been escorted into this gorgeous temple of nature, they included the Rev. d M. A. Clark (the vicar), J. W. Padfield and J. W. Hartley, Dr. Statman, W. D. Lewis, J. Edwards, W. D. Evans, C. H. Collard etc., etc. One delighted admirer described a certain piece of exceptional beauty as resembling a wing of an archangel . . . Before the public are admitted, of course, there will be a lot of excavating to be done and probably some blasting . . . this is being rapidly carried out . . .

Gough made an application to the Longleat Estates for an extension to his then current lease but this appears to have failed as the lease expired in 1927.

Preparation of the new chambers for general viewing did not take long, for by the end of May 1899 Gough had the area opened to the public.

The chambers of St. Paul's and Solomon's Temple were the first to be illuminated by electricity. This was quickly followed by the removal of the installed gas apparatus which was replaced with electric cabling and lighting throughout the remainder of the cave. On the 29th April, 1899 the

Weston-super-Mare Mercury reported that the discoveries of 1898 were to be illuminated by electric generating stations, of which there were eventually two, installed by Messrs J. H. Winter & Co., of 82 New Quay, Bristol. There were 'to be 1208 candlepower lamps placed at convenient spots in the cave'. A visitor to the cave on the 30th May 1899 wrote that the cave was by then illuminated by electric light (Buxton Herald, 1899, 14th June). This is confirmed by the Weston-super-Mare Mercury on the 10th June:

The latest discovery of Mr. Gough, with assistance of his sons is now lighted by electricity, and with a number of jets judiciously arranged . . .

A photograph of the electric generating plant is included in a later handbook (Gough, 1910, p. 35). Where it was housed is not known.

The press described the new chambers with great enthusiasm. The Weston-super-Mare Mercury, 10th June 1899 said:

You come away overpowered with the brilliance of the scene, and almost intoxicated with its splendour . . .

In a long report in the same paper, 1st July 1899, reprinted from a Clevedon local paper, a correspondent writes:

. . . But, perhaps, to the man in the street, the tourist tramp, the unscientific wanderer, the Stalagmite Caverns of the famous Cheddar cliffs, are the most striking and attractive. To do full justice to them is really beyond the power of the pen for mere description . . . On the 30th of May last, I penetrated one, that belonging to Mr. Gough, accompanied by his courteous, and communicative younger son. Somebody, was it Tom Moore, has written, "I dreamt I dwelt in Marble Halls," but I feel certain that he never conceived such a scene of exquisite statuesque beauty, as this marvellous cave displays. I have seen many caves . . . and admired most of your Derbyshire Caverns . . . there are none with such a display of Stalactites and Stalagmites as in the great cave at the Cheddar Cliffs . . . the most gorgeous was only recently opened to public inspection, being still in the hands of workmen who are fitting the electric lights throughout . . . When I visited the scenes, some five years ago, this particular cave was esteemed of no importance, another cave, Cox's Cave, so called, was the popular one. Now all is changed, it is simply a case of transformation.

THE 20TH CENTURY

Gough had achieved his greatest ambition. He had discovered a cave that could rival that of Cox's Cave a little further down the gorge. From this date Gough's New Cave was hardly out of the local newspapers and periodicals.

In an article in *The Windsor Magazine*, Harry Golding wrote of the increasing competition between the cave proprietors (Golding, 1902):

The caves, however, are by far the most interesting feature of Cheddar. But before the tourist penetrates these great underground workshops of Nature he will be perplexed by conflicting claims. There is competition, it seems, even amongst caves. Here we have "Cox's Caves" and "Gough's Caves," and veracious handbills declare each to be far and away superior to the other. The only point on which they agree is the demand for a shilling entrance fee . . . The truth is that both caves should be seen – indeed, must be seen. . . Perhaps the syndicate of the future will be good enough to make a reduction on taking a quantity, and let us have the two for eighteenpence.

Rivalry between the two cave proprietors was not new. During the development of Gough's Old Cave in the 1880s both proprietors made great

claims, giving reasons why the public should visit one or other of the caves. The intense commercial warfare continued well into this century. Balch (1926, p. 17) commented 'It jars.'

After the discovery of the 'New' cave, Gough set about reorganizing the approach to the caves. The notice boards for the 'Old' cave were removed and an arched gateway was built at the edge of the road. Inside the perimeter of the ground in front of the cliff several rustic buildings were erected housing the offices and museum. Entrance to the 'New' cave was through a stone archway leading to a flight of steps.

Winter flooding of the entrance section of the cave was a regular problem that still bothers the cave management today. Lowering of the floor near the entrance was attempted in 1903 by excavating the floor of the 'Vestibule' and clearing a side passage on the north side into which the flood water was to flow and empty itself down into a flooded rift that connected with the subterranean river (see FIG. 3, p. 107). The digging at this point revealed the now famous skeleton of the 'Cheddar Man' and this passage is known today as the 'Skeleton Pit' or 'Cheddar Man Fissure'.

The discovery of the skeleton gave the proprietors an immediate advantage over their rivals and it was exploited to the full. Handbills were widely circulated, tourists were able to buy picture postcards of the skull to send to their friends and relatives. Eminent archaeologists pronounced as to its importance and dated the remains to be between 40,000 and 80,000 years old. This figure was amended on later postcards to between 10,000 and 12,000 years, and radio-carbon dating now suggests 9,000 years only. The skeleton was assembled during 1937 by M. Rix of Oxford University. He had been recommended for this task by Sir Arthur Keith.

Richard Cox Gough had died before this important discovery was made. He suffered a short illness and passed away on the 25th February 1902, being buried in the parish churchyard on the 1st March. The control and management of the cave passed to his widow, Frances, and his eldest son, Arthur. Mrs Gough managed the tea-rooms in Lion Rock House, while Arthur ran the cave. This he continued to do until about 1933 when he was replaced by Captain Brend. The lease agreed with Richard Gough in 1877 had by then come to an end. The cave came under the control of the Longleat Estates and was directed by the present Marquess of Bath, then Viscount Weymouth.

The chambers and passages beyond the show cave had been explored in the early years of this century, and little more has been found since them. During 1908 Aladdin's Grotto (off St. Paul's Chamber) was illuminated and on view to the public. Then in 1935 a concealed passage at the base of the Pixie Forest was opened up as a result of excavating the cave infill. Some 3000 tons of spoil is said to have been removed from the site. Beyond the low passage, several chambers were apparently discovered and Thomas Gill, the manager, announced that it was the intention of the management to make a circular route connecting up with St. Paul's Chamber (*News Chronicle*, 1935, 23rd November). This was not carried out and it was over 30 years before such an idea came to fruition.

By the 1930s advertising for Gough's Cave was widespread, even in foreign papers (e.g. *New York Herald*, Paris edn., 1935, 2nd April). In

1934 annual admissions to the cave had reached 200,000. By 1936 this had increased to 273,000, and today the number of visitors is vastly greater. At that time the total number of staff employed at Gough's Cave was 54, requiring an annual wage bill of some £5200 (Weston-super-Mare Gazette, 1937, 13th February).

1934 saw great changes at the cave entrance. A new office and catering complex was built, designed by Mr G. A. Jellicoe. The restaurant was opened on the 23rd June 1934. The event was one long remembered in Cheddar and it is said that there were more Rolls-Royce cars present than any other make. The cliffs above the cave entrance were floodlit and the evening ended with a splendid firework display.

What future discoveries will be made at this famous cave will be dependent upon a great deal of luck but the perseverance of Richard Cox Gough will never be forgotten.

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